

In Search of Premodern Bengal's Literary Treasures

Bangladesh may be geographically small, but its contributions to the world are immense. Tony K. Stewart did more than most to highlight Bangladesh's significance globally.

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With the passing of Professor Tony K. Stewart, Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Chair in Humanities Emeritus, the field of South Asian religions, and more specifically, premodern Bengali literature, has lost one of its leading lights. His contributions to Bengal studies, and indeed to the history of cultural frontiers and entangled religions more widely, have had momentous impacts on these fields. He will long be remembered for his masterful studies of the biographies of Kṛṣṇa Caitanya and the hagiographies of fictional Muslim holy men. His scholarship straddled the study of Hinduism and Islam in premodern Bengal, fields more typically siloed. Stewart's writings are characterized by a unique combination of cultural history, literary theory, textual criticism, and hermeneutics. He produced consummate analyses of the grammar of hagiography and the cultural and ideological work these genres performed in Bengal. At the same time, his skilful English translations introduced a wide audience to Bengali historical and fictional figures, the focus of his lifelong scholarly work. Stewart's first major work, his dissertation from the University of Chicago (1985), eventually became his magnum opus, *The Final Word* (OUP, 2010), following the publication of the late Edward C. Dimock's translation of the *Caitanya Caritamṛta*, which Stewart edited. With poet Chase Twichell he also published *The Lover of God: Rabindranath Tagore's 'Bhanusimher Padavali'* (Copper Canyon Press, 2003).

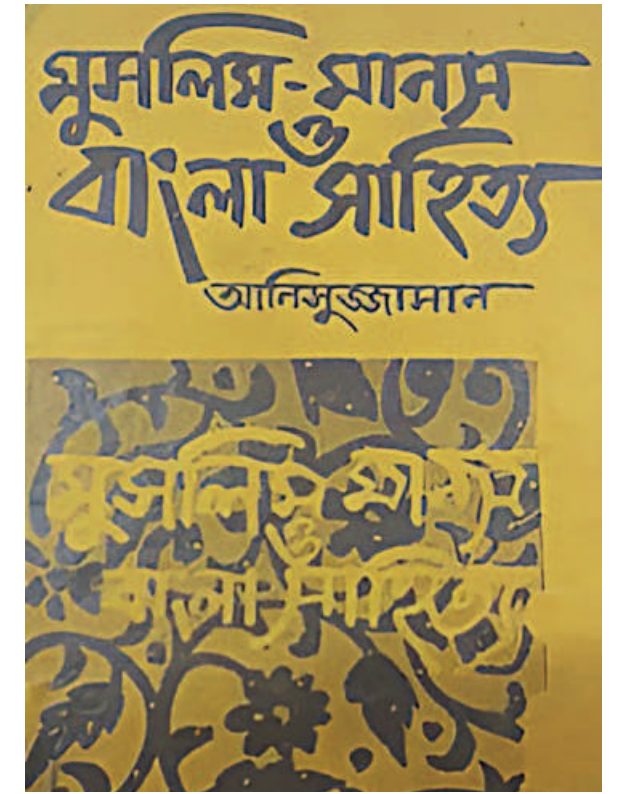
Thereafter his work turned east and most of his research and other scholarly activities focused on what is now Bangladesh and the Islamic literatures of Bengal. Most notably, he worked on the tales of Satya Pir, who represents a rapprochement of Muslims and Hindus in a plural Bengali society in the premodern period. In *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs* (OUP 2004) he translated eight tales out of several hundred, each focused on the ways women, aided by Satya Pir, keep the world ordered in the wake of male-generated chaos. In *Witness to Marvels: Sufism and Literary Imagination* (University of California, 2019) he examined the ways the Islamic imaginative has insinuated

Working in what is now West Bengal, Sukumar Sen completed his PhD in 1937 under the tutelage of some of the best historical linguists of the day: L.D. Barnett, R.L. Turner (author of *A Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages*) and Jules Bloch with a dissertation entitled "Historical Syntax of Middle and New Indo-Aryan (Bengali)." He began collecting and editing manuscripts of Old Bengali materials, and that led him to Middle Bengali *maṅgala-kāvya* texts. Sen began with *Manasa-maṅgala* and published a critical edition of *Caṅḍi-maṅgala* in 1977; working with Pañcanana Moṅḍal, he critically edited and published the first third of Rūpama Cakravartī's *Dharma-maṅgala* in 1944, with a second edition that included one additional *pala* in 1956.

