

essay

## Nuances of Cultural Complexity and the Puerile Bid to Unlink the Two Bengals

by Jamal Hasan

**M**OST of us have differed often enough with one another on what precisely constitutes culture. That is hardly surprising in view of the fact that it is common for even erudite philosophers to debate and disagree with each other on the raw definition and nuances of culture. The way we perceive culture is very much a mirror of our philosophy in life and of our view of the society we live in. It is but natural that we differ. But does it really make any meaningful difference to a society what a particular cultural guru might envision as the cultural attributes of that society in a particular point in space and time?

Culture is much like water flowing through a river. It takes on the colour of the alluvium soil it is flowing over at that moment. Culture of a people is anything but static, it changes and evolves like the life form on earth. But the final destination of a river is in accordance with the scheme of things of the Creator, namely, the sangam with the ocean.

The so-called Calcutta Book Fair fiasco has prompted certain coteries of vested interest to make mountain out of a mole hill. In the forefront is Bangladesh Nationalist Party which donned the mantle of the keeper of Muslim Bengal culture. It has emphasised the distinctness of Muslims to create a separate identity for Bangladeshi culture. The party was founded by a freedom fighter who fought for the liberation of Bangladesh or Bangla nation. But the Kakul trained former Pakistani army officer who spoke Bangla with a distinct Urdu accent, due to his long stay in the western wing of former Pakistan, ultimately took on the role of a Trojan horse. When he assumed charge of independent Bangladesh in the aftermath of a series of coup d'états and assassinations, he took upon himself the task of rebuilding the nation in the model of "East Pakistan." Thereby, he failed to live up to his glorious deeds during the days of blood and thunder. The unholy coalition that he forged with the religious right, rehabilitated those that had stood discredited after the liberation in December of 1971. It served to resurrect the ghost of East Pakistan.

The Bengalis in Pakistan had made

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sacrifices to found a modern state based on secular ideology. The Sufi tradition had deeply influenced the Islam in Bengal. Its tolerant ethos was a far cry from the religious tradition in West Pakistan that would later spawn the Taliban movement. The Bangladesh Liberation War was a struggle against the hardline exclusives tradition in West Pakistan that was trying to supplant the liberal tradition in the eastern wing and turn it into a colony. Under the guidance of the Pakistani junta from the west, the Islamist parties made it their goal to eliminate the religious minorities and to discard the secularist strands from the composite culture of Bangladesh.

They cried "Islam is in danger." To garner supporters for their invidious goals. It was a national past time in certain quarters during the Pakistan era, to erect a psychological wall between West Bengal and East Bengal in the guise of championing the cause of Muslim Bengal. There was a crack in this wall for a brief period during 1971-75. But, after 1975, for the next two decades, the wall was rebuilt and reinforced to mirror the prejudice and predilections of those in power. The master architects of this wall were the Pakistan trained officers of the Bangladesh army who continued to look back to the pre-liberation days under Islamabad for political inspiration.

The balance of power in Bengal in the era of Permanent Settlement had indeed tilted disproportionately in favour of the Hindus. The 1947 partition did serve to restore the balance. But it can just as easily be argued that East Bengal got rid of the overlordship of the local zamindars only to turn into a colony of

West Pakistan. Furthermore, it was asked by its new rulers to sever all ties to "Hindu" West Bengal with which it shared a common cultural heritage and where at least a quarter of the population was Muslim.

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They have absolutely nothing in common. Inevitably, proponents of this juvenile thesis ignore the cultural affinities between West and East Bengal to dwell at length on the religious differences only. That is the only way they can erect a wall between the two Bengals. But even that is not easy because a quarter of West Bengal's population is Muslim. Will the religionists disown Kazi Nazrul Islam because he is from West Bengal?

