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ABDUL KARIM'S DISCOVERIES

Origins of modernity in Bengali literature

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'As a man in a dream who fails to lay hands upon another whom he is pursuing—the one could not escape nor the other overtake—even so neither could Achilles come up with Hector, nor Hector break away from Achilles.'

—Homer, *The Iliad*.

'It is thus to an empty identity that they cling, those who take it to be something true, insisting that identity is not difference but that the two are different. They do not see that in saying, 'Identity is different from difference,' they have thereby already said that identity is something different.'

—Hegel, *The Science of Logic*.

'On June 23, 1757,' Sir Jadunath Sarkar, a former Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University, once wrote, 'the middle ages of India ended and her modern age began.' That this indomitable truth should have been touted in 1948 and that also in a volume called 'History of Bengal, Muslim Period: 1200-1757,' perhaps adds a dimple to the grimace of history. 'When Clive struck at the Nawab,' our wise old historian noted, 'Mughal civilization had become a spent bullet.' 'Today the historian, looking backward over the two centuries that have passed since then,' as for his part claimed this bigot of a chronicler, 'knows that it was the beginning, slow and unperceived, of a glorious dawn, the like of which the history of the world has not seen elsewhere.'

The literature produced since the conquest in 1757 has often been described as 'modern' literature. By 'modern' is obviously meant 'European'. To wit: 'The literary history of Bengal in the 19th century is really the history of the influence of European ideas on Bengali thought,' wrote Sushil Kumar De, once of Dhaka University. 'Taking 1800 A.D. to be roughly the date of commencement of the modern era of Bengali Literature,' this literary historian also claims: 'The problem of English education now decisively settled, the triumph of the West was fully proclaimed; and the literature as well as the society, in trying to adjust itself to this new order of things, began to take a distinctly new tone and colour.' This view of our literature, which is still accorded 'almost an axiomatic status,' indicates at best 'nothing but a failure of memory.' I wish only to raise a point or may be two here.

Even a cursory review of early Bengali literature, for instance of the works rediscovered by Abdul Karim (1871?-1953) at the turn of the twentieth century, makes this inflexible 'historical' argument quite vulnerable. This is perhaps the burden of my slight endeavour here. Who is then this Abdul Karim, anyway? When Haraprasad Shastri (1853-1931) introduces him as 'a Muhammadan gentleman in Chittagong' no one is surprised, for in putting it that way Shastri is only furrowing a well-worn tradition, if in reverse. Muhammedan gentlemen are not supposed to be reading and writing Bengali, or procure Bengali manuscripts, let alone produce them. And that too in far away Chittagong, a land forsaken by Indian gods!

The search for manuscripts of Bengali Literature, as a visibly moved Haraprasad Shastri put it in Calcutta Review in 1917, 'is still going on unabated, the newspapers and magazines teem with descriptions of old manuscripts of old works brought to light and two names stand prominent in this department of literary activity: one is a Muhammadan gentlemen in Chittagong, Moulvi Abdul Karim, who has collected and described several thousands of Bengali manuscripts of works written both by Hindus and Muhammadans and his descriptions are always full and accurate and possess much literary and historical value.' 'The other gentleman,' Haraprasad adds, 'is Babu Siva Ratan Mitra who has made a large collection of manuscripts and described them but has not yet been able to publish much.'

On Abdul Karim, or rather on Chittagong, his site of being, Haraprasad Shastri throws up also a highly excitable comment: 'Chittagong being an out-of-the-way place free from the vicissitudes of the richer and more favoured districts of Bengal have preserved many valuable relics of the past and among these the manuscripts of the works of Bengali Literature, and it is a matter of congratulation that these have fallen into the hands of such an earnest and enthusiastic worker like our friend Abdul Karim.'

