

THE LEGEND OF LIFE AND LOVE

AN AMAZING PART OF OUR CULTURE THAT REVEALS THE TRIUMPH OF LOVE AND HUMANITY OVER HUMAN FATE.

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

Composed between 13th to 18th century AD, Mangal Kavya is one of the most precious treasures of Bengali literature. It is actually Hindu religious poetry composed by local bards depicting man's relationship with the deities revered in rural Bengal. Among many Mangal Kavyas, the most famous and the oldest one is Manasamangal Kavya, the epic that tells how a beautiful and devoted wife Behula regained her husband's life by impressing the gods with her alluring dance.

Manasa is the serpent goddess worshipped among Hindus living throughout Bengal for her 'control' over all the snakes. The epic started with the conflict between Manasa and a rich merchant called Chand Saodagar, a worshipper of Shiva who refused to worship Manasa and did not even recognise her as a deity. Full of vengeance, Manasa threatened Chand that she would kill all of his progeny and destroy his wealth. Then, seven merchant ships owned by Chand drowned one by one and seven of his sons were also killed by snake bite.

Chand was disheartened but not broken. His youngest son Lakshinder was still alive. Chand arranged marriage of his son Lakshinder with Behula, a beautiful girl whose destiny told that she would



PHOTO: COURTESY

never be a widow. The determined Chand also built an impregnable iron palace for the newlywed couple so that no snake could sneak into it. However, threatened by Manasa, the builder of the palace left a hole into the palace to make way for the killer snake. On the wedding night, the snake entered the room and in the morning Behula found her husband dead.

But Behula refused to succumb. Behula took her husband's body to a tiny raft and sailed it towards the heaven. She faced many dangers during her epic journey along the river. Winning all the obstacles,



PHOTOS: NAILA AZAD



she finally reached the heaven and there, she convinced all the gods with her enchanting dance. The impressed gods agreed to return Lakshinder's life.

From time immemorial, this life-giving dance locally called 'Behular Lachari' became an integral part of Bengali culture. The dance was practiced in every celebration of rural Bengal especially in monsoon when snake bites are common. Bengali farmers used to portray the epic love and courage of Behula, the symbol of Bengali womanhood, through their unique theatrical dances. However, recently this very appealing part of our culture is about to be forgotten.

This year Shadhona- centre for advancement of South Asian culture and Jatrik- a cultural tourism and art management company organised a festival in Tangail. There, local dance troupes from

different parts of the district re-enacted the tales of Manasamangal through spellbinding dance and musical performances.

The epic of Manasamangal has profound historic and anthropological significances. It describes the status conflict between non-Aryan and Aryan deities and finally the non-Aryan deity Manasa had to succumb to the Aryan gods. It is a beautiful allegorical depiction of how Aryan culture had replaced the local Bengali culture time to time. This epic tale also declares the victory of love and humanity over fate and religions. We should take immediate step to preserve this amazing piece of cultural heritage. Otherwise we might lose another part of our folk culture from sheer negligence.

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CULTURE

HERITAGE

PRITILATA'S BATTLE

APURBA JAHANGIR

PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

We know Chittagong as the second capital city and the biggest port city of our country. Filled with up and coming businesses, Chittagong has built quite a reputation. The district also holds a rebellious history. The fact that the first rebellion against the British Empire occurred in Chittagong is quite intriguing. The famous tale about the Chittagong East European Club and the martyr Pritilata Wadedar took place in the heart of Pahartali.

In 1930, Surya Sen popularly known as Master Da along with a group of rebels planned to attack several British establishments which is known as the famous armoury raid. Though the plan did not work, it scared the British Raj. Surya Sen and some of his comrades got caught while others escaped or got killed. One of



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the escaped comrades was Pritilata Wadedar, a former school teacher, who participated in the telegraph office attack and supplied grenades in the Jalalabad battle.

