THE BANGLADESH READER

HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

Meghna Guhathakurta & Willem van Schendel, editors

The Bangladesh Reader

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Meghna Guhathakurta and Willem van Schendel, eds.

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Durham and London* 2013

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Typeset in Monotype Dante by BW&A Books, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The Bangladesh reader : history, culture, politics /
Meghna Guhathakurta and Willem van Schendel, eds.
p. cm.—(The world readers)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8223-5304-1 (cloth : alk. paper)
ISBN 978-0-8223-5318-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Bangladesh—History. 2. Bangladesh—Civilization.
3. Bangladesh—Politics and government.
I. Guhathakurata, Meghana.
II. Schendel, Willem van.
III. Series: World readers.
DS394.5.B364 2013
954.92—dc23
2012044744

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Acknowledgments

We are very grateful for the many kinds of help we received in putting together this book. Its publication would not have been possible without the support of many different copyright holders who gave us permission to use images and excerpts of text. We would like to thank them for their cooperation.

We are also grateful to Abu Faisal Md. Khaled for his enthusiastic assistance in collecting copyright permissions. In addition we thank the following for help, information, comments, advice, and much more: Hana Shams Ahmed, M. M. Akash, Rasheda Akhter, Ellen Bal, Suraiya Begum, Bhaswati Bhattacharya, Apurba Kumar Bose, Timour Claquin, Khushi Kabir, Utpal Kanti Khisa, Nienke Klompmaker, NETZ Bangladesch, Md. Mahbubar Rahman, Saifuzzaman Rana, Niko Richter, Bianca Son, and Eef Vermeij. At Duke University Press, Valerie Millholland made the project possible and Gisela Fosado, Vanessa Doriott Anderson, Lorien Olive, and China Medel skillfully guided us through it; we are grateful to all of them.

Bangladesh and its surroundings. By Bill Nelson.

Introduction

Bangladesh is the eighth most populous country on earth. It has more inhabitants than Russia or Japan, and its national language—Bengali—ranks sixth in the world in terms of native speakers. And yet, Bangladesh remains a great unknown. It rarely figures in global affairs or the media, and when it does we usually hear dismal stories about floods, mass poverty, or political turmoil. These stark portrayals do no justice at all to the rich historical, cultural, and political permutations that have created contemporary Bangladesh. Without a deeper understanding of these processes, Bangladesh will remain a riddle.

There are good reasons for this weak international presence. Bangladesh is a newcomer: as a sovereign unit, it is only some forty years old. Before it gained independence, it was known as East Pakistan (1947–71) and before that as the eastern half of Bengal. Still, it has always been a region with a strong identity because its ecology is distinct from that of the surrounding areas. Bangladesh comprises the world's largest delta, formed by multiple rivers flowing from the Himalayas. The Ganges and the Brahmaputra are the largest of these rivers but there are dozens of others. Annual silt deposits make the soil of the Bengal Delta extremely fertile, and the tropical monsoon climate allows for lush vegetation. From the earliest recorded history to the present day, rice cultivation has been the bedrock of human existence here. Intensive agriculture has resulted in a population that is among the most densely packed in the world. With more than 150 million inhabitants and an area the size of Wisconsin or Greece, Bangladesh has a population density that is three times higher than that of neighboring India.

It would be wrong, however, to think of Bangladesh as an inward-looking agricultural society. On the contrary, openness to the outside world has been its historical hallmark. From the earliest times the society has been a crossroads of trade routes where ideas, people, and goods mingled. Here Tibetan wares were dispatched to ancient Rome, traders from the Maldives met their Armenian counterparts, African kings ruled, and Europeans gradually rose from positions as mercenaries and pirates to colonial overlords. In precolonial times, rice from the Bengal Delta fed populations as far apart

as the Moluccas in eastern Indonesia and Goa in western India, and its silk fabrics traveled even farther. The delta was a major stronghold of Buddhist learning—and has many remains to show for it—before Hindu and Muslim identities came to dominate the cultural scene. Linguistic, religious, and regional diversity have been a feature of Bangladeshi history as much as the mobility of its population.

Modern identities in Bangladesh are the outcome of this long-lasting openness and incessant renewal. And this includes the very idea of Bangladesh itself, the unexpected outcome of a unique and spectacular double decolonization, first from British rule in 1947 and then from Pakistani rule in 1971. These historical vicissitudes must be understood if we are to make any sense of the intensity of contemporary identity politics in Bangladesh—and why these revolve round cultural distinctions such as Bengali Muslim versus Muslim Bengali, or Bengali versus indigenous people.

The Bangladesh Reader provides an introduction to this huge, old, multifaceted, and little-known society. But it is not a history of Bangladesh—there are other books that provide analyses of the country's history (see "Suggestions for Further Reading"). *The Bangladesh Reader* approaches its subject in a different way. Think of it as a choir performing a grand oratorio, a multitude of voices evoking social life and aspirations past and present. Its main aim is to convey the ambiance, complexity, texture, and excitement of Bangladesh to a broad readership. First-time visitors, students, and others seeking an introduction to the country will find much that is new and interesting, and so will Bangladeshis and scholars of the region.

We hope to surprise readers with unusual angles and thus inspire them to explore further. To this end we have selected both classic contributions that are familiar to many Bangladeshis—and essential reading for those who want to know the country—and quirky ones that are much less known. We aim for a lively, broad, and entertaining collection that brings out the cultural richness of Bangladesh from its earliest history to the present day.

This book assembles an array of entries, including eyewitness accounts, historical documents, speeches, treaties, essays, poems, songs, autobiography, photographs, cartoons, paintings, posters, advertisements, a recipe, maps, and short stories. Many of these contributions have not been accessible to English-speaking readers before, or are very hard to get hold of. We offer translations not only from Bengali but also from a range of other languages, including Prakrit, Sanskrit, Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Chakma, Dutch, Urdu, Portuguese, French, Sak, and German. We have abridged some selections for readability.

The *Reader* chronicles Bangladeshi history and culture over two and a half millennia by letting a great diversity of actors speak in their own words. We encounter rich and poor Bangladeshis, women and men, kings and poets, colonizers and colonized, rebels and saints, urban and rural folk, and scholars and laborers. Our introductory notes to individual entries provide context, but the focus is on how participants tell the story of Bangladesh—in a format that is readable, welcoming, and eclectic. The intended result is a tapestry of facts, opinions, emotions, and perspectives that evoke the thrill of life in Bangladesh from ancient times through colonial and postcolonial transmutations to the present day. To use a Bangladeshi expression, the book is as variegated as an embroidered quilt.

We hope that *The Bangladesh Reader* will provide a much-needed boost to the study of Bangladesh and South Asia. The book engages with themes and debates that challenge conventional ideas about Bangladeshi culture and history. For example, the contributions of the country's many non-Bengali communities tend to be ignored in the existing literature because Bangladesh history tends to be written as either the emancipation of downtrodden Muslims or the inexorable emergence of the Bengali nation-state. Both are highly problematic; there is nothing monolithic or preordained in the multiple histories and many social worlds that have created contemporary Bangladesh. Our contributors hint at local accommodations, popular perceptions, political processes, and transnational connections that challenge scholars of South Asia to advance more-insightful explanations. We hope the book will open up new avenues in Bangladesh studies.

