

ESSAY

Bengal and the Bengalees

CHITTARANJAN DAS

(Chittaranjan Das --- man of letters, political leader, spokesman for nationalism --- died eighty eight years ago on 16 June 1925. The following article is an abridged version of a speech he delivered at the Bengal Provincial Conference held in Calcutta in April 1917.

We present it for its literary merit to our readers.
---- Literary Editor)

Today in this Great Assembly of Bengalees I have come to speak of Bengal. You have commanded me to do so, and I hasten to answer your command. In this Hall of Union I shall not waste your time by spinning words at long length about my fitness or unfitness. But I have loved this land of mine with all my heart from childhood; in manhood, through all my manifold weakness, unfitness and poverty of soul, I have striven to keep alive its sacred image in my heart, and today, on the threshold of age, that image has become truer and clearer than ever. And I can boast of no claim to leadership, as based on title, the claim that springs from deep and passionate love, that claim is mine. Love, like a lighted lamp, will lead me on my way; and your combined fitness transmitted to me will make up for my deficiencies.

... I rather feel an inexpressible pride in describing myself as a Bengalee. I know that the Bengalee has a culture and philosophy of his own, that he has a law, history, philosophy and literature of his own. And so I can declare with confidence that he knows not my Bengal who describes the Bengalee as wanting in manhood.

But we may take it for granted that the Bengalee has many faults which require to be corrected; and in that sense we may concede for argument that the Bengalee is deficient in manhood. To correct this deficiency ... must be the aim and endeavour of our political efforts.

We repeat ad nauseum the political maxims of Burke; we imbibe the words of Gladstone and think perchance they represent the acme of political wisdom; or we make choice quotations from Seely's 'Expansion of England' and Sidgwick's treatises on politics. There is no end to our talk about schools and systems of politics; we learn by rote all the polished phrases that we can pick up from the texts and scriptures of European politics; and fancying ourselves invincible in our panoply of learned phrases, we challenge the government to enter into a war of words with us. We fancy that we shall triumph by talk and discussion; and so we burden all our endeavour with a load of unnecessary words and formulas.

Only we neglect the one thing essential. We never look to our country, never think of Bengal or the Bengalees, of our past national history, or our present material condition. Hence our political agitation is unreal and unsubstantial --- divorced from all intimate touch with the soul of our people.

What is our relation to the vast masses of our countrymen? Do they think our thought or speak our speech? I am bound to confess that our countrymen have little faith in us. And what is the reason of this unfaith? Down in the depths of our soul, we, the educated people, have become Anglicised; we read in English, think in English and even our speech is translated from English. Our borrowed Anglicism repels our unsophisticated countrymen; they prefer the genuine article to the shoddy imitation. Besides, we seem to look upon them with contempt. Do we invite them to our assemblies and conferences? Perhaps we do, when we want their signatures to some petition to be submitted before the government. But do we associate with them heartily in any of our endeavours? Do we cooperate with them in deed and truth? Is the peasant a member in any of our committees or conferences?

No truth, no right, can be based upon a falsehood; and hence I have said that our political agitation is a lifeless and soulless farce --- a thing without reality and truth. ... The Hindus of Bengal had lost strength and vigour alike in religion, science and life. And the

Musulmans also had similarly declined since the days of Alivardi; their strength and manhood had been swept away in that passion for luxury which is a sure mark of weakness and decadence.

It was in this period of gloom and depression that the English tradesman came to India. He raised his empire in a world of ruins, and by rapid extension of power gave proof of his wonderful energy and vitality. ... We accepted the English government, and with that we accepted the English race --- their culture, their civilization, their luxury and their licence. ... We, in the blindness of our misfortune, drifted away from the ancient landmarks of our soil --- its history, its culture, its law and its philosophy, and went in passionate pursuit of the literature, science and philosophy of the English people.

Then, after long years, Bankim came and set up the image of our Mother in the motherland. He set up the image and inspired it with life. ... More time passed. The trumpet of *Swadeshism* began to sound in 1903. The people of Bengal began once more to understand and realize themselves. Rabindranath sang: 'The soil of Bengal, the water of Bengal --- make it true, O Lord.'

The Swadeshi movement came like a tempest; it rushed along impetuously like some mighty flood. When the soul awakes, it awakes without calculation; when man is born, he is born without calculation. Man comes into life because he must; and the soul rises to consciousness because it must.

