

SACH

SOUTH ASIAN COMPOSITE HERITAGE

ISSUE NO. 72-73 • OCTOBER 23-MARCH 24



EDITORIAL

‘Clash or Confluence’: Accounts on Migration, Interlaced Cultures and Acculturation in South Asia

THE coalescence of cultural practices and traditions in South Asia is a result of extensive and complex interactions between communities for a prolonged duration in the past. The movement of communities to different parts of the world incited them to maneuver with existing cultures and social life of a particular region. One can find instances of blending, hybridization and integration of various cultural forms, driven by factors like trade, conflicts and urge of exploration, which in succession constructed new identities and social spaces. In this issue, Ainie Naqvi in her article attempts to document the cultural contours that she observes in the qasbah of Mustafabad as a fruition of Awadh’s syncretic culture which emboss the Ganga Jamuni tehzeeb. Highlighting the cultural milieu, she elucidates upon the newness that developed as a result of interactions between the Shi’a muslims and the non-Shi’a as well as the Hindu community. On the other hand, Daniel Tepper records the lives and rituals of the lost tribe Jews in Mizoram. While identifying practices that represent Jewishness, he finds elements entwined with an expression of indigenous histories, realizing that it was kept alive by different communities across the world. In Kayalpatnam, few residents are trying to save a waning language. Sumaiya Mustafa documents the initiatives being taken towards generating curiosity around a fast disappearing language, Arwi.

Faced with the extent of migration in the past century and even today, it is crucial to understand the patterns revolving around the movements of groups and communities to different parts of the world and its relationship with the driving factors of migration and the leading impacts it imprints on societies, cultural identities and behaviors. Sm Najmus Sakib and Anjana Pasricha documents the lives of Rohingya refugees and Tibetan refugees, respectively, while they struggle to preserve and guard their cultural heritage. Mashiyat Ahmed records her experiences as a Bangladeshi born Canadian. In this process she analyzes the impacts of linguistic imperialism on her identity and her desire to express herself in her native language. Vivek Bald reconstructs the forgotten stories and communities of Begalis in America. Highlighting the wiped out narrative of immigration and assimilation of South Asians in America the article explores the challenges around race relations and acceptance faced by the Bengalis/Indian communities. Furthermore, Harsha Pandav delivers his idea of a transitory home, as a born expat from India to the UAE. As he explores the continuous struggle between one’s destiny and destination, Pandav identifies a sense of crippling identity that accompanies the childhood of all expat kids across their class and religion.

While, many communities spontaneously become a part of enabling syncretic values, on the other hand innumerable groups struggle with experiences of aversion, acculturation and exclusion in the process of migration. Hence, the current issue brings forth diverse aspects that help us understand the complexities and boundaries around composite culture, cultural amalgamation and cultural identities from a migrants’ perspective.

‘Hori Khelungi, Keh Bismillah’

By **BULLEH SHAH**

I will play Holi beginning in the name of the Lord,
saying bismillah.
Cast like a gem in the name of the prophet,
Each drop falls with the beat of Al-lah, Al-lah,
Only he may play with these colourful dyes,
Who has learnt to lose himself in Allah.
“Am I not your lord?” asked the Lover,
And all maids lifted their veils,
“Everyone said, yes!” and repeated:
“There is only one God.”
I will play Holi beginning in the name of the Lord,
saying bismillah.

— Translated by Maaz Bin Bilal
(Originally printed in Scroll.in)

I Come From There

By **MAHMOUD DARWISH**

I come from there and I have memories
Born as mortals are, I have a mother
And a house with many windows,
I have brothers, friends,
And a prison cell with a cold window.
Mine is the wave, snatched by sea-gulls,
I have my own view,
And an extra blade of grass.
Mine is the moon at the far edge of the words,
And the bounty of birds,
And the immortal olive tree.
I walked this land before the swords
Turned its living body into a laden table.
I come from there. I render the sky unto her mother
When the sky weeps for her mother.
And I weep to make myself known
To a returning cloud.
I learnt all the words worthy of the court of blood
So that I could break the rule.
I learnt all the words and broke them up
To make a single word: Homeland...

Two New Genetic Studies Upheld Indo-Aryan Migration. So Why Did Indian Media Report The Opposite?

By **SHOAIB DANIYAL**

“CAN we now prove the historical existence of Bhagwan Ram?” rang out a question at a press conference in Delhi on Friday to explain the findings of two much-awaited studies on the genetic origin of modern South Asia. On the podium to explain the two new papers of which they are among the co-authors were Vasant Shinde, an archaeologist and vice-chancellor of Deccan College, and Niraj Rai, head of the Ancient DNA lab at the Birbal Sahni Institute for Palaeosciences.

Taken together, the studies – one in *Cell*, the other in *Science* – painted a fascinating genetic picture of how groups as diverse as local

hunter gatherers, Iranian farmers and pastoralists from the Pontic steppe grasslands in Eastern Europe mixed to form most of the modern South Asian population. However, as the question at the press conference on the historical existence of gods demonstrated, this detailed science published on September 5 was also accompanied by the inevitable politics that hangs over any exploration of human origins. The sharp ascendance of Hindu nationalism in India has resulted in a nativist movement that places great emphasis on the claim that most of India’s peoples have indigenous roots – a narrative that sits uncomfortably with the very



eclectic origins of the country's modern populations.

As a consequence, though the genetic studies themselves were rather clear, many in the media misrepresented the results to suit this political narrative. In fact, even the co-authors of the papers themselves seemed to disagree on the conclusions that can be drawn from the research.

MEDIA CONFUSION

The Economic Times reported that the research raises doubts over the "long-held theory of Aryan invasion or migration into South Asia". Amar Ujala, one of India's largest Hindi newspapers, was more emphatic: "The Aryan invasion theory proved completely false; India is the guru of South Asia."

The theory of the Aryan invasion (or migration) was first put forward by Western scholars during the colonial age. It maintained that a race of European or Central Asian "Aryans" swept into the subcontinent displacing the indigenous Indus Valley Civilisation. These Aryans were said to have introduced key elements of Indian culture such as the Sanskrit language – which gave rise to the Indo-Aryan branch of languages spoken all across north, west and east India today – as well as the Vedas, the foundational texts of Hinduism. This went against Hindutva's own imagination of India, in which all significant cultural development was held to be indigenous.

Some of what the term "Aryan" once referred to has been proved to be scientifically inaccurate. The Nazis, for example, mistook what is a language grouping to be a racial one. However, much of the Indian media did not bother to explain that the new research actually upheld the theory that people with European Steppe ancestry had brought the Indo-Aryan language

branch to India – not overturned it.

In contrast, the media in the West (with no political dog in this fight) communicated this fact rather well. People of Steppe-pastoralist ancestry likely "brought horses and the Indo-European languages now spoken on the subcontinent," reported the Atlantic. The Smithsonian.com website of the American museum group wrote, "Indo-European languages may have reached South Asia via Central Asia and Eastern Europe during the first half of the 1000s BC."

