

essay

## Some Aspects of Nationalism of the Bengalis—III

*Bankim's hope that the language would bring the Bengalis together was at once legitimate and false. Language can unify, but it does not always do so. The way Prafullah Chaki, the first of the Bengali martyrs to die for attempting to kill an English officer in 1908, was treated by two persons, both Bengalis, is illustrative, almost symbolic.*

by Serajul Islam Choudhury

INDIA, for all we know, has never been a nation. All-Indian nationalism is not only false but also harmful. India is really like Europe minus Russia, and offers a greater divergence among its different nationalists than is noticed among those in Europe. The point has been very forcefully made by Pramatha Chowdhury in an essay on the patriotism of the Bengalis. He argues that in relation to Bengal, Indian nationalism has been clearly imperialistic. He uses the same metaphor of the mother, but puts it to an altogether different use. As he sees it, Bengal is the mother with her children tied to her by the umbilical cord. It is only natural that the mother should breast-feed her children. To accuse her of isolationism would be totally wrong, he maintains.

All-Indian nationalism has been harmful in two specific areas — casteism and communalism. There is a casteism among the Muslims too, they also have their *Ashraf*s and *Atrabs*. This, like the one among the Hindus, also came from outside.

In the above-quoted review of Mosharrar Hossain's book, Bankimchandra rightly points out that the aristocrats among the Bengali Muslims have been harming the unity of the Bengalis by their all-Indian proclivities, he says:

যতদিন উচ্চ শ্রেণীর মুসলমানদের মধ্যে এমন পর্ব থাকিবে যে, তাহারা হিন্দু দেশীয়, বাঙালি তাহাদের ভাষা নহে, তাহারা বাঙালি শিবিরে না, ততদিন একা জন্মিবে না।

[It will be impossible to achieve unity, so long as the upper-class Muslims continue to boast that they are of a foreign extraction, that their language is not Bengali, and that they would not learn Bengali.]

And he adds that language lies at the root of national unity. That the more well-to-do class represented by the Syed Ameer Ali of Calcutta and the Nawab Abdul Latifs of Faridpur considered Urdu rather than Bengali to be the proper language to use is well-known. They were also enamoured of English, keeping pace with their Hindu counterparts. Michael Madhusudan Dutt mentions Abdul Latif in one of his letters,

but the difference between the two is no way insignificant. Michael read at Hindu College and was exposed to the best possible English education available in India: Abdul Latif was a student of Calcutta Madrasha where English was not on the syllabus during his student days. Abdul Latif cannot be expected to be a great writer in the Bengali language; at best he can be the founder of a Mohammedan literary society, which he was.

Bankim's hope that the language would bring the Bengalis together was at once legitimate and false. Language can unify, but it does not always do so. The way Prafullah Chaki, the first of the Bengali martyrs to die for attempting to kill an English officer in 1908, was treated by two persons, both Bengalis, is illustrative, almost symbolic. Profullah and Khudiram had gone to Muzaffarpore in pursuit of the erring Englishman. Having thrown a bomb at the officer's carriage, the two young men had escaped into darkness. Profullah had walked all night, and was seen at daybreak by a Bengali employee of the railway. The man had heard the bomb-explosion; he suspected Profullah to be involved in it, but instead of betraying him to the police, took him home, fed him, gave him a pair of new shoes and clothes, and in the evening put him on a railway train. There in the train Profullah fell into a conversation with another Bengali, this one a policeman. The man was suspicious of Profullah's new shoes and swollen feet; he pretended to be a sympathiser and eventually got Profullah arrested. Like all revolutionaries, Profullah Chaki carried poison with him, which he took and killed himself, finding arrest unavoidable.

Language did not unite the three: instead it helped the policeman to betray the patriot. Profullah's tie with the railwayman who came to his help was more than linguistic, it was patriotic. Like the betrayer, the railway worker too was a government employee, but he had within him an urge which made him swim against the current, and not with it. That precisely was what Profullah Chaki himself was doing. Demo-

cratic nationalism thrives challenging the established order, it dies as soon as it surrenders.

Incidentally, Khudiram, the other revolutionary involved in the bombing incident, was betrayed by his language. He too had walked all night. A hungry and exhausted Khudiram had asked a shopkeeper at daybreak for some puffed rice. His Bengali pronunciation gave him away. A police watchman challenged Khudiram, overpowered him with the help of others before Khudiram could make use of the poison he was carrying. Later he was hanged.

