Eternal Bengal

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«O city, O grey city, do you not hear the lecherous steps on Kalighat Bridge!
Do you hear the steps of Time, O city, O grey City!»
[Samar Sen, *Farewell to Paradise*, 1937]

The question has been repeatedly raised in the history of Bengal: What does it mean being a Bengali? But it also means that this question can be understood only in a historical frame. We have to ask, why does this question repeatedly arise? What is this history that has again and again led the Bengalis to ask of themselves, do they know of their own history enough[1]? What sense do they make of this history that compels them to recognise that this issue of self-identity and self-knowledge is a historical one, and that therefore they must know adequately their own history to claim that they are indeed Bengalis? In short, what is this history that merges the two issues of becoming and being?

As we know, this consciousness of being a Bengali is a product of modern time – modern education, modern politics, and modern history. Yet the question would be: where do we mark the beginning of the modern? How would we identify or define the epistemic break that supposedly inaugurated the modern era for the Bengalis, whence the Bengalis started thinking of being Bengalis? I admit that the question may seem somewhat academic and philosophical. But some discussion on this will help us in understanding the pattern of our own self-inquiry, this preoccupation with our collective self that marks our own history. Probably a good start can be made if we can trace how the later day Bengalis had judged the period of transition from Nawabi rule to colonial rule – a period of half a century full of myths, scandals, killings, famines, regicide, unrest, and other infamies, and the instituting of a different order and rule, but ostensibly also the period after which modernity is said to arrive in Bengal, and the idea of a particular identity begins to take possession of the Bengali mind. Therefore, what sense did the later day Bengalis make of this era of violent transition?

My intention is to explore briefly that world of reflexive history; which, today in view of the violent and contentious atmosphere in Bengal – I mean here West Bengal – appears to be also politically relevant.

[1] For instance, the famous Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra lamented one hundred and fifty years ago that Bengalis were an oblivious race; they did not know their history.

1. There is a line of thinking in today's cultural historiography on Bengal that extols its language, art, culture, and independent intellectual and associational heritage – beginning possibly with Young Bengal and ending with Tagore. With some variety (marking the religious, ethnic, rural, artisan-centric, and various popular-cult-centric sub-lines) admitted in this nearly two hundred year long history, this history has now its own appropriate major figures – with Ram Mohan as the beginning, Bankim Chandra as the middle point, and as the last figure Tagore symbolising the confluence of all that was best in this long period. The essential features of this received cultural history are supposedly the following: the strong impact of romanticism on literature, hence the dominant presence of Nature and landscape in art, sensitivities, and literature, celebration of nature as life, harmony in the past and harmony of the society, by contrast the calamitous present signified by, above all, the colonial rule, and the making of a new Bengali nation based on this aesthetic feeling amidst the calamity. In this way political and historical identity came to be based on what can be grossly called «affect» and was aestheticised. In short, our self-inquiry has not been through the philosophical route or even as its substitute through historical route, but through an examination and reconstruction of our aesthetic self. The interrogation and cross-examination of our aesthetic proclivities formed the core of our critical sense of the present.

This over-all scenario generated enthusiasm for possessing a total history of Bengal – we may recall in this context for instance Dinesh Chandra Sen's *Brihat Banga* (2 volumes, 1935) – but this was not enough; we also undertook the task of knowing and writing local histories, no doubt partly inspired by colonial gazetteers, district handbooks, and travelogues of colonial administrators, surveyors, and revenue officials. One has to only note as an instance the extensive use of Henry Beveridge's *Were Sundarbans inhabited in Ancient Times?* (1876) and *District of Bakarganj: Its History and Statistics* (1876) in Satish Chandra Mitra's *Jessore Khulnar Itihas* (2 volumes, 1914 and 1922) And, yet, while these local histories gave us glimpses of the micro-chronicles of the conflicts of the past (between local power-holders and the imperial administration, or between revenue officials and peasants, or between despots and benevolent protectors at ground level, or between profligate rulers and victims of famines, likewise between symbols of old relations and new public associations), by and large these micro-histories replicated the model of a total history of Bengal (given by the British writers), yet in the total history that came to be written aesthetics made up for the lack of political history, unity took the place of conflicts, and life was celebrated in place of death, at times effacing death from (account of) life. Possibly it will be correct to say that armed with a sense of local histories, the Bengalis proceeded to write the total history of Bengal in which aesthetics would have the pride of place.

In other words, through this strategy of writing a total history of Bengal, art and culture or correctly speaking aesthetics lent a crucial hand in shaping the particular nature of self-inquiry. If we consider Rakhal Das Bandopadhyay's history of Bengal, *Banglar Itihas* (2 Volumes, 1914 and 1917) or the finely written *Bangalir Itihas* (*adi parba*) by Nihar Ranjan Ray (1949) and marked by evocative touches, and the variously written history of artefacts, statues, sculptures, verses, etc., we can get a sense of how this picture of tolerant, devotional if trifle quarrelsome, fish-eating, literature-loving, siesta-enjoying, plentifully productive Bengali acquired its frame. History of Bengali literature was crucial in understanding history of Bengal. Joydev was our past. Buddhism, Sufi Islam, and Vaishnavism, were the three sources of our unique spiritual lineage from the middle ages. And, romantic literature coupled with reason-based finely argued persuasive essays composed our present. Aesthetics in this way made up for the absence of politics and indigenous imperial legacy.