Bankim's song went through our ears and thrilled our hearts. We understood once again what it was that Ramkrishna sought and found; and we understood how it was that Keshab Chandra could leave the outer world of argument and enter the inner world of the heart. The speech of Vivekananda filled our souls. We understood that the Bengalee might be a Hindu or Musulman or Christian, but

he continued to be a Bengalee all the same. ... In this world of men, the Bengalee has a place of his own --- a claim, a culture, a duty. ... In the wonderful variety of God's infinite creation the Bengalee represents a distinctive type, and Bengal is the image and embodiment of that type, nay, more, it is the life and soul of that type. ... The Bengalee cannot forget that he is a Bengalee first and last. ... Just as the laws of gravitation existed before the birth of Newton, so the nationality of the Bengalees existed before the advent of the

British people; only the shock of an alien civilization was needed to make us conscious of this spirit; and the shock was supplied from Europe.

We had corn in our granaries; our cattle gave us milk; our tanks supplied us with fish; and the eye was smoothed and refreshed by the limpid blue of the sky and the green foliage of the trees. All day long the peasant toiled in the field; and at eve, returning to his lamp-lit home, he sang the song of his heart.

Today that peasant is gone --- his very breed extinct; gone too is that household with its ordered and peaceful economy of life; the granaries are empty of their golden wealth; the kine are dry and give no milk; the fields, once so green, are dry and parched with thirst. The evening lamp is not lighted; the household gods are not worshipped. ...

How has this fearful nakedness and desolation come about? Whatever the evidence of history may be, considered deeply, the fault is our own. ... Wherein lay our mistake? It sprang from the clash and conflict of ideals. The conflict of ideals between the East and the West --- it is this which has been the cause of our present weakness and feebleness.

The ploughman of Bengal, as he followed his yoke, would sing to himself: 'You know not true village, my soul; fallow lies this field of life, which would give you gold if you tilled it well.' And so the boatman of Bengal, as he plied his oar, would sing: 'Take up the helm, my soul, for I can row no more.' ... Even the tradesman as he returned from mart and market-place would sing: 'The day is gone and evening has come; ferry me over, O Lord.'

(COURTESY: CHITTARANJAN DAS, ED VERINDER GROVER, DEEP & DEEP PUBLICATIONS, NEW DELHI, 1994)

her in the hands of God."

Haroon spent that night in my house. I thought I would give him some money while he was leaving, but he didn't let me have that opportunity. He was not around when I got up in the morning; before sunrise, he left the place and went his way, without letting anyone know.

Crossing the river, the attacking barbarous troops came over to our village after some days. Barely was there any preparedness to ward off their attacks. Our freedom fighters dispersed in different directions in an attempt to save themselves. Also, I along with my family members left the village. Thereafter, we had to weather many a storm, and finally, we took shelter in Calcutta after crossing the border. I never really had any time to think about Haroon and Poribanu. Neither was I in the right mental frame then to inquire about their whereabouts. I had to go through difficult situations and hard times to get a shelter in Calcutta, however, it was made possible through friends. Days were going by under financial constraints. I would spend the mornings and afternoons in a tea-stall drinking tea and reading newspapers wherefrom I would read news on Bangladesh, in particular. While reading those news items I would feel myself like an escapist who had only maintained this much of connection with my motherland where incidents of reckless plunder, killings and rapes were going on unabatedly. One day I was stunned by a newspaper item -- the story of the resistance force, the heroic struggle put up by village women of Pirojpur subdivision under Barisal district.

Even though I couldn't exactly identify the village, I had a hunch that it could be close to the village of the Haroons. The entire village was under the grip of the occupation forces. Going round the village, they embarked on their torture and killing mission. One afternoon, three soldiers entered a crowded area of the village in search of a prey. Almost in a flash, the streets became naked, and the doors and windows of the houses were bolted. The prying eyes of the soldiers came to a sudden halt as they saw four-five nicely-dressed girls standing along a street, but hardly was there any trace of fear, whatever faint it might be, painted in their faces even after having a look at the troops; rather their smiling faces and oblique looks signaled something meaningful and inviting. Enchanted by their amorous hints, the troops like a corolla of insects followed the girls into their room. Knowing it fully well, the girls voluntarily surrendered to the animal instincts of the soldiers.

Meanwhile, the evening slid into the night enveloping the entire area and creating an anesthetizing impact. Under the delicate and flickering light of the candle, the girls, with practiced skills of profligate women, offered drinks to the soldiers. Sipping the drinks, they started dozing off, and then the seductive girls in an opportune moment belligerently launched themselves into action: they planted a heavy heft into each of them and then sliced them into pieces with a sharp chopper. The killers who smeared their hands with the blood of the innocent people screamed in utter pain, but nobody came to their rescue.

I was intrigued by this story of resistance published in a newspaper. Was it a true story or an imaginative one? Could it be a true story? How could our girls do such a job? With the pledge and determination to kill the enemy of the country, how could our girls surmount the innate cultural concept of chastity of women, the so-called wisdom our girls receive from our age-old tradition?