Communalism persists. Pramatha Chowdhury was a Bengali, if ever there was one. But he too remains a Brahmin, and, in the very essay on patriotism, referred to earlier, uses the terms Hindu and Bengali in a way suggestive of his considering them interchangeable. This is not an unnatural occurrence. For the upper-class Hindus did not have much of a contact with the Muslims, most of whom belonged to the poorer classes. And it was because of the same lack of contact that the Sir Syed Ahmed Khans of North India thought that all Bengalis were Hindus, although majority of them were of the Khan's own religious stock. The North Indian Muslims knew the Mukherjees and Chatterjees of Bengal, who were their rivals; the Bengali Muslims were beyond their ken, owing to their inferior class status. That class prevails over religion has had many examples indeed, and could be found in the unlikely of places.

And yet communalism was powerful. A K Fazlul Huq had the heart of a Bengali mother, and could claim to be every inch a Bengali; but when he became a Muslim Leaguer in the early forties, he called himself first a Muslim and then a Bengali, similarly, Nirad C Chaudhuri, despite his very pronounced cosmopolitanism, becomes a Hindu when he reacts to the Chittagong Armoury Raid. He writes that on hearing of the 'foolish' incident, his mind 'only dwelt on what was likely to happen to the Hindu inhabitants when the Gurkhas arrived' at Chittagong and he found that his fears were not unfounded:

Collectively, the Hindus of the town became politically suspect and had to

suffer more, for which they remained bitterly anti-British till the end of British rule. Chittagong became part of the Muslim state created by the partition of India in 1947, and most of the Hindus of region migrated to West Bengal to become expatriates.

One need not be surprised to see that when Bangladesh established itself as an independent state Chaudhuri called it 'so-called'.

The tension between the already-advanced Hindu middle class and the fledgling Muslim middle class did not augur Bengali nationalism well. It could not. When Mosharrar Hossain complained in his journal:

পাপল সাহাইতে মুসলমান, আহাৎক প্রমাণ করিতে মুসলমান, অভ্যাসবীর ভিন্ন অকিত্তে মুসলমান, বিশ্বাসঘাতক দেখাইতে হইলে মুসলমান।

[It does not matter whether the character to be portrayed is lunatic, an idiot, an oppressor or a betrayer — there is always a Muslim to be depended upon.]

he, a liberal, spoke for his class and community at large.

Pramatha Chowdhury's categorization of Indian nationalism as imperialistic has not been accepted by many. Believing as he does that language makes a nation, Suniti Chatterjee, for example, did not find it contradictory to feel in 1963 that in appearance as well as character the Bengalis are Indians. He makes it clear that for him and for those a similar persuasion

সকল ভাষাই হিন্দু ভাষাকে, রাক্ষস বর্বরো বারা চালিত ভারতকে এক সূত্রে পাকিয়া বন্ধ হিন্দু-বিভিন্ন নানা প্রদেশকে মিলিত করিয়া... অন্ধ দেশে পবিত্র করিয়াছিল।

[It was the Sanskrit language alone that had built a unified country out of the many scattered provinces of Hindu India, the India that was guided by Brahminism.]

UNMISTAKABLY, this is the voice of those who supported the two-nation theory. It is not the Muslim League alone that believed in the theory; the Hindu Mahasabha was also a party of the believers; and, despite their mutual antagonism, in the matter of their belief in communal separation they were next of kin. That what Suniti Chatterjee said in 1963 should have been said by Ghulam Mustafa, the poet, in 1952 need not sur-

prise us. Ghulam Mustafa thought East Bengal to be an inseparable part of Pakistan and wrote, right after the state language movement had taken its final form, to urge his people:

ধামাও তোমার ভাষার ঘর, তুল না একথা দিত না লাল মুখবতের রাষ্ট্রভাষার দিলে দিলে কথা কহিব আজ।

[Put a stop, will you, to your quarrel over language. Oh, do not put us to shame: We shall talk today through the language of love]

With a heart meeting a heart.]

Political surrender to All-India leadership has proved disastrous for Bengal, and its cultural consequences were also harmful. When C R Das died in 1925, Bengal was left with no outstanding leader to assert that Bengal should be allowed to fend for itself; and when Fazlul Huq turned a Muslim Leaguer, the surrender was complete.