The Bangladesh Reader follows a largely chronological order, but we are less concerned with providing a historical timeline than with conveying the feel of Bangladesh. In our selection of pieces we have applied a number of criteria. Brevity and accessibility were very important. We have avoided long pieces and readings that require much prior knowledge. We have given priority to pieces that are crucially important but presently unavailable in English or difficult to find. We have aimed for a mix of different types of materials, most of them originally intended for a general audience. Finally, we have chosen a very broad variety of voices and contributions that we hope will pique the reader's curiosity and challenge existing clichés about Bangladesh. These choices dictated the omission, purely owing to considerations of space, of many works that are of great significance to our understanding of Bangladesh. Naturally, some of these are included in the list of further readings at the end of the book.

The *Reader* consists of chronologically ordered parts, preceded by selec-

tions that present some contemporary voices from Bangladesh. What are Bangladeshis discussing today? How do they see themselves? Where do they think their country is heading?

We then look at the long period from the earliest surviving writings to the eighteenth century in part II. What people were living in the Bengal delta in those long-gone times? Can we still connect with their experiences? We hear the voices of poets, pilgrims, and kings, as well as those of adventurers from many lands.

Part III takes us to the 190-year period of British rule (1757–1947). We read fragments from the first Bengali autobiography; accounts of politics, revolt, and famine; a call to holy war; a satire on gender relations; a Nobel laureate's short story; and much more. A section of images of Bangladesh's past is included in this part.

Next, we consider the period when the Bengal Delta became part of the new state of Pakistan and was known as East Pakistan (1947–71). We read about the partitioning of British India: joy at the passing of colonial rule, puzzled officials trying to find the new international border, a lament for lost unity, and the story of a migrant. We then turn to the gradual unraveling of the state of Pakistan and trace how language emerged as the main rallying theme in East Pakistan politics. We also hear about new lifestyles, minority issues, and more.

The war of 1971, which enabled Bangladesh to break away from Pakistan, forms the focus of part V. A period of abiding significance in contemporary Bangladesh, it is the attention of much historical writing. Here we present contrasting voices and perspectives. We hear popular leaders declaring independence, Pakistani army men denouncing the betrayal of East Pakistan, and people from many walks of life articulating their feelings about the maelstrom in which they were caught up. The war was followed by the exuberance of independence and the constitution of a new state, and we include an introduction to the early years of Bangladesh. A gallery of images of politics is included in this part.

Then we explore national identity, a vexed issue in Bangladesh today, in part VI. Since independence the idea of the nation has been at the center of swirling debates and contestations: what makes us, inhabitants of Bangladesh, a nation? A question like "Are we Bengali or Bangladeshi?" may sound strange to untutored ears but it is being debated daily all over the country—and devotees of Bengali culture, Islamist activists, secular thinkers, and people from the many ethnic minorities provide different answers.

Part VII looks at an aspect of Bangladesh that is still astonishingly little known abroad: its vibrant cultural life. This is a society that displays its cul-

tural creativity, from popular arts to fine arts, in many and surprising ways. Poetry has always been a major art form. It is deeply appreciated and widely practiced but rarely reaches an international audience. We provide some examples. Painting, dance, creative writing, filmmaking, artistic parades, pop music, food, and rickshaw art are some of the other cultural expressions that are briefly introduced. A section of images of cultural diversity is included in this part.

The next part explores *development*, a term that became omnipresent in public discourse in Bangladesh and continues to be the lens through which most outsiders try to understand the country. We encounter development practitioners and their critics, sketches of lives in poverty and wealth, and the power dynamics surrounding the implementation of development projects. We learn what it is like to be a patient in a Bangladeshi hospital, or a migrant in a provincial town, or a rich person in the capital city Dhaka. And we hear Bangladeshis comment on the development regime that has such deep roots in their society.

In the *Reader*'s final part, we explore some of the links that connect Bangladesh's society to the wider world. Millions of people have left the country to find a livelihood abroad, and many of these migrants maintain strong emotional (and sometimes economic and political) ties with their former home. We hear about the fate of refugees from the partition of India, well-established Londoners of Bangladeshi origin, and unauthorized settlers in India. We also learn how the state of Bangladesh became part of the world state system, how the idea of microfinance became one of the country's best-known exports, and how Bangladeshi chic may have a global future.

Districts of Bangladesh. By Bill Nelson.

I

Voices from Bangladesh

We begin *The Bangladesh Reader* with a few contemporary voices—Bangladeshis speaking their minds about issues that are important to them today: their work, their hopes for the future, their dissatisfactions, and their spiritual aspirations. These voices stand for the tens of millions of articulate citizens of Bangladesh and give a taste of one of their great talents: self-expression.

Becoming a Village Photographer

Sabina Yasmin Sathi

The media image of Bangladesh tends toward the somber, if not tragic. Floods, cyclones, mass poverty, political instability, corruption, and underdevelopment figure prominently in most media coverage of the country. To challenge this unbalanced view, a group of young media activists started a quest to find positive stories about Bangladesh, stories that spoke to the remarkable achievements of ordinary people in rural Bangladesh. In their quest they came across physically handicapped people who started a green revolution by using natural fertilizers, women who took to repairing cycles to send their children to school, and singers who claimed that their mystical songs eased two kinds of hunger: physical and mental. Here is the story of a teenage girl who refused to believe that her destiny should be determined by anyone but herself.

My name is Sabina Yasmin Sathi and I am seventeen years old. I come from the village of Akua, located in the union of Shohodebpur, in Kalihati *upazila* [subdistrict], Tangail district. My father was a poor *madrasha* [Islamic school] teacher. He wanted me to study in the madrasha as well. My mother and I did not want that. So I got admitted to the local high school instead. In the year 2001, I took a course in photography under the science curriculum of the mass education program. Later I took a loan, bought my own camera, and started to take pictures.

At first my father objected because he feared social pressure. But later he relented. Besides, my mother supported me all the time and that was my strength. Many neighbors spread the word that I was engaging in un-Islamic behavior. Taking pictures is against Islam, they said. But others saw that I was spending the money I earned toward my own education. I no longer depended on my parents to pay for my schooling.

At a certain point in time I became the pride of my village. I am now called to photograph many events in my village and also villages around me. When young girls seek admission to a school or college, they need a passport-size photograph. They seek my help. UNICEF did a photo essay on me once.

Translated from Bengali by Meghna Guhathakurta.

Wait for a While, Death!