In this there were two problems. First, the ambivalence: what would be the best route of this inquiry – knowing the history of *Bengal* or of the making of the *Bengali*? Critics may today say that with an emphasis on knowing the history of Bengal (*the land, territory*), this inquiry did not make much headway in knowing the *subject*, known as the Bengali, with the consequence that various conflicts (such as those based on caste, religion, language, class, region, migration, etc., particularly conflicts in periods of transition) that marked the history of the subject-hood were ignored. Second, in this harmonious history, whatever identity was excavated and historicised was found perched precariously between the identity of an individual subject (the Bengali) and that of the subject of a collective history (of the Bengali people, the Bengali *nation*). As a consequence, in this long gaze on the past the violent periods of transition, particularly the transition from the Nawabi rule to colonial rule, were shrouded in haze. When we study the confusion in Bengali historiography beginning particularly in the later half of the nineteenth century and demonstrated in the writings of historians, cultural chroniclers, and essayists of that time, I think the lessons are clear. What were required were both a sense of an acceleration of time and a reworking of space to make history intelligible for the Bengalis, in other words, making ourselves capable of knowing that we were part of history.

In other words, what was needed was to see this history of the land called Bengal as part of a larger interconnected space called the Bengali suba or later the Bengal Presidency – a matter of reworking of space, and likewise a focus on transition – a matter of acceleration of time, because transition accelerates the dynamics of time.

2. In this background, somewhat simplistically drawn for want of time and space, I want to concentrate on two features: first, the question of death in modern Bengali consciousness, and second, the issue of race. My argument is that the phenomenon of transition loomed large over both these issues of death and race; yet both of them

were sublimated in such a way in the course of historicising our identity, that the leap from the romantic to the critical remained abortive. Or, to put it more precisely, to be critically aware of the history of our self-consciousness we have to examine this process of sublimation. What is the critical ontology with which we can examine the question of being? How can we relate becoming to being? Or, how do we explain the fact that in the history of Bengali identity a critical sense could arrive in whatsoever limited manner only through the aesthetic? By which I mean the aesthetic negotiation of the two problems of death and race that marked our historical awareness of transition?

First, then, is the question of death, because death was the critical issue in this passage or mutation of the modern – *from romantic to the critical*. It is not that the romantic framework of searching for identity only eulogised life and did not admit the factor of death. After all the heroic literature that we have in the second half of the nineteenth century beginning with Nabin Chandra Sen (*Palashir Yuddha*, 1875), Bankim's *Rajsingha* (1882), Ramesh Chandra Dutt's novels (*Bangabijeta*, *Rajput Jiban Sandhya*, *Maharashtra Prabhat*, all published in 1879) and then Akshay Maitreya's *Siraj-ud-daullah* (1896) – some of the novels and writings of that time built probably around the works of Walter Scott, had epic characters dying, and some kind of tragedy enacted as part of the romance of life. Yet, it is also true at the same time, that these characters do not tell us the mortal conflicts of the time of transition. Or, if they tell, the narratives focus on the almost «historically inevitable» demise of heroes of the old age, and the equally «historically inevitable» emergence of the enlightened Bengali as the modern subject leaving the dirt and death of the time of transition behind. These novelists or writers make use of *Sier-ul-Mutakherin* (by Sayyid Ghulam Husian Tabatabai, 3 Volumes, first English translation of part of the work published in 1789), and *Riyaz-us-Salatin* (by Ghulam Husain Zaidpuri, English translation published in 1903) to show that Siraj had to die, and the transition to colonial rule was inevitable given the enlightened ways of the English rule. The death was of an individual person, not of a society. The prince dies, with his death sovereignty passes hand, but there is no indication of awareness that with this a new type of domination begins. Bengal did not have a Mirza Ghalib, who had viewed things differently in the wake of the suppression of the mutiny of 1857, mass slaughters, and the violent transition in Delhi[2]. To be truthful, Bengali intellectual intelligibility had no room for owning up to the transition of 1757, the famines thereafter, and the peasant revolts characterizing the time. *Anandamath* (1882) narrating the peasant revolt ends as we know by mystifying the issue of sovereignty and transition: When the rebel Jibananda says before the final battle, «Let us hasten,

[2] Ghalib wrote, «Now every English soldier that bears arms / Is sovereign, and free to work his will…/ The city is thirsty for Muslim blood / And every grain of dust must drink its fill» (RALPH RUSSELL - KHURSHID ISLAM (edd), *Ghalib 1797-1869 – Life and Letters*, Delhi 1994, p. 149.

let us die on the battlefield», he is advised, «We shall talk of death later. Let us presently say, Bandemataram!» (Translated roughly as, «Hail Motherland»[3]) But who is this mother? Not the country as usually thought, or not only the country, but «the dazzling statues or idols of two men» (figures), one holding the other's hand, «sacrifice (*bisarjan*) holds the hand of foundation (in the sense of birth, the Bengali word used, *pratistha*)». In this mutation, «This is what the virtue was like», «this is what s/he is now», and «this is what the figure will be» – with this the account ends, and as the novelist tells us, the rebel leader Satyananda, terrified at the gaze and the prospect of mutation. Even the recognition of 1857 as of central importance in the process of the self acquiring sovereignty was little, except perhaps in the 5 volume account of Rajani Kanta Gupta, *Sipahi Yuddha* (who again took the cue from Kae, Malleson and others, published between 1879 and 1900).