Sen moved around the countryside in search of manuscript materials for his work with Middle Bengali literature. His reputation began to grow, and many people who owned old manuscripts offered them to him. Eventually he amassed a collection of nearly one thousand pieces. His collection, now held in the National Library in Kolkata and available also on microfilm, epitomized Sukumar Sen's ideas about what constitutes Bengali literature. He applied his meticulous scholarship to that collection to produce his five-volume *Baṅgala Sahityera Itihasa*, one of the first comprehensive studies of Bengali literature, which Sen later summarized and published in English; it also provided the basis for his many publications on the language itself.

Sukumar Sen's vision of Bengali literature included the above-mentioned *maṅgala-kāvya*, epic literature (mostly Bengali *Mahabharatas*, with several *Ramayanas*), and Vaiṣṇava texts. He paid no attention to Bengali Muslim (including Sufi) literature or to literature in general produced in what is now Bangladesh. He received so much criticism for that lacuna that not long after, he published his slim volume, *Islami baṅgla sahitya* (1951). But other scholars meanwhile more than made up for Sen's omission.

Working in East Pakistan and later, Bangladesh, Abdul Karim Sahitya Bisharad (1871-1953) was also amassing a collection of premodern Bengali literary manuscripts. Karim was primarily but not exclusively interested in Muslim contributions to Bengali literature. In the course of his work, he discovered about one hundred Muslim poets of the premodern period, who had been previously unknown to modern scholars. Abdul Karim edited and



Covers of books by Ahmed Sharif and Anisuzzaman

his uncle in scholarly impact and output. Surrounded by his uncle's literary collections as a child and young adult, Sharif surprised no one with his own career choice. But by the time Sharif came of age, the Bangladesh liberation movement was well underway, and he became one of a group of left-leaning opposition intellectuals.

As for his literary work, he edited some forty manuscripts and published most of them. Probably his finest work, though, is his two-volume *Baṅgali O Baṅgla Sahitya* (1978, 1983), a comprehensive history of medieval Bangla literature of different communities, including Buddhist, Vaiṣṇavas, Bauls, and Sufis. Sharif produced several other important books on the literature of the medieval period.

Sharif's scholarship was outstanding, and thanks to him, and to his uncle, we know something of the literary wealth of premodern Bengal. Sharif was not only a brilliant intellectual, but also a rationalist and humanist who possessed strength of character and determination. He was a dedicated and fearless intellectual who frequently spoke out against fundamentalism, military rule, autocracy and, prior to 1971, the opponents to Bangladesh liberation. In March 1971 he administered the oath at the Shaheed Minar in Dhaka to writers vowing to fight against Pakistani autocracy. He served as General Secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh from 1969 to 1973. He received many awards over the course of his career, including the Bangla Academy Literary Prize, the Daud Literary Prize, and the National Ekushe Award. Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata awarded him an honorary DLitt. Even after his retirement, Sharif remained committed to the study of early Bengali literature, and continued to help younger scholars work through sometimes difficult texts. He spent many hours in the first months of 1994 reading Vaiṣṇava *jvani* with this writer, for example, and working through the often challenging related manuscripts she had found.

Sharif's contemporary Anisuzzaman (1937-2020) was equally brilliant and equally committed to human rights. Anisuzzaman was born in 24 Parganas in India, but shortly after Partition, when he was in seventh grade, his family shifted first to Khulna and later to Dhaka, where he completed his education. He was a prolific writer. Among his most notable books are *Muslim Manas and Bengali Literature* (1964), *Muslim Bangla Periodicals* (1969), *Baṅgla Sahityera Itihasa* Vols. 1 and 2 (1987), *Creativity, Reality and Identity* (1991), and two memoirs, *Kahirobodhi* (2003) and *Bipulaprihibi* (2015).

Like Ahmad Sharif, Anisuzzaman was very much involved in politics, and particularly with the Liberation Movement. When the liberation war started, he and many colleagues left for Calcutta, and worked hard for his countrymen and -women from there as General Secretary of the Bangladesh Teachers' Association.

Anisuzzaman's teaching career began at Chittagong University and shortly after independence he took up a position at Dhaka University. He also conducted research at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, and at the United Nations University. He was honoured with visiting positions at the University of Paris, at Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies in Calcutta, at North Carolina State University, and served terms as President of both Bangla Academy and of Nazrul

Institute. He was a frequent guest lecturer in the US Department of State-sponsored Critical Language Scholarship Program in Dhaka (2006-2015). Throughout his life he was very generous with his time and wisdom with more junior scholars, always willing to help think through ideas and work on difficult texts.