Abdul Gofur Hali

In this poem—written in 1997—Abdul Gofur Hali addresses death and evokes life as a chance to reach for the divine. He follows a poetic tradition in Bangladesh when he describes himself as "crazy." Gofur is a well-known representative of a popular mystical Islamic (Sufi) movement known as Maijbhandari. This movement venerates the Muslim saint of Maijbhandar, a small town in the southeastern district of Chittagong.

Wait for a while, death,
Let me behold my true self a little longer.

My soul has found its playmate
And is still busy playing,
Don't be so harsh as to destroy
The mating of soul and god.

When the soul comes home after playing,
Then go and show yourself.
Don't you remember your own words?
This bond abides through ages.

Crazy Gofur wonders:
What did I do in the name of playing?
Human life quivers
Like a drop of water on a taro leaf.

Translated from Bengali by Hans Harder.

Telephone Ladies and Social Business

Muhammad Yunus

*The Grameen Bank (*gram *means village in Bengali) is an institution that provides small loans to poor people who do not qualify for traditional bank loans because they lack collateral. Its founder, Muhammad Yunus, has been exceptionally successful in promoting his ideas about microcredit (or microfinance) and social business worldwide. Today his method is widely eulogized and also criticized. The Grameen approach spawned one of Bangladesh's most powerful conglomerates of institutions, and Yunus became one of the country's best-known citizens. In 2006 the Grameen Bank and Yunus shared the Nobel Peace Prize. In this excerpt from the speech he gave to accept another prize, the World Information Society Award, he explains some of his ideas.*

All you need to do is to find a business model where ICT [information and communication technology] can become an income-generating activity to the poor. I tried this through [putt]ing mobile phones in the hands of the poor women in Bangladesh. It worked beautifully. Almost everybody that I shared my thoughts [with] about getting poor women involved in mobile phone business thought: this is an idea which may fit into a science fiction, but not in a real situation of Bangladesh.

But poor women responded to my idea with enthusiasm. They learned quickly how to handle the phone, and the business. Today there are 200,000 telephone ladies in Bangladesh, earning a good income for their families and contributing USD 11 million worth of revenue per month to Grameen Phone, the mobile phone company.

Grameen Phone found the women in Grameen Bank network so reliable as business partners, that it has now launched another programme with them. This time . . . poor women [not only will sell the airtime, they will also sell telephone connections for new subscribers, receive money on behalf of the company from the subscribers for replenishment of their accounts, and replace their prepaid card completely. This is a case of win-

win-win situation from all three sides, the mobile phone company, the subscribers and the poor women.

Grameen Bank now serves over 6 million borrowers, 96 per cent of whom are women. The number of these borrowers will reach 8 million by the end of this year [2006], and 12 million by the end of 2010. The number of telephone ladies is expected to reach 400,000 by the end of this year, and exceed one million by 2010. . . .

We have been emphasizing the importance of sending the children to school since we began our work in the mid seventies. Our social programme, known as "Sixteen Decisions," includes this. Not only 100 per cent of the children of Grameen families started going to school, now many of them are going to medical schools, engineering schools, universities, etc. Grameen Bank provides them with student loans. There are more than 10,000 students at high levels of education who are financed by Grameen Bank's education loans.

We are in the process of setting up a technology promotion fund in collaboration with Mr Mohammed Abdul Latif Jameel of Saudi Arabia, to provide financing to innovative adaptation of already designed technology, provide venture capital and loans to produce and market these technologies. I am expecting that ICT will be an area of technology, which the innovators will give high priority.

Two years back, Grameen Bank launched a special programme to give loans to beggars. We did not impose any of our existing rules on them. Their loans are interest-free. They can pay whatever amount they wish, whenever they want to pay. When the first loan is repaid they can take a second loan, usually a bigger loan, and so on. With this money they turn themselves into door-to-door sales persons. It is up to them to decide when they should give up begging. We now have over 70,000 beggars in this programme and it will reach 100,000 by the end of the year. . . .

I strongly feel that we can create a poverty-free world. The basic ingredient of overcoming poverty is packed inside each of the individual human beings, including the poorest human being. All we need to do is to help the person to unleash this energy and creativity. Once this can be done, poverty will be history. It will disappear very fast. The only place in the world where poverty may exist will be the poverty museums, no longer in human society.

We need to reconceptualize the business world to make sure it contributes to the creation of a humane society, not aggravate the problems around us. We need to recognize two types of businesses, not one, and offer equal opportunities to both. These two types of businesses are: One which is al-

ready known, business to make money, that is conventional business, the principle of whom is to maximize profit. And the other new kind, business to do good to people, or social business.

Social business enterprises are a new kind of non-loss non-dividend enterprises, which aim at solving social, health and environmental problems, utilizing the market mechanism. We need to give opportunities to the social business entrepreneurs [that are] similar to the institutional and policy support system that the world has built over the years for the conventional businesses. One such new institution to help social business entrepreneurs will be the creation of "social stock market" to bring the social business entrepreneurs and social investors to come in contact with each other and solve the problem of finding investment money for this new type of business.

I Work in a Clothing Factory

Shana K.

Factories making ready-made clothes for export first appeared in Bangladesh's towns and cities in the 1980s. They spread rapidly and became the country's major export industry. Today these factories give employment to hundreds of thousands of workers, mostly women. One of them is Shana. Here she gives us a brief sketch of what life is like for workers in the ready-made textile industry.

June 15, 2010

My name is Shana K—. I am 18 years old and work as a sewing operator at the Meridian Garments factory. I started working three years ago at several different sewing factories. My duty at Meridian starts at 8:00 A.M. and regularly ends at 10:00 P.M. or 12:00 midnight. There are also 14 to 15 all-night shifts [per month] to 3:00 A.M. Management allows workers to leave at 8:00 P.M., to go home to eat supper and rest before starting the night shift at 10:00 P.M. I don't get any weekly day off. On Saturdays, management allows us to leave work at 8:00 P.M. On average, we can enjoy just one day off in two or three months. I studied up to the ninth grade, but unfortunately, could not continue my studies due to financial hardship.

My salary is 3,100 taka ($44.60) a month, but I can earn 5,000–6,000 taka ($71.94–$86.33) including overtime [OT] work. We work an average of five or six hours of overtime each day and the rate for OT duty is 22 taka (32 cents) per hour. I haven't married yet. We are only two in our family. My father died when I was nine years old. I have one brother, who lives in a village with my uncle. He is studying in the ninth grade. My mom has been living with me. My mother is also working in a garment factory at Savar, as a sewing operator. She is earning 4,000–5,000 taka ($57.55–$71.94) per month including overtime duty. Often we get paid late.

We have rented one small room in the Mirpur neighborhood, which costs 1,500 taka ($21.58). The house is very simple, made of corrugated iron

Laborers in a garment factory. Photograph by Jenneke Arens. Used by permission of the photographer.

sheets. Inside the house it is very hot. There is some garbage around the house which smells bad. We rented this house a few months ago since it was too difficult to pay the 2,600 taka ($37.41) rent for our old room. We have a single wooden bed, a mirror, a hanger for keeping clothes and a rack for keeping plates and glasses.