Sier, known to the nineteenth century intellectuals of Bengal, tells us of the ways in which the old rule was crumbling down, treachery was all around, greed ate into the levels of society and administration, and the political oligarchy along with the financial-military clique survived on intrigue and self serving measures. It tells of «the surrender of common sense», «vanity» of the aristocracy, the uncertainties of peace, war, and truce in that age, and asks rhetorically who could be a «high sovereign», and what could be the marks of princely character and princely qualities. It describes in course of the account of transition the murder of Siraj, the Bengal prince, and the «display of the mutilated body on the back of an elephant» by saying that the prince was «slaughtered by way of notifying the accession of new sovereign», and how Mir Zafar began his reign by placing himself «in the abode of sovereignty». In fact, Syed Ghulam Hussain tells us, Mir Zafar began his reign in a state of intoxication and then sleep; meanwhile Siraj was murdered, and in an incomparably economic description of the event of transition, Syed Ghulam Hussain quotes the murderer of Siraj, Miran the son of Mir Zafar, as addressing a curious crowd in front of the palace, «the abode of sovereignty», on receiving the instruction of his father to take care of the custody of Siraj, «Pray Gentlemen, is not my father a curious man with this message? And indeed as a son to Aaly-verdy-Qhan's sister, how could I prove dilatory in so important a matter? Such was the end of Seradj-ed-doulah»[4] Revenge brought in «revolution». *Sier Mutaqherin* is not a simple

[3] Translated by Aurobindo as, «Mother, I bow to thee» (SRI AUROBINDO, *Bande Mataram and a Lecture on the Hidden Meaning of that Song*, in «Karmayogin», 20 November, 1909).

[4] SYED GHULAM HUSSAIN KHAN (Tabatabaite), *Sier Mutaqherin Being the History of India from the Year 1118 to the Year 1194 (This Year Answer to the Christian Year of 1781-82) of the Hadjirah Containing in General the Reigns of the Seven Last Emperors of Hindostan and in particular an Account of Bengal with Circumstantial Detail of the Rise and Fall of the Families of Seradj-ed-Dowlah and Shujah-ed-Dowlah, the Last Sovereigns of Bengal and Oud to which the Author has added a Critical Examination of the English Government and Policy in those Countries down to the Year 1783*, the Whole written in Persian by Seid Ghulam Hossain Khan, an Indian Nobleman of High Rank who Wrote both as an Actor and as Spectator, trans. Nota Manas, or Hajee Mustapha, or M. Raymond, 2 Volumes (London and Kolkata: R. Cambray and Co., 1789; reprint, Kolkata: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1902), Volume 2, p. 244.

chronicle, massive in size, but an advice to rulers how to conduct public affairs, and restrict private greed and self service. Syed Ghulam Hussain tells us that sovereignty passed from the Sultans to the Company because government failed; anarchy ensued because the princes lost the art of governing. Thus though the transfer of sovereignty from one emperor or prince to another was marked regularly by such public acts such as ceremonial entry of the new sovereign in the capital, public prayers, display of the standard, coining of money in the new sovereign's name, and above all by the murder of the old sovereign and display of the dead body (Tabatabaite of course does not list these like this, but mentions them at several places in his account), yet rule could not be stable, as besides the confusing presence of so many «nations» and «races» (as in Azimabad)[5], mercenary administration, and «dissensions, ruins, and desolation crept under the columns of the Timurian throne»[6], and there was now a «tremendous sign in the air by which Heaven signified its wrath»[7]. Syed Ghulam Hussain was clear in his advice in this hour of transition, and he put the lines of advice in verse,

> «See and take warning
> It was in the manner the wind shifted and the face of the thing changed
> O World, fickle and fragile! O World, incapable of stability
> Like a dancer, that goes everyday from house to house
> [...] You shall carry no more with you than what you have enjoyed or bestowed
> Do good today, since the field is yours, and have the power of it
> Make haste, for the next year the field will pass on to another hand»[8].

Another Ghulam Hussain, Ghulam Hussain Saleem Zaidpuri, also wrote in the same vein in *Riaz us Salatin* (1788) in accounting for the way Sultan rule in Bengal ended and gave way to the Company rule.

In the next one hundred and fifty years after its composition the *Sier* again and again surfaced in discussions on sovereignty[9]. For instance the famous essayist of Bengal Kazi Abdul Wadud referred repeatedly to *Sier Mutaqherin* as one of most graphic chronicles of the «closed destiny of Bengal» when light simply went out of Bengal's life[10]. And in these references the issue that repeatedly comes up is: Why could we not govern ourselves? Why did we lose out? Even if Siraj was a hero, why did he lose out in that tragic way? In all these inquiries, death does not seem to be a necessary ingredient in the history of a heroic race now destined to lead the national struggle, but only a pointer as to why we needed strong and the «right» kind of character. Siraj was weak. «Building up character» became in this way another trope for return to aesthetics. Thus, poems, novels, and plays of Bankim Chandra, Nabin

[5] *Sier Mutaqherin*, cit., vol. 1, p. 97 (Azimabad is known as Patna today).
[6] Ibidem, p. 101.
[7] Ibidem, p. 201.
[8] Ibidem, Volume 2, p. 243.
[9] For instance, Rajib Lochan Mukhopadhyay, Jogindra Nath Samaddar, Akshay Maitraya, Gaur Sundar Ray, Satish Ch. Mitra, Jadu nath Sircar, and our days M.A. Rahim, K.K. Datta, Somendra Chandra Nandy, Rajat Kanta Ray, Abdul Karim and others.
[10] QAZI ABDUL WADUD, *Saswata Banga*, Dhaka 1951, see for instance, pp. 163-166 and 209.

Sen, Akshya Maitreya, Ramesh Ch. Dutt, or the long essays by Wadud and Abul Hussain, and the writings of Abul Fazal perch themselves on the connection between heroism and lack of character, and the connection marked by an ambivalence about death and politics itself. Even if politics appears essential and we must involve ourselves in politics, we must prepare through inculcating the right character, which can be done only through practice of aesthetics, and aesthetic education.