There are indeed differences between the inhabitants of the two Bengals. But it is not simple to cut off West Bengal from our cultural canvas on the basis of

these differences. Religion, ethnicity, dialect, and regional characteristics, all play an important role in defining our cultural ethos. It is as dishonest as it is misleading to try to define it in terms of religion alone. Consider the regional component, for example. The immigrants in Calcutta from East Bengal, from long before the 1947 partition, had indulged in their regional pride by cheering for the East Bengal team on Calcutta's soccer field. And to this day they continue to do so. It pleases them no end when East Bengal defeats Mohan Bagan. The Islamists in Bangladesh will be hard placed to explain this exultation on the soccer fields of Calcutta in terms of their tactics of seeing everything as a confrontation between Hindu West Bengal and Muslim Bangladesh. Region-based differences indeed seems far more significant than religion-based ones. A Muslim Bengali from West Bengal is likely to feel more at home with a Hindu Bengali from West Bengal than with a Muslim Bengali from Bangladesh. The age old Ghati-Bangali issue has always transcended religion to give primacy to geography instead.

The endogamic tradition of the sub-continent kept apart the Hindu migrants from East Bengal to India from the Hindu natives of West Bengal. Even some half a century after the partition of India, Calcutta newspapers continue to conspicuously mention the ancestral roots of prospective brides and grooms in matrimonial columns. One may attribute that to the discriminatory practices of the natives or to the exclusivist practices of the immigrants. But the fact remains that ancestral district can

come in the way of tying matrimonial bonds between the Hindu natives and the Hindu immigrants in West Bengal.

In fact, even among the Hindu immigrants themselves, a Baidya from Jessore or Bikrampur might find it beneath his dignity to have matrimonial ties with a Baidya from Sylhet or Comilla! Many a nation state in the world exhibits regional variations in dialect and culture. The regional dialect and the local customs gives the nation a "salad bowl" cultural milieu. Thus, Bavarians in Germany have the image of hillbillies. After the reunification of Germany, the people from the former East Germany were often perceived by their newfound compatriots as third worlders! Belgium and Switzerland have people speaking different dialects and even entirely different languages. In USA, the Mecca of multi-culturalism, people speak of the East Coast, the Mid West, or of the deep South with very specific cultural connotations. Let me narrate a personal anecdote. I took a speech course in an American college. During a discussion session, one student was frank enough to admit to her cultural bias based on regional accent. She told the class that Jamal has a non-American accent which is okay with her.

But if she hears somebody with a southern accent, she seems to struggle with the thought that the person is of inferior intellect. Most religionists in Bangladesh take a victimological stance to justify their prejudice. They blame the arrogance of the Hindus from West Bengal or of the Hindu zamindar of yore from his own East Bengal for their antagonism toward all Hindus. But if

they were honest enough, they would have readily admitted that there can be just as much a tradition of arrogance among the Muslims of Bangladesh. For many years, educated Bengali Muslims inhabiting the central part to the north western part of Bangladesh were extremely reluctant to enter into matrimonial ties with people from Noakhali, Chittagong and Sylhet. Similarly, many Chittagongians and Sylheties never could harbour the thought of marrying "foreigners." I know of people from Noakhali who feel ashamed to disclose their roots. Many of them feigned to be from Comilla or Chittagong to get accepted by the Dhaka-centric "Bhadrolok" culture.

I was still a school kid when my father got transferred to Chittagong. It was a big cultural shock for me. I was afraid that I would never master the Chittagongian dialect, which is significantly different from the standard Bengali language. To my relief, I finally learnt to not only understand the local dialect but even speak in it after a fashion. A few years later, my father was transferred to Sylhet where I stoically withstood the scorn of my classmates who called me a "Bengali." Needless to say it was a pejorative. It was then that I learnt that the Sylheties considered themselves to be from Assam. They were telling me that they did not think I was worthy of being a friend because I was nothing better than a "Bengali." I am sure I will have far less of a cultural shock if I visit Nadia in West Bengal. If I visit the Calcutta metropolis, I may cross path with some Bengalis (Hindus and Muslims alike) who may turn out to be somewhat different.