For the two of us, we spend 5,000 taka ($71.94) a month for the simplest food. We eat rice three times a day with mashed or fried potatoes, or other kinds of vegetables and lentils. We can eat fish just once a week and meat or cheap broiler chicken just one day a month. The prices of all commodities have increased more than 100 percent in the last two or three years, but our salary has not increased at all. We have to spend 2,500 taka ($25.97) a month for my brother for his education and other costs. My uncle takes care of him, but we have to provide the expenditures for his education, food, clothing, etc.

We have no opportunity for recreation or entertainment. There is a 17-inch black-and-white television, but we cannot manage the time to watch it. When we return home, it is around 11:00 P.M. or 12:00 midnight. When we return from the factory, we have to cook food and we eat supper at

midnight. We have no energy to watch TV then. My mom has one day off per week on Fridays. When relatives from our village visit our room, they usually come on Fridays.

We have to spend 2,500 taka ($35.97) for medical treatment. My mom is 45 years old. She became very weak after she suffered an electric shock about three years ago. She needs medicines regularly that cost more than 1,500 ($21.58) per month. My mother is planning to arrange a marriage for me after two years from now. But we need to save 70,000 to 100,000 taka ($1,007–$1,439) for arranging this marriage, for ornaments and the feast for guests.

There is also no security in our life. We do not have any health insurance. A few months back when I was coming from the factory at 12:00 midnight with my pay, some thieves attacked me and grabbed all my wages. I cried out that we are very poor and will starve without this money, but the robbers did not pay heed to me.

I walk to the factory, but my mother takes the bus to the factory. For transportation, she needs to spend 1,000 taka ($14.39) a month.

Due to our poor income, our lives are gradually getting ruined. We are trapped living in a small room with no facilities. There are only two gas burners, one toilet and one water pump for five families. So we have to wait in a queue for cooking or using the toilet. The bed we use is very uncomfortable, but we cannot buy a better one due to the shortage of money.

My brother is living far from us with my uncle in our village back home. We cannot bring him to live with us as the expenditure for education is much higher in Dhaka and we would need to rent a larger room if he comes. We have a small piece of land in our village, but there is no house. We had to sell our house after the death of my father. The food we are consuming every day is very poor. If the minimum wage is raised to 6,200 taka ($89.21) my wage would be higher, including overtime, and as a result we could eat fish once or twice a week and meat once a week. A wage increase would help us take care of our health. Right now we are always anxious about whether we can manage money to buy food or for medical treatment. We have never been able to save money for the future. In fact, we sometimes have to borrow money just to eat or for medicine. In truth, we live just from hand to mouth.

Translated from Bengali; translator not identified.

Bengali New Year

Shamsuzzaman Khan and Kajalie Shehreen Islam

Since 1989, Bengali New Year (Pohela Boishakh) has been celebrated publicly as never before. The Bengali year begins on April 14, which is the first day of the month of Boishakh. One of the holiday's high points in Dhaka is a festive parade featuring floats with enormous, colorful animals—peacocks, owls, frogs, tigers, elephants—as well as music and theater performances and food. Although Bengali New Year has long been important because it marked the festive annual settling of debts, the parade is a new tradition. Today it is a celebration of Bengali culture as well as a symbolic statement against communal (religious sectarian) politics, as this interview explains.

Every year on April 14, thousands of people in white-red saris and colourful *panjabis* [shirts] brave the heat to join the parades, *melas* [fairs] or family-and-friends gatherings around *panta-ilish* [soaked rice and hilsa fish] and a variety of *bharta* [mashed dishes]. Their faces painted, terra-cotta crafts and bright masks in hand, they celebrate the advent of the Bengali New Year. But has the day always been celebrated in this manner and what social relevance do these rituals have in our lives today?

Professor Shamsuzzaman Khan, Director-General of Bangla Academy, has spent most of his life studying Bengali culture and folklore. He has served as Director-General of the National Museum and Shilpakala Academy; taught at National University, Jagannath College and Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh[;] and edited and continues to edit journals and magazines.

On the occasion of Pahela Boishakh, Professor Khan talks to Kajalie Shehreen Islam of *The Daily Star* about the traditions surrounding the festivities, how they came about and their social significance for Bengalis.

How did the Bengali new year, that is, the Bengali calendar, come about?

The history of the Bengali new year and calendar is somewhat unclear and it is difficult to say exactly when it came about, but some assump-

tions can be made based on circumstantial evidence. The fact that it is called Bangla *san* or *saal*, which are Arabic and Parsee words respectively, suggests that it was introduced by a Muslim king or sultan. Some historians suggest Moghul emperor Akbar, as he had reformed the Indian calendar—with the help of his royal astronomer Fatehullah Shirajee—in line with the Iranian *nawroj* or new day. Others suggest it was the seventh-century king Sasanka.

I personally believe it was Nawab Murshid Quli Khan who was a *subedar* or Moghul governor and later a Nawab, who celebrated Bengali traditions such as the *Punyaha*, a day for ceremonial land tax collection. I believe he used Akbar's new year framework, revenue reforms and fiscal policy and started the Bangla calendar.

Why is Nababarsho [Bengali New Year] *celebrated on different days in Bangladesh and West Bengal?*

An expert committee headed by Professor SP Pandya, after much scientific deliberation, set the date and their report was published in the *Indian Journal of History of Science* in 2004, where it was clearly stated that "The year shall start with the month of Vaishakha when the sun enters nirayana Mesa rasi, which will be 14th April of the Gregorian Calendar." The Indian government accepted this in 2002 but has not been able to convince West Bengal to adopt it.

How do Pahela Boishakh *celebrations today compare to those you remember from your childhood?*

The main element back then was the *halkhata* or the ceremonial opening of a fresh ledger by businesses. In our agriculture-based society, people were short of cash and would often buy on credit. On the first day of the New Year, shop owners would decorate their shops with paper flowers and *dhoop* (incense) and lay out sweets for the customers who would repay their debts in full or at least in part. It was a matter of social prestige to do so.

In this context, I would like to quote Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I remember Bangabandhu, after forming the Planning Commission following the country's independence, saying that the members who were scholars trained in the west understood little about the lives of the rural people of Bangladesh, about the local context, geography, economy. "In our agriculture-based society, people do not have cash all

New Year's Day parade in Dhaka. Photograph by Palash Khan, © Palash Khan / leadfoto.com. Used by permission of the photographer.

year. Even our fathers and uncles would buy a sari for their wives and *hilsa* fish on the new year," said Bangabandhu.

Other *Nababarsho* traditions included the *lathi khela* [fighting with bamboo clubs] and of course the *mela* or fair which would begin a day early on *Chaitra Shankranti*, the last day of the Bengali year, and continue for two to three and up to seven days. The *mela* was a source of entertainment as well as a place to shop and stock up on necessities, mainly kitchen utensils such as *da, boti, kurol*, wooden crafts, children's toys, etc., which were all available at these fairs.