ACADEMIC SPLIT

These results were not only misinterpreted in the media, they also led to a split in how the authors of the landmark studies and other genetic scientists interpreted them. Vasant Shinde, co-author on both studies, put out a press release on September 6 where he argued that the new data "completely sets aside the Aryan Migration/Invasion Theory" and also proves that the "Harappans were the Vedic people". When Scroll.in spoke to Shinde, he explained his point further. "This is not a migration but a movement of people," Shinde argued. "And the movement from the Steppe is not large." Shinde also disagreed with the linguistic conclusions in the research, claiming that they were not based on any scientific proof. "The Harappans were speaking Sanskrit since they were so advanced," Shinde told Scroll.in.

American geneticist and science writer Razib Khan did not agree with Shinde's conclusions. "This research points strongly to the fact that Aryans migrated to the Indian subcontinent," said Khan. "Steppe ancestry is found in almost every group in India. And Steppe ancestry maps to the spread of Indo-Aryan language migration".

What about the Shinde's conclusion that the people of the Indus Valley

Civilisation were the same as the Vedic people? "I at least cannot make such an interpretation," Vagheesh Narasimhan, co-author of the Science study told Scroll.in. "This proposition makes jumps that I am not comfortable with."

Another co-author on the Science paper, Niraj Rai chose his words carefully when it came to Shinde's claim of equating the Indus Valley Civilisation with the culture that authored the Vedas. "This is not my statement; I don't agree with this statement," said the geneticist.

Nick Patterson, another co-author, and one of the main movers along with geneticist David Reich of the endeavour to genetically decode South Asian origins had much the same point to make while speaking to Scroll.in: "While I am always willing to listen, I disagree with Dr Shinde that the people of the Indus Valley spoke an Indo-European language."

TWO NEW PAPERS

The study of the genetics of ancient humans, using DNA to do the work of archeologists and historians in explaining our past, was pioneered at Harvard University by geneticist David Reich. However, till now, India has been one of the dark spots in this field of study. This is because, as Nick Patterson, a co-author on the two new papers and a close associate of Reich, told Scroll.in, "Genetic material survives best in cool and dry climates. And two words I would not use to describe India are cool and dry."

However, researchers managed to extricate enough DNA from the ear bone of a woman who lived in the Indus Valley Civilisation 4,500 years ago from an archeological site in Rakhigarhi, Haryana. This DNA was analysed by Reich's team in one paper published in Cell. Another analysis by Reich's team in Science took a macro view, analysing genetic data from 523 ancient people spanning 8,000 years across Central

and South Asia right up to the European Steppe – the largest study of ancient human DNA.

The picture that emerges is one of diverse origin for the modern South Asian population. The main building blocks at the time of the Bronze Age (around four millennia ago) are the Ancient Ancestral South Indians, the people of the Indus Valley Civilisation and a significant migration from the Pontic Steppe. None of these people exist today but it is their mixing that caused most of the modern Indian population to be formed.

Of these, the Ancient Ancestral South Indians are probably the least studied and were present across parts of the subcontinent that did not fall under the Indus Valley Civilisation. Their closest modern-day relatives are the tribes of the Andaman Islands. Thanks to the Cell paper released on September 5, we now know that the people of the Indus Valley had no Steppe DNA. They mainly had a mixture of Iranian-farmer-related DNA as well as some DNA from Ancient Ancestral South Indians.

The Steppe population came in from grasslands in Eastern Europe corresponding to modern-day Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan. The genetic research identifies that this Steppe ancestry burst into India during a "narrow time window" dated between 2,000 BC and 1,500 BC.

Once these Steppe people entered India, a great churning ensued. They mixed with the Indus Valley people to create what is now called the Ancestral North Indian grouping. However, a significant portion of the people of the Indus Valley Civilisation were pushed south when the Steppe people entered. They then mixed with the Ancient Ancestral South Indians to form a group known as the Ancestral South Indian population.

For the next 2,000 years, Indians mixed freely. As a result, most modern South Asians are some mix of Ancestral North Indian and Ancestral South Indian. However, this great churning stopped around 1,900 years ago when Indian society calcified into thousands of endogamous groups who do not intermarry across caste lines – a societal structure maintained till today.

There are however some exceptions to this narrative. The Bengalis and Mundas, an Adivasi people of eastern India, “have significant amounts of ancestry from South East Asia”, noted Razib Khan, and cannot be explained using this Ancestral North Indian-Ancestral South Indian model.

How this explains modern India

Perhaps the biggest learning from this genetic research is that it explains the various languages South Asians speak. “It is clear that the movement of people mirrors the information we have from linguistics on how different features of language families are shared between them,” explained Vagheesh Narasimhan of the Department of Genetics at Harvard Medical School, who has contributed to the research.

The main theory to which Narasimhan is referring deals with how a single language family, the Indo-European family stretches all the way from Britain to Bangladesh and encompasses more than half of the modern world’s population. It counts amongst its members ancient heavyweights such as Sanskrit, Greek, Roman and Pali as well as modern tongues like English, Persian and Hindi.

The people who spread the Indo-European language family across Eurasia are the same Steppe pastoralists who are key constituents in making up the modern Indian population. As the Science paper states, its results provide

“evidence for the theory that these [Indo-European] languages spread from the Steppe”.

In South Asia, the Indo-European language family bought in by the Steppe people forked to give rise to the Indo-Aryan daughter branch. The first Indo-Aryan language in South Asia was Vedic Sanskrit, the language of the Rig Veda. In present-day South Asia, around 1.3 billion people speak an Indo-Aryan language. Each of the modern states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka use an Indo-Aryan language as their official language.

Much of this Steppe ancestry is male, the research shows. This means that Steppe migrants “were more successful at competing for local mates than men from the local groups” – which tells us something about the aggressive nature of Indo-Aryan migration into India. The Science paper concludes that there was an “asymmetric social interaction between descendants of Steppe pastoralists and peoples of the Indus Periphery Cline [Indus Valley Civilisation]”.

In simpler language, David Reich explains that the preponderance of male Steppe DNA means that this encounter between the Steppe pastoralists and the people of the Indus Valley Civilisation “cannot have been entirely friendly”.

This male bias is standard for Indo-European migration. In fact, when these Steppe pastoralists reached Europe, Reich’s research found an even larger proportion of male Steppe genes. In large parts of Western Europe, Steppe migrants almost completely displaced local males in a short time span, leading to one Danish archeologist postulating that the coming of these Indo-European speakers “must have been a kind of genocide”.

This pattern, wrote David Reich

in his 2018 book *Who We Are and How We Got Here*, “is exactly what one would expect from an Indo-European-speaking people taking the reins of political and social power 4,000 years ago and mixing with the local peoples in a stratified society, with males from the groups in power having more success in finding mates than those from the disenfranchised groups”.

This ancient encounter is, incredibly, reflected even in the present-day Hindu caste system, with Steppe DNA correlated with upper-caste status. “Groups that view themselves as being of traditionally priestly status, including Brahmins who are traditional custodians of liturgical texts in the early Indo-European language Sanskrit, tend (with exceptions) to have more Steppe ancestry than expected on the basis of ANI-ASI mixture,” says the research in *Science*.

