

Spotlight on an essence of Bangladesh's culture

AUTHOR: SHAMSUZZAMAN KHAN

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

(Bangla Academy, 2015)

IT goes without saying that rising globalism in this age of information technology has had, is having, and will continue to have for the foreseeable future, a significant impact on societies and cultures across conventional nation-state borders. Of course, this impact, irrespective of being positive or negative, is overwhelmingly a one-way traffic. Even if we accept, for

harmony but of clashing moral spheres. Now we have, in the colourful, yet accurate, words of a premier scholar of global communication, Majid Tehranian, "(t)he lords of the electronically moated opulent castles and the rebellious serfs, shamans, and jesters surrounding them have confronted one another through a variety of violent encounters: physical, political, economic, cultural, and environmental."

The influence of global communication on international cultural life is probably its most visible manifestation. And that impact is, to reiterate, almost entirely one-way: from the few lords of the communication manors in a few advanced countries (notably the US, but also Great Britain, not to forget Australia --- remember, Rupert Murdoch hails from that country!) to the vast multitude of diverse residents of the countryside, to carry on with the analogy of the erroneous concept of the 'global village'. Such pervasive cultural incursion is no less menacing to a country than a massive military presence in its proximity, though far less obvious. As another scholar of global communication, Hamid Mowlana, trenchantly states, "The notion that information and communication are, in fact, culturally neutral is the greatest myth of our time." Since mass migrations and international trade began millennia ago, cultural interface was inevitable, and cultures underwent modifications, wholesale additions and subtractions included, under the influence of the interactions. That is not at all a bad thing. In fact, a static culture represents a moribund society. Nonetheless, some changes, those representing the enduring core values of a culture, should not happen. Such cultural transformations debase a society, and diminish group identity.

theoretical purposes, Canadian Marshall McLuhan's concept of a 'global village', envisioned years before the Internet was first developed for the US Department of Defense, that village has, in practice, turned out to be a reflection of old English fiefdoms, a place not of

crucial aspect of Bangladesh's culture, folklore, through articles written by local and international authorities on the subject. The chief editor, a longtime scholar and devotee of folklore, lays out the centrality of culture and folklore in the "Prelude" to the book: "Bangladesh has benefited from cultural pluralism in spite of a semblance of communal rancor resulting from political bitterness. Folklore presents enormous evidence of communal harmony." And, then, elaborates: "In Bangladesh we are concerned with the safeguarding of minor cultures and the study of folklore pragmatically." As several of the articles spell out, or at least indicate, they have not been easy to execute in practice. Khan is particularly incisive in acknowledging the inevitability of the encroachment of globalism and the necessity of preserving a society's core values and culture in the face of such onslaught: "In the current state of globalization...economic greed and political dominance manifest, and as such it is a real threat to cultural autonomy for the weaker nations. Apart from promoting national cohesiveness, folklore can stand as a bulwark to thwart the cultural dominance of the technologically superior entities.... While we recognize the necessity of knowing others and opening the mind for contacts and exchanges with people belonging to different cultural traditions, it is also important to preserve one's own heritage."

And what is the state of our folklore and culture in the first decade and a bit of the twenty first century? Let some of the writers, twenty two in all, thirteen of them Bangladeshis, elucidate. Mahbul Haque ("Folklore in the Global Context") is seriously concerned that the age-old Baul tradition is being undermined by those he terms the pop Bauls or of the fake variety of the present times using heavy metal music, making bizarre and indecent body gestures, and wearing weird costumes. "This," he says, "is one of the many instances where our folklore is being seriously affected by harmful cultural invasions." In a very short piece ("Secular Identity and Bengali

Nationalism: A Perspective from the folklore of Bangladesh"), Shafiqur Rahman Chowdhury is concerned that the forces of religious intolerance and fanaticism have been mounting a challenge to the secular and syncretistic modes of cultural expression that the folklore of Bangladesh strongly espouses. However, he concludes by placing his faith upon the success of Prajanma Chatter to save and secure secularism, the driving force behind Bengali nationalism and the folklore of Bangladesh. We are in trouble if we have to depend solely on a transient movement to preserve our secular traditions!

