

I am increasingly becoming a subscriber to the view that the cultural roots of competing societies must be playing a very critical role in its struggle for survival and prosperity. How effectively a society is able to cope with the challenges it faces depend largely on its culture. Some cultures facilitate quick adoption to emerging challenges while others hinder it. This constraint (or advantage) becomes even more acute when time compression is introduced. Given enough time, most societies can change its cultural patterns to adapt to changes in the environment. However, in a rapidly changing environment, the adoption time becomes the primary determinant of success or failure.

For many years, I have been struggling to understand our culture roots—not expressions like song and dance—but the roots: What were we? What kind of environment did we live in? What challenges did we face? What were our social organisations? What were the characteristics of those organisations? What were our institutions? How did we view change? Who were our enemies? Were we mostly agricultural, pastoral, or both? What were our interactions with the outside world? It seems that the answers to these questions are fundamental in developing an understanding of

This historical cultural inheritance has left a deep imprint on the psychology of the people, some of which are:

**Narrow thinking horizon:** Primarily due to its mostly agrarian background where thinking beyond immediate (agricultural) period has no utility—there is no practical utility in conceiving what will happen the year after next. On the other hand, societies that must struggle and compete to survive, either for scarcity of land or other resources, display more ability at planning, as survival for them depend on finding new resources or taking it away from others—activities that cannot be achieved without organization and planning.

**Village oriented thinking:** Since the primary social and political unit was the village, people are more inclined to set priority based on immediate family, extended family and then the village. Things that exist beyond are of little interest to the community. However, one must contrast this with a tribe-oriented thinking. A tribe is typically a much larger social and political organization than a village.

**Authoritarian as opposed to democratic:** Its root

## In Search of Our Cultural Roots

SHAHZAMAN MOZUMDER, BIR PROTİK

our strengths and weaknesses.

So far, I have been able to identify the following:

Mostly fishermen, weavers, potters, and small farmers inhabited the territory that is today called Bangladesh, an extremely fertile delta. The many rivers and even more tributaries, marshes, and canals isolated communities and never allowed large indigenous political organisation. This isolation among apparently nearby communities is evident from the various dialects of Bangla. The fertile soil that allowed relatively easy living conditions was also an effective barrier assisting isolation—the people had no incentive to venture out. The pre-Muslim era caste system also contributed significantly to lower the expectations of these people.

However, many outsiders came to these territories either to take refuge from their enemies, or to exploit the riches of the delta from the simple and naïve people. The majority of the people did not object as they were already being oppressed through the caste system. Consequently, the masses of this delta have always been oppressed and subjugated by other races—from time immemorial.

can again be traced to the village (with its caste system) where decision-making is not based on consensus but by the powerful, and power in a traditional society stems from hereditary. Even the *panchaet* (village council) provided (and still does) arbitration only by the powerful. On the other hand, a society that must plan for uncertainty such as war, and constantly search for new resources would display attitudes that are more democratic. Take war; for instance, to be successful in war, those who take part in battles, the warriors, must agree to win. Without individual commitments to personal sacrifice, battles cannot be won. Such societies, therefore, will tend to cultivate decision making through consensus.

**Absence of significant or complex institutions:** The isolation of the villages did not allow formation of many complex institutions. The people always remained, even psychologically, confined to their villages. Institution building invariably involves a prosperous class within the society that act as patrons to the institutions during both formation and continuity; prosperity of this class is a prerequisite to

success of the institutions. The need for complex institutions evolves as complexity within and among societies increase. Isolation in small communities does not assist formation of complex institutions.

**Aggression:** Traditionally, people were mostly non-aggressive, as aggression results from stress. Even though the majority has been oppressed, if they are made to accept that oppression as fate and if they have very limited opportunity to compare themselves with others, they may not even perceive that they had been oppressed, and consequently they will not feel stressed. However, a docile people can show sufficient aggression if stress increases, which can result from various factors. In contrast, a society that is in constant struggle with other societies may develop a culture of aggression. A pastoral society is likely to be more aggressive than an agricultural society. Even an agricultural society located in a plain and open to attack from all sides will be more aggressive than another agricultural society protected and isolated by natural barriers, and so on.

**Intellectuality:** An agrarian society isolated by many rivers, lakes, marshes, etc., is likely to have more leisure time, part of which will be used for intellectual activities. The intellectual energy will primarily be channeled to activities such as praises of nature and religion. However, this kind of intellectual activity must be contrasted with another kind of intellectual activity that generates science and technology.