While this new genetic research backs it up, this claim has been made before by experts using only linguistics and archaeology. In his remarkable 2007 book *The Horse, The Wheel, and Language*, David Anthony, a professor of anthropology and one of the world’s leading authorities on Indo-European migration, pointed out that funeral sacrifices at Sintashta, an archaeological site all the way out on the Russian Steppe “showed startling parallels with the sacrificial funeral rituals of the Rig Veda”.

Moreover, not only does the new genetic research explain the origin of the Indo-Aryan languages of North India, it also seems to explain the Dravidian language family of South India, which it traces to the Indus Valley Civilisation. “A possible scenario combining genetic data with archaeology and linguistics is that proto-Dravidian was spread by peoples of the IVC [Indus Valley

Civilisation],” argues the *Science* paper.

Though much of India does not speak a Dravidian language, this does not mean the Indus Valley Civilisation has not been influential outside the modern south. In fact, the research concludes that the Indus Valley Civilisation is the single-largest source of DNA for modern South Asia. As for the Iranian component in the Indus Valley Civilisation DNA, it was found to be so old that it dates to before the invention of farming in the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East. This means that Indians either invented farming on their own or learnt it via cultural contact with people out west.

What about Shinde’s claim that the Indus Valley Civilisation was the same as the Vedic civilisation, with both speaking Sanskrit? This is, in fact, an assertion that has long been made by many Hindutva supporters as a way to claim that key cultural markers of modern Hinduism such as Sanskrit or the Rig Veda have completely indigenous origins.

However, there is little data to support this theory. In fact, this recent genetic research backs up the claim that the Indus Valley Civilisation was completely different from the Vedic people. The *Science* paper points out that the former probably spoke a Dravidian language, while we know that the Vedic people spoke an Indo-European language: Sanskrit.

This gap is further widened by the fact that there was no Steppe DNA found in the Rakhigarhi woman, providing yet another data point in favour of Indo-Aryan migration (this data was also egregiously misinterpreted by the *Times of India*). After all, Steppe DNA and Indo-European language is highly correlated – so it is rather unlikely that the Rakhigarhi woman spoke an Indo-European language like Sanskrit. Rather

than the Indus Valley Civilisation and the Indo-Aryans being the same, the genetic data points to the fact that the latter followed the former chronologically as a result of Steppe migration.

THE POLITICS OF IT

This enquiry into the origin of modern Indians has set off hectic political debate in India. David Reich recounted how politics played a part in his work. Given the significant Steppe ancestry in the Ancestral North Indian component, Reich had originally termed this group “West Eurasians” – a move that received violent pushback from Reich’s Indian collaborators, who controlled the access to genetic material. Reich recounts these discussions as the “tensest 24 hours of my scientific career”.

“At the time I felt that we were being prevented by political considerations from revealing what we had found,” he complained.

Eventually, a nomenclatural solution was found. Names were chosen for the two ancestral groups that seemed to suggest to the layman that they had solidly subcontinental origins: the earlier discussed Ancestral North Indians and Ancestral South Indians. “The ANI are related to Europeans, central Asians, Near Easterners and people of the Caucasus,” wrote Reich, but with those 100% subcontinental names, “we made no claim about the location of their homeland or any migrations”.

While all people are interested in their origins, why do feelings in India run especially deep? Reich, in an interview to Scroll.in in February, put forward a cultural argument, noting that in contrast to India, its Muslim-majority 1947 twin Pakistan doesn’t seem to care very much about the ancient past. It is similar to the situation in much of the West, Reich noted: “In Europe, there’s almost no emotionality at all about the

ancient farmers or Bronze Age people or hunter-gatherers. There’s in fact, no emotion about the dead.”

To Reich’s cultural argument, there is also a political layer. India is today dominated by the politics of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism, an ideology which is fiercely nativist. Vinayak Savarkar, the founder of Hindutva and a foundational thinker for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, based his nationalism on nativism arguing that for a true Indian, India had to be both his *pitribhumi* (ancestral land) and *punyabhumi* (the land of his religion).

“A Hindu therefore could not be descended from alien invaders,” said historian Romila Thapar, explaining how Hindutva saw the world. “Since Hindus sought a lineal descent from the Aryans, and a cultural heritage, the Aryans had to be indigenous.”

Much the same argument was echoed by Madhav Golwalkar, the highly influential second chief of the Rashtriya Swayasevak Sangh, the parent organisation of the BJP: “Hindus came into this land from nowhere, but are indigenous children of this soil always from time immemorial”. It is this racial factor that, as per Golwalkar, “is by far the important ingredient of a nation”.

Even as Golwalkar and Savarkar’s ideas spread with the rise of the BJP, scientific research started to point the other way, providing strong proof that, driven by events such as Indo-Aryan migration, India’s peoples have incredibly heterogeneous origins. This research might not fit the dominant politics of the day but really, is it such a surprise that India is diverse? For most Indians, this genetic research would only be confirmation of their everyday, lived reality as part of this remarkable subcontinent.

(Originally published in Scroll.in)

Talk of The Trade

By SUMAIYA MUSTAFA

A few residents of Kayalpatnam, a coastal municipality in Tamil Nadu's Thoothukudi district, have been trying to generate curiosity around a fast-disappearing language—Arwi. Also called Arabu-Tamil, Arwi developed in Kayalpatnam as a bridge language between seafaring Arabs and Tamil-speaking Muslims of Tamil Nadu. Arwi was in active use in the community from the eighth to nineteenth century, according to a research paper by KMA Ahamed Zubair, an associate professor from the department of Arabic studies at New College, in Chennai. It became a medium for business, property dealings and correspondence, and played a major role in literacy among Tamil Muslims. “Arwi is a wonderful

child of its two classical parent languages of Tamil and Arabic,” Salai Basheer, a writer, told me. “Though it has lost its purpose and sheen in the recent past, it must be rescued and guarded.”

Arwi enthusiasts set up the Kayalpatnam Historical Research Center, an independent grassroots organisation, in September 2022, aiming to record and preserve the municipality's overall history and culture. The centre will soon host an event at Wavoo Wajeeha College for Women, Kayalpatnam to spread awareness about Arwi.

As a Tamil Muslim from Kayalpatnam, I learnt about the genesis of Arwi from my community



and neighbourhood. I also read a few research papers that have documented its evolution over the years. To understand the advent of Arwi, one must look at the forgotten histories of Kayalpatnam as a distinct matrilocal port town. Prior to the seventeenth century, when northern Europeans asserted their dominance and took over sea-routes, the Indian Ocean trade was replete with Arabs from West Asia and Persians from the coasts of the Persian Gulf.

From roughly seventh century onwards, itinerant Arab traders—which included porters, peddlers, small and big-time merchants—gradually started settling down in coastal pockets tracing the Indian peninsula, and married local women. Arwi emerged through these interactions. Local women of Kayalpatnam used Arwi to keep in touch with their sea-faring fathers, brothers and “visiting husbands”—a term used by Indian Ocean history scholars for itinerant trading husbands, who visited their wives and children whenever their route fell in these municipalities, once or twice a year.