Saifuddin Chowdhury ("Effects of Globalization on Bangladesh Folklore: Two Contexts"), as if to reassure us that the protection and continuation of secularism rest with a variety of people and practices, relates how the Gambhira has metamorphosed into a secular folksong after discarding its religious overtones. That secularism is splendidly exemplified by, among other things, the Sufi tradition of the country and the mysticism of Lalon Shah. The section on Sufism includes the pieces of Pierre-Alain Baud ("Sufi Soul or Sufi Soap?"), Frank J. Korom ("Modern Anxieties and Sufi Solutions"), and Muhammad Zamir ("Sufism"). Korom portrays an intriguing mystic from Sri Lanka, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, while Zamir's is a succinct, yet thoughtful, discussion on the origins and practices of Sufism. Zamir singles out Lalon Shah for special treatment as a great humanist, and eloquently captures the essence of his songs: they "aim at an indescribable reality beyond realism." Another folklore form, and an endangered cultural species at that, the yatra, is discussed with passion, sensitivity, and sympathy, not to mention a sense of foreboding, by Christina Nygren ("Yatra in the Centre of the Storm: A Bengali Tradition in Danger"). She fears its "unfortunate stagnation or even imminent extinction" in the face of negative influences from the proponents of highbrow culture. She pleads for the preservation of "this ancient indigenous popular and folk theatre form, which

is part of the world heritage of traditional folk performing arts."

Niaz Zaman's ("The Bangla Baromashi Songs of Sorrow and Celebration") is a delightful depiction of the light-hearted Bangali in tune with nature as exemplified by having songs written and sung as odes to twelve months of the Bangla year. To her, "...these songs which juxtapose the sadness of separation from the husband/lover and agricultural scenes are celebratory more than sorrowful. They celebrate the ever-changing splendours of the natural months as well as the bonds between men and women which separation cannot destroy." Indranil Acharya ("Quest for an Alternative Aesthetic in Bangla Dalit Folk Poetry") touches on a sensitive (on several counts) topic, and concludes with an assessment broad enough not to ruffle too many feathers: "Bengali Dalit poetry strives to occupy a space where contradictory feelings of anger, cooperation, frustration, toleration, resentment, pity all cohabit to create a complex web." Murshid Anwar ("Chazir Gan") discusses at length a song that originated from the popular legend of Ghazi Pir, lauds it as exemplifying religious harmony prevailing in rural Bangladesh, and categorizes it as a combination of three genres: a folk tale, a folksong, and a folk belief.

Jawaharlal Handoo ("The Status of Folklore in Indian Society and Discourse: A Theoretical Viewpoint") is outraged that, to many historians, a culture and a civilization have been reckoned only in terms of stone structures, wars, conquests, colonization and slavery. He is even more indignant that, very often, both the scholars and laypersons subsume folklore and oral traditions as relics of the backward past and of no use in the modern processes of development and modernization. He urges for the reversal of such thinking. Syed Jamil Ahmed ("Exorcizing the Orientalist Ghost of Messrs. Thoms, Temple, Day et al.: A Call for Decolonizing Folklorists of Bangladesh"), in a hard-hitting essay, advises: "...unless the legacy of the colonial village is uprooted by decolonizing the

mind of the folklorists, folklorists of Bangladesh will continue to be the playground of romantic pastoralists driven by transparent Orientalism and dressed as postcolonial folklorists."

In his illuminating keynote speech ("Recording Folklore"), Henry Glassie lays down the truism that, "Folklore is a human universal...a central, perpetual reality, always present, even changing." He then prognosticates (not forgetting to end with a disparaging remark): "The twenty-first century...will be the Asian century. Folklore will be studied in relation to preservation and cultural autonomy in the context of the high-tech, neocolonial expansion of greed called globalization." Shamsuzzaman Khan ("In Search of a Model for Bangladesh's Folklore Materials") argues that both the diachronic and synchronic methods have to be employed in the study of folklore of Bangladesh rather than just the synchronic method being preferred. That is because, "(s)ince this subcontinent of ours has a history of great antiquity and a perennial backwardness in the social development, non-literate culture or oral culture still has an abiding influence."