Then there were the *gorur larai* (bullfight), *morog larai* (cock fight), *putul naach* (puppet show), *jatra*, etc., some of which still take place in certain parts of the country, though not as much. For example, some people in far-flung *haor* areas [wetlands] of the country still invest in expensive bulls and raise them to be able to win the bullfight at the new year.

From where did we derive and what is the significance of traditions such as eating panta-ilish *on* Nababarsho?

Panta-ilish is, I think, an unfortunate joke towards the poor.

However, there was a tradition called *Amani*, according to which the woman of the house would, the night before, soak rice and the twig of a mango tree in a pot of water and on the morning of the new year, sprinkle it on everyone in the family. This was based on a magical belief that the water would wash away the mistakes and negative aspects of the past year and bring peace to the family. This tradition is also empowering for women as they have the responsibility of this *mangolik* or wishing-well ritual.

Some aspects are also taken from early *Nababarsho* festivals, namely, *Nabanno utshab*, which is a thanksgiving ritual in which *payesh* [sweet rice porridge] is laid out by the river or for birds to have and which is also believed to bring peace.

How do you see the way in which Pahela Boishakh *is celebrated today?*

I see it very positively. I think the celebrations are a sign of national cohesion regardless of religion, caste and creed. It is a national festival. It has taken positive aspects from *Amani*, *Nabanno*, etc., and is a wonderful mixture of several traditions. The parade brought out by the Institute of Fine Arts, for example, is an extension of the *michhil* or processions that used to be brought out in the villages. The parade with masks of

owls, snakes and more have a multidimensional meaning and metaphor. They are a symbol of protest. They first began in 1989 when, under the autocratic rule of General Ershad, people could not protest openly and this was a symbolic way of doing so. Even today, they are symbols of protest against governments and political parties which are communal, oppressive, etc. Bengali culture is a mixed, secular culture and the *Pahela Boishakh* celebrations are a reflection of this, invigorating our culture even more.

Do you think Bengali culture is in the face of any threats?

There are the threats of globalisation, satellite culture, etc., but I believe our culture is so powerful that it will survive the onslaught of these. It has had to be accepted even by these elements, which use, for example, Baul songs, in perhaps a different form and of course for their own profit, but the important thing is that they are not being able to deny its presence and power. Bengali culture has the strength to adjust to new situations, and it is based on human values. The phrase that parents are always telling their children, *"Manush hou,"* cannot be translated into English; "be human" does not carry the same connotations that it does in Bengali. But the original phrase is proof of how humans and human values are put above everything else and that is the essence of our culture.

The Fundamentalist

Abdul Qader Mullah

A senior member of the Islamic Assembly (Jama'at-e-Islami, the most prominent Islamist political party of Bangladesh) criticizes national politics. He explains that following "Islamic ideology" will bring about a perfect society.

In our country, democracy is not there. The Prime Minister [Sheikh Hasina] would never be where she is if she were not the daughter of Sheikh Mujib. She has no political background. She is a housewife. Khaleda Zia, too, was never a political worker. If she were not the widow of Zia [President Ziaur Rahman], she would not be head of the party. The behaviour and mode of expression of these two women are not those of normal ladies. One is busy with revenge, the other with her husband's killing. Hasina thinks those entangled in her father's killing should be punished by any means. Women are emotional anyway, but how can these two be normal, think of the common people?

We cannot go back to the feelings of 20 years ago. History is important for learning and improving the future. We, in Jama'at, are free of this emotion. We work for an ideology which seeks to improve the social, judicial and economic system, even the political system.

What is written in the Koran is not practised by our leaders or by the common people. The ruling class prevents non-Muslim communities from understanding Islamic ideology. It was Bernard Shaw who said, "When I go through the Koran, it offers the best ideology for the improvement of human society, but when I see the society of the Muslims, this is the worst." If someone like Mohamad were dictator, he would remove all evils from the world, and people could live in heaven.

Sixty per cent of wealth of the world is in the hands of Muslims. Yet we have so many poor. More than 90 per cent of the world's homeless are Muslims—how will they say our religion, our ideology are the best? The Prophet says "If a Muslim has everything and allows his neighbour to pass his night without food, that man is not a Muslim." Whether the neighbour

is Muslim or not is not important. Social inequality is against Islam. Those who have their money in the USA, their children educated there, their dogs have meat while the man who lives under his building has not 100 grammes in a month. Most of our wealth has been captured by a few, spread through corruption, illegal business. When they go to the Baitul Mokarram Masjid on Friday, that is hypocrisy.

This Land Is Your Land, This Land Is Our Land

Farah Mehreen Ahmad

A young member of an activist writers' collective chides fellow Bangladeshis for keeping silent about human rights abuses and the treatment of minorities.

There are a few things I want to say to my peers.

Dost [friends], we the "new-new" don't know much about our history other than the heroism of our relatives, the brutality of the *hanadar bahini* [occupying forces], some specific dates, some illustrious names, and some songs.

When we wear a Che T-shirt, he looks like Michael Jackson. Most of us haven't read his biography. Most of us are unaware of his flaws. Yes, he had some. You'd know if you dug beyond the translation of "hasta la victoria siempre" [until victory, forever].

When we buy a T-shirt with "Joy Bangla" [Victory to Bangladesh] printed on it, we kind of know what it means. To us it resonates as something parallel to a "carpe diem/noctem" or "veni, vidi, vici" sort of deal or even a yin-yang tattoo.

History is not a thing of the past for us to relish on particular days. It is what we make every day, whether we know it or not—just by virtue of existing. When we were too busy being the Converse All-Star, Old Navy hoodie, and *gaamchha* [thin cotton towel] clad "casually classy" generation, Bengali settlers burnt down over two hundred homes of Bangladeshis who don't look like us. The army joined in and [killed several of them by brush fire]. And we were here making history—once again—with our silence.

We are going down in the books, babe, as the one that didn't speak up; as the one that when asked to attend a rally to protest said, "Kintu dost, oita toh plan a chhilona" [But that wasn't in the plan, buddy]. Sorry for the disruption, bud, but I don't think being subjected to this kind of atrocity *oder plan a chhilo* [was part of their plan].

Some elders tell us this land really isn't ours; that we don't respect our history and are too west bound and east wounded; that we really don't know what it means to be Bangladeshi since the *desh* [nation] was fed to us with a silver spoon. We resentfully worship the rubble we stand on, as if it's all over, as if there is nothing else to fight.

But there is one more thing left to be defined though. We have that one more [line] that shows when we say "us" we mean "them" too. Why did we vote in 2008, in what was arguably the most monumental political event we witnessed in our two-decades-and-then-some-old lives? I thought we took a few vows:

To not only chuckle when our friend laughingly tells us that his dad, an army officer, asked him to "stop acting like a bloody civilian" when he was disappointed, but be alarmed by how people who are paid to protect us see us.