Many such hybrid languages were born out of the demands of the Indian Ocean trade, according to Anees Ahmed, a student of the Arabic language and an Arwi aficionado. “This hybridisation had happened with the indigenous languages of the lands wherever the Arabs had set their foot,” Ahmed said. “Arabi Malayalam, Jawi are other instances.” Ahmed and his friend Mohamed Ibrahim Ansari, a software developer, have been developing an app that makes Arwi and its script easily accessible, which is slated to be launched at the KHRC event.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Arwi, something that the women of my

community can attest to, is that it was also widely read and written by Tamil-speaking Muslim women. Seminal works in the seventeenth century by Sam Shihabuddin, a religious cleric and scribe—like Pen Puththi Malai, or etiquettes for women—were aimed specifically at women. There were even notable women scribes and poets of Arwi in the nineteenth century, such as Sayyid Asiya Umma.

According to Zubair’s research paper, while historians argue that Arwi has a history of over a thousand years, a significant portion of its literary works was lost in the Portuguese conquest of the Pearl Fishery Coast in 1525—extending along the Coromandel coast from Tuticorin to Comorin. The paper stated that it was Hafiz Amir Wali Appa, a saint of Kayalpatnam, who first re-introduced Arwi after the Portuguese devastation and gave it a systematic style of writing. Later, with the proliferation of lithographic printing over typeface, books in Arwi began to be printed from Rangoon to Bombay in the nineteenth century. Hajee MA Shahul Hameed & Sons, a bookstore and publishing company in Madras, established in 1909, is the only surviving publisher of Arwi works, according to a research paper by scholar and translator Torsten Tschacher, who specialises in Muslim culture and society in South Asia. However, in the last many decades, they have only re-published old works.

Most of the language’s history is an oral one, passed down from ancestors. “Sufis from Kayalpatnam kept the language alive through read-aloud sessions at their sermons on religious occasions,” Jariya Azeez, the creative director and curator of Abati,

a community centre for cultural and creative development in Kayalpatnam, told me. "Several Madrassas in town have taken initiatives to teach primary school children to read Arwi. We can still find Arwi books and texts from families in Kayalpatnam up until five generations back."

It was only due to the efforts of some individuals that Arwi has survived this far. Till date, Ammaji Akka, an elderly former Ustad Bi—a female teacher of Islamic scriptures—from the Salem district, teaches Arwi to young kids. "We [at Abati] have long-term plans to engage everyone with the script through children's books and for adults too, as the fonts [and scripts] are now made available, thanks to Ansari and Anees," Azeez said. It may appear that Arwi is simply Tamil written in Arabic script, as the Arwi alphabet is the Arabic alphabet. But its script possesses additional letters used to represent vowels and several consonants that could not be mapped to Arabic sounds. Arwi even boasts of a distinct literary style, a syncretised lexicon of its own. Poets composing in Arwi, in the absence of a synthesised grammar that neither conformed to Ilakkanam—Tamil grammar—nor Nahw—Arabic grammar—devised methods of their own.

The advent of schools in the state that adopted Tamil and English as the medium of instruction also contributed to the decline of Arwi. According to Basheer, "It was only in post-independence India, when the country was divided into states based on language, Arwi gradually lost ground even among the Tamil Muslim circles."

To add to it, even the last of the institutional custodians of Arwi in

the region, the Ulama—guardians, transmitters, and interpreters of religious knowledge in Islam—had begun to fall out of favour among Tamil Muslim reformers in the early twentieth century, much like the language itself. The reformers, borrowing from the Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu, challenged what was perceived as the reserved elite readership of Arwi. For the most part, writers of Arwi had a Sufi bent. Twentieth-century Islamic revivalist discourses condemned the Sufi mystical episodes, which were richly documented in Arwi texts. This prompted scholars of Arwi to suggest that lay readers be kept from such texts to avoid misinterpretation, reasoning that mystical experiences could not be understood by everyone. Tschacher's research paper speculates that such a defense from the Ulama may have contributed to the image of the "Muslim Brahmins," which was brought up by the Self-Respect Movement.

"It is upon us, the posterity, to preserve what is left of it," Kayal SE Amanullah, the co-ordinator of the recently inaugurated KHRC, said. The KHRC has so far gathered many old Arwi books and documents through various Islamic religious seminaries and personal collections donated by families.

Basheer expressed his concerns over diverse identities being pushed to be "melted into one" today, which he felt was a euphemism for the erasure of diverse languages, cultures and faiths. "I feel it is more important now than ever to hold on to our identities," Basheer said, "India's pride is its plurality and diversity."

(Originally published in Caravan Magazine)

Reflections on Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb

By **AINIE NAQVI**

IN the heartland of the Indo-Gangetic Plain in the north eastern part of the modern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh lies the erstwhile region of Awadh—also known as Oudh in the British historical texts. Awadh, was not just a place of political significance, but is synonymous with adab and tehzeeb, a labyrinth of Hindu-Muslim harmony at its soul, while establishing itself as an epitome of love and brotherhood of the two biggest communities of the nation. Tracing its pre-colonial past, one can trace the beginnings of a culture which was to flower so abundantly and richly in subsequent ages and that has continued, in spite of many changes, to our own day. The basic ideals, conducts and governing concepts that took shape, majorly in the Mughal courts and gatherings, smoothly segued in the realm of literature, philosophy, art and drama. Thus, various activities of life at a popular level were conditioned by those ideals and world view.

Awadh was truly a melting pot with the Ganga, Jamuna, Sarayu and Gomti flowing through it. One could find a smooth blend of cultures, a coalescence of Persian aesthetics with the Indian cultural values at Prayag (Allahabad), Kashi (Varanasi), Vrindavan (Mathura), Haridwar and Rishikesh. The reign of the Nawabs gave rise to what is known as the Ganga – Jamuni Tehzeeb, a form of multiculturalism particular to the area denoting a fusion of Hindu – Muslim elements. The land of Awadh came to epitomize all that was significant, refined and cosmopolitan, emerging as a

cultural node in the 19th century. Hence, it developed its own style in many spheres of culture, endowing it with its distinctive stamp and sophistication. Fashioned with syncretic values, a blend of Persian aesthetics and Indian cultural values eradicated exclusiveness, and provided strength and equilibrium to the society.

The Mughals, who had leanings towards Persian culture, imbedded rich traditions of composite nature and dynamic culture that was further nurtured by the rulers of Awadh who were great patrons of art and culture. At several levels, amidst the process of Persianization of culture, yet there was a space for indigenous traditions, largely based on Hindu practices which generated a two-way material and aesthetic exchange in the culture of Awadh. Later, some of the arts and crafts assumed considerable European color due to the interaction of European and Awadh elite, the renowned Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb remained intact.

