

Evolution of Bengali language and literature by Shahed Murad

Script written for the Bengali New Year 1400 cultural programme, organised by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and the Indian Dance Society.

In the early centuries of the Christian era, the Pala dynasty of Bengal endeavoured to give a distinct shape to the Buddhist contributions, specially on the intellectual front, in the form of terse and cryptic songs known as *charyas*. However, the successive dynasty of the Senas, determined to revive the essential grandeur of Hindu orthodoxy, put forth the cult of Vishnu, the protector of the Universe. Jayadeva, a poet in the court of Laksmanasena, during the 11th century, blended the cult of love with the doctrine of *Sahaj*, that is the innate and the spontaneous, which have been cherished as the golden link between the liberated masters of the early *charya* compositions. In sharp contrast to the orthodox stand front, this was the path of progressive elevation through sensual enjoyment of life, identified with the cosmic mating principle. The seeker was on the look out for the cosmic male and female, Krishna and Radha. Jayadeva's dramatic lyrical poem *Gita Govinda*, is a unique work in Indian literature, a source of religious, literary and artistic inspirations in both medieval and contemporary times. *Gita Govinda* spread through out the sub-continent in the centuries following its composition. Translated in major languages of the world, it has often been described as the Indian "song of songs." Commenting on F H van Dalberg's German rendering of the *Gita Govinda*, the German poet Goethe, said "What struck me as remarkable are the extremely varied motifs by which an extremely simple subject is made endless." Until the 13th century, Radha had no place in the Vaishnavite cult and was not represented or even associated with Lord Krishna. It was only after the infusion of the *Gita Govinda* into the literature that Radha became known and accepted as to be of equal standing as that of Krishna.

Radha and Krishna thus became an indivisible couple; carnal union in divine love became the symbol of total fusion where all distinctions disappeared. Jayadeva is the name which the poet shares with Krishna. Thus by invoking Krishna in the signature song of the *Gita Govinda* "Jaya Jaya Deva Hari", the poet's name in turn gains a sacred dimension when the listener is reminded of his special relationship with Krishna. The literary tradition which was established by Jayadeva can be conceived as the beginning of Bengali and some other Eastern Indian languages. The *Sahaj* experience culminated in the movement of Sri Chaitanya, the Bengali apostle of love. The bulk of the sacred literature in Sanskrit, Bengali and particularly in Brajabali (a unique artificial mixture of Bengali and Maithali) created by Vidyapati, Chandi Dasa and others during the 12th -14th centuries was very much influenced by the writings of Jayadeva. Radha-Krishna became the part of everyday Bengali life, Kashiram Das took this special relationship further by translating the great Indian epic on Krishna and Pandavas *The Mahabharata*, into Bengali. Kashiram's *Mahabharata*, is acknowledged as the best literary Bengali work of the 17th century.

The 16th and 17th centuries are also important in the Bengali literary history for their secular romantic verses on the model of Persian and the Hindi poems. Some very significant contributions were made by the poets of Mangala Kavya and by the poets from the court of Arakan. *Mangala Kavya* is a corpus of long narrative poems of epic

dimensions, dealing with the stories of popular Goddesses like Chandi and Manasa. The most popular poet of this tradition is Kavi Kankan Mukundaram Chakravarti. His Chandi Mangal is the greatest work in this tradition. Kataka Dasa's Manasa Mangal is famous for its remarkable simplicity, which the masses are able to understand. Arakan was then a small North Tibetan speaking kingdom of the Eastern India. Centuries of intellectual contact with Bengal created a very lively centre of Bengali literary activity in this kingdom. Doulat Kazi composed the romantic verse *Sati Mayana*, borrowing the story from a Rajasthani poet, Sadhan. Alaoul's Bengali adaptation of Jayasi's Hindi Padmavati is a great literary contribution from the Arakan court.

Despite all these developments, the Vaishnava themes and poetic traditions in Brajabali continued and influenced some of the famous Muslim poets of that time. Towards the end of the 16th century there was a new enthusiasm for Vaisnavism. Its philosophical exponents in Vrindavana made efforts to bring it very close to the Bengali mind. A new style of singing *Kirtan* was introduced giving a new height to lyrical poetry by combining music and poetry. One of the important pioneers in this style was Narottam Das.