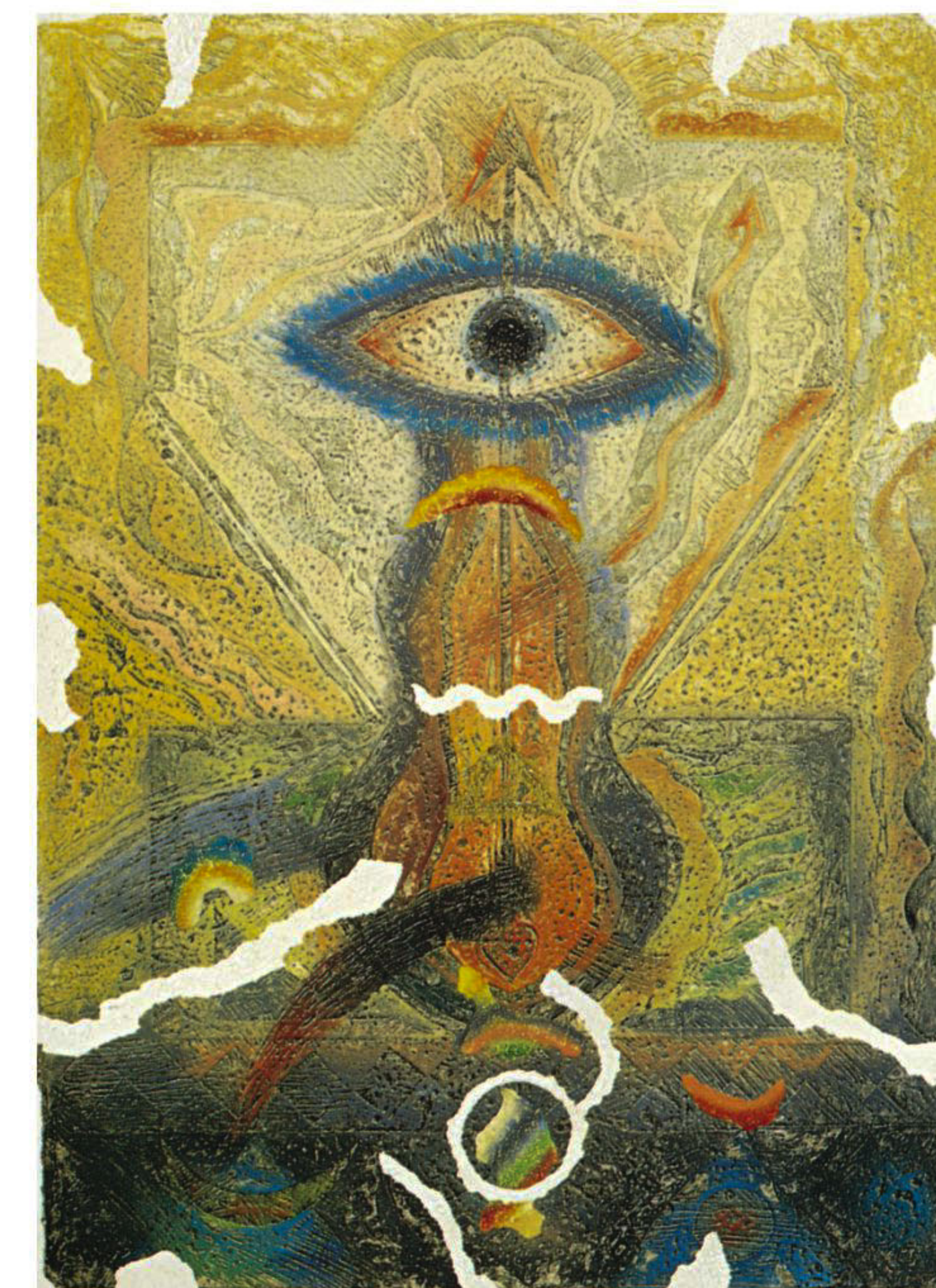
**Respect for authority:** Since the people have always been oppressed and subjugated by others, they remain respectful to authority as long as the authority is forcefully enforced. However, if authority is not enforced, they tend to emulate their oppressors, often without the limitation of the oppressor's culture. The oppressors have their own culture, founded on religion, social structure, class, etc. The self-interest of the oppressors act as a limit to their oppression—they tend not to cross that limit.

**Socialising:** The ample time between agricultural seasons will typically be spent in socialising among individuals and groups. It will often, but not always, takes a religious form. A significant part will also be spent on discussing the crop, weather, neighbors, village politics, and in idle talk. Each member of the society will be intimately familiar about their neighbors and a significant topic for discussion.

**Industriousness:** A society as painted above, where most cannot benefit from their labor; the isolation that denies them to know better, a caste system that does not allow one to grow, and the fertile soil that makes agriculture relatively easy, is not likely to be industrious and will have no incentives to produce beyond subsistence—most will be lazy and poor.

Islam did not arrive in this region before the capture of Bengal by Muhammad Ghuri in the 11th century and the subsequent arrival of Sufi missionar-

ies to spread the religion among the oppressed people. This conversion of the mostly lower casts to this new religion; however, did not significantly influence the social, political, and economic life of the masses. Indeed, it may have added further complexity to an already complex social structure, as political and economic power remained with the powerful, either the old power-holders or the new invaders. In addition, many people started to settle in this region through the patronage of or links to the new rulers. Interestingly, these new settlers, due to their proximity to power and better experience of the world, claimed superiority over the indigenous



Kalidas Karmakar, *Image 5*, woodblock and mixed media, 1984.

converted people, and gradually replaced the social vacuum. The oppressed continued to be oppressed and change in religion did not help improve their material world.

The above socio-cultural profile, if correct, is fundamental to understanding the unfolding of events until today, and should be a critical factor in designing our institutions. If true, emulation of many of the western institutions will consistently fail, and success requires modifying the institutions to suit our peculiar socio-cultural heritage.