The Nawabs of Awadh happened to be Shi'as, who presided over the creation of an Islamicate culture in Northern India, bringing strong associations between Shia practices and Indian cultural traditions. It had delivered a significant impact on the Shi'a settlements bordering the city of Lucknow. Here, in this article I aim to elucidate upon my reflections and observations made around my experiences with the Syncretic culture of Awadh. Our ancestors had settled in Mustafabad (Unchahar), a Shi'a qasbah and had links with other Shia townships

in Kara, Manikpur, Bilgram, and Amroha. The families were zamindars possessing jagirs often referring to themselves as the 'qasbati sharufa' or country gentlemen.

There was great curiosity in the family on how these qasbahs were formed. One of the most reliable sources of reference was the shajra, an impressively complex family tree. It is said that caravans moved and traveled from Mashad, Nishapur (in Iran), to Gardez in Afghanistan. The Shi'as lived in a colony of Sayyids, which means descendants from the family of the Prophet through one of the eleven imams. The name Naqvi is supposed to be derived from the tenth Imam, Ali Naqi. In the early eleventh century, the continuous advance made by the Mongols led by Genghiz Khan caused panicked migration in search of a safer territory, and a large number of groups settled in Gardez until the next upheaval, which was followed by establishing elaborate townships in regions of northern India.

The pattern of settlements in Mustafabad was horizontal in structure, unlike the vertical pattern of most Indian enclaves of the time. The zamindars occupied the area lying at the end of the qasbah, overlooking the land and ponds. The other sophisticated structures were occupied by families who were cousins from our own tribe.

The qasbah of Mustafabad didn't remain untouched by the syncretic culture that was grounding its roots in the city of Lucknow. My grandmother belonged to kara, a township near Allahabad. After her marriage, she moved to Mustafabad. I often asked her about her life in Kara before she came to Mustafabad. She replied that there was not much difference, emphasizing on the similarities she observed during the observations made in the months of

Muharram and Safar, which lasted for a period of two months and eight days. My grandmother and her coevals gradually opted for Saris which was maintained by the rest of the daughter in laws in the family. These women were raised in the Awadh Region and the cultural motifs associated with all activities related to the household reflected a unique blend of Persian aesthetics and Indian cultural values. By this time, the Muslim household had acquired a different nature that exuded Hindu cultural values. For instance, the rituals that surrounded birth and marriage prepared a tapestry of cultural interplay, what we call composite culture. The arrival of Aseemun, a family songstress, was essential.

Allah miyan bhauji ka deta Nandlal, kangan hum le bayi ho...

(Allah has given our sister-in-law a Nandlal (son), I shall not settle for nothing less than a bracelet.)

Aseemun's songs, accompanied by the spare sounds of the dholak and harmonium, with its easy mix of folk, ritual, spiritual and pious, bespoke a syncretic tradition. These songs accentuated commonalities and compositeness found in the descriptions of canonical texts through vocal forms. The themes and plots in these songs made it easier for people to relate to these ideas and resulted in a creative intermingling between cultures. Aseemun sang sohars and other festive songs in Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Urdu and Hindi. Miryasins, other than Aseemun, embellished the eve of celebration by blessing the bride and the groom by singing songs of harmony and wellbeing, often making reference to Ram and Sita, Shiva and Shakti in some cases. Marriages in the Shia community had obtained a different essence. The rituals and materials to be used were

largely inspired by the Hindu traditions, considered as a sign of good omen and fortune. The use of sandalwood to be applied on the bride's parting of the hair, serving paan, and organizing manjha (Haldi ceremony), are foreign to the customs performed in Arab and central Asian regions. Thus, the practices transcended from the highest to the popular level and the other way around.

Another popular cultural snippet passed to the children in our family was for Hazrat Bibi, the Prophet's daughter, asks Sugra to go in search for her Husband, 'Ali Sahib', who has not returned from the battle. 'If you cannot find him, go to Vrindavan, where Krishna is. Look for him there'. The enormous cultural enmeshing between the two communities blurred the boundaries of religion and faith. This cultural exposure to a Hindu Ambience had exerted a powerful influence on our day to day lives. This background was a mixture of popular philosophy, tradition, history, myth and legend. The old epics of India and stories of Hindu Mythology, in translations and paraphrases, were widely known among the masses, and every incident, story and moral in them was engraved on the popular mind and gave richness and content to it. For many poets in the Awadh region, they would know hundreds of verses by heart and their couplets would be full of references to some stories enshrined with a moral in some old classic. This diverse literary milieu also produced works that embossed the events of Karbala through the light of Hindu philosophy and history.

As part of the tahzeeb, hospitality was a habit and not merely a function of prosperity, which was expressed by laying out a Dastarkhwan (particular to Persian and Turkish culture) with a wide array of traditional Awadhi

food accompanied by a variety of assortments. People would sit cross legged at the dastarkhwan (a yellow cloth spread on the floor for the service of food). The Persian inscription on the dastarkhwan was apt:

*Shukr baja aar ke mehmaan e tau
Rozi e khud mi khurad az khwan
e tau*

(You are fortunate and you must thank God that your guest is eating 'his food' at your dastarkhwan)

The cultural values, central to the muslims in the form of tehzeeb, khatir, akhlaq, and mehman nawaazi had proved beneficial in fostering greater peace. These cultural values enmeshed with the Indian cultural values provided a space for acceptance and adaptability, increasing the scope of cultural interplay. An example found in the day-to-day interactions could be traced in the gesture of the guest, portraying a culture of 'takalluf' (formality) while the host expressing sakhawat (Generosity). This expression materialized on the Dastarkhwan where the visitor would hesitate, and would only partake of the meal when persuaded by the elders.

The elaborate Dastarkhwan adapted a Ganga-Jamuni Flavour as the women in the household started to experiment by combining local spices and vegetables with the meat counterparts. The splendor of this cuisine is at its peak during the first ten days of Muharram at the Naqvi household. Until the Ashoora, families would organize Majlis that were followed by distributing tabarruk or a Dastarkhwan for the gathering depending upon their readiness to spend. Before serving the people, a sumptuously rich Dastarkhwan would be laid out to perform Nazr (vow or an act of commitment to Allah) as an offering. These practices can be seen as a way of preserving one's heritage and passing the essence of one's culture to

the future generation.

The yearly gathering for Muharram was a mandatory act that couldn't be deterred by other official or personal engagements. At Mustafabad, all family members gather even today to commemorate the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson. The Imambarah in every home were lit with candles and embellished with different colors of Alam, the biggest alam of them representing the one being carried by the flagbearer of Hussain's army, Abbas (brother of Hussain). The alam of Abbas is important and has been an article of faith not only for Shi'as but also the non-shi'a community that took part in the processions. The processions being carried in Mustafabad are simpler and subtle than the ones being organized in cities of Lucknow and Aligarh. The nauhas and soz being recited were generally, the local compositions in languages like Awadhi, Khadi boli and urdu. Many Hindus become part of the procession with an intention to seek the grace of the martyr in order to grant their wish or probably as an act of faith. Apart from taking part in the cortege for the martyrs of Karbala, a majority of Hindus in the Qasbahs have been involved in the task of making Taziyas, since the pre- Nawabi period. With the grounding of the rule of the Nawabs in Awadh, particularly Lucknow, a lot of the customs and practices pertinent to religious observations got institutionalized exhibiting extravagant demeanor, however, it had always existed since the Shia community had settled in the Qasbahs, which was much earlier from the days of Nawabi influence. The Farzand Hussain ki deodi (name of our home in Mustafabad), being the largest of all the residences in the qasbah, was a center of larger gatherings and Majlis. The men would carry processions on

the streets and conclude them in the Deewan Khana (Imambarah adjacent to our home). On the other hand, majlis organised by women were followed by performing Matam at Farzand Hussain ki Deodi. Women also expressed their grief and would lament over the death of Hussain and his children by abstaining from wearing bangles, jewellery or by applying henna on their palms.