Haraprasad Shastri, being his well-cultivated self, upheld his own cause only in the wake of the other two explorers: 'While these earnest men were enthusiastically working in the plains with Bengali manuscripts, Bengali works, their history, their influence, their literary merit and so on, a Bengali Brahman, who for obvious reasons should be nameless here, was working patiently, quietly with the dusty heaps of palmleaf manuscripts in the Royal and private collections in the

depth of the Himalayas, in the city of Kathmandu and in its neighborhood.' It is in course of this not a slight endeavor that he discovered manuscripts of those now famous oldest extant Bengali texts, better known as Caryapadas in the annals of our literature.

Let's get it then from the good old Brahman's own mouth: 'But the delight of this Brahman knew no bound when he laid his hands, one fine morning, on a palmleaf manuscript in the early 12th century Bengali script, of a collection of Bengali songs with Sanskrit commentary attached. About the date of the script he had no doubt. It was Bengali on the face of it, much older Bengali handwriting than that given in Professor Bendall's photo etching at the end of his catalogue of Buddhist manuscripts in the Cambridge University Library, and belonging to the year 1198.'

'If so, he argued,' goes on our good Brahman, 'the script belongs to the early 12th century, the Sanskrit commentary must be [of] earlier [vintage] than that time. The collection of songs must precede the commentary, and the composition of the songs must precede the collection. The songs belong to 20 different authors, whose signatures are invariably attached to the last lines of their songs. The authors therefore must belong to the 10th century at least, and all these afforded food for his thought, reflection and study for several years.' Besides the fifty songs, two collections of dohas, or dohakosas, were also discovered shortly afterwards.

These reflections on the songs and dohas led to a number of tentative judgments. First, their language was identified to be a form of old Bengali: 'When the songs are Bengali of the 10th century, the dohas represent the archaic dialect of that period.' Secondly, 'the originality claimed by the Vaisnavas in inventing Kirtana [some 'six hundred years later,' as adds Shastri] does not hold good any longer,

reasons. First, these remarks do suggest that origins of the Bengali language itself must be a modern incident and that the literature it spawns is also nothing if not modern. My second point is that these remarks of Haraprasad Shastri's anticipates mutatis mutandis conclusions we might draw from the more than remarkable new discoveries made by Abdul Karim, better known as the Sahityavisarad, since 1893.

What's new, then? Abdul Karim discovered that there existed also Muslim writers of quality in Bengali literature and, what's more, their quantity also is far from negligible. In diction their works, for instance, those of the 17th century lauraetes Kazi Daulat (1600-1638) or Syed Alaol (1607-1680) are no less 'elevated and dignified,' i.e., Sanskritized in measure than Bharatchandra Ray's (1712-1760) or Madhusudan Datta's (1824-1873) of later fame. Genealogically speaking, the Bengali Muslim writers drew on both pre-Islamic Indian and Indo-Islamic materials found in languages such as Arabic, Persian and Hindusthani. In terms of thematic apperception, they made forays into much terra incognita for Bengali literature. In their desire to relay to a Bengali reading public or rather auditors the culture of Islam by way of a standard Bengali, they gave pride of priority to the secular motifs. Apart from a few manuals drafted for religious purposes, the dominant motifs in all works of the time are secular.

Syed Sajjad Husain, English translator of the Descriptive Catalogue of Bengali Manuscripts by Abdul Karim, writes in his introduction: 'Syed Sultan's *Nabi Bangsa* [Genealogy of the Prophets], perhaps the most ambitious work of its kind in which the author's aim is to give a biographical account of the prophets from Adam to Muhammad, was undoubtedly inspired by the desire to create for the Bengali Muslims a kind of a

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'Abdul Karim Sahityavisarad Memorial Lecture' delivered in Dhaka in 2003, i.e. on the savant's 50th death anniversary, also applies the Chakrabarty thesis. He too finds Abdul Karim as a nationalist of sorts, a hysterical type that is. Bhadra translates 'Politics of Identity' as 'Atmasattar Rajniti'.