Therefore Bankim Chandra would write *Krishnacharitra* (1886). Even though in this massive work Bankim would address the issue of death – Krishna's untimely or the self-chosen moment of death – *Krishnacharitra* is an account of character, *wisdom*, and an exposition of the aesthetics of *anushilan* or practice. In fact, as I have shown elsewhere, Bankim Chandra's theory of *anishilan* in *Dharmatattva* (1888) tried to lay down a path of practice as a path of virtue, what in modern times we call as practical ethics. Developing a political path out of this ethico-aesthetic route required time. No where do we find a more illustrative case of this dilemma than in the earlier written *Hutom Penchar Naksha* (1862) as well as in Tagore's distaste for politics (which would mean invariably for him killing, death, violence, and attrition), yet, particularly in Tagore, an equal amount of dedication to prepare the Bengalis as valorous beings ready to counter the scourge of colonial rule. Hence even the child in his poem *Beerpurush* (1903) dreams to be the warrior on horseback and armed with sword, guarding his mother going in the palanquin through the forest in the dense darkness of midnight. Tagore embraced death more tellingly as he grew old. He already had posed the problem of *departure* in terms of aesthetics in the essay, *Kabye Upekshita* (1900)[11]. His aesthetics became increasingly less and less romantic, there was a Socratic detachment, and this death was more a submission to destiny, and a realisation that with death life would be fulfilled. Bengalis as we all know identified themselves with his songs, poems, plays, and then with his drawings and later paintings, in an impossible and unforeseen way, so much so that while aesthetics became a mark of non-correspondence of a certain philosophy of life to its age, yet till today, politics can acquire mass legitimacy in Bengal only by aestheticisng itself. It must not appear as course and vulgar. You must be ready to go to jail or face the gallows, but you must do so with songs on your lips. Bengal was eternal, beyond history, beyond the rules of life, because it was beautiful, and beauty was virtuous.

Kazi Abdul Wadud called this phenomenon as «enchanted Bengali» (*sammohita bangali)*. Yet there remained a problem which we can point out here. If identity means sovereignty of the self, then a sense of collective identity – collective

[11] Originally composed as an essay and published in *Bharati,* Jaistha 1307, after the poet's death it was brought out as a collection of essays on literary judgments (1960). The collection had the same title, and contained poet's some other essays also.

sovereignty – could not be formed without an accompanying sense of achieving some sort of *power*. Violence and deaths signified the clash of sovereignty. Clash of sovereignty meant that different powers had taken forms, come into contact with one another, and were now making claim over the same people and same country to seek rule and guide people's lives. Clash of sovereignty meant further that contacts must now explode into contentions, rule must be disturbed severely; and uninterrupted and undisturbed rule must now crumble down and give way to collective violence. But if this was the path to attain identity, where was the place of beauty and virtue in this? And in what way this identity would be different from that of the western rulers who symbolised violence? Therefore the solution that suggested itself was that Bengalis must engage in *sadhana* (dedication, practice, learning), in which *sadhana* would involve issues other than god, safety, security, and immortality. S*adhana* was linked to *anushilan* and *karma* (here meaning action). *Sadhana* was not principally a demand on an individual, the entire nation of the Bengalis would have to be involved. Through conversations the collective *sadhana* would materialise[12]. This would produce «inner strength» – the collective capacity to face death. Individual death could inspire this collective strength. Death had been thus turned into a matter of virtue, the final aesthetics. As the poet sang, «*Death, you are to me like the Lord…*»

But did this solve the problem of identity of the Bengalis? How could the beauty of the land be transferred to being a mark of collective and individual character of the Bengali? It meant above all building up certain marks that would identify the land with the being; and for that what was required was the presence of an all Bengal public sphere in which the various fault lines in the society would be submerged. But Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah was a Muslim, a non-Bengali prince, known as fun-loving rent-extracting ruler, who might be built up posthumously as a figure of lost sovereignty but not as a figure of the sovereignty of the Bengali self. Again, the numerous peasant revolts were not accepted as actions of the rebellious Bengali – except perhaps in Bankim's *Anadamath* – because caste identities stood here as a big hindrance. We can multiply the examples. But the net lesson is the same. It was easy to extol the beauty of the land as singular and unique, but the transference of this virtue from land to its inhabitants was not easy.

[12] One of the principal ways this action-centric philosophy of the early terrorists of the country would develop further was to begin a dialogue with the early communists in the prison camps. There are some accounts of these dialogues to the effect that most of the terrorists merged with the communists; but the accounts of the real dialogues are sketchy, and certainly historians have not given due importance to the ways in which the dialogues proceeded, and how the theory of action of the terrorists led them to accept communist philosophy as the creed. The life of Rebati Barman is instructive in this respect. Politically initiated as an active and a significant leader of the terrorist movement in Bengal, he dialogued with the communist prisoners in Deuli camp in Rajasthan for eight years (1930-37), led other comrades in welcoming communist philosophy, and became of the early publicists of communist movement in Bengal. He contracted leprosy in Deuli camp, and died in complete isolation in Agartala, Tripura in 1952 at an early age of 48. See for this the reminiscences on REBATI BARMAN - ARUN CHAUDHURY (edd), *Rebati Barman Smaraney*, Kolkata 2006.