Given our harmonious existence and free cultural intermixing, three major events in the past cut rather deep through the closely knit relations between the two communities in the qasbahs and in other townships. The pain of the Partition in 1947, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the rise of Hindu Majoritarianism and fundamentalism has abruptly affected the syncretic culture of our country. A considerable rise in communalism and concentration on the politics of hate has dwindled the flame of harmony. A syncretic culture once internalized deep in the minds of the people seems fading, as if fear or perhaps, misconceptions have hollowed the soul of India. The qasbahs or the mohallas are becoming centers of mythical communally- charged politics consuming ideas of rationality and genteel interplay.

I have witnessed the moving drama of the masses. They look ahead in the future but are always held back by the ideas and values of the past. The syncretic past of the country and the numerous traditions woven around it have stood the test of time. There was hate, poverty, loss and the innumerable progeny of hate, poverty and loss everywhere and the mark of distress was on every forehead. But there was also a gentleness and mellowness, the cultural heritage of thousands of years which no amount of misfortune had been able to rub off.

The Widening Gulf

By HARSHA PANDAV

FROM the writings of the explorer Ibn Battuta to the tales of the One Thousand and One Nights, references to the Arab fondness for oudh have persisted for centuries. Pungent yet pleasing, the complex fragrance from the agarwood tree permeates the air with a sense of opulence. Used to perfume everything from bodies and garments to houses and palaces, oudh has become undeniably synonymous with the Arabian Gulf. Interestingly, though, no agarwood-producing species is known to grow anywhere west of India. Deeply coveted within Arab commerce for over a millennium, oudh was always sourced from South and Southeast Asia, its sillage trailing long behind caravans on the Silk Route and medieval ships on the Indian Ocean.

An important entrepôt of maritime trade, the Gulf historically relied on pearling, which formed the foundational basis for the cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. By the early twentieth century, fleets employing over seventy thousand people would remain at sea during the pearling season, divers sometimes being paid in pearls. South Asian merchants—including my ancestors—established themselves in the region for centuries and eventually controlled the trade as the chief financiers of the industry, with Bombay emerging as the world's largest pearl market.

Although the natural pearl industry eventually declined after the Great Depression and the Second World War, the discovery of oil provided

the most secure source of revenue in establishing the region's path to urban development and industrial expansion. By the mid 1970s, twelve merchant houses—nearly all of Persian, Pakistani or Indian extraction—controlled import franchises, constituting the commercial elite in the United Arab Emirates, while doctors and nurses in the region were already overwhelmingly South Asian. For example, in 1976, of two hundred working physicians in Oman, only twenty were Omani, most being Indian or Pakistani.

These expat contributions in vital sectors of the Gulf economy effectively grounded the influx that occurred post the oil boom of the 1970s. However, disproportionate studies on the more recent South Asian migration to the region have contributed to the popular notion of this being a singular moment in history. There is a hierarchy of factors to this occurrence.

While diaspora studies is an expanding field in South Asian academia, little attention is paid to the history of merchant networks. This can be attributed to the outbound movements of early emigrants from South Asia belonging more to the sphere of "circulation" than "migration." Unlike European migrants heading to the Americas to build a new life, most South Asians, across class barriers, left because they wanted to improve their lives at home—a crucial point often lost sight of. Reliance on colonial archives limited studies to only the processes of "formal" migration, including

indentured emigration, regulated by the British colonial state, while temporary migration actually accounted for ninety percent of departures from India between 1830 and 1950. Furthermore, it is well accepted that there are few written records of the cultural history of the UAE, the country being instead reliant on the oral tradition for its sources.

Another factor relevant here is the lack of visual record-keeping around South Asian life in the region. Indicative of how the very act of photography is political, socioeconomic factors dictated access to film and camera equipment for many, limiting their ability to build personal archives of life in the Gulf.

Coming to the descendants of these early-migrant families, a lingering preoccupation with survival in a post-Partition and postcolonial India becomes evident. Intergenerational attempts to integrate within their respective surroundings both inside and outside of India leave little time to be devoted to a search for one's roots. When spirited by a sense of inquiry, it is usually driven by an appetite for nostalgia rather than historical curiosity.

Archives exist because some things live within cracks and crevices of the stories that survive over time, things that cannot necessarily be articulated. This reconstruction, hence, is necessarily personal and thus partial: far too much has been irretrievably lost.

Westbound winds first brought my family to the Trucial States—later known as the UAE—over a century ago. Hailing from Karachi and Thatta, their careers as the seafaring merchants of Sindh saw them sailing away to distant lands with pearls, spices, fragrance and textiles in tow, eventually establishing a presence widely across the

Gulf. When touched violently by Partition, those who were already spending years at a time there, such as my grandmother's father and grandfather—both pearl traders, like my grandfather's father—decided to bring their families over and base themselves more permanently in the region. Decades later, born in Dubai, I still wonder where I am from.

The cultural connections established between Arabia and South Asia as a direct result of these historical relations are more ubiquitous than one might imagine. For example, mandi, a Khaleeji staple, or the Yemeni and Kuwaiti versions of machboos are modeled after biryani, from the Indian subcontinent, exemplifying the region's historic dependence on trade for rice and spices. Traditional Gulf food was simpler before the introduction of South Asian imports such as dried limes, cinnamon, nutmeg, cardamom and saffron. The paratha evolved into a contemporary, nostalgia-inducing being called the Chips Oman sandwich—a paratha rolled with processed cheese, hot sauce and Chips Oman crisps—a uniquely Emirati amalgamation of Indian and American influences. Chinese in origin, tea also travelled to the UAE. Today, social gatherings planned around a karak or a suleimani are standard protocol for any self-respecting Dubai resident. Karak—tea with generous helpings of sugar, cardamom and evaporated Rainbow milk—has Indian and Pakistani origins while suleimani—black tea with mint and sugar—journeyed from Kerala's Malabar Coast. Older Emirati citizens, once sailors and shopkeepers, still speak the four languages of trade: Hindi, Urdu, Farsi and Swahili. Some words that crossed over into the

everyday vocabulary of the Emirati dialect include seeda (to keep going straight), darwaza (door or gate), banka (fan), aloo (potato) and rubia or beza (money). Bollywood, the first genre of cinema introduced to the country, continues to enjoy a legion of Emirati fans, with programming subtitled or dubbed in Arabic. Iranian, Pakistani and Indian textiles and garments, as well as henna, also quickly became integral to Emirati wedding customs, developing their own local aesthetics.