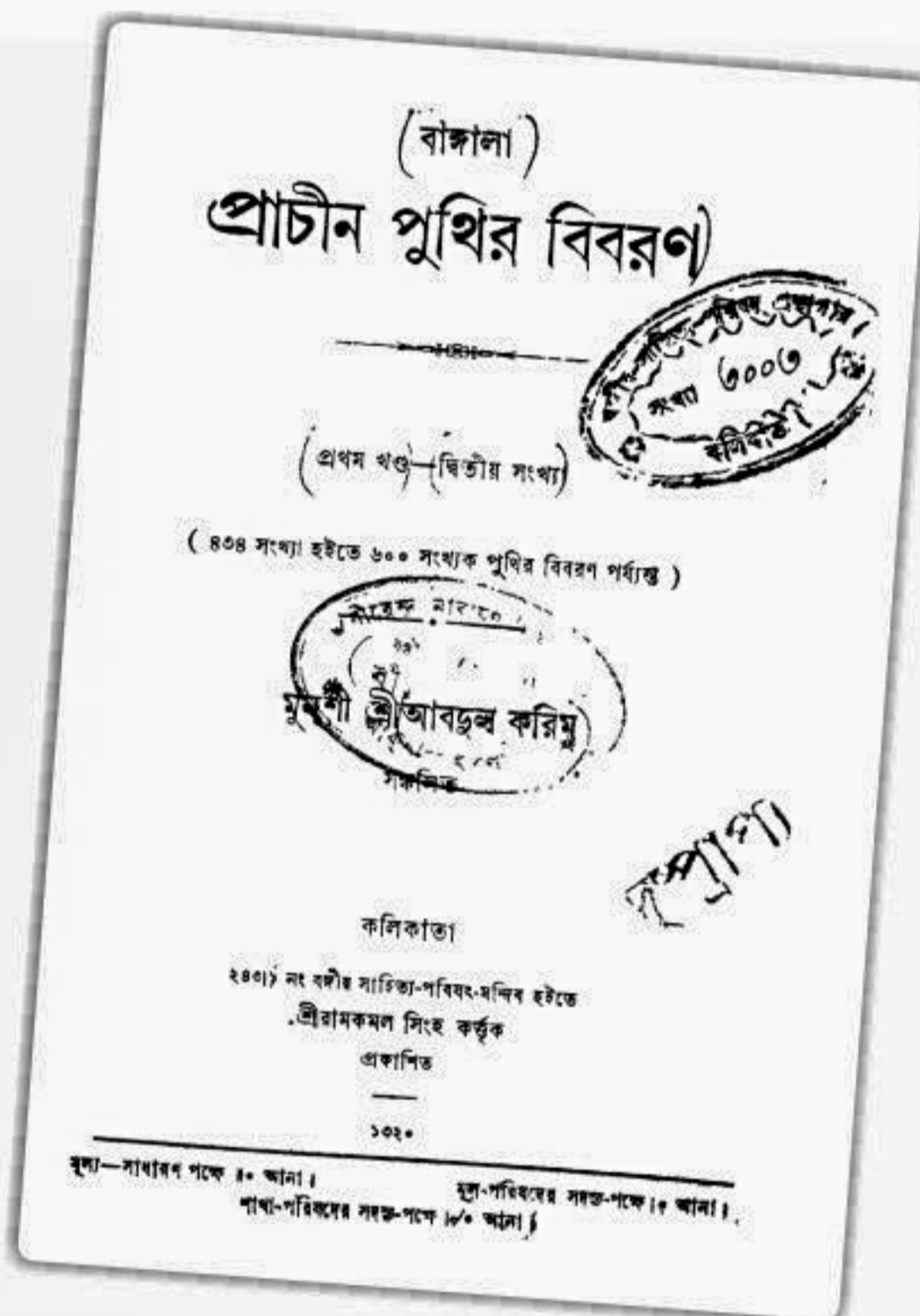
Does he pay any attention to Abdul Karim's numerous writings or for that matter to the arguments of the old Haraprasad Shastri? Apparently, and sadly I must say, not at all. He depends only on the catalogue, without reading into the texts at all. This in Bhadra's view Abdul Karim appears to embody it all, the contradictions of all nationalism in Bangladesh. He stops just short of calling it 'Muslim nationalism'. What is right or wrong with Abdul Karim? Bhadra finds it in Abdul Karim's putative accent on Chittagong, where he just happened to find almost all of his manuscripts, as also on his valorization of Bangladesh as a privileged site where he found himself domiciled on partition in 1947 and, finally, in his fervor on the identity of Muslim poets, his co-religionists, as indicative, nay proof of his identity politics. It seems Syed Sajjad Husain is not dead, nor Sir Jadunath Sarkar either.