A cultural difference existed between West Bengal and East Bengal even before the first partition was attempted. East Bengal was inhabited by weaker classes. True, Laksman Sen had set up his capital in Vikrampur, but that happened after his defeat in 1204, and not before. In his book of grammar *Gauria Vakaran*, and in his early creative career Madhusudan saw himself as writing for an audience belonging to Gaur. His final arrival at the Bengali identity occurred later. It is also significant that much of his writing centres around the betrayed progeny's suffering because of the failing father. He himself had rejected the culture and authority of his father, and having moved, as he says in his famous sonnet, from one country to another like a beggar, came back to the riches hidden in the treasury of his mother tongue. What happened in Madhusudan's life in the course of two decades did not happen in the life of Bengal in two thousand years. The separation remained, and that East Bengal should have established itself as the first fully independent state for the Bengalis looks like a historical revenge of the neglected mother.

Irrespective of the communal identity, the man from East Bengal has been the stock country bumpkin, funnier than the country cousin in English literature. He has been the odd man out as

much in writings as in real life. One wonders whether Ghulam Mustafa's desperate clinging to Pakistan nationalism has not been encouraged by the teasing he had been subjected to by Calcutta students when he began his teaching career in a Ballygunj school. Satyajit Ray records in his autobiography how he and his friends made fun of the young poet's Jessore pronunciation, persuading him to recite in the class room one of his poems. Incidents like these were not rare. They must have been funny for the leg-pullers, but not for the victims.

And who from East Bengal was not a victim? When Dinesh Chandra Sen went to see Vidyasagar, equipped with a good degree from Comilla and aware of his Brahmin ancestry, Vidyasagar put the young man in his place, pointing out that because of his East Bengal pronunciation he would find it a maddening experience to handle the Calcutta boys. Dinesh Sen had also found it frustrating, if not insulting, when on his first visit to Bankimchandra, the novelist refused politely but positively to discuss literature with him. Bankimchandra went on asking him about the climate, agriculture and population of Comilla, making Dinesh Sen feel that the novelist took him to be no more than a peasant, unworthy of any conversation beyond the plough and the tillage.

Dinesh Sen had reasons to be plaintive. For although he was born and brought up in Dhaka, he was aware of an ancestry linked to the court of Laksman Sen. In his autobiography he recalls that his forbears had come to Dhaka from Khulna, which was during their time the prime centre for the Hindus. The same self-consciousness is noticeable in an earlier writer, Nabin Sen. Autobiographically, he says:

মহারাজ বিপ্লবের সময় হইতে পূর্ববঙ্গের রাঢ় হইতে উঠিয়া আসিয়া উপনিবেশ সংস্থাপন করেন। তাহার একটি প্রমাণ আমাদের স্থানীয় ভাষা। ইহার সঙ্গে বঙ্গীয় ভাষার বিশেষ সাদৃশ্য আছে। পূর্ববঙ্গের পঞ্চ মাত নাই।

[It was during the revolution in Maharashtra that my forefathers colonized in Chittagong. This is testified by the language we use.... It resembles the Bengali language in many respects, but has nothing to do with the local dialect.]

To be continue

## poems by Louise Schleiner

## Naomi and Ruth

## I. The Bitter Road

"Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell but Ruth clung to her and said, 'Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go; your people will be my people and your God my God. . . . So Naomi returned from Moab and Ruth with her. . . . Ruth bore Boaz a son, and the women said, 'Blessed be the Lord, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him. Then Naomi laid the child in her bosom and became his nurse' (from Ruth 1:14-17, 4:14-16).

You started up dry water courses, heading  
For the rocky fields of Ephraim, Naomi,  
Woman mourning husband and sons.  
To how many griefs is the mind answerable?  
You melted again  
For the dear ones setting out with you--  
Why should they lose their past  
For a blank unknown?--  
Friends and kin, village fountain, and gods of home.  
'Give up, my daughters, let me die to you,  
'I've no more sons to bind us,' you said,  
But Ruth put a hand to your shoulder,  
Turned you half about and held your eyes with hers  
Till you saw light inside their brown.  
'My former gods I leave,' she said,  
'Your country will be mine, I know  
My Mahlon cannot come again from your womb and yet  
My life and yours are one.'