Culture evolves from the sense of community born when roots are allowed to grow deep, and ideas shared. How could hosting a revolving door of expats possibly compete? Seeking stories from now-passed elders in my extended community for this work, I listened to tales of shared majlis, food, language—a camaraderie in youth—between them and their Emirati counterparts. However, as life sped up, and class divides widened, this age-old sense of allegiance between “local” and “non-local” seemingly faded, like scent.

After Independence, Dada—my grandfather Haridas Pandav—initially moved to Bombay, where he would soon marry my grandmother Laxmi. Within a few years, however, subjected to the sudden financial and emotional shock of Partition and unable to rebuild his career as an artisan in an India he had not known before, he left for the Trucial States in his early twenties to join his father-in-law. He soon forged his own path, working in maritime logistics and later as one of the first few employees of the National Bank of Dubai. Having spent little youth in the country of his nationality, he acclimatised instead to the weather and ways of the desert, only returning to visit India once every five odd years. My grandmother initially

split her time between Bombay and the Trucial States, visiting with their children when possible while also caring for his ageing parents in India, before moving to Dubai and Sharjah, where they lived in houses made of coral and limestone.

Dada took great pride in sharing with me what he discovered for himself in this brand new city. He tried to teach me Arabic and took me on after-school walks every day through the old neighbourhood. If I were to guess, I would say the creek with its little wooden abras—traditional ferries, now updated to polished, contemporary versions—and the ever-hungry fish was his favourite spot in Dubai. As a child, I spent many sunsets there with him, feeding fish and pigeons and crows and mynahs milky samoon—a type of bread—probably causing a lot of tiny belly upsets in retrospect.

Grandma tells me stories about his life there, one being about how, one day, a colleague and he fell right off a heavily loaded abra that capsized just as it was leaving port, almost drowning before a kind Bedouin man quickly came to their aid. With his head underwater and an arm stretched overhead, Dada had managed to hold up his accounts ledger to “rescue” it. The incident did not seem to persuade him to learn how to swim nor could it pull him away from his gravitation towards the old waters for our evening walks.

WHEN YOU ARE BORN in a place like this, you do not have a straight answer to a simple question like “Where are you from?” Even as a child, a born-expat, you live with the unspoken understanding that this is not your destiny or destination; an impending decision is waiting to be made. Friends, colleagues, even family, are all transitory. An aversion to attachment arises sometimes.

Monoculturists seem to find it difficult to comprehend that one's very idea of home could be transitory.

In a transient city, people move all the time. The ground is forever, and rapidly, changing. This is not the sort of old city you can sink your feet into and plant yourself emotionally in. Because permanence is simply not an option, you are constantly forging new relationships more out of necessity than want. If you were part of the millennial generation and saw the infamous "boom," relentlessly discussed in pop culture, the city you grew up in no longer exists. Watching a whole city being born is a privilege few can attest to witnessing, and it was surreal while it lasted. It is only fair to acknowledge the beauty in some of the architecture that surrounds you here, in spite of the urban planning drawing the flak it does. However, when you are an adolescent in a place that is also growing with you, nothing prepares you for the sort of loss you inherit with it. Your childhood home is now a parking lot. Your old neighbour's mulberry bushes are a manicured front lawn. Your favourite spots in the school you went to are now renovated into utilitarian spaces. Where the library with the pretty window was is now a whole new creek.

It is a most human tendency to seek an anchor in the familiar during times of uncertainty. Here, in so many ways, this was simply not possible.

I spent a lot of time at this particular beach in Jumeirah. So much so, I decided to sprinkle my pet's ashes there when she passed. One day, that beach was suddenly closed for four to five long years. It is now a sparkly waterfront promenade, with only a slice of sand left untouched. I have no idea where my sacred spot is anymore. There is no space for emotion in business.

Owing to Dubai's global image as a destination of a certain eccentric sparkle, it is difficult to tease out the necessary nuance in the sense of privilege felt growing up there. As a cis-het woman, I experienced the city as a safe place to walk in at night, but I was fortunate to live in a comparatively unproblematic neighbourhood. Although my community was more global—with friends from places as distinct as Minsk, Nairobi, Kochi and Basra—I did start working at the age of 18 to afford myself further access to the adventure. A child's life-world growing up in this city, commonly experienced as being sharply segregated economically and socially, shapes after their family's origin and economic situation, and will translate as uniquely and separately as these. I did not understand the systemics at play until my travels outside offered perspective from a bigger world.

Dubai being a truly 24/7, cosmopolitan city, you are allowed to taste wildly different cultures—just as long as you can afford to access them, which comes with many caveats that require serious addressal. The geographical organisation of the city makes this most apparent. Residential zones are "visibly organised" by people of either similar nationalities, economic status or, sometimes, colour, while urban planning and arbitrary laws regulate access to common spaces, leaving behind very few places that truly allow a meld and leading me to reimagine the melting-pot metaphor as something more akin to a salad—everything exists together, but neatly separated in a hermetic system of organisation.

The one thing that unifies expat kids across class, however, is the crippling identity crisis that accompanies childhood here, a levelling sense of placelessness.

Even as they share the same scented air, locals and non-locals are separated by bureaucratic and cultural barriers, creating invisible distances between them. A language barrier, with many expats only speaking a crude version of Arabic, both exacerbates and is exacerbated by their limited interaction with Emiratis, who make up only eleven percent of Dubai's population. Progressive policies securing education, healthcare, housing, employment and financial well-being cover only Emiratis, while you are permanently designated to—and constantly reminded of—being an expat in the only land you have known as home, requiring a clean chit on your biennial blood test to ensure renewal of your visa.

Dubai being a truly 24/7, cosmopolitan city, you are allowed to taste wildly different cultures—just as long as you can afford to access them, which comes with many caveats that require serious addressal. The geographical organisation of the city makes this most apparent. Residential zones are “visibly organised” by people of either similar nationalities, economic status or, sometimes, colour, while urban planning and arbitrary laws regulate access to common spaces, leaving behind very few places that truly allow a meld and leading me to reimagine the melting-pot metaphor as something more akin to a salad—everything exists together, but neatly separated in a hermetic system of organisation.

The one thing that unifies expat kids across class, however, is the crippling identity crisis that accompanies childhood here, a levelling sense of placelessness.

Even as they share the same scented air, locals and non-locals are separated by bureaucratic and cultural barriers, creating invisible distances

between them. A language barrier, with many expats only speaking a crude version of Arabic, both exacerbates and is exacerbated by their limited interaction with Emiratis, who make up only eleven percent of Dubai's population. Progressive policies securing education, healthcare, housing, employment and financial well-being cover only Emiratis, while you are permanently designated to—and constantly reminded of—being an expat in the only land you have known as home, requiring a clean chit on your biennial blood test to ensure renewal of your visa.