We have to remember, the concept of solidarity serves to define not land, but people as their specific mode of existence, that specific mode being marked by an intervention in individual lives by a specific structure of power. With the demise or more correctly speaking the weakening of kinship ties (most evident in reports of the two great famines of Bengal with one hundred and fifty years separating the two famines) and we can only recall here Hunter's *Annals of Rural Bengal* (1868), wherein he described as to how men ate dogs and dogs ate men, the social bond was affected severely in the Great Famine of 1770[13]. We have to take into account the interlude – the second half of the eighteenth century extending to the first two decades of the succeeding one – when early modernity and colonial modernity started interacting with each other, at times forming a single architecture. We have to grasp this specific moment of the arrival of modernity – modern forms of association, language, art, literature, production, city, and politics – in which we find the Bengali thinkers thinking of aesthetics and life that could escape the brutality of the arrival of the modern yet take what was attractive. In this decision reason played a great role. Our early modernity arrived in this way. What was characteristic in this early phase of Bengali modernity was that, the question as to how did the Bengalis originate (which could link the land and the people) transformed into an idea of an indefinitely receding moment of the past. And consequentially history as the instrument to re-awaken that which had been forgotten or excluded and now needed to be rejoined with, was not given importance (except by Bankim Chandra[14]) in the period I am alluding to here[15]. Instead, I shall argue, different discursive worlds emerged with their thresholds and disappearances. It was in this chiaroscuro that life and death played their distinct roles out, and the story of our identity was shaped in that background of darkness and sudden shafts of light.

Which is why one can say that the composition of Madhusudan's *Meghnadbadh Kavya* (1861) was a unique moment in a hermeneutic narrative of being a Bengali, for not only here death was being celebrated in an unprecedented way (The dramatist Utpal Dutt in the play staged in 1980 *Darao Pathikbar* interpreted the poem as reflecting on the mass slaughter in Delhi by the colonial army after the suppression

[13] W.W. HUNTER, in *Annals of Rural Bengal*, London 1868, p. 28, wrote quoting John Shore:
«Still fresh in memory's eye the scene I view,
The shriveled limbs, sunk eyes, and lifeless hue;
Still hear the mother's shrieks and infant's moans,
Cries of despair and agonizing groans
In wild confusion dead and dying lie; —
Hark to the jackal's yell and vulture's cry,
The dog's fell howl, as midst the glare of day
They riot unmolested on their prey!
Dire scenes of horror, which no pen can trace,
Nor rolling years from memory's page efface».
http://www.archive.org/stream/annalsofruralbenoohuntuoft/annalsofruralbenoohuntuoft_djvu.txt

[14] See the essays by BANKIM CHANDRA - BANGLAR ITIHAS - BANGLAR KALANKA - BANGLAR ITIHAS - SAMPARKEY KOYEKTI KATHA, and others, in JOGESH BAGAL (ed), *Bankim Rachanabali*, Kolkata 1361, vol. 2, pp. 249-312.

[15] Of course local histories started to be worked out around this time, or to be precise little later.

of the Mutiny of 1857), but the problem of the hero was solved here by making the anti-hero as the hero of an epic time. So if the Bengali had been vanquished by the British and Bengal was now a possessed land, so what? Death was the way through which new life could come.

To continue: In order to understand how death was recognised gradually as part of identity – and heroism and martyrdom came to be combined in *anushilan* and *sadhana* (practice and dedication), in other words the combination of character of life with the end of life – we may take a brief look into the writings of the early militant nationalists of Bengal. In the militant nationalist discourse the ethos of life (virtuous conduct, a proper theory of practice, and dedication) was combined with a single minded attention to task, a sort of obsession, which the militant nationalists called, *unmadana* (madness), and through this, to sacrifice and death. This ethical reconstitution of life brought in the question of death. Yet, this was not enough for a swing away from romanticism to critical awareness of society and social contradictions. But more important, this contributed to a particular dynamics in the process of historical self-discovery. The question remained – awareness, yes, namely that we Bengalis are a part of history and therefore this awareness also is a part of history; but what kind of history? And thus, what kind of awareness is this, its differentia specifica? Time was made intelligible in an extremely intriguing way. In the imagination of being, the intelligibility of time and place was thus constantly acquiring new form. It was not a (history of) Socratic self-inquiry, but an inquiry whose history from the days of early modernity to the violent political turn almost a century later (with the publication of «Jugantar») was marked by a different ethics of life and death.

Thus it was reminded in «Jugantar» in March 1906 (the revolutionary journal, the title meaning *The End of An Age* or *The Transformation of An Age*)[16], that without connecting its present, past and future, no society could establish itself, and for «transformation» society needed new ideal, theory, education, and above all «new practice». «Practice» implied *sadhana*[17]. *Sadhana* meant doing with away with indiscipline in thought and lifestyle; it further meant the realisation that individual benefit and collective benefit were dependent on each other. The editor pointed out that under alien rule none of these two was possible, and that only with collective

[16] In March 1906, the revolutionaries in Bengal started a journal, called «Jugantar» (*The End of An Age or The Transformation of An Age*). The colonial administration initiated measures against the journal within a year under the Incitement to Offences Act, and the journal had to close down in mid-1908. Only few issues thus came out. Yet the name survived. One of the strongest revolutionary-terrorist groups carried on their work for about next twenty-five years under the name, «Jugantar». The influence of the journal was so strong in those days that few years later in 1913 a few members of the «Jugantar» staff brought out a compilation of some of the articles and entries in the journal under the title. *Mukti Kon Pothe* (*Whither Freedom?),* the title under which a series of polemical entries for discussion had been previously published in the journal. This was actually the second edition of the compilation. See, ASHOKE KUMAR MUKHOPADHYAY (ed), *Mukti Kon Pathe*, third edition, Calcutta 2006.
[17] Ibidem, p. 54.