In the twenty-first century interest in premodern literature has waned, and there is little institutional support for its pursuit. The Bangla Academy is a beacon of light. Growing out of the language movement of 1952 and modelled after the Academie Francaise, the organization has fully embraced its work in the promotion and development of the Bengali language. It continues to emphasize the nation's literary and linguistic heritage and has a vast publication agenda. It has become the largest publishing house in the nation, with a catalogue of several thousand books and journals.

Outside of South Asia, a number of scholars in addition to Tony K. Stewart have developed love for Bengali and the Bengali language. Sadly, many are no longer with us. Edward C. Dimock (1929-2001) brought Bengal to the U.S. academy. He first travelled to India, with his wife and five small children, in the mid-1950s. There he studied with Professor Sukumar Sen, among others. Dimock eventually taught for 35 years at the University of Chicago, where he trained Stewart as well as many other scholars who made their own important contributions to the study of Bengali culture and literature.

Clinton B. Seely (b.1941) served two years in the U.S. Peace Corps teaching biology at the Barisal Zilla School in then-East Pakistan as he learned Bangla. Seely went on to earn his PhD from the University of Chicago working under Dimock's tutelage. He subsequently spent a great deal of time in Calcutta during his studies and produced his dissertation "Doe in Heat: A Critical Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibananda Das (1899-1954)," in 1976. That was just the first of his works with Bengali literature, which included translations of compositions by Buddhadeva Bose, Ramprasad Sen, and Michael Madhusudan Dutta. Seely also helped produce an intermediate Bengali textbook for foreign learners and several software packages for writing in the Bengali script.

Carol Salomon (1948-2009) probably did more than anyone to foster the study of the Bengali language in the U.S. Over the years she spent a great deal of time in Calcutta and in Shantiniketan, as well as in Bangladesh. The first time she heard Baul music she became fascinated with the Bauls, their music, their philosophy, and their way of life. Completely fluent in the language, she became something of a celebrity in both Bengali, and especially in Bangladesh, and her premature death was widely mourned. Salomon trained many U.S. scholars in the Bengali language. My own *parampara* goes through Dr. Salomon on the one hand, and to Professor Dimock via Professor Stewart on the other.

Salomon's career paralleled that of her friend and colleague Jeanne Openshaw, of the University of Edinburgh, who has written extensively on the Bauls, and continues to do so. Other U.S. scholars working today include and are not limited to Joel Bordeaux, Keith Cantu, Lisa Knight, Glen Hayes, Rachel McDermott, Sufia Uddin, and this writer. France Bhattacharya, in Paris, has translated several *maṅgala-kāvya*s. Scholars working at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies in the U.K. have also

worked extensively on premodern Bengali texts pertaining to Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism.

The most versatile and generous current scholar of pre-modern Bengali literature is Professor Thibaut d'Hubert, who earned his PhD and completed his Habilitation in 2018 from the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) in Paris. He has worked on Kṛtibāsa *Ramayana*, Alaol's *Sayphulmuluk Badiujjama*, the *Nirnāma*, as well as on the Brajabuli poems of Govindadasa and the Persian *ghazals* of Akbar's court poet Faydi. D'Hubert has also striven to foster the study of premodern Bangla literature through organizing annual reading retreats that bring together scholars from around the world who are actively working on Middle Bengali projects. The community he developed continued to meet, virtually, during the pandemic to read various of the *Sitala-maṅgalas*. Participating scholars have come from Australia, Bangladesh, the Czech Republic, France, India, Japan, Poland, Russia, Spain, Sweden, the U.K. and the U.S. and are at various stages in their respective careers, ranging from graduate students to very senior scholars. As we sit around the table puzzling over a text, each one of us has something to contribute and we work as equals.

