

Bangladesh : Between Two Civilizations

by Kazi Khaleed Ashraf

Bangladesh is actually in a cultural interstice, right in the middle of two great civilizational matrices. Being in the middle, being in-between has its natural tension : Am I this, or am I that? Should I adopt this, or should I adopt that? ... seeking purity of this or that kind may be a futile exercise; what is perhaps profitable and creative is an amalgamation of desires, a composite of ideas, or even a collage of identities. But at least we must know what these are.

BANGLADESH and for that matter Bengal, has always been considered part of the Indian subcontinent. The history, culture, language, and institutions of this region are intricately tied with the broader development in the subcontinent. The making of Bengali identity and character is implicated here in a major way. In fact, this fact of the subcontinental intimacy is so well entrenched in our thinking that it needs to be sharply deconstructed. It is possible that an understanding of Bengali identity is still very much an incomplete project.

We often say deep-rooted tradition or deep-rooted experience, but what do we mean? There are certainly two strong traditions (I am calling them 'streams') which have largely determined the cultural fabric of Bangladesh. One is the Sanskritic, and the other is the Islamic stream. This much we all take for granted.

The Sanskritic stream is basically formed by the Aryan-Vedic-Brahmanic cultures. Its roots is largely in the tradition that was brought in by Indo-European tribes into India, and which was slowly amalgamated, with varying degrees of contest, conflict, and conflation, with existing non-Vedic traditions. By the current Sanskritic stream, I don't mean the Vedic/Brahmanic/Hindu religious traditions, although there is always the shadow of that in anything Sanskritic, but its most important offspring — language, and all that has followed it. What finally gives a continuity to South Asia, or actually northern South Asia, is language. One can note here the interrelatedness of political development and language. Despite current differences and linguistic conflicts, there is a great structural unity among Hindi, Bengali, and Urdu. It is the structure of language that shapes our mental world, harbours many persistent concepts and ideas, and gives sense and meaning to societal existence. If who we are is largely consti-

tuted by language (as per the post-modernist claim), then we have to take this seriously.

The land of the Aryas comprised mostly what is northern India, extending from the Karakoram mountains to the eastern plains of the Ganga centered around Pataliputra (current Patna). The region now called Bengal was either outside or at the periphery of Aryavarta, the land of the Aryas. In fact some old texts mention that from the dominant Arya centers, Bengal was considered an impure land and any Arya son venturing there had to be purified before he could reenter his society. It is this tension, being a part of and apart from mainstream Arya culture, that characterised the relationship of Bengal with northern India. This is not just a historic miscellany now but perhaps a persistent northern perception that continues even today.

The other deep rooted experience in Bangladesh is that of Islam and its religious ethic. The main Muslim entry into the subcontinent took nearly the same route as the Indo-Europeans — the north-western passes of the Himalayas (besides some sea-faring contacts). Similarly, the consolidation of the Central Asian and Turk-Persian culture in Northern India meant the principal seats of Muslim power remained in the north. The principal Turk-Persian perception of the eastern region curiously resembled the Arya perception: Vanga was "duzak-i-niama" (hell full of booms), and so forth.

But the important fact is that there is a great degree of confluence of the Islamic ethic and the Arabic-Turko-Persian cultural norms. One is seen as the shadow of the other without realizing that there are many cultural practices in Persia, or even in Arabia, which are extra-Islamic in origin, or there are major differences between Persian and Arab culture. Who is going to decipher and filter out what is truly an Islamic

ethic and what is perhaps only a local cultural production, a Turkish, a Persian, or a Central Asian practice. And yet such practices have taken a major hold on our own values and imagination.

There is a third stream, which is always there but again somewhat unacknowledged, and that is my concern here. For lack of any appropriate term, let me call it, a bit superfluously perhaps, the "aquatic" stream. The "aquatic" stream is actually shared by a broad geographical matrix that stretches roughly from Bangladesh to Burma and onwards to Thailand and Vietnam. From Bangladesh it also dips down towards southern India and Sri Lanka. Bangladesh could be seen as a fulcrum in its cultural matrix.

A number of common features characterize this "aquatic" matrix. It is primarily a water-based civilization created by an almost common geographical and climatic condition. The principal economic and cultural occupation in this matrix revolves around rice.

What is common about both the Sanskritic and Islamic streams is that they are primarily a historical experience in the context of Bengal, that is, they originate at a specific moment in Bengal's political history. Unlike these two historical streams, the "aquatic" stream cannot be so easily located historically. In fact, the character of the aquatic is not historical but, more accurately, prehistorical or even transhistorical. Although it would be a mistake to say that "history does not happen" with the rice-culture matrix, that it has been like this all along since time

immemorial, the ingredients of its makeup is made up of not human constructs, that is, history and language, but primarily the terrain, the land, or whatever you like.