good individual good could be assured. But what was collective life? It was above all national life. And what was the fundamental requisite to make national life possible? Again above all, it was «appropriate work», which meant «goal oriented performance» (*upajukta karma ba lakshyabhimukhin anusthan*). «Jugantar» in the subsequent issues went on to illustrate what the group meant by goal-oriented work. Of course it could rarely say that full independence thorough forcible eviction of alien rule was the goal, therefore the goal was always explained through what Lenin had called the compulsion of «Aesopian language». The goal was end of poverty, slavery, bad traits in «national character», of the infantile attitude in disclaiming responsibility for one's own action, of racist marks in the society, quarrels, pettiness, cowardice, laziness, and finally and significantly, bad literature. Why bad literature? Because, as the writer surmised, «Without a country and without liberty we cannot produce vital art». In this diagnosis of the ills in the body of the country – and «Jugantar» rarely used the word *jati* (nation), it almost always used the word *desh* (country) – there was little of the invocation of the past glory of the country. If the disease had been recognised, «Jugantar» argued, redress too had started, first with character (charitra) reformation. Character reform was possible through suitable readings and actions – both individual and collective exercises, which would drill the body and mind into being appropriate agencies for actions. It assured the readers that Bengal did not lack in capacity or ability, it lacked only in determination and contact. Therefore practice meant finding out «right» people, formation of «societies» at both local and district levels, widen these societies by increasing their membership, organising local movements against ill effects of alien rule with the aim of inculcating collective spirit, pursuing right style of work, and finally «appropriate work», which meant «goal oriented performance» (*upajukta karma ba lakshyabhimukhin anusthan*).

Was this insane thinking? In a letter to the editor published in «Jugantar» (3 Bhadra, 1313 B.S.), an «insane» reader (insane through meditation – *jogakhyapa*) admitted that currents of new thinking might trigger wild thought in a reader's mind; but then, as he asked, were not these clear symptoms of the end of an age? «And was it not now Bengal's turn to serve the country with glory?»[18]. Indeed the suggestion came in the next issue that insanity was perhaps understandable given the «hypnotic state of the country» in which some felt that the country belonged to the English. In the epic *Mahabharata* Arjun the warrior was advised not to behave like a coward; he was further advised to clean his mind of the agony at the prospect of killing men who were foes. This was goal oriented thinking, though this was seemingly an insane state of mind occupied with only one thing. Aesthetics of

[18] Ibidem, p. 96.

insanity also, connecting life with martyr's death, became in this way a feature of being.

The Bengali gradually found him/herself at home in this ambivalent milieu of welcoming life and death, aesthetics and politics, domesticity and a desire to take to flight paths, and realism and catholicity that at times verged on a healthy scepticism towards all big and sovereign claims. The Bengali is thus at home in writing poems, at the same time discussing politics, and as a matter of humour – in being a doctor. Life consists of intellect, probing, diagnosing, and pointing the ills of society and the body. The combination of aestheticisation, politicisation, and medicalisation of the life-world/s of the Bengali makes the question of being to the Bengali a light hearted one, a matter of vulnerability characteristic to the Bengali. Tagore's character Gora is vulnerable, great characters are vulnerable, the recruit to revolution and war is vulnerable. Life is vulnerable. Death, disillusion, and demise can any time take away the greatness of life and convictions.

Let me explain little more what I mean by the phrase «light hearted one». If one aspect of this is to accept vulnerability of life and situation, it also indicates and as I have briefly demonstrated, in spite of at times heavy prose and thought in Bengali thinking on issues of life and death, being a Bengali has signified an achievement in reaching a threshold in encountering physicality of life, where that encounter would mean locating, deciphering, directing, and interpreting the marks of physicality as marks of virtue and aesthetics. In Bengali thought therefore there is no Nature, Truth, Laws, and other capital meanings. It has become in time a land of hundred deities, gods, dogmas, cults, and Marxisms. Hundred voices are echoing the physicality of things and affirmations of events in terms of different virtues and aesthetic senses – from the time of Bharatchandra to, say, a novel on the war time (*Rangroot / The Recruit Sent off to War Zone*) written in the forties of the last century. Such multiple echoes take the heaviness away from the denseness of thought, and make everything appear possible. Everything impossible is drawn into the imaginary of the possible. The poetry loving youth becomes the idealist recruit of revolution. In this sense nothing remains transcendental in Bengali genealogy. Or more correctly speaking the «eternal» is therefore daily, and within grasp. There is ground therefore to argue that the *Baul* (mendicant mystic) songs of eternity can be experienced also as songs of the everyday. It does not mean of course that art is accepted as the source of being and redemption. It too becomes another «ground» of the interface between aesthetics and the materiality of life – the interface that marks Wadud's famous title to his collection of the some of the fascinating essays in Bengali literature, namely *Saswata Banga* (1951, roughly translated as *Eternal Bengal*)[19]. That interface marks our being.

[19] Saswata may mean also, «classic», «timeless». In the context of the essays in the volume I have rendered it as "eternal".

3. The issue of race in the making of modern Bengal is equally interesting and relevant. By race if we mean the most concentrated mark of difference, then Bengal's experience suggests what a post-colonial resolution of difference could be. And again, Wadud's writings are enormously suggestive on this. To be sure the question of race appears in modern Bengali thinking in terms of defining who the aliens were, and by that measure, what we would mean by alien-hood. From Bankim Chandra onwards there is a constant attempt to define an «alien race» – beginning with defining the British rulers with different colour of skin (white) and by that token many others with same skin colour as of the British conquerors – providing a clue. Yet colour could not be enough. Language and religion also became factors, complicating the race question. Till now rulers were «our» rulers with somewhat perhaps different skin colour, language, and by some measure religion. But was this difference so stark as to constitute the rulers into a different race than that of the Bengalis? In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century we do not much evidence of marking out difference in the process of constituting an identity. But after the Mutiny things start happening quickly on this front. Novels, essays, poems, and finally plays have to deal with the race issue. The impact of the Mutiny and the Wahabi rebellion was felt in the distant villages also in the later part of the nineteenth century, as Abul Mansur Ahmed's *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchas Bachar* (*Fifty Years of Politics As I Saw It,* Dhaka, 1968) testifies. We have in some writings indications of anthropometric ideas, but not much. More interesting are the cultural, social, and religious indications. Therefore even though the *Sier* was read by various people in the nineteenth century, the dilemma remained: Was Siraj-ud-daullah Bengal's own ruler? Was he a Bengali Prince? Was what Syed Ghulam Hussain Khan wrote of his character calumny? If he was not a Bengali, how different was he? In the generic nature of such inquiry we come across two terms in this respect – *bidharmi* and *jati*. These two terms have intriguing connotations.