After some days, I got the answer to the question. Incidentally, I met someone from the neighboring areas, who came along with other refugees to Calcutta due to the system-

MUSINGS

The story of the pearl

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA

The Holy Quran mentions that the dwellers of Paradise will be adorned with pearls. In other scriptures the metaphor of a pearl appears in the longer "Hymn of the pearl", a poem noted for its high literary quality.

Today, one might associate one's feelings with the sad saga of a pearl torn from the bosom of a shell.

"Tumi amar shokal belar shuur" was a song that pearl fishermen who went hunting for pearls early in the morning often heard with much amazement. How could such a tune be heard from the depths of the sea? Actually, it was not a song but a deep feeling which ran like currents in the sea. The fishermen had often wanted to get hold of this golden lipped, at times apparently white lipped oyster. But it always escaped their clutches, the reason being that the pearl throbbing in its bosom saved the oyster from all such dangers. But the power of man is infinite when it comes to piling up wealth for himself! One day, when the sky became dark, appearing quite ominous, this oyster was trapped to get hold of the nacreous iridescent, the interior of the shell that gives birth to this pearl and which embraces the soft tissue of this shell. Unseen and unfelt tears rolled down as the pearl was torn from the shelled mollusc.

Thus began the sad story of this special object, valued as a gemstone, an object of beauty for centuries. Perle, as the French call it, but commonly known as pearl, became a metaphor for something very rare, fine, and admirable; and above all, valuable.

Pearls often came under the threat of being crushed and used in cosmetics, medicine, and in paint formulations.

And now comes the tale from the pearl, or Pearl: 'I became Koustubha at which people gazed without even blinking when I helped adorn; according to the Hindu scripture, the Hindu deity, Vishnu, I was fitted boldly on his chest! The reflection, refraction, and diffraction coming from me just held them stupefied!' People exclaimed, "Oh! What colour, what luster, how perfectly round and large." Surprisingly, I became a collector's item, being set as a center piece in a unique statue.'

While people were happily admiring, Pearl became nostalgic...

'How happy we were swimming on moonlit nights, hardly talking, just bathing in its shine in the Sea of Bahrain. He used to fondly call me Margarita, for my yellow radiance. Sadly, tons of oysters and mussels were opened by pearl fishers in search of me, until finally one day they got hold of me; they pulled me away from my helpless oyster. But do they know the truth? My heart was crippled by the veins that I kept on closing, they cut me open and I kept bleeding and I kept bleeding. Bewildered, mine was a cup of sorrow and I drank it and apprehended the essence of life's joy, clothed with a robe of longing.'

His was a yearning that flowed with dreams and ran with spirits. Alas! The ignorant, angry fool, the shell, blind with Pearl's love should have known that Pearl was not his to keep; it was for some men who

were molded with the dust of arrogance! A cry of oppression poured forth, and struck dumb by grief, the shell was left to daydream. Alone, in his dreams came the apparition of Pearl, wonderful, still...

As the pearl was being extracted the oyster remained helpless, staring, through which the sweetness of pity and bitterness of grief poured out over his own being. Love did touch her soul but her body was subjected to the desires of others, and a fate at the hands of people ruled by matter and struck dumb by greed. The sun was disappearing at twilight as though it were weary of the cares of men, loathing their oppression.

The evening began to weave a delicate veil from the threads of darkness and stillness, and instead of the song "Tumi amar shokal belar shuur"; the shell was burdened with cries of grief, not caring for melodies. Thoughts kept on haunting him... 'Will the silence of the night stifle the depths of my heart's song to greet the morn? My pearl has gone to the city where the poisonous breath of men will ride upon her pristine body and cling!'

Meanwhile, a nostalgic pearl recalled: 'I was uprooted from the ancient tree of my soul. So I cut off the memory of a thousand springs and a thousand autumns, planting my soul once again in another place far distant from the paths of the past. Often wearying of the praises showered on me by people, I wished to return to the harbour of the seabed where I was born, drowning in its infinity. Life has become for me a sea of solitude and isolation. I am now thirsty unto death, put in a cage fashioned from gold and jewels, but empty of water.'

Grief however, sometimes is mute, though its eyes scintillate like the stars. 'Thus pass nights while we remain heedless of others' sorrows.

Ages ago, the day greeted them, but they were frightened of both day and night. Night fell and slumber draped its mantle over the face of the earth. The sea was awake and in its wakefulness was a heart throbbing inside a shell, sorcery pervading the seabed.

'Read our story, but have no pity, for pity is shown to the weak and we are ever strong in our agonized love. Only reflection remains on how hope was transformed into despair, joy into sorrow, ease into torment... All that is left is the sea wrapped in a shroud of mist'

When the pearl was being fitted it cried out for the last time: '

I was smitten with the love of my dear shell, my soul melting with love was lonely. It was a mist desiring to be transformed into teardrops, in my beloved's bosom. But, alas, unable!'