Colonial rule tightened its grip by the end of the 18th century, and added a new dimension to the development of the Bengali language and culture. In the first half of the 19th century the intellectual movement in Bengal was due to the literary activities of the new regal and elite class which had emerged in Kolkata, then capital of India. Thus a new learning and literature took shape at the time of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Michael Madhu Sudan Dutta, Sri Arobindo Ghosh, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Bankim Chandra gave modern Bengali prose and novel writing a distinct form. As a foremost novelist of that age, Bankim Chandra was very much aware of the time he existed in and was equally meticulous about his technique. His novel *Anandamoth*, which includes the song *Vandematram*, is a powerful expression of his intense patriotism. To this intellectual re-awakening Ramakrishna Paramahansa added the essential Indian spirit.

The suppression of the Indian rebellion of 1857 strengthened the colonial rule in India. The educated elite class became puppets of the rulers, not only accepting the political sub-ordination, but undermining the very culture, tradition and philosophy of the Indian life under the pressure of the Western civilisation. Then came Swami Vivekananda, under whose guidance the Indian people once again started to perceive themselves with pride and self respect. He was not only proud of being an Indian, but he did not hesitate to express this pride at all occasions. In 1893 his address at the parliament of Religions in Chicago remains a mile stone in the Indian history.

The suddenness of the changes that occurred over these two centuries resulted in confusion and conflict in the literary world. But Rabindranath Thakur, known as Tagore in the West, came as a protector and gave a new meaning and magnitude to the Bengali literature and culture. Even Tagore the greatest Bengali poet of this sub-continent, who in 1913, was awarded the Nobel prize for literary contributions was not immune to the influence of Jayadeva's work. Tagore not only composed

Vaishnava verses, but he also used songs from the *Gita Govinda* and the work of other poets of this tradition to compose his dance ballet "*Bhanu Singher Padavali*".

The modern age in the Bengali literature begins with the second quarter of the century. The most popular poet of this generation is Kazi Nazrul Islam, whose poems and songs, particularly those which he composed against the colonial rule in India, express a youthful exuberance of feeling. The Bengali language and culture went through several transformations, accommodating new ideas and vocabularies. Some of the famous names of this period are Jivanananda Das, Sudhindranath, Vishu Dey and Shamsur Rahman. However, woven into the tapestry of the Indian literature and culture remained the ever green theme of Radha and Krishna.

Popular cults blended with the myths and legends in the Sanskrit tradition offering new material for narrative poetry in the vernacular. The Hindu-Buddhist Tantric culture produced mysticism which acquired new shades through contact with the Islamic mysticism and the Baul tradition was born. Some of the famous Bauls are Hason Raja, Purna Das Baul and Lalan Fakir.

Immediately after the second world war, the process of decolonisation in India began. The Eastern part of Bengal became East Pakistan in 1947. This reality caused a major setback for the development of the Bengali language. The government of Pakistan imposed restrictions on the free practice of Bengali literary work. Many people died in the Bengali language movement in East Pakistan. In 1971 a new nation, Bangladesh was born. This new development was not just a triumph for Bangladesh alone. The Bangladesh movement had received moral and material support from India. This was therefore a triumph for the free spirit as advocated by the great philosophers of the sub-continent. There was another setback, though temporary, in the intellectual life of that area. But gradually a new society emerged, creating a new cultural climate.

Rivers have played a very important role in every day Bengali life from time immemorial. In fact Bengal has been termed as the land of rivers. This natural beauty is one of the most significant inspirations and sources of literary activity in Bengal. A vast amount of mystic and folk songs by unknown composers have been collected and preserved for the future generation by SD Burman and Abbasuddin, both famous singers of this tradition. No aspect of life including pangs of separation and humour remained untouched by the writers of the folk tradition. Most of the writers/composers are unknown however the contribution of Jasimuddin in modern Bengali folk tradition is very significant. A good harvest in Bengal not only brings a festive mood, but there is also a great concern about how to protect the land and her wealth. This can be accomplished only through unity and a notable amount of literary work is based on this sentiment.

Swagatam! We welcome you to the new year, to the new century as we look forward to living in this great world as one family *Vasudeva Kutumbakam*.