But I doubt they will find me as different as I was found by my Chittagongian and Sylheti classmates. But then I have to bear in mind an important aspect of social anthropology — many a person I will be friend in this old city have had the advantage of a college education and of urban living for many more than a generation or two. So, there is bound to be some difference between them and those I had encountered in Chittagong and Sylhet who were of rural background and may have belonged to the first generation in the quest of a college education.

fiction

## My World

by Matiur Rahman Siddiqui

**I** have the blues. For the last three days I am confined to my hotel room. Oppressive thoughts occupy my mind. Sometimes I try to read but after reading a few pages I find the lines blurred. There is a heaviness round the temple. A burning sensation torments my entrails. Even the heart seems to skip a beat or two. The restless energy that keeps me going seems to have evaporated.

I never thought I would have to endure such a situation where my energy defies my will. Sometimes I try to elevate my energy level by an effort of will. When I enjoy a particular sight, sound or sensation I try to optimise the feeling. In case I have to face a situation that calls for more energy I love to store emotional and intellectual energy.

I feel I must go out today. But where shall go? I don't have any friends.

What about visiting one of the few acquaintances that I have, Ronjon, Humayun, Khaled....

I cannot go to Ronjon's place because he has got married recently. Even friends should not intrude on the privacy of newly weds.

Humayun must be off to the United States for higher education by now. The last time I ran into him at a bookstore he talked enthusiastically about his future plans. The glow in his eyes seemed offensive to me. When we were students at Notre Dame he was only a mediocre student. Being at the top of my class I never bothered to talk to him. Now he is eager to even the score by drowning me in his abysmal enthusiasm.

Khaled of all my acquaintances seems to have some interest in my affairs. The last time I met him he invited me to his home.

I try to get up from my bed, my head reeling. I close my eyes and try to feel better. After what seems an eternity I pull myself together.

As I come out of the hotel a soft breeze caresses my face. I look up at the sky where some birds are wheeling about. Instantly my mood is lifted.

The street seems all on a sudden full of cheerful people. I saw a man driving a car with a woman seated beside him. He tells her something and she bursts out laughing. A chubby kid going to school with its mother flashes a happy smile at me.

I reached Khaled's place when the sun was beating down mercilessly. An almost eerie silence enveloped the double-storyed building. I called Khaled's name once, twice, thrice. No response. As moments after moments rushed away I felt impatient. The door seemed locked from inside but when I gave it a slight push it opened. When I entered Khaled's bedroom surprise greeted my eyes. It looked like the room had been transformed into an office. Some ordinary furniture was all that the room contained. I found none in the room except an old man half sitting, half dozing. His eyes closed, he was sunk in a chair. I tried to clear my throat to awaken him but no response. What is this? Something must be wrong, I told myself.

I don't remember how many times I called to him but when I was thinking of giving up he opened his eyes. The man seemed exhausted and in a feeble tone he said: "Help me with a glass of water." I found a glass nearby and fetched some water from the bathroom tap. As he emptied the glass he looked better. When I told him why I was there he informed me that it was an indenting house where he worked.

"I was feeling weak."

I was thinking of having a drink of a glass of water. But I didn't have any strength left in me. Fatigue forced me into nap. Your arrival must be a real godsend," he said.

I taught himself a technique to work off the energy of hate. Whenever one of my colleagues robbed me of peace I would find it handy. One of my senior colleagues, a fellow journalist was so unimpressive, so mean that I fund the guy loathsome. The very sight of him would inspire hearty disgust in me. Every time I saw him or even heard his voice I would feel a silent rage. Finally



in desperation I developed a mental strategy to deal with the situation.

I thought if I could realise how insignificant the guy was hatred for him would evaporate.

I then listed the negative traits of the guy: First, physical. The guy although tall looked highly unimpressive. Not yet forty he had streaks of grey in his hair. He was rather effeminate.

Emotional: His emotions were immature, childish.

Intellectual: Rather dull. He could never give a new twist to an old idea.

Spiritual: He was not sufficiently evolved to have a spiritual side to his nature.