To be repulsed by their gunshots and read it as *rokkhok* [protectors] morphing into homicidal *tokkhoks* [venomous beings], disrupting the silence we choose to bury those darn *paharis* [hill people] under.

To not only high-five me when I tell you how I walked into the checkpoint to give that officer a piece of my mind for winking at me, but remember how you especially loved the part where I told him that he gets paid to protect me and I have the right to make him surrender his uniform if he makes me feel vulnerable. Since playing poker is your favourite after-work pastime, can you [muster] that same [enthusiasm for] the hills and raise it a thousand notches?

To not forget to notice the face some several inches above the *pinon* [hill women's skirt] your sister was wondering where she could buy.

To notice the human being whose dancing feet you watched admiringly while saying "era kintu ektu Thai-der moton, na?" [They look a bit like Thais, don't they?].

To cringe at the patronizing generalization when the aunty asked for a Chakma [one of Bangladesh's hill minority communities] cook because "ora khub sincere hoy" [they're so honest] or a night guard of the same because "ora khub teji hoy" [they're so spirited]. To burst this greedy and exploitative bubble of fantasy traits attributed to those who are forced to be third-class citizens for our needs and convenience, as if their sole purpose is to serve us—the Raj.

To slap our friend who has a crush on his Chakma classmate and calls her "minority" behind her back as if that's her name, and allows his friends to do the same. "Dost, Minority'r shathe khub mojaye asos na?" [Hey, bud, having a swell time with Minority, I see?].

To not pervert "majority rule" to mean the rule of a power tripping, vile, and nonchalant majority, but the rule of a conscientious majority. To put an end to those darn [categories]—"foreign" . . . "stranger" . . . "unknown" . . . "different" . . . "them."

To harness a Bangladesh that isn't exclusively for Bangalis.

Can we vow to not allow evil to defecate all over our Home? Can we fix our radars to catch their [hill people's] corpses though we have skipped their lives? One of these days during one of those *addas* [chats] at one of those coffee joints, can we touch on their plight? Maybe just throw in a "dost, oi paharigulir na life a onek para . . . purai bad buzz" [Buddy, those hill people have a raw deal . . . a real bad buzz], for good measure?

How They Discriminate Me

Roshni Rani

There are roughly eleven million Hindus in Bangladesh, the largest Hindu population in any country except India and Nepal. Hindus are an important minority in Bangladesh and they are highly differentiated. In this firsthand account, Roshni Rani, a woman from Kushtia (a town in western Bangladesh), speaks of gender discrimination among her low-caste community—and how hard it is for women to take part in decision making.

"Boy or girl, two is enough"—that statement has failed to make its way into the Harijan [Dalit, the lowest caste] community. Boys are assets and girls are a burden—this is currently the predominant conception among the Harijans. When a male child is born, the whole community rejoices. But when a girl is born, a completely different emotion prevails. This is the first barrier in the development of a girl child. Parents of a boy think about every minute aspect of their child's future. But parents of a girl do not even give a passing thought to planning their little daughter's future. "Health is wealth." When children are healthy, both their bodies and their minds are alert. If a child, whether a boy or girl, does not get care, love, nutritious food, and the freedom to play from childhood, then his or her development is stunted.

From their earliest childhood, girls are not allowed to play with boys. Moreover, parents think if girls go outside they will be spoiled, if they are allowed to play outside it will degrade the reputation of the family . . . "people will talk," they whisper. In this way, girls are discriminated from their very birth. Although my brother is younger than I, he has more chances to play than I. When my brother is playing or going to school, I am busy working in the household. Most Harijan girls are involved in child labour. Not only that, they are also engaged in risky and injurious work. For example, a girl of seven, eight years old should play but she has to cook and do other heavy household chores. Moreover, their parents do not give them any directions or advice when they go through the physical and mental changes of

Harijan women demonstrating in the streets of Kushtia town. Photograph by Willem van Schendel, 2006.

puberty. Even when someone from outside tries to educate us, our parents do not welcome such advice but become suspicious. For example, a senior woman from FAIR [a local NGO] came to educate us in reproductive health, but our parents declared that she had come to spoil and corrupt us girls. Her intervention would make the girls unruly, they thought. But later they were properly briefed and they allowed the session to begin. Those of us who attended the workshop understood that to protect ourselves we should have a thorough knowledge about reproductive healthcare.

There is will, but no way, among Harijan women. A girl may think that she will grow up to be something better and be successful in life but her wish remains unfulfilled. Education is not approved of for girls, though many desire it. Parents think that it is a waste of money to pay for a girl's education. They think a girl belongs to the family of her future husband and will leave her father's home once she is married. As a result, child marriage is very common in the Harijan community. Parents want to marry off their daughters early so that some of their financial burdens are relieved. Therefore, when the girl goes to her in-laws' house at a young age, she faces physical, mental, and sexual oppression. Moreover, she becomes a mother at a very young age and, due to lack of adequate knowledge, both mother and child suffer from malnutrition. Most efforts of Harijan women to attain con-

jugal bliss tend to end in disaster. Sometimes it becomes difficult for them even to stay in a marital relationship. Usually, after a long day, her husband arrives at night, completely drunk. And then he begins bout after bout of physical and mental torture. He beats up his wife, uses foul language, and, without any proof, accuses her of suspicious behaviour. The Harijan community has a social council but there is no participation of women in its decision making, even when the woman is a plaintiff or an accused.

I think that women should participate in the social council because otherwise women's rights will always be violated. Why is there so much discrimination against women in our society? Can't we find a way out of this?

Translated from Bengali by Sushmita Hossain Natasha.

II

Early Histories

As a sovereign country, Bangladesh is only forty years old, but people have been living in this great delta and its surrounding hills for hundreds of generations. Archaeological findings show that agriculture was introduced early on and that around 500 BCE an important shift occurred when rice cultivation on permanent, irrigated fields spread across the region. This allowed for much higher population densities and the growth of urban centers. The tropical monsoon climate and a scarcity of durable building material—there are no stone quarries in the delta, so bamboo, wood, mud, and adobe were the materials of choice—means that relatively few buildings and artifacts survived from early times. As a result, there is much uncertainty about Bangladesh's earliest societies.

What we now call Bangladesh has been known under many other names in the past. Among these are East Bengal and East Pakistan, but for the earlier periods it is best to speak of the Bengal Delta and its surrounding hill country. The Bengal Delta has always been a crossroads, linking enormous river systems (notably the Ganges and Brahmaputra) with the Indian Ocean. Its cities were important nodes of long-distance trade and cultural exchange. Here traders from Tibet, north India, Persia, Southeast Asia, China, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Arabia met on a regular basis, and the goods that the Bengal Delta exported could be found from ancient Greece and Rome to Central Asia and China. In addition to trade, politics and administration showed the openness of the delta. Over the centuries, state power was sometimes in the hands of local rulers but often it was not. Non-Bengali rulers included Afghans, Turks, north Indians, Arakanese, and Ethiopians.