Bidharmi is one with different (*bi* – *biporit*, opposite[20]) religion. It is not *adharma* (sin, defiling of religion, sacrilegious). There had always been the problem in modern Bengali being (in both Hindu and Muslim communities), namely, was interaction and relation with a *bidharmi* an act of *adharma*? Tagore's famous novel *Gora* (1910), possibly built around the historical character of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (a missionary revolutionary in the early years of the twentieth century and the editor of *Sandhya*, the anti-colonial journal), discusses among others the issue of *bidharma* and *adharma*, and on the question as to whether universalism and cosmopolitanism can rid the Bengali of this problem. Siraj is *bidharmi*. But does that mean that he is not of Bengal? The matter of language is less important here, because Persian was

[20] WADUD's compilation of Bengali words, *Vyabaharik Shabdakosh*, Kolkata 1953.

the accepted language of administrative and court work in Bengal. And, even the local and small princes would have many of the protocols in dress and custom as practised by the Nawabs, or previous to that the imperial aristocracy. Race is thus a complex question in defining a nation. Are therefore the Bengalis a nation or a *jati* (*jati* meaning here not caste, but people). It seems, notwithstanding the voluminous literature in nationalist studies on Bengal, that in using the word *jati* again and again Bengali thinking was trying to be non-essentialist. *Jati* could mean identity of a population group by land, language, religion, caste, colour, etc, yet not all at the same time, or fixed in usage at any time. In this unique idea of singularity with singularities, existing in a somewhat Deleuzian sense of *fold*, we have an indication of the post-colonial resolution of the question of difference. Sanskritic heritage meant little here. The ambivalence is present in the writings of even in Bankim Chandra or Sarat Chandra, but much more clearly in Maniruzzaman Islamabadi, Akram Khan, Abul Mansur Ahmed, Tagore, Suniti Chattopadhaya, Kazi Abdul Wadud, Humayun Kabir – who not, whoever tried to think of difference, history, and co-existence in Bengal in the past?

Take for instance one of the hardest issues in this regard – the Hindu-Muslim difference. Wadud said in his fascinating essay, *Sammohita Musalman* (*The Enchanted Muslim*), that the last hundred years of Bengal Muslims form a period of sadness and grief, because they could not make sense of conflict and collision (*sangharsha*), when they thought of difference with the Hindus while there was continuous conflict between the «marfatpanth» and the «alempanthi»[21]. He further told in an address to the annual conference of Faridpur Muslim Chatra Samiti in 1927, «We have remained for long mystified with words», and never saw the reality[22]. And then more directly he posed the question of the nineteenth century idea of the communal difference, divide, and split, by referring to *Sier Mutakherin* and Hunter's *The Indian Musalmans*[23]. And then arguing that this history was one of closure caused to a substantial degree by resumption proceedings and a narrative of social split, he asked, «When would the Bengali Muslims attain freedom from this closure?»[24]. The closure he suggested was equally of Hindu Bengali history, otherwise why did Ram Mohan's effort remain confined to the Hindus only, why could it not be all-embracive, and the history he initiated was finally known as Hindu renaissance? His own answer was that the educated public sphere was small with fragile connections with broader society and in this way it remained a problem of intellectual endeavour with limited reach[25]. This emphasis on self-introspection

[21] KAZI ABDUL, *Wadud Rachanabali*, Dhaka 1988, vol. 1, pp. 76-77.
[22] Ibidem, p. 81.
[23] W.W. HUNTER, *The Indian Musalmans*, New Delhi 2002 (original title, *Our Indian Mussulmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel against the Queen?*).
[24] *Wadud Rachanabali*, cit., pp. 323-331.
[25] Ibidem, pp. 348-349.

was a mark of the writings also of Wadud's fellow travellers (Abul Hussain, Qazi Motahar Hossain, Abul Fazal, and Muhammad Shahidullah among others) in search of «buddhir mukti» (emancipation of intellect).

What is clear is the enormous pain marking Bengali thinking as it tried to make sense of the social split trying at the same time not to fall in the trap of racist thinking. As if the query and therefore the search were: how can we live in our specific existential modes but together, how can singularities stay within a singularity, thus Hindus and Muslims as singularities in the singularity called the Bengali nation/people, or «Marfatpanthis» and «Alempanthis» in the singularity called the Muslim society, or the Shaktas and Vaishnavas in the singularity called the Hindu society? It is this deep ambivalence towards *difference*, or *any sovereign claim*, that made discussions in Bengali informal circles a permanent symposium, known in Bengali parlance as *adda*. This catholicity was not always treated as virtue, even Tagore wailed, why Bengalis are not decisive, why they like to depend on others' support, etc. Not that this prevented Bengalis shun the path of hatred or petty mindedness. The Great Calcutta Killings (1946) is inexplicable if we do not consider the complete breakdown of Bengali society in the war time with the famine, the rush of exodus of people leaving the nearest ones behind in fear of Japanese invasion, and the complicity of the Bengali elites and the political class to divide Bengal in order to get rid of the «race» question, and make Bengal homogenous. Bengal's path to *buddhir mukti* was linked to the democratisation of society, which meant a dialogic negotiation of differences. This was a path that Bengal's aristocracy, the land-owning class, and power brokers were not to consider. The great experiment to build-up what Antonio Grasmci had in another context called the «national-popular» was over. When we write of «blocked dialectics», and «passive revolution» in explaining our current stagnation, we often fail in taking into account this slice of cultural history.