Once I had done this exercise I felt wonderfully relieved. For such a nonentity like him I can only feel pity, not hatred.

And then I had an insight. If people existed on physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual planes then that fact could be employed for classification of humans. Some people exist on the physical plane mostly with other levels underdeveloped. A construction worker or a cab driver belongs to the physical category. The poet exists mostly on the emotional plane, his senses too receptive to sights, sounds and sensations. He is the emotional type.

The philosopher exists mostly on the intellectual plane with his intellect developed at the expense of other aspects

of his existence. The mystic exists on the spiritual plane, the highest. He communes with God.

I had a strange experience today. I decided to put into effect a new exercise regime. First thing I did some physical exercise. When I had felt a flow of joy I decided to reward myself. I thought if an exercise in self improvement was self-rewarded the motivation for repeating the exercise later would be beefed up. Eating out was one at my ways of rewarding myself.

So I went to a Chinese restaurant alone. I did not notice that he planted myself on a chair close to the family room. From the hushed conversation issuing from that room I could guess that a pair of lovers were in the room. I did not make any attempt to eavesdrop. I ordered chicken fried rice. Thai soup and beef with chillies. Chinese restaurants are so slow to serve food. When one comes to a Chinese restaurant with an anticipation of relishing tasty food eating out was one at my ways of rewarding myself.

Waiting for the food I was feeling impatient. Suddenly some familiar words reached my ear. The man said: "Let me feel your heart. The woman said: Here is my heart."

It was obvious she had guided his hand to her left chest.

And then a brief silence later: "Where is your belly?" said the man I could hear the conversation because in the heat of

passion they had abdicated caution. And then: "Do you feel like touching it?" The words seemed so familiar. Where have I heard this conversation before? I tried to remember. An then it became as clear as dawn. The words being uttered, the caresses going on were all real life versions of a movie's opening scenes. So I thought the man's hands were on her belly now.

And then a pregnant silence ensued. Arif thought the man's hands had now travelled upward fondling her breasts. She must have covered her eyes with her hand. And then true to his expectation, an admonition: "Where did you learn all this? That Swedish girl must have taught you."

I by now was sure that a movie scene was being reenacted by the couple who must have seen the movie, "The bad cat." Lust and shame are mutually exclusive. I thought.

On a day like this a nameless feeling takes possession of my mind already burnt in the fever of longing. Longing for life punctuated with a deep yearning to get away from it all. My mind alternates between love and hate, pity and contempt for the same people. My world is filled with memories which constantly afflict me or shall I say I am yet to know the difference between possessing memories and being possessed by them?

Why am I so concerned about a life which I, at the age of 12 knew is so empty, so purposeless. It is because purpose and meaning are so difficult to come by we borrow them from myths. Man mostly leads a life of other people's cumulative hopes and fears, dreams and desires projected on him.

I have seen people making almost a religion of self-improvement rituals without any tangible improvement in their lives. Why? This is not the first time that I have asked myself this question. This morning the answers springs up in my mind as clear as an early morning dream. If you are talking with someone over telephone, some more telephone calls may have to wait.

Between sadness and badness I chose sadness.

Everybody has some pain which does not have any particular source. This pain can not be pinpointed or shared. When people are love accompanied with longing they can pinpoint their pain to love. The pain then hurts less.

People often do not pour out their miseries to their wives or lover. They unburden their souls to their female friends. Is it because to your wife or lover you want to put your best foot forward? Friends on the other hand can be safety valves for the release of painful feelings and emotions. They are supposed to be less judgemental than lovers or wives.

Between sadness and badness I chose sadness.

I think pleasure is a flirt. If you keep her waiting she would find another suitor.

I am surprised that people talks about aphrodisiacs and how and where to find them. It is right within their reach. For it occurs to me that love is the only aphrodisiac that there is. If men and women learnt how to make love with their bodies, minds and souls impotence in men and frigidity in women would not have existed.

And the rest is silence for I have closed my mind for today.