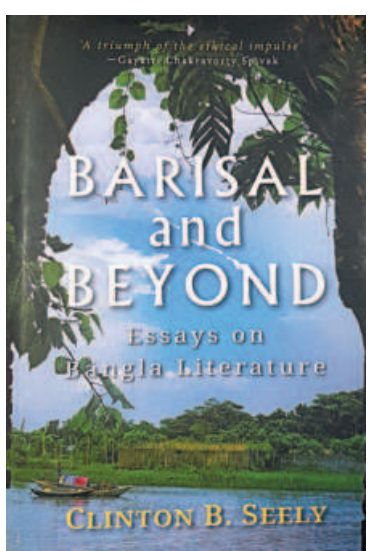
While currently there may be little institutional support for the study of premodern Bengali literature outside of the Bangla Academy in Dhaka, the community of concerned scholars continues to grow. For all involved, it is very much a labour of love.

That love of the language led Tony Stewart to acquire a flat in Dhaka and to develop and serve as the first director of the U.S. Department of State-funded Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) Program for Bangla, hosted in Dhaka by the Bangla Language Institute at Independent University-Bangladesh. That program brought American students in a wide range of disciplines (anthropology, agriculture, law, medicine, religion, literature, history, and more) to Bangladesh. Those students learned in the classroom for several hours daily, partnered with local students to learn about daily life while improving their conversation skills, and visited sites of historical and cultural interest during their ten weeks in the summers in Dhaka. Some even found time to volunteer in local NGOs. Many had had no prior exposure to either the language or to Bangladesh but continued their study of Bangla back in the U.S., and a number returned to the CLS program more than once. Stewart insured that during their time with the program, they had the opportunity to interact with people who had been involved in the Liberation Movement, with writers and artists, and even had an evening with Baul singers. They learned about the ecological challenges of life in Bangladesh, from the Chittagong Hill Tracts to the Sundarbans. Many of those students have in time taken up positions in the American academy, or the Foreign Service, making use of their skills in the language as well as their knowledge of Bangladeshi civilization and culture. Bangladesh may be geographically small, but its contributions to the world are immense. Tony K. Stewart did more than most to highlight Bangladesh's significance globally.

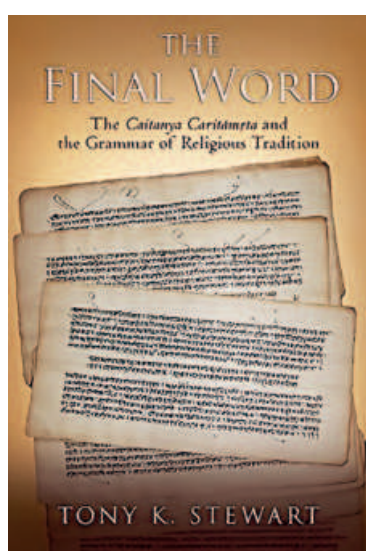
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Tony K. Stewart (16 February 1954 – 6 October 2024)



Cover of Barishal and Beyond (UPL edition, February 2025)



Two significant books by Tony K. Stewart



itself seamlessly into a Bengali consciousness through mythic heroes who extend their help and protection to anyone regardless of sectarian affiliation. The accompanying anthology of unabridged translations of those key tales has recently appeared as *Needle at the Bottom of the Sea: Bengali Tales from the Land of the Eighteen Tides* (University of California, 2023).

The study of premodern Bengali literature began to develop in the first third of the twentieth century. Until then, scholars had viewed post-Sanskritic linguistic creations as less serious than their predecessors of the Golden Age of the Gupta period, even sometimes labelling them "vulgar." But in the years just before independence some linguists began to urge their academic colleagues to take vernacular material seriously and as worthy of consideration. Not only did this literature provide valuable evidence about the history of the Bengali language, it also had much to tell us about everyday life and cultural values in the region prior to the arrival of Europeans.

published eleven of the texts he found.

In 1920-21 Bangiya Sahitya Parishad published his catalog of Bengali manuscripts, *Baṅgala Prachin Puthir Bivaran*. The Department of Bengali of Dhaka University later published a catalog of the manuscripts preserved in its library under the title *Puthi Parichiti*. That University acquired those works years later, when Karim's nephew Ahmed Sharif joined the faculty as the first research assistant in the Bengali Department (1950). His employment was conditional upon the donation of the manuscript collection, in exchange for which the university would take responsibility for its preservation.

Karim's collection included works by Hindu authors as well, and most of those manuscripts are in the Varendra Research Museum in Rajshahi. His work was widely recognized and appreciated. The Nadia Sahitya Sabha bestowed the title of 'Sahitya Sagar' upon him, but he himself preferred the title 'Sahitya Bisharad,' which the Chattal Dharmamandali gave him.

Abdul Karim's nephew Ahmed Sharif (1921-1999) arguably exceeded