ESSAY

BETWEEN SILENCE AND SONG: Early Bangla literature and the poetics of the 'Charyapada'

ILLUSTRATION: **MAISHA SYEDA**

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AZFAR HUSSAIN

Pandit Haraprasad Shastri read—and was deeply inspired by—Raja Rajendralal Mitra's seminal work *Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, published in 1882. That book was instrumental in inaugurating a whole new age in the history of Bangla language and literature.

It also prompted Haraprasad Shastri's further explorations of Buddhist philosophy. Naturally, Nepal—the very site of Buddhist literary and philosophical practices—immediately attracted him. He visited the country in 1907.

That visit proved extraordinary. In Nepal's royal library, Haraprasad discovered several unfamiliar texts. Among them was the *Charyapada*, the earliest known example of Bangla literary production, along with *Dakarnab* and *Dohakosh*. In 1916, he published all three together under the title *Hajaar Bochhorer Puran Bangla Bhashai Bauddha Gaan o Doha*.

Haraprasad Shastri's publication was nothing short of sensational. His book revealed the richness and rigour of the earliest Bangla literary productions, and yet it immediately became a site of fierce claims and contestations. Some Bengali scholars enthusiastically declared the *Charyapada*—a collection of 46 lyrics and a fragment—to be 'ancient Bangla', while others insisted the verses belonged to Asamiya, Oriya, or Maithili traditions.

But it was Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay's massive intervention—*Origin and Development of the Bengali Language* (1926)—that proved truly consequential, even decisive. With indisputable theoretical rigour—drawing on phonetics, grammar, and prosody—he demonstrated that the *padas* of the *Charyapada* were composed in none other than Bangla itself, making the collection our very first book, our earliest anthology of poems in Bangla literature.

Soon after, other Bengali scholars turned serious critical attention to the *Charyapada*. Prabodh Chandra Bagchi discovered and published Tibetan translations and highlighted the original language of the poems. In 1927, Muhammad Shahidullah, for the first time, explored their theological dimensions, while in 1946, Shashibhushan Dasgupta called attention to the rich theoretical resources animating those earliest lyrics.

Then came Rahul Sankrityayan—the celebrated theorist and scholar from Bihar—who ranged within a broad zodiac of philosophical questions tied to the *Charyapada* brand of Buddhism, writing in both Hindi and English. One should also note Dr Tarapada Mukhopadhyay, who anatomised and analysed crucial lexical, syntactic, and grammatical features of the text. Since these interventions, numerous critical works have continued to enrich our understanding of the earliest literary practices in Bangla.

The songs of the *Charyapada* were composed roughly between 950 and 1200 CE.

But who were these poets or lyricists? Their number stands at 24, and their names carry striking sound-effects, sharing at the end a common syllable—*pa*—which signifies glory or honour. Among them are Luipa, Kukkuripa, Biruapa, Gunduripa, Chatilpa, Bhusukupa, Kanhapa, Kamalipa, Dombipa, Shantipa, Mohittyapa, Binapa, Sarahapa, Sabarpa, Ajdebpa, Dhentonpa, Darikpa, Bhadepa, Tarakpa, Kanhanpa, Jayandipa, Dhampa, Tantripa, and Laridombipa.

Of these, Kanhapa is credited with the largest number of lyrics—thirteen—while Bhusukupa composed eight, and Sarahapa only four; the rest are distributed among the others.

Many Bengali scholars suggest Luipa is the earliest *Charyapada* poet. Muhammad Shahidullah, however, argues that Shabaripa holds that place, while the youngest poet was either Sarahapa or Luipa.

Of course, ancient Bangla is exceedingly difficult to grasp. Yet certain translations of the *Charyapada* immediately attest to the lyrical energy, imagistic intensity, and even theoretical richness of these songs. Whenever I recite particular padas in the original old Bangla—and yes, I relish doing so—I feel their "magic lyricism," their beautiful sound-patterns, and their remarkable cadences and caesuras.

Although we have a rich homegrown tradition of narrative verse—from Baru Chandidas's SriKrishnakirtan to Jasimuddin's Nakshi Kanthar Math—its dominant current has always been lyrical. And that tradition, richly and rightly, begins with the *Charyapada* constellation of marvelous lyricists, who play exquisitely with sounds, syllables, and silences while weaving intricate networks of evocative and suggestive images, accompanied by even theoretical tropes and tenors.

Therefore, I cannot resist urging those anti-theoretical, self-absorbed aesthetes—those under the spell of bourgeois aesthetics and poetics who stubbornly harbour the idea that theory ruins poetry—to read the *Charyapada* in order to see how the lyrical and the theoretical engage in a mutually enriching conversation within the brief space of a single pada.