Time, if not space here, today hardly permits me to take up the issue further. But I chuckle. I will limit myself here to only flagging some of the holes in their cosmos. These gentlemen are yet to address the question of modernity in Bengali Literature. Syed Alaol, as everyone now knows, was by all evidence Abdul Karim's most favourite star. There may be more reason than one for his appreciation of a savant of a poet like Alaol. It just happened that he also was a Muslim, a rather good Muslim well-embroiled in letters. Dusan Zbavitel, a European specialist in Bengali literature, has not long ago written: 'It was not easy for a Muslim poet to be recognized by the Hindu-dominated Bengali society, in the subsequent era, but Alaol did win distinction and general recognition. His diction was flawless and his style was truly poetic. As a good narrator he was able to enlarge the thematic repertory of Bengali literature by attractive and widely read renderings of foreign sources and to invigorate the tendencies towards a definite secularization of Bengali poetry.'

If secularization indeed arrives how far could our modern age lag behind? This will take us back to square one: what is modernity anyway? 'When the sun dipped into the Ganges behind the blood-red field of Plassey, on that fateful evening of June, did it symbolize the curtain dropping on the last scene of a tragic drama?' Or, 'Was that followed by a night of eternal gloom for India,' as the poet of Plassey imagined Mohan Lal foreboding from the ranks of the losers?' This hoary cry coming from the wilderness once mastered, Tarzan-like, by Sir Jadunath Sarkar now seems to have found its resounding echo in the worldly voices of our new philosophers in global times, you know them, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gautam Bhadra and their many readers who must remain nameless here for obvious reasons. One never knows who knows.



Abdul Karim Sahityavisarad (1871?-1953)



as those old Buddhist songs are in no way inferior to these later Vaishnava marvels.

Not least, the social standing of the Buddhist authors of the old differed not inconsiderably from that of the Vaisnava authors. In Haraprasad Shastri's own words: 'In those old days Brahmins were few in Bengal and their followers almost a negligible quantity. The little Aryan culture the people then had came filtered through Buddhism. But still the poets of the songs came from the highest society of the time. Their language was not boorish but elevated and dignified and they tried to make it as much Sanskritized as they could for even then Sanskrit was supposed to give dignity and add respectability.' The comparisons, 'Haraprasad notes, 'are drawn from natural objects such as [lotuses], mountains, rivers, etc., but what strikes one as peculiar is the oft-repeated simile with boats and their constituent parts, the oars, helms, ropes, pegs, and so on. Another fruitful source of comparison is the milking of cows. The authors seem to have been substantial boatmen, cowherds and men in a similar position.'

For some time this must have sounded seditious, or sacrilegious to Shastri's compatriotic ears, whom he called 'spiteful people'. 'Spiteful people may magnify a printing mistake here and a clerical there into grave serious mistakes and inexcusable faults, but that is the storehouse of information to which everyone must turn in his need, he wrote at the time in turning to the Buddhist contribution to proto-Bengali and Bengali literature of our early modern ages.

I I condescend to cite here the discoverer of the oldest known Bengali songs of the 10th century or thereabouts, in some detail, for two

national religious epic. It was intended to be both historical and imaginative. In his descriptions of Satan in particular the author gave free rein to his imagination though the didactic purpose is never lost sight of.' Sayed Sultan (1550?-1648?) is, per Muhammad Enamul Haq, 'one of the oldest known poets of Bengal.'