Margaret Ann Mills ("Trickster between Myth and Tale") and Ulo Valk ("Magic, Participation and Genre: Narrative Experiences of the Supernatural") have written two delightful pieces on two subjects that stride a gray area between myth and possibility, while M. Shahinoor Rahman ("Belief in the Evil Eye: A Critical Study") deals with a topic that will, I dare say, remain a wonderful superstition for many Bengalis to follow for a long time. Susmita Chakrabarty ("When Folklore becomes a Survival Tool for the Laboring Women in the City of Rajshahi") highlights a folk food called kalairuti that sustains labouring men and women in Rajshahi city. *Folklore: New Challenges* is a monumental book that has knowledgeable writers on folklore expounding on various topics related to it --- ranging from the theoretical aspects to its practice in Bangladesh. Going through it will be a worthwhile journey.

The reviewer is an actor and educationist.

Folklore New Challenges

"Bangladesh has benefited from cultural pluralism in spite of a semblance of communal rancor resulting from political bitterness. Folklore presents enormous evidence of communal harmony."

Buddhism in Bangladesh since 2nd century BCE

REVIEWED BY PROF. DR. SHARIF UDDIN AHMED

EDITOR: BULBUL AHMED, PUBLISHED BY KARUNANGSHU BARUA

AUGUST 2015, ISBN-978-984-90160-S-2, PRICE : TAKA 4000; USD 50; EURO 46

WITH the current occurrence of religious intolerance and rise of fundamentalism, the publication of Buddhist Heritage of Bangladesh is a welcome relief. Once again, this anthology will focus on the cultural and religious heritage of Bangladesh. Bangladesh, being a melting pot of diverse culture and religions, has developed a tradition of showing reverence to all religions and culture.

Bulbul Ahmed, one of our bright, young brand of archaeologists and historians, is the editor of this anthology. He and his colleagues have undertaken the much needed task of highlighting Bangladesh's contribution to achieving harmony and tolerance among different religious and cultural groups throughout its history. Buddhism has played a distinctive role in this regard. The book contains seventeen essays and innumerable images and drawings.

Several historians, archaeologists and others have observed that Buddhism appeared in Bangladesh before the Common Era (CE), to be precise during the Mauryan Rule and accepted the presence of a Buddhist community in Bangladesh in about 2nd century BCE on the basis of Mahasthan Brahmi Inscription of c. 2nd century BCE. Of late this has been challenged (see Journal of Bengal Art, Vol. I, 1996, pp. 33-38). Though the issue is still being debated, the story of Buddhism in Bangladesh can be safely narrated on the basis of various sources including archaeological findings. This is what this anthology has done.

No story of a religion can be completed without dwelling upon its proponent. The proponent of Buddhism was a Prince of Nepal turned into a Savior of Mankind. His principal concern was to save mankind from worldly sufferings and miseries. At the time of his enlightenment, he was only 35 years old. For

the next 45 years he preached his beliefs throughout the larger part of India. But his visit to Bangladesh, very close to his seat of activities cannot be confirmed by any yardstick of historical justification. Buddhism and Buddhist community flourished in Bangladesh certainly from the time of Emperor Asoka (BCE 268-231).

From the time of the Gupta Empire (320-550 CE), Buddhism took deep root in Bangladesh, and Buddhist communities increased tremendously in large areas of northern, southern and middle Bangladesh. But the glorious days of Buddhism began with the foundation of the Pala rule in Bangladesh. Gopala the founder of this dynasty was a Buddhist and after gaining power he 'created a new social order based on justice and equality among all people'. He established numbers of Buddhist Viharas or monasteries all over the country, and these Viharas soon became the centers not only of Buddhist learning but also of great academic and intellectual persuasion. D. P. Barua, in the introductory pages dwelt critically on the rise and expansion of Buddhist religion, culture and civilization in Bangladesh.

Rudra Prosad Samaddar in his essay written on the inscriptional records drew a picture of the country's educational, social and cultural life. One of the most significant aspects of Buddhist Bangladesh was the patronage of the Emperors, Kings and devotees of the educational institutions and scholars.

Other inscriptions discovered so far also reveal the names of famous Buddhist teachers and sects. They also refer that Kings professing different faiths also donated lands for Buddhist Viharas and temples. Likewise the Buddhist Kings also made land grants for Hindu temples. These examples 'indicate the existence of a peaceful multi-religious

society in ancient Bangladesh'.