Indeed, there are poets who theorise by way of composing poems, and compose poems by way of theorising. And the *Charyapada* poets surely belong to that group of poet-theorists. Within this very tradition, then, one must also invoke Lalon Fakir, who produced radically rich and theoretically loaded musical work in the 19th century. Lalon—at once a first-rate poet and theorist, among other things—directly employs the word "tattva" (tattwa) in more than one song, while his meditations on the corporeal and the linguistic remain profoundly integral to his poetics and to his politics alike.

One must emphasise that the language of the *Charyapada* has come to be called "sandhyabhasha." Indeed, it is a language woven out of interplays: darkness with light, what is with what is not, the abstract with the concrete, the spectral with the corporeal, the revealed with the concealed—tensions and transactions that dialectically define its very character. Other crucially constitutive aspects of this twilight-like language include symbols and codes and metaphors—ones that tend to render meaning profoundly indeterminate or uncertain.

For those unfamiliar with the Buddhist bajrajani sahajiya path, meanings often flounder, totter, or slip away, and certain concepts resist easy unpacking. Reading the padas of the ancient Bengali poets, one enters a world of difficult semantic and hermeneutic struggles, where metaphors often prove more tenacious than facts. Yet this does not mean that a special "depth-hermeneutic" is always required. There are always elements—scenes, subjects, sounds, silences—in the *Charyapada* that ordinary readers can still enjoy, even amid its lingering obscurities.

The theological, the theoretical, and the philosophical converge organically in certain lyrics of the early Bangla poets. As noted, these concerns revolve primarily around Buddhism. The *Charyapada* poets interrogate tensions between life and death, joy and suffering, and the question of emancipation, or even the absolute freedom of the spirit (never to be conflated with the Hegelian Geist)—from the narrowly worldly, without undermining the worldliness of their signifying practices. They also accentuate the need for espousing an ethic of submission to the guru as part of a spiritual struggle toward truth, or even the Absolute.

While some images, symbols, and metaphors in the earliest Bangla lyrics resist easy access, others vividly open up the world of nature as it appears in those songs. Recurring images of the body, mountains, rivers, deer and hunters abound, alongside striking depictions of forests, trees, and flowers. Equally significant are the imagistically rich and spiritually charged celebrations of physical beauty. In one lyric, for instance, Shabarpa portrays a hunting girl whose body seems to embody the forest itself: flowers glimmer in her dark tresses, a garland dances on her bosom, and the poet, entranced, forgets everything else. Here we glimpse a moment of poetic trance, a state of mind attuned to the rhythm between nature within and nature without. In another lyric, flowers drenched in moonlight fall from the endless sky, and on such a night—as the poet suggests—there is nothing to do but drink, get drunk, and celebrate life itself.

Lastly, the aesthetic, the theoretical, the theological, and the metaphysical in the padas of our earliest Bengali poets never occult or obscure the social or even the political-economic. Some critics have rightly characterised the *Charyapadas* as songs of the subaltern—songs of the marginalised and the subjugated—that vividly portray the quotidian lives of common, suffering people. In one lyric, for instance, a poet laments that he lives atop a mountain without neighbors, that his cooking pot holds no rice, that his family keeps growing, and that hunger reigns everywhere. Other lyrics, as critics note, become explosive sites of class struggle, offering satirical and subversive images of the oppressive practices of the upper classes. It is telling that the earliest Bangla literary productions emerged from poets acutely sensitive to the struggles of suffering humanity.

Our earliest Bangla poets emphasise the power of humanity as well as the need for celebrating life and sustaining struggles at all levels—spiritual and social ones included—in the face of all possible odds and obstacles.

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POETRY

Carnival of carnage

PURBITA DAS

War scenes creep like a daily soap to watch for seasons on mobile screens now;
Rarely remember the scenes
But the feelings never leave the humane body.
The ancient hunger for humanity
Seems like
will not be ever fulfilled.
The clauses of cruelty
categorically encourage the grammar of geographical atrocities.
We, the mass, are the mesmerised audience
by the audacity of the aluminium power of a ruthless ruler that can't be melted away, dropping the recorded results of historical hegemony.
A terrible time of weeping ,watching the dead
A horrible hour of digesting harrowing details
of the industry of pain even after praying for days and nights.
Yet
A Sun that everybody hopes to witness one day

ILLUSTRATION: **MAHMUDA EMDAD**

that brings the news of salvation from the humans surrounded by our own makeshift humanity for ages.

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POETRY

From the prayer hall

SHIBLEE SHAHED

Whose bell rings in the temple tonight?
Whose hymn rises from the Gospel's heart?
And in the call of Esha,
does the muezzin still implore—
"Come, come toward salvation"?
Across the purified valley of night,
from the world's scattered prayers,
gentle lights drift upward,
carrying these questions into the dark.
From the fading pages of the Avesta,
birds and boulevards alike
slowly turn to vapour...

Dr Shiblee Shahed *is a public health specialist, essayist, poet, and translator. His debut poetry collection was published in 2013 by Shuddhashar Publications and his poems and articles have appeared in numerous national and international outlets. He is a regular contributor to* The Daily Star.

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