IF you are looking for ancient history, Bengal's achievements are clearly limited. The Indus Valley Civilization that immensely enriched the sub-continent in the third and second millennia BC hardly reached Bengal. No part of the Vedas and the Upanishads is known to have been composed in Bengal.

The great advances of mathematics in the first millennium that came from the works of Aryabhata and his successors covered a huge span of the country -- from Kerala to Bihar -- but Bengal was out of it all. When al-Beruni, the great Indian mathematician, roamed around the sub-continent in the early eleventh century in pursuit of the current state of Indian mathematics, he did not bother to visit Bengal.

There is nothing in Bengal's history to match the ancient glory of Patna or Ujjain or Benares, or the medieval splendour of Agra or Delhi or Jaipur.

Yet it is possible that being somewhat left behind over a long stretch of history has made it that much easier for Bengal to develop its peculiar combination of open-minded receptivity and cultural pride. To cut a long story short, the pride that is taken in Bengali culture, which is very strong -- sometimes distressingly so -- is like that of a cook about the excellence of what she has cooked, not at all about the indigenous origin of every element of the cooking style or ingredient.

Rabindranath Tagore presented a spirited defence of receptivity in a letter to Charlie Andrews:

"Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own. Let me feel with unalloyed gladness that all the great glories of man are mine."

The Hindutva movement that stormed over a huge part of India over the last couple of decades (the storm now seems to have, happily, subsided) did not get any serious popular response at all in West Bengal. There are many different reasons for this (including the burying of the sectarian hatchet by the force of contemporary -- intensely secular -- Bengali politics), but the Hindutva movement's "localist" passion for claiming and glorifying indigenous roots of all Indian achievements had no significant resonance in Bengal.

As it happens, the early Muslim kings of Bengal, who had learned Bengali despite coming from elsewhere, were sufficiently impressed by the multi-cultural history of the region to commission good Bengali translations of the Sanskrit epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. This was in the fourteenth century.

Catholicity in this sense also has a bearing on the acceptance of people of many faiths, with varying backgrounds, some with religious ancestry in other countries. When Rabindranath Tagore told his Oxford audience, with some evident pride, at his Hibbert Lectures in the early 1930s that he came from "a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan, and British," this was both an explicit negation of any sectarian identification, and an implicit celebration of the dignity of being broad-based, rather than narrowly confined.

A similar catholicity can, of course, be seen, among other traditions, in the history of the entire sub-continent, as I have discussed in my book *The Argumentative Indian*. Plural tendencies have been widely present everywhere in the sub-continent. And yet the relative force and the propensity to use the respective tendencies have varied between different regions.

When Buddhism disappeared as a practice from much of India after a thousand years of dominance, it continued to flourish in Bengal up to the late eleventh century, with the Buddhist Pala kings representing the last bastion of Buddhist regal power in India. Between the end of the Buddhist rule and the Muslim conquest of Bengal -- by the Pathans and the Turks -- in the early thirteenth century there is only a thin slice of revivalist Hindu rule for less than two centuries.

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There are moving accounts of how one of these Muslim kings wanted to hear those old Sanskrit stories again and again every evening. They were not, of course, abandoning Islam in any way whatever, but they were also establishing non-religious affiliations in addition to their own religiosity, showing -- seven hundred years ago -- that a person's religious identity need not squeeze out every other aspect of a person's life and attachments.

The issue of multiple identity is quite central to understanding contemporary Bengal -- on both sides of the border. Bengal did have its own share of terrible communal violence between Hindus and Muslims during the 1940s immediately before the partition. But within very few years of separation, Bangladesh, with its overwhelmingly Muslim population, burst into the celebration of Bengali language and culture, which would unite Muslims and Hindus, rather than putting them in warring camps.

If one reads the large circulation newspapers in Bangladesh today, like *Prothom Alo* or The Daily Star or *Sangbad*, one can see how the concerns of the ordinary Bangladeshis go far beyond religion into language, politics, secularism, and also embrace a kind of affirmation of borderless global identities that live side by side with Bengali, Muslim, and Bangladeshi identities.

In West Bengal in India, too, the recognition of multiple identities has been strong, but given the dominance there of parties on the left (West Bengal has the longest history of democratically