Goatskins of water on your backs,  
You two, sticks in hand,  
You trudged.  
When the flatbread was gone you trusted to gifts  
>From strangers.  
Nights, you doubled your travel cloaks  
And cradled together--  
Two spirits' inward parts were knitting in one incubation--  
Into one life new grown  
For a country to be known.

Struggling over the last hill,  
Bethlehem and ripe fields in view,  
Down the road you came  
At evening, women's time with water jars,  
To the well.  
Cries of recognition and surprise  
Enveloped you,  
Draft on cool draft you drank.  
Anna, cousin of Elimelech,

She who best remembered you,  
Took you by the hand, with Ruth behind,  
And led you to her rooftop for the night.

## II. Boaz

## Or, The Elder Brother Gets a Life

The barley's good this year, tips white.  
I'll get to town at sunup,  
Hire more hands.  
Get more grain rigs too for the asses.  
Here come the gleaners from town.  
Watching for scythes to swing.  
A boy, an old man, two widows, --  
Who's the young one? Headscarf tied back,  
Chin forward, determined she looks.  
Tell the men to drop plenty.  
Ah, I saw her yesterday,  
Sandals in hand, feet blistered--  
Not used to field work.  
She sat with the water dipper by at noon,  
Munched her flatbread,  
Slowly rubbed a heel and flexed her hands  
Open and shut--  
Young Mahlon's widow, they say,  
My father's second cousin.

Where's Shmuel now with the midday baskets?--  
A slacker, that boy, my Miriam's youngest.  
At least he hasn't the fits like poor Aharon,  
My other boy still living.  
His mother dotes too much on him as well.  
What can I say? It's Leah my firstwife,  
She runs the household--  
A tongue and thoughts for order she has,  
I show respect; but  
Just the one boy we've had.

Ah, today she's retied her sandals a new way.  
She's gleaned again.  
Send a boy to put up the extra wood  
>From the rigs--  
Just the stuff for the booths of festival next month  
When we thank Adonai for harvest.  
Blessing us he is,  
Ruach, breath-spirit, he waves across our fields of grasses  
White gold with food.  
Where was I . . .  
Yes, send a boy to hurry Shmuel along,  
And get the scout's message to town--  
Mustn't let up on posting where  
The marauders are, down valley.  
A lean winter or worse if they get our grain.  
Now she's working up this way--

A kindly girl they say,  
Wouldn't leave Naomi.

Evening at last, field greens simmering,  
Good with last year's goat cheese, toasted grain,  
New wine in harvest jugs--no harm to tip a few.  
Tonight we sleep out with the padded cloaks--  
Best way to start at dawn.  
Finally my aching legs can stretch,  
The muscles ease.  
Cool air, first flow  
Of night across me--and sweetness  
Enfolding, of grain aroma.  
My thoughts drift, timbrels of the mountain shrines  
Sound the rustling touch of their beat in my doze.  
A dance ring circles.  
It slows and brings a face around to me,  
The foreigner's, but with my mother's eyes.  
I turn and doze again,  
Mind deepening into rest.

Suddenly at my feet, something ripples in  
Under the cloak.  
I curl!  
A lizard, a field mouse? A hand and fingers,  
Then a quiet voice,  
'I am your servant,  
The life blood saved of a kinsman lost--  
I offer myself.  
My feet and legs awake at the touch,  
Cool hands clasping my ankles,  
The cool, grain-scented air on my face.

I gather my wits  
And speak kind words to her goodness,  
Say that Eliezer, son of the aged priest,  
Is closer kin to her Mahlon.  
He must hear first of her desire.  
The path of duty must be walked.  
But Eliezer has his own new wife--he'll say 'no.'  
We sit up.  
At dawn gray I first admire  
Her eyes close up, her smile.  
Next week we'll hear the wedding flutes and timbrels.

About the writer: Louise Schleiner is currently Professor and Director of Graduate Studies at the English Department, Washington State University. She took her Ph. D. from Brown University and taught at the University of California-Davis. She teaches sixteenth-century literature and postmodern theory and has published on topics including poetry and music, Shakespeare, Milton, women writers, and cultural semiotics. She is the author of such books as *The Living Lyre in English Verse* (1984), *Tudor and Stuart Women Writers* (1994), and *Cultural Semiotics, Spenser, and the Captive Woman* (1995).