This part contains some clues to trace developments from about 300 BCE to 1750 CE: the early introduction of writing, observations by visitors from foreign lands, the development of the Bengali language (now the national language), important religious and ethnic permutations, and the rise and fall of states. Together the pieces introduce the regional specificity of the

There is a centuries-old tradition of excavating large rectangular ponds in Bangladesh. Here we see the huge Horse Pond (Ghora Dighi) that was created in the fifteenth century in the southern town of Bagerhat. Photograph by Willem van Schendel, 2006.

cultures that emerged in what is now Bangladesh. Set in the middle of this collection is a powerful interpretation (by Richard M. Eaton) of the ultimate expression of that regional specificity: over the centuries the Bengal Delta—unlike any of the regions surrounding it—saw most of its inhabitants adopt Islamic identities.

The Earliest Inscription

Anonymous

In November 1931, Baru Faqir of Bogra district found a piece of stone that turned out to contain the oldest inscription found so far in Bangladesh. Baru Faqir lived in Mahasthan, a village located on the earliest and largest archaeological site of Bangladesh. Today the monumental brick walls of the ancient city of Pundranagara (or Pudanagala) can still be seen here, and archaeologists continue to excavate the site, which has been occupied continuously for several millennia.

The inscription soon became known as the Mahasthan Brahmi Inscription. Written in the Prakrit language and the Brahmi script, it dates from about 300 BCE*. The text reveals an urban administration handing out food from its granary to victims of natural disasters. It also shows that the local economy was monetized. The* Gandaka *mentioned in the text may have been a coin worth four cowries—small shells imported from the faraway Maldive Islands. Cowries continued to be used as currency in Bangladesh up to the nineteenth century.*

Some archaeologists have suggested that the inscription supports the idea that Pundranagara was an eastern outpost of the Maurya Empire, which ruled over large tracts of India at the time.

The Mahasthan Brahmi inscription, c. 300 BCE. From *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*, vol. 6 (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2003), 350. Image © Banglapedia Trust. Used by permission.

To Gobardhana of the Samvamgiyas [ethnic or religious group] was granted by order sesamum and mustard seeds. The Sumatra [group of people] will cause it to be carried out from the prosperous city of Pundranagara. [And likewise] will cause paddy to be granted to the Samvamgiyas. In order to tide over the outbreak of distress caused by flood [or fire, or superhuman agency] and insects [parrots?] in the city, this granary and treasury will have to be replenished with paddy and Gandaka coins.

Translated from Prakrit/Magadhi by Jean-François Salles.

A View from the Sea

Anonymous

The ancient Greeks used to write what they called periploi*, documents that listed the seaports and landmarks that the captain of a ship would find along a shore. In the first century* CE*, a Greek in Egypt wrote one of these for the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Fortunately, a copy of this unique text survives in a Byzantine manuscript from the tenth century. It describes the coast of India up until the region that we now call Bangladesh.*

In early times mangrove forests covered most of the unstable coastal islands of Bangladesh. Today the remaining mangroves, the most extensive in the world, are known as the Sundarbans. Here they are observed from space. Photography by the Science & Analysis Laboratory, NASA Johnson Space Center, Houston, 1997. Courtesy of nasaimages.org.

Sailing with the ocean to the right and the shore remaining beyond to the left, Ganges [a town] comes into view, and near it the very last land towards the east, Chryse. There is a river near it called the Ganges, and it rises and falls in the same way as the Nile. On its bank is a market town that has the same name as the river, Ganges. Through this place are brought malabathrum [cassia leaves or *tej pata*] and Gangetic spikenard [muskroot or *jatamangshi*] and pearls, and muslins of the finest sort, which are called Gangetic. It is said that there are gold mines near these places, and there is a gold coin which is called *caltis*. And just opposite this river there is an island in the ocean, the last part of the inhabited world towards the east, under the rising sun itself; it is called Chryse, and it has the best tortoise-shell of all places on the Erythraean Sea [Indian Ocean].

Translated from Greek by Wilfred H. Schoff.

Jackfruits and a Jade Buddha

Xuanzang

Over the centuries, many Chinese pilgrims visited India to receive instruction in the Buddhist faith and to visit holy places. Perhaps the most famous is Xuanzang, who traveled widely in Central and South Asia in the early seventh century CE. *His fame is based on the observant account of his travels that he wrote after his return to China. In his book,* Buddhist Records of the Western World, *he describes his visits to two centers of Buddhist learning in Bangladesh around 640* CE. *The capital of the first center, Pundravarddhana, is Mahasthan—the city in northern Bangladesh that also yielded Bangladesh's earliest inscription. The capital of the second, Samatata, is Mainamati (then known as Devaparvata), near contemporary Comilla town. Xuanzang describes how he finds devotees of different religious traditions living together in these cities, and he is much impressed by a huge Buddha image made of green jade. Finally, like many visitors to Bangladesh before and after him, he marvels at the sight and taste of the ubiquitous jackfruit.*

Pu-na-fa-tan-na (Pundravarddhana)

This country is about 4,000 li [six hundred kilometers] in circuit. Its capital is about 30 li [twelve kilometers] round. It is thickly populated. Offices connected with river navigation, with their surrounding flowers and groves, occur at regular intervals. The soil is flat and loamy, and rich in all kinds of grain produce. The jackfruit, though plentiful, is highly esteemed. The fruit is as large as a pumpkin. When it is ripe it is of a yellowish-red colour. When divided, it has in the middle many tens of little fruits of the size of a pigeon's egg; breaking these, there comes forth a juice of a yellowish-red colour and of delicious flavour. The fruit sometimes collects on the tree branches as other clustering fruits, but sometimes at the tree roots, as in the case of the earth-growing *fu ling* [China root].

The climate is temperate; the people esteem learning. There are about twenty monasteries, with some three thousand priests; they study both the Little and Great Vehicle [the two main branches of Buddhism: Theravada

Gold-plated statue of a *bodhisattva* (a being on the path to enlightenment) from Mahasthan (Pundravarddhana) in northern Bangladesh, seventh to eighth century. From the Kern Special Collections at the Leiden University Library, University of Leiden. Photograph © Leiden University Library, Kern Institute, P-038529. Used by permission.

and Mahayana]. There are some hundred Dêva [Brahmanical] temples, where sectaries of different schools congregate. The naked Nirgranthas [Jains] are the most numerous.

Some 20 li [eight kilometers] to the west of the capital is the Po-chi-p'o [Vasibha] monastery. Its courts are light and roomy; its towers and pavilions are very lofty. The priests are about seven hundred in number; they study the law according to the Great Vehicle. Many renowned priests from Eastern India dwell here.

Not far from this is a stupa built by King Asoka. Here Tathâgata [Buddha], in old days, preached the law for three months for the sake of the Dêvas. Occasionally, on fast-days, there is a bright light visible around it.

By the side of this, again, is a place where the four past Buddhas walked for exercise and sat down. The bequeathed traces are still visible.