What is also common about the Sanskritic and Islamic stream, is that both are primarily metaphysical in their philosophy, something that is not tied up with or related to a specific land or locality. The Indo-Europeans brought much of the proto-Sanskritic stuff with them somewhere from Central Asia, while the Islamic stream came from the Arabian peninsula. In the lands of their origin, they might have ties with the land, but once it was abstracted it could literally be transported anywhere.

The aquatic stream does not propose portability of ideas; its significance comes from the particularity of a place, in the real and phenomenal encounter with actual land, water, and air. It is the picture of the most primordial encounter of man with nature. Man and nature. There is a particularly about this encounter; it is not the same everywhere, the nature of the encounter depends on the specific nature, the specific place.

What are the main features of its water civilization? First of all, it is an existence in a particular kind of geographical and physical environment. Deltaic land condition, heavy rainfall, and lush vegetation characterize that environment. One thinks of the land-water terrain created by the Ganges-Padma, Irrawaddy, Chao Praya, Mekong, and so forth. The river-related delta leads to conditions of flooding, and all that is a consequence of it.

What all these mean is the heavy presence of water, on the land and in the atmosphere. If one stands still for few hours one will have fungus growing all over. It is just rashness to think that one can fight water... one can live on it, with it, even partially underneath it, but hardly against it. One look at an aerial photo of the delta during flood should tell us how puny we are with all our economic mights, development fantasies and millennial myths. One cannot emphasize that too much at this time.

The second most important thing is the cultivation of rice as the mainstay of life. In the Bengal delta, rice cultivation is an existential/occupation; the production of rice is the production of a world-view. Here rice is not something which is merely produced and consumed, but is the basis of value-construction, of the creation of a collectivity, and of the articulation of self-identity. With the nurturing of rice comes what is held dear, what is valued, and what is celebrated. The Japanese anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (in the book *Rice as Identity: Japanese Identities through Time*) has described how the Japanese have defined their identities through the rituals of production and consumption of rice. It is no common matter that wherever a Chinese goes, he takes with him a rice cooker. The Bengali anguish for eating rice in a foreign land is also quite well known. The phrase "machhe bhatte bangali" says enough. Aditya Malla-Burman, in his novel *A River Called Tithi*, identifies two model human figures in the deltaic landscape of Bengal: the

man with the plough (*langal*) and the man with the net (*fall*). We often argue that language is the truest depth of our culture, but one should look at how our whole lifestyle, life ethic, and belief patterns revolve around the preparation, production, and consumption of rice. The early Muslims understood this. This American scholar Richard Eaton has studied how Sufi literature in Bengal adapted Muslim narrations to local beliefs and practices (before it became an uncompromising ideology). The early Sufi masters became involved in agricultural explorations, basically rice cultivation, even if they themselves came from a very different occupational value-system. Sufi literature specifically contained myths, narrations, and eulogies of rice; examples abound about the Prophet (SM) eating rice rather than dates as expected. Rice cultivation became gateway for penetrating the heart of Bengal, a metaphor for the delta. It may be necessary to point out that the practice of wet rice cultivation has been known to exist in this region from 2000 BC, much much before the region came under Sanskritic domination, and much before we invested our identity in language and literature.

Other than common hearsay, there has not been much anthropological study of peasant myths and values in Bengal/Bangladesh that will shed light on the "aquatic" stream and "rice culture". Moreover, we have a remarkable ability to disown and disregard those values in a single generation once we move to an urban situation. It may be consciously disowned but is never

completely forgotten. It appears and reappears in unselfconscious ways, in moments when we least expect it. And that is also a cause for anthropological inquiry. Take *alpana* drawing for example. Alpana has now become an urban decorative art when it was actually a ritual drawing down with rice paste to invite the spirit of abundance (*Laxmi*) in the house. And that spirit always had to do with rice. If you had rice (*dhari*), you had wealth (*dhon*). *Dhionodharange pushe bhora*, as the poetic sentiment goes, in Vietnamese, I am told, the term for wealth and abundance comes from the word denoting rice.

Certain writers have pointed out the similarity in attitude of the upper-class, both Muslim (the so-called *ashraf* class) and Brahmanic. Both classes held a disdain for the agricultural ethos, that is, the physical and spiritual tie to the land. While they benefited from the produce of the land (being much of the owners of the land), they maintained a safe *distana* basically because and has remained a pejorative term among the elite.

Recently, Bangladesh has been endeavouring to create trade linkages with countries of south-east Asia. What might appear as only an economic link could point to other connections. The issue of identity has never approached this. If there is any identity conflict, it maybe this: the meaning of our collective identity may not lie to the west of us, but more to the east.

Bangladesh is actually in a cultural interstice, right in the middle of two great civilizational matrices. Being in the middle, being in-between has its natural tension: Am I this, or am I that? Should I adopt this, or should I adopt that? That system is deeply rooted with the land, and has a far greater structural correspondence with south-east Asian cultures than we actually realize or acknowledge.

The author teaches and practices architecture, and writes on architecture and culture. He is currently with the University of Pennsylvania in the USA.