A large number of Seals and Sealings have been discovered from various sites like Paharpur Mahavihara and Salban Vihara in Comilla. These seals and sealings throw light on many things like the names of Vihara and their founders as well as on the social and economic life of the country. Jibananda Basu dwelling upon the subject observes that seals and sealings made of

King of Gaur (c. 590-625 AD) (North West Bengal), was involved in anti-Buddhist activities. However, they agreed that the accounts of Hiuen Tsang and other Chinese pilgrims like Sengchi, I-tsing throw much light on Buddhist Bangladesh and affirm that Pundravardhana and Samatata (South East Bengal) were major Buddhist centers of ancient world.

Perhaps the most informative chapter of the book is the Ancient

distinct forms of architecture but they also show the skill of the contemporaries in designing and planning the monuments. Moreover, some of the features of these structures depict the contemporary life and society.

Viharas were basically built as residences for the Buddhist monks. However, the architectural style and designs were breathtaking. Bulbul Ahmed and architect Shameem Aminur Rahman have given an outstanding account of the Buddhist architectural features in Bangladesh.

Terracotta ornamentation is the most significant artistic expression of human societies. The dynamic representation of this art is found mainly in South Asia, especially in Bangladesh. It was mainly used for the outer decoration of the Buddhist shrines during the 7th- 12th centuries CE. A detailed and graphic account of the terracotta work has been given by Mohammed Shohrab Uddin and Sharmin Rezwana.

Md. Mosharraf Hossain and Swapan Kumar Biswas have provided an excellent account of Buddhist Sculptural pieces that have been so far found in Bangladesh. Buddhism in Bangladesh is also associated and reflected in religious symbols like Bells and Coins. Bells as Sabikun Naher and Pranab K. Chattopadhyay in their essay observe, 'hold an honored place in various religious ceremonies of the Buddhist pantheon'. Coins with symbols have been discovered in great numbers in Bangladesh.

Poems and songs are important cultural offshoots of Buddhism. In fact, the composition of the earliest poems which are collectively described as the Charyapadas led to the emergence of Bengali language and literature.

The other art form which is an offshoot of Buddhism in Bangladesh is the 'Manuscript painting'. The earliest specimens of painting,

observe Niru Shamsun Nahar and Mohammad Abu Al Hasan, 'So far discovered in Bangladesh are the religious miniatures on the Buddhist manuscript'.

The more charming offshoot of the rise and evolution of Buddhism in Bangladesh is the drama. Dramatic performance is associated with Buddhist religion. Saymon Zakaria observes that Buddhist drama mainly dealt with the life and theological ideology of Gautama Buddha, and the way to achieve nirvana...through music, dance and acting'.

Buddhism in Bangladesh has also produced eminent personalities and scholars. Bandana Mukhopadhyay highlights such great scholars as Silabhadra (c. 584-654) and Chandragomin (c. 7th century CE). Sufi Mustafizur Rahman highlights the recent excavations which have unearthed evidence that support the existence of Buddhism and Buddhist culture in Bangladesh in remote past.

Enamul Haque attempts 'perhaps for the first time, to set together aspects of Buddhist art and architecture as have been revealed at Nalanda, Paharpur and Mainamati'. He also remarked that he finds the growth and development of Mainamati site of Bangladesh, as a parallel to Nalanda!

Overall, the book is a timely and refreshing addition to the world of heritage studies. Moreover, it will provide to the general readers the true ideals of Buddhism. As Bandana Mukhopadhyay rightly observes, 'Buddha also taught that we cannot be happy as long as others suffer, and that when we do reach out, we discover the best in ourselves. The universal message of peace, love, good will, tolerance and compassion preached by Buddha more than 2600 years ago had never been more relevant than today'.

The reviewer is Chairman, Department of History and Philosophy, North South University.



terracotta, stone, copper and bronze reflect the artistic skill and religious characters.

Hiuen Tsang, the first Chinese pilgrim to visit the kingdom of Pundravardhana around 638 CE remarked that there were about 20 Samgharamas or monasteries with some 2000 monks in Pundravardhana. Bulbul Ahmed and Md. Asaduzzaman did not accept Hiuen Tsang's claim that Shashanka,

Sites and Settlements contributed by Bulbul Ahmed et al. This chapter gives a graphic account of the major settlements of the Buddhist community in Bangladesh.

Buddhism also led to the flourishing of the artistic genius of the people. In Bangladesh as elsewhere, it gave rise to a unique style of architecture in the form of Stupas, Shrines and Viharas. These monuments and structures not only mark them as