



# Literature and national consciousness

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for he had already a highly sophisticated country culture of his own. Feudalism has been abolished but sophisticated aristocratic attitude typical of feudal relationships persists in spite of Western education in the absence of an organised peasant movement conscious of its rights. After independence, the Pakistan movement showed its chief weakness in that it was built on an insecure cultural foundation. The new middle class intelligentsia was too weak to resist the political chaos that set in with the disintegration of the Muslim League. The decay of that great national organisation was itself a symptom of the crisis. The army took over in October 1958 after years of misrule. It was felt for the first time since independence that Pakistan was yet to evolve into what Albert Hourani of Oxford called a political society, where various group loyalties would be integrated into loyalty to the nation-state. It was no wonder, therefore, that the new regime laid the greatest emphasis on national unity and did everything it could to create conditions for positive cultural orientation of the national movement. The fundamental problems of Democracy and Islam are being raised and discussed as also the host of other problems connected with them. One of such problems is the role the literary people are expected to play in the promotion and enrichment of national consciousness resulting in increased stability and integrity of Pakistan as a nation-state.

According to Ziya Gokalp, the ideologist of Turkish nationalism, national movements first have a cultural awakening, then make political decisions and finally formulate an economic policy. Literature in the first stage of the Muslim national movement in India was consciously but spontaneously national. Who does not owe his debt of gratitude to the contributions of Iqbal, Hali, Kaikobad, Ismail Husain Shiraji and Nazrul Islam to the cultural awakening of the Indian Muslims? But the quality of thought in this literature was rather poor. Iqbal alone was the honourable exception. He alone had a distinctive vision of his own, based on a critical revaluation of both the heritage of Islam and that of the modern civilisation of Europe. He gave a new direction to the Muslim philosophical thought in India but curiously enough, he did not find a successor who could follow it up.

Starting about a century earlier, thanks to their acceptance of western rationalistic tradition, the men of the Bengali Renaissance found time enough to lay an effective philosophical foundation for the Hindu national movement. In the case of the Muslim national movement, the task remained unfinished. Not that such a task can ever be really finished. What I want to say is that our intellectual preparation for a modern Muslim state was rather inadequate. We were racing against time and wishfully thought that deficiency in critical thought could be made up by



**Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta with his students at the University of Dhaka in 1967.**

PHOTO:  
MEGHNA GUHATHAKURTA

an overbalance of action. But we are, on the whole, on the right track. We know that we are weak but not weak enough to be infected by the "terrible frenzy" of the Arab world which has yet to find a crystallisation of its national aspirations in an organised political society.

It is often pointed out that we are still to go a long way before we find a common cultural base for the much desired national unity—a unity more significant and meaningful than mere political unity. We Bengalees suffer, it is alleged, from an excessive attachment for the regional culture in which we are born. But is regionalism necessarily inconsistent with national unity? It will be useful to refer to the literary programme of the East Pakistan Renaissance Society (founded in Calcutta in 1941) in this connection:

To publish the works of the Muslim writers hitherto neglected by the Hindu intelligentsia.

To return to the medieval *punthi* literature, and folklore of East Bengal for inspiration.

To depict the social life and religious consciousness of east Pakistani Muslims.

To produce literature based on the Islamic cultural tradition not only of India but also of other Muslim countries

of the world.

The programme rightly stresses the importance of the regional cultural tradition and of the Islamic tradition as whole. The programme marks a fruitful departure from the ideological romanticism of both the Wahabi and the Khilafat movement and is a bold attempt to root East Pakistan culture "more deeply into its locale". In the brochure entitled *Muslim traditions in Bengali literature*, Mr Syed Ali Ashraf writes:

"The emotions of the Bengali Muslims were not attached to their soil, they did not think much about their own surroundings, they did not draw much inspiration from their recent past; they attached their emotions to their evolutionary glory of Early Islam, ... The difference between *Muharram Shareef* of Kaikobad and *Navi Vangsha* of Syed Sultan clearly indicates that these values of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were puritanic."

Mr Ashraf's later statement, that it is in the Pakistan movement that the puritanism found its goal, I find difficult to accept. The stress on regional literature which is partly secular and partly Islamic is a new element which can be hardly described as puritanical. If there is anything wrong in it, from an artist's

point of view it is the parochial nature of the programme. It excludes reference to the two of the most vital literary traditions that are meaningful for every writer in Bengali, namely the nineteenth century Bengali literature and modern European literatures. The nationalist approach to literature appeared to be wrong not because it gave precedence to cultural regionalism over the claims of political nationalism but because it ignored the supranational aspects of literary traditions, and tended to make literature an instrument of politics. In actual practice, however, the sponsors of this programme were more catholic in their literary taste.

In matters cultural there are certain tangible local elements which cannot be suppressed for the sake of political uniformity. Mr Tremaine McDowell, an American author, writes:

"Josiah Royce thoroughly approved of what he called provincialism as calculated to root Americans more deeply in their own locale and thus to strengthen resistance to conformity and mass hysteria. His provincialism we today call regionalism."

Regionalism in literature, painting and music is the interpretation of human experience in the symbols which the artist finds in that area of United States with which, either for life or for the moment, he is most familiar. This does not mean that regional art is merely local. It employs unmistakably regional language to express the universal—otherwise it is not art—If a region is not to relapse into a section, it must constantly share with other regions what it possesses.

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