A Challenging 1999 for the UN

Farhan Haq writes from New York

The US and British strikes on Iraq point to the increasing divisions between the United States and the United Nations at a time when the latter strongly needs Washington's support.

IN a perceptive moment, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan warned on his return from Europe and the Middle East this month that if the Kosovo and Iraq crises were not resolved soon, "we have reason to fear the worst by 1999."

Two days later, the United States began bombing Iraq.

The chaotic state of world affairs in general indicates how challenging 1999 will be for the United Nations, with some of its most recent diplomatic efforts — in Iraq, Angola, Central Africa, Kosovo and Afghanistan — all foundering badly at year's end.

More importantly, the US and British strikes on Iraq point to the increasing divisions between the United States and the United Nations at a time when the latter strongly needs Washington's support.

But from its more than one billion dollars in unpaid UN dues to its opposition to an International Criminal Court (ICC), the US government is more inclined to go it alone and snub the United Nations than it has been for years.

With US President Bill Clinton facing an impeachment drive led by the harshly anti-UN Republicans — in the US Senate, any turnaround in Washington's stance on the world body is unlikely.

The immediate consequence is that the United Nations goes into 1999 with a full plate of world crises, but little US backing to help take them on.

Particularly daunting is the fallout from the ongoing financial crisis which began in East Asia in 1997 and spread to Russia and parts of Latin America this past year. Annan cited the financial crisis as one of the

main challenges of the coming year, and pledged that the United Nations will be involved in discussions on reforming the world's "financial architecture".

Yet for all the sincerity of UN officials' desire to be involved in that debate, the main industrialised states, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund seem as unwilling to include the world body in international financial decision-making as ever.

Even in the areas where the United Nations has considerable authority, diplomacy and peacemaking 1999 is already shaping up to be a difficult year. Central Africa is in turmoil, with at least eight nations entangled in the inconclusive fighting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), formerly Zaire. Supporting DRC President Laurent Kabila are the governments of Angola, Chad, Namibia and Zimbabwe. The rebels who have worked for his ouster, and who now threaten the country's mineral-rich centre, are backed by Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi.

UN diplomatic efforts earlier this month have brought all sides together in a commitment to ending the war and an informal cease-fire. But dozens of armed factions, from Rwanda's former genocidal militias to anti-Uganda armed groups, are also snared in the fighting and UN officials believe that a peacekeeping force must eventually be deployed to monitor any lasting truce.

Some 400,000 Angolans have already been driven from their homes in recent fighting, causing UN officials to warn of an impending humanitarian crisis.

Like the collapsing Angolan peace process, the Iraq fiasco which until the US attack had seemed a major diplomatic triumph.

Considering that the United

Nations now fields fewer than 17,000 soldiers in all its peace-keeping operations worldwide, garnering support in the UN Security Council for such a large force could well prove an uphill battle in early 1999.

Yet that challenge almost pales in comparison to the need to rally international attention to the unfolding blood bath in Angola, where for the second time this decade the rebel National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) has turned its back on the UN-sponsored peace plan.

Annan conceded that Angola has returned to war, following several years of peace after a 1994 pact was signed in Lusaka. Experts here believe that UNITA has successfully kept some 30,000 fighters from turning in their arms in recent years, and is now ready to bring them back into action against Angola's army, already stretched thin by its commitments in the DRC and Congo-Brazzaville.

The UN Observer Missio

in Angola, or MONUA, has been

forced by the recent fighting to redeploy to "safer" areas like

the capital, Luanda, leaving

central Angola a largely unmonitored battleground be-

tween the rival forces, who have fought with only a few inter-

ruptions since independence in 1975.

Some 400,000 Angolans

have already been driven

from their homes in recent

fighting, causing UN officials

to warn of an impending humanitar

ian crisis.

Like the collapsing Angolan

peace process, the Iraq fiasco

which until the US attack had

seemed a major diplomatic tri-

umph for Annan — demon-

strates how little authority the

world body has if it is not

strongly supported by the major

world powers.

For the past year, a majority

of nations on the 15-member

Security Council, including

permanent members China,

France and Russia, had resisted

US desires to attack Iraq and

had urged a timetable for lifting

the eight-year-old sanctions.

Annan carefully trod a mid-

dle path, promising Iraq that it

would earn a "comprehensive

review" of sanctions and other

concerns in the Council if it co-

operated with UN weapons

monitors. In turn, Iraq occa-

sionally sparked rows with the

inspectors but always backed

down in time to avoid US attack

and lease its Council support-

ers.

That cycle of slow diplomac

y and intermittent crisis was

abruptly broken on Dec 16,

when US President Bill Clinton

responded to a mildly critical

report from chief UN weapons

inspector Richard Butler by immediately launching air-

strikes.

In an instant, months of

Iraq diplomacy and the

promise of a comprehensive

review were thrown out the

window, along with any hope

for cooperation in the Council

between the pro-Iraq bloc of

Russia and China and the two

attacking nations, Britain and

the US.

That was the moment when

the world's attention turned