Not far from this there is a monastery in which there is a statue of Kwan-tsz'-tsai Bodhisattva. Nothing is hid from its divine discernment; its spiritual perception is most accurate; men far and near consult [this being] with fasting and prayers.

San-mo-ta-cha (Samatata)

This country is about 3000 li [twelve hundred kilometer] in circuit and borders on the great sea. The land is low and is rich. The capital is about 20 li [eight kilometers] round. It is regularly cultivated, and is rich in crops, and the flowers and fruits grow everywhere. The climate is soft and the habits of the people agreeable. The men are hardy by nature, small of stature, and of black complexion; they are fond of learning, and exercise themselves diligently in the acquirement of it. There are believers both of false and true doctrines. There are thirty or so monasteries with about two thousand priests. They are all of the Sthavira [Theravada Buddhist] school. There are some hundred Dêva temples, in which sectaries of all kinds live. The naked ascetics called Nirgranthas are most numerous.

Not far out of the city is a stupa, which was built by King Asoka. In this place Buddha [Tathâgata] in former days preached the deep and mysterious law for seven days for the good of the Dêvas. By the side of it [the stupa] are traces where the four Buddhas sat and walked for exercise.

Not far from this, in a monastery, is a figure of Buddha of green jade. It is eight feet high, with the marks on its person perfectly shown, and with a spiritual power which is exercised from time to time.

Translated from Chinese by Samuel Beal.

Songs of Realization

Bhusuku-pada, Sabara-pada, and Kukkuri-pada

In Bangladesh, ritual forms of worship and spiritual practices that aim at liberation from ignorance and rebirth have been popular for a very long time. Practitioners of these "tantric" traditions may seek liberation by performing dances during which they improvise "songs of realization." These charya *songs give expression to the mystics' heightened clarity and bliss.*

A collection of such songs, composed by numerous poets between the eighth and eleventh centuries CE *and recorded on palm leaf, was discovered in the library of the royal court of Nepal in 1907. The collection, named* Charyapada, *turned out to be a major find because it contained the earliest written examples of the Bengali language. Similarly, other major modern languages such as Assamese, Oriya, and Maithili trace their histories to songs in the* Charyapada.

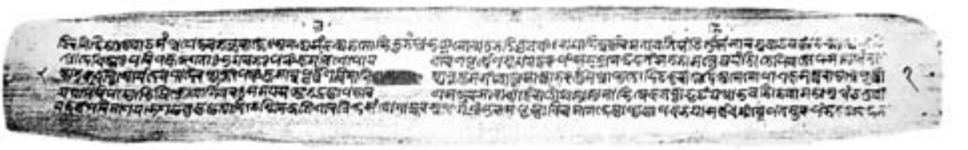
Little is known about the composers of these songs except that they were all Buddhist monks. Bhusuku-pada, Sabara-pada, and Kukkuri-pada, whose mystic songs of realization appear here, are thought to have been from Bengal and to have lived in the eighth or ninth century CE.

CHARYAPADA 6, *by Bhusuku-pada*

Who have I accepted and who have I given up?
All sides are surrounded by the cries of the hunter.
The deer's own flesh is his enemy.
Bhusuku the hunter does not spare him for a moment.
The deer touches no green, nor drinks water.
He does not know where the doe lives.
The doe tells the deer: leave this forest, and free yourself.
Thus the deer sped for his life, leaving no hoof-marks behind.
Bhusuku says "this does not reach the heart of the unwise."

CHARYAPADA 28, *by Sabara-pada*

The mountains are high, the Sabari [hunter] girl lives there.
She wears peacock feathers.



One of the Charyapada songs, written on palm leaf. From Hasna Jasimuddin Moudud. *A Thousand Year Old Bengali Mystic Poetry* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1992). Used by permission of The University Press Limited.

Her neck is adorned with a necklace of *gunja* [rosary pea] berries.
O wild Sabara, o mad Sabara,
Do not cry or make a noisy complaint.
Your own wife is the Sahaja Sundari [a goddess].
The tree blossomed into flowers, the branch touched the sky.
Sabari wears ear-ornaments and *vajra* [ritual thunderbolt].
She wanders in this forest alone.
The bed of three metals is placed.
Sabara spreads the bed with great pleasure.
Sabara the lover and Sabari his mistress made love into the morning.
The heart is a betel leaf, eating camphor with great enjoyment.
By embracing the Void in his neck he passes the night in bliss.
Consider the Guru's advice as your bow and, with you mind as the arrow,
Pierce through Nirvana in one try.

CHARYAPADA 48, *by Kukkuri-pada*
Kulish and Karuna are united.
The army is in deep sleep.
The senses are won over.
Great bliss becomes king of the Void.
The shell played the *anahata* [unplayed] sound.
The magic tree and the worldly powers fled away.
Kukkuri-pa raised his finger aloft and said:
In the City of Bliss all has been won over.
The three worlds became filled with great bliss.
So says Kukkuri-pa in great content.

Translated from old Bengali by Hasna Jasimuddin Moudud.

A King's Gift of Land

Anonymous

In the past, the territory we now know as Bangladesh bore many different names. In recent centuries it was best known as eastern Bengal but in ancient texts, such as the one reprinted here, we come across other terms. Scholars think that these refer to various regions of the country. It is impossible to be sure, however, where exactly these regions were located: different historical sources contradict each other, the meaning of the terms has changed over the centuries, and the political geography of the region has been volatile. Nevertheless, it is generally assumed that Pundra was in northern Bangladesh, Vanga (or Vangala) was in central Bangladesh, Samatata was in southeastern Bangladesh, and Harikela was in eastern Bangladesh.

The modern term Bangla *is derived from* Vangala. *It refers to both the region (Bengal) and its dominant language (Bengali). Inhabitants of the region are known as Bangali (Bengali in English). Today Bengal is divided. Its eastern parts are administered by the state of Bangladesh (*desh *means country) and its western parts by India.*

At the time of the land gift described here, a lineage known as the Chandra dynasty ruled over eastern and central Bangladesh. The capital was in Vikramapura (Bikrampur), near contemporary Dhaka. This copperplate inscription dates from the middle of the tenth century CE. *It publicly announces that King Srichandra ("an excellent follower of the Buddha") had donated land in perpetuity to Srikaradatta Sarman ("protector of Brahmans"). The inscription warns that the gift must be respected, by (future) kings as well as "by farmers dwelling there, who are obliged to hear this command." The inscription gives us a glimpse of power relations, religious diversity, landlordism, and royal style in Bangladesh a thousand years ago.*

Siddham, success to you! Venerable is the blessed Victor, the single vessel of mercy, and victorious, furthermore, is the law, the single light to the world, through the worship of both of which the whole great community of monks attains the end of the cycle of existence. Now, in the lineage of the powerful and prosperous Chandras, rulers of Rohitagiri, was one like the full moon who was celebrated in the world as the blessed Purnachandra. He was