After the Jalalabad battle, Surya Sen's revolutionary group disengaged its activities due to lack of man power. In 1932, Pritilata Wadedar planned to seek vengeance. She gathered a few rebels including Kalishankar Dey, Bisheshwar Roy, Prafulla Das and Shanti Chakraborty, who could somehow manage to survive. The plan was to attack the Chittagong East European Club. There was a significant reason why they chose to attack the club. It had a sign on the front gate which clearly stated, "Indians and Dogs are not allowed".

Surya Sen assigned Pritilata to lead the group as she would attract less attention. The members of the group were given potassium cyanide and were told to swallow it if they were caught.

On September 23, Pritilata dressed as a Panjabi male, attacked the club with

her associates. The attack was launched at around 10:45 pm. There were 40 people in the club including high ranking British officers. A few officers with revolvers started shooting right after the attack, which killed some of Pritilata's associates.

Pritilata herself was injured and got trapped by the British police. Finding no way out, she swallowed the potassium cyanide and killed herself. The next morning the police found the body and identified her. While conducting the search, the police found a few leaflets, photograph of Ramkrishna Biswas, things like bullets, whistle and a draft of their plan of attack.

The historical structure of the East European Club still stands in Pahartali with a monument of Pritilata Wadedar. It is now being used as a government office. The authorities plan on renovating the structure soon by tearing down the building. If that is the case, then we will be losing one of the major historical battle fields that our country has ever witnessed. ■



"WE CAN'T HELP EVERYONE BUT EVERYONE CAN HELP SOMEONE."

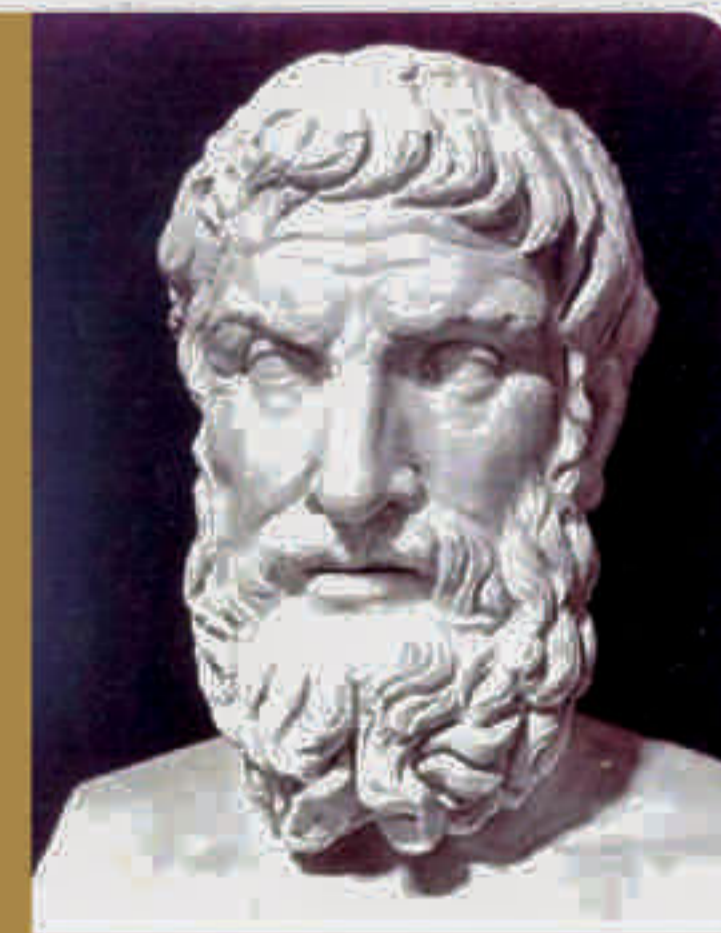
RONALD REGAN
40th President of USA

PEARLS OF WISDOM



"THE MOST TERRIBLE POVERTY IS LONELINESS AND THE FEELING OF BEING UNLOVED."

MOTHER TERESA
Humanitarian worker and missionary



"ALL OTHER LOVE IS EXTINGUISHED BY SELF LOVE; BENEFICENCE, HUMANITY, JUSTICE, PHILOSOPHY SINK UNDER IT."

EPICURUS
Ancient Greek Philosopher