As if partition is only a sudden wrath of history and a new imperfect world begins in 1947. But let us also know that this *as if* carries the whole charge of equivocation, that hangs on the fact that it has no status, no stability, no legitimacy. This non-status depends on what we can call a kind of un-decidability, an indeterminacy; which marks the attitude of a world born after the transition towards the period of transition. We have been unable in the past two hundred years to judge Siraj, we still do not know how to judge Siraj, we do not know how to accommodate 1947 in our history, and our indeterminacy begins to determine our position, mood, stand, mentality, and being. Once again here the interplay of becoming and being – the interplay we see in the relation of destruction/death and our life. And even though the traces of this indeterminacy are effaced, or sought to be effaced, it is in the nature of thing, in the very *structure of the trace*, that what is effaced reconstitutes within what we term as indeterminacy. The difference between what we hold as

symbolic and what is imaginary loses all valid distinction. The period of transition, when symmetry was broken and sovereignty lost its meaning, became possibly the most significant factor in constituting subjectivity, Bengal and Bengali as the subject of history.

Is this a description of the Bengali *babu* culture, on which we find countless articles, books, and stories (from Bankim Chandra to Samar Sen)?[26] Yes, but only to certain extent, and only in certain sense – both the sense and extent marked by the reality of a self flagellating educated middle class. It can also be pointed out that the aesthetics is not an unproblematic field. Yes, we have had several quarrels in the past as to what constitutes the aesthetics of a society, but that only showed how the problematic of aesthetics has remained a critical question in our historical self-awareness. The idea of an aesthetic self has repeatedly floundered on the two rocks of religion and caste. Yet it has not vanished. One of the reasons is that even if we agree that it is a partial, cultural story of who we are, it is also a story of the popular, the *popular*, which is a field of over-determination. One can also, I am aware, say, that this is again «high culture» and politics – the poetry loving, bullet facing youth is more a romantic imagination confined to the urban literati. Beyond that there is the vast section of agrarian masses, and the still more neglected by developmental history the unorganised petty sections of society, whose culture is defined as «popular culture», by which commentators probably mean the attraction of the unemployed youth to popular Bombay film songs and dances, and other visual, audio, and reading products. Again, there is truth in this, but once more only to an extent, marked by conditions of petty production that led both the local government in West Bengal and the managers of culture-industry to cater to the mass products of culture in the name of the popular. Add to that the more than thirty year long control and grab of every available cultural resource by the ruling political class – and one will have certainly some ground to argue that the earlier attempt to forge an aesthetic-political identity of the Bengali being is facing a difficult moment. Yet there is reason to contend that while all such stalemates in the making of the national-popular can be *explained* by political economy, they are *resolved* by/in *politics*. I am sure, given the long history in Bengal of aesthetics trying to make up for the deficiency in politics, we shall witness once more politico-aesthetic endeavour/s. It is not that Bengal has been unaware of the problematic of aesthetics/politics and has not tried to grapple with the question that had at times bled it from within. Poets have gone to jails, writers have taken up rifles, singers have walked up the gallows, and thinkers and artists have quarrelled in the past as to how to resolve the tension[27].

[26] BANKIM CHANDRA, *Babu* in *Lokrahashya* (1874) in JOGESH BAGAL (ed), *Bankim Rachanabali*, Kolkata 1361, vol. 1, pp. 9-11; and SAMAR SEN, *Babu Brittanta*, Kolkata 1978.

[27] Once again, to give an instance of the way this has created rift in intellectual thinking, we can refer to the debate between historian Akshay Maitreya and the artist Abanindra nath Tagore. Maitreya

For the philosophically-minded, at least this much Bengal's history of identity-forging shows, in the being the becoming is always at work – not so much as history, but as the constitutive virtue of the subject. There is no original unity of becoming and being, in as much there is no original disjunction or secession. One can of course complicate matter, and say, that this particular style of coming to terms with one's history is a sociological process, as Pierre Bourdieu was never tired of stressing[28]. Why in Bengal the «pragmatic turn» did not take place, and why in the «mirror of nature» the speculative tradition in Bengal always felt itself assured is a question that will call for a rigorous cultural history. Probably in searching for a clue to our longing for what Richard Rorty called «edifying thinking or philosophy»[29] we shall find an answer to the stalemate that stares at us and marks our current historical moment.

emphasized the need for scientific study, grasp of laws, and proper understanding of history to the extent that Bengalis should also know of the history of its aesthetics. To this Abanindranath's reply was, the capacity and the right to imagine and thus practice art had to be earned or renewed every time. This was not like a law of inheritance. See on this debate, the fine essay by PRATHAMA BANERJEE, *The Work of Imagination – Temporality and Imagination in Colonial Bengal*, in SHAIL MAYARAM - M.S.S. PANDIAN - AJAY SKARIA (edd), *Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History – Subaltern Studies XII*, New Delhi 2005, chapter 8.

[28] See particularly, P. BOURDIEU, *The Field of Cultural Production – Essays on Art and Literature*, Cambridge 1993.

[29] I am referring here to the ideas in R. RORTY'S two books, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton 2008, and, *Consequences of Pragmatism – Essays, 1972-1980*, Minneapolis 1982; My use of the word «pragmatic» should not be confused with «convenient» and «a policy of convenience» of which we have had umpteen instances in our recent past of thirty years.