Meanwhile, the oyster was breathing his last, singing:

'Leave me all of you, for my soul is drunk with love / leave me to drown in the arms of slumber/ for my eyelids have wearied of this wakefulness/ blow on... reed flutes and weave from their sweet melodies a shroud about my heart which is hastening toward a standstill...'

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA --- POET AND SOCIAL ACTIVIST
--- IS A CONTRIBUTOR TO THE DAILY STAR

FICTION

Twilight

Fairy tale of bangles.....

RUMMANA CHOWDHURY

She gazed outside the patio door with burning blurry eyes. She was determined not to let the tears spill out of her misty eyes. He had told her once while playing with her coloured glass bangles that he loved the tinkling music of the jingle that they make when they touch each other. In the last three months that they had met and fallen head over heels in love with each other she had added a new bangle after each memorable incident. She had caressed them lingeringly with infinite love and tenderness every night in the enveloping ebony darkness before dozing off into her enlightened land of dreams.

She had put on the red bangle with gold polka dots when he had used his first ever endearment for her.

The coffee and chocolate swirled bangle was for the first time he had taken her to his favourite Italian restaurant. The pink with purple flowers was for the first time that he had kissed her. The white one with silver butterflies was in remembrance of their first dance together. The autumn sky blue coloured one with crimson roses was for the first poem that he had written for her. The midnight blue with sparkling stars was for the first time he had taken her to an ancient English churchyard and showed her his favourite old tombstones with heart rendering epitaphs. The gold bangle with copper pansies was for the exclusive moment when he had proposed to her. And the mauve one with corals and fishes was for the first time he had swam into her and she had completely given herself to him.

The tears eventually spilled out as she painstakingly took out one bangle after another from her bruised hand and slowly threw them out. It had become such an exhilarating, intensive habit for her to have them on her hand and listen to their mysterious melodies through every waking minute of every passing day. As the silver moonlight reflected on her glistening tears, she went back to her beloved childhood amongst the rice fields in Bangladesh. She could almost smell the savoury *pithas* and *payesh* that her mother used to make at harvest time. Even as a very young girl she had loved the kerosene lamps with their flickering lights unexpectedly dying out.

RUMMANA CHOWDHURY --- POET AND WRITER
--- IS BASED IN FROM TORONTO, CANADA

FICTION

Poribanu

SATYEN SEN

Translation: HAROONUZZAMAN

(This is the third and concluding segment of this story)

"But I can't help saying one thing. We have been married for such a long time, but this time only I have got the real taste of marriage. Looking at the bright and smiling face of Poribanu, I could feel she was thinking the same way. For some days, we have been living separately, and I can't go to the village in this current situation. I don't know where she is and how she is doing. We haven't been seeing each other for quite some time; however, we stay in touch through letters. Sometimes, it is through people we exchange letters." Haroon paused after a protracted speech.

Anxiously I queried: "Being a woman, how is she managing her days in this crisis? What does she write?"

"It's true she is not having a good time, but she is mentally very strong. She doesn't wilt under any pressure. What does she write? In all her letters, she encourages me like anything. Once she wrote: 'Eat regularly and keep your body fit. Although it's not time to say this, I still repeat, try to stay healthy as far as possible. Besides, be watchful. Under any circumstance, you shouldn't let them catch you. Don't think about me, I am a woman. I have a lot of advantages; like water, I am dissolved in abundant water.'" Haroon answered.

"Did she write anything about the situation out there?"

"Don't say that. I got her last letter some days ago. She wrote: 'They are tightening their noose around us. It is as if they are sitting on our chest. The extent of their torture is indescribable. Often they are launching attacks. They are setting fire to river ports, huts and bazaars leaving their charred remains as a witness. Whenever they see a young man, they shoot at him outright. That's not all. At times, they are barging into houses to take aged women to their camps. I just can't tolerate these things anymore. I feel like doing something, but what to do? The fire that is burning within me, I keep it doused in me. I fervently pray to God so that He lets me kill, at least one of the enemies, before I get killed.'" Haroon stopped briefly after the prolonged talking, and then again he started speaking: "This was her last letter, but she didn't say anything about herself in it. She didn't write anything about her whereabouts and about the life she was having. Also, the man who carried the letter could not say anything specific about her."

"Amazing," I soliloquized while thinking about her, and then I advised him: "Haroon, go and bring her here. If you people are staying there, both of you will get killed. Besides, you look so broken and distraught."

"Sorry Sir, I can't let it happen." He replied immediately and then added: "How can I come out here leaving others in the face of such a danger? If you are talking of her, then I should say that she is a very strong woman. It's just impossible to take her away from that place. Also, I told her the same thing, but she just didn't bother to listen to it. She is a very tough and doggedly obstinate woman. I have known her thoroughly during my days with her, though they were few in number. Now whatever God decides, it will happen. I have left