To provide a second instance here let's quote Sajjad Husain once more: 'Similarly, Muhammad Khan [1580-1650], author of *Maqtul Husain* [The Slaying of Husain], and one of the disciples of Syed Sultan, took up the story of the conflict between Husain, grandson of Prophet Muhammad and Yazid, ruler of Damascus culminating in the former's defeat and assassination at Karabala. The purpose clearly was not only to write history but to impress upon the Muslim the lessons of one of the greatest tragedies in the annals of Islam.' I hope a third instance, in addition, should suffice for now. In *Muhammad Hanif Larai* [Muhammad Hanifa's Battles] 'we meet a semi-historical person called Hanifa believed to be a son of Caliph Ali, who engaged in a series of adventures which are far from being historical,' and 'Fatemar Suratnama [In Praise of Fatima's Beauty] recreates the daughter of prophet Muhammad in the likeness of a Bengali beauty.' The words indeed inverted commas, let it be noted, are Syed Sajjad Husain's.

This free rein of imagination, only to be expected in modern literature, has caused some consternation—nay concern—in late colonial Bengal's learned circles. One hypothesis, advanced by Syed Sajjad Husain, holds that it 'appears to have been to create in Bengali for the Muslim readers something like an exact equivalent, built out of Muslim history, of the Hindu myths and legends which formed the stuff and substance of

contemporary Bengali literature.'

Bengali Muslim authors, c. 15th-18th centuries found themselves confronted with two main modes of literary works, 'as part of the general heritage of the Bengali language,' as Sajjad Husain puts it. 'One was a corpus of lyrical literature developed by the [Vaisnava] poets. The central figures in the [Vaisnava] cult were Krishna and Radha, and the literature which these poets produced wove beautiful fantasies around their passionate attachment to each other.' In course of the development, Krishna and Radha got refined into symbols into which profound cosmic and spiritual meanings could be read.' The manifest eroticism of Vaisnava lyric poetry is often explained away as a metaphor for 'a deeper mysticism,' with Krishna and Radha substituting for aspects of 'the timeless and the temporal,' of the transcendent and the subject. The second type of literature that the Muslim poets confronted, 'Sajjad Husain observes, 'was represented by the *Mangala Kavyas*, poems celebrating a pantheon of local deities.'

III Syed Sajjad Husain, not unlike the hoi polloi of this minor profession, seems to have collapsed most works of Muslim writers into the category of puthi literature, of a literature of mere imitation, of Dobhashi puthi vintage 18th century, and what's more, he seems to completely deny the genre any literary worth whatsoever. He, however, would grant them some negligible felicity in the ethnographic archive of the modern. To wit: 'As the traditional culture of the villages disintegrates gradually under the impact of industrial and technological change, the puthi seems destined to die out as literary form sooner or later. Recognition of this truth need not however prejudice our appreciation of the puthi as a magnificent record of the workings of the popular mind in East Pakistan [what is now Bangladesh], as vast storehouse of legends and stories, as social document of incalculable value providing an index to the thoughts and beliefs of the people of East Pakistan.'

Unfortunately, Husain is not alone. He seemingly would find himself in good company. His not so strange bedfellows are certain Brahminical gentlemen from the West Bengal State of our great neighbor India (i.e., Bharat). Sometime ago Dipesh Chakrabarty, a Brahminical gentleman as well as a world shattering historian in Chicago among other sites, made the remarkable discovery that the old Bengali literary historian and editor Dineshchandra Sen (1866-1939), a Baidya of East Bengal, by the way, had been long fascinated with the folk-literature of Eastern Bengal on account of an affliction, of a species of parochial nationalism, or even better put, a pathology named 'politics of identity.' Our good friend Dipesh Chakrabarty gives it a pretty hoary sounding title: 'Romantic Archives,' that is to say a species of medieval relic, now fortunately adrift in the global ocean.

Gautam Bhadra, another distinguished historian and a Kayastha gentleman, in his

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