While some residents, who either have the privilege of options or acknowledge themselves as migrants from the start, accept their temporary status, the idea of leaving is particularly painful for born-expats and others, like my grandfather, who have, over decades in many cases, developed emotional relationships with a place where their inputs were viewed only through a lens of transactional unemotionality. At the age of 68, having no sustainable options to retire there despite his four decades of service, Dada left the UAE to start a new life in India, his country of birth. Afflicted by dementia in his old age, sitting in bed in the house he built with his remittances from the Gulf, he imagined himself still in Dubai with us. He wrote me letters and birthday cards as long as he could, before he slipped away.

In a time that asked him to revel in the permanence of his temporariness, Dada somehow built a world suspended between sea and sky. Despite involuntarily-and-voluntarily spending large sections of his life across colonial Sindh, Dubai and postcolonial Mumbai, he always remembered his way back home.

HE IS ONE OF MANY put in the

same situation every year.

With the world's largest diaspora population, India relies on remittances for three percent of its GDP. About half of this comes from the Gulf, where the majority of the diaspora lives. Most migrate alone, limited by family-reunification policies based on income, and are further subject to informal housing segregation, living in cramped bedshares or, if employed in construction or similar labour, in neighbourhoods like Sonapur, which houses almost two hundred thousand people, some of them living fifteen to a room.

On one side, reminiscent of colonial-era oppressions, you see certain labouring bodies worked to exhaustion, making less in a lifetime than it would take to afford appropriate recourse to protest their treatment, and on the other, an extortionate excess, the unattainability of its wealth paraded as a strength, altogether presenting as an exceedingly dissociative state of being. It induces fantastical landscapes, built for consumers, by the consumed, directed by federal real-estate interests here and "manpower" recruiting firms there, while at the helm of both rest people of the same skin. The identity of the disposable worker is born, referred to and defined wholly by their line of work, ready to be replaced by the next, until the robot revolution, old age or serious injury negates their usefulness.

As mirrored in the protests over India's Citizenship (Amendment) Act and practices of withholding citizenship from certain sections of domestic populations in other places, migrant incorporation is contentious because at stake is power itself. Finding sustainable recourse in bureaucracies of belonging, however, has never been a more important conversation to be had, since, as one migration scholar put it,

"There is nothing more permanent than temporary foreign workers."

After spending over three decades in the UAE as a born-expat from India the whole time, I have existed, in almost every fathomable way, in the in-between space of these two worlds—belonging to both and neither, simultaneously. A visa scare around my thirtieth birthday reminded me how easily my entire life could be upended. A life of such transience had me so used to leaving people and places behind, that I had given up on the idea of belonging to a group altogether, and the unbelongingness had me exhausted. A home should not make you feel like you need to look for ways to stay in it. So, in December 2020, I left.

Science around the subject says that, of all the senses, smell has the strongest link to parts of the brain that deal with emotions and memory, the amygdala and the hippocampus. Before you enter a room, you become familiar with its smell, not how it looks or feels. I am not sure if this is rooted in science, or an emotional attachment instead, but what I miss most about Dubai is the way it smelled—specifically, the scented wafts of cold air that hit you on a hot summer's day when you enter what invariably, and quite frustratingly, is a retail space. It is a strange sort of trickery, because it gets so hot most of the year that it is humanly impossible to remain outside and there is almost nowhere else to run to. I really do miss that fragrance, though, the perfume of deliciously smoky resins oozing with body and soul, the sort of things the city is frequently criticised not to have. Scent, I feel, is the one place where Emirati benevolence is lavishly abundant.

Sometimes, I perfume my hair with it.

(Originally published in Caravan Magazine)

Arts and Culture, Lost in Translation

By **MASHIYAT AHMED**

I once heard someone say that the language you can argue in is your language. I come from Bangladesh, a small yet vibrant country with a rich history, nestled on the northeast side of India, where Bengali is the official language.

However, I have lived in Canada from a very young age; thus, I never had to translate my mother tongue to English or deal with words getting 'lost in translation,' because at no point in my life was Bengali the dominant way I expressed myself. Growing up on the diverse and bustling streets of Toronto, English naturally became the language in which I could best think, express, and argue. Communicating in Bengali became an act of translating my mother tongue from English. This very fact has shrouded me with much guilt, and to some degree, cultural estrangement. I was left wondering whether Bengali was even my language, when my loved ones can not only argue in Bengali, but also risked their lives to do so.

The British Empire directly ruled the Indian subcontinent from 1858 until 1947, and afterward, it partitioned the area into Pakistan and India — a process which resulted in massive upheaval of the region's diverse ethnic groups and violence along religious lines. Before its independence from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh — formerly East Pakistan — had an ethnically and culturally distinct population that was made out to be inferior by ethnocentric ideologies perpetuated by West Pakistan. Then-President of Pakistan Muhammad

Ayub Khan called Bengalis "conquered peoples, while the inhabitants of West Pakistan were the descendants of conquerors."

This rhetoric, among other ideologies, inspired multiple attempts by West Pakistani officials to eradicate the linguistic and cultural sacredness of my nation by imposing Urdu as the official language rather than Bengali.

My grandfather, who was a medic during the War of Independence in 1971, recalls how Bangladeshi men and women vehemently — and at the expense of their safety — protested the imposition of West Pakistani cultural norms and for the right to speak Bengali in what is now known as the Bengali Language Movement of 1952. In fact, speaking Bengali was such an immense source of comradeship that it laid the foundation for Bangladeshi nationalism, pride, and unity years later.

For these reasons, my difficulty reaching native fluency in Bengali can make me incredibly emotional. In both casual exchanges and heated conversations, while I try to speak as effortlessly as my grandparents do, I am stung by how uneasy I feel speaking a language my elders fought to protect. I am more comfortable when speaking English — the colonizer's language — than when I speak my mother tongue, whose preservation and endurance came through the martyrdom of those who fought for Bangladeshi independence.

When I last visited Bangladesh in 2017, apart from being overwhelmed by the heaviness of the mid-July heat,

I was surprised by the sheer amount of 'Banglish' I heard. Banglish is a combination of Bengali and English, where people will switch between both languages or weave one into the other.

As an immigrant in Canada, I knew that Banglish was a linguistic reality among people like me who had to acclimate to another culture, but I did not expect it to be so popular among people who had lived their entire lives in Bangladesh. In the urban chaos of Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital, I saw endless advertisements and heard multiple conversations solely in English. Common words in Bengali were frequently substituted by English ones.

I gradually realized the extent to which globalization and the colonial legacy of the British Empire had influenced the language bias of my community. For example, even in vernaculars not completely taken over by Banglish, it is more common to say "amakay owui chair ta dhou" — translating to "give me that chair" — because the Bengali word for "chair" is hardly ever used, and thus is an extinct piece of vocabulary among many youths, including myself.

Even though Bengali is the state-officiated language, English has come to symbolize modernization, social prestige, and even notions of educatedness: higher paying jobs are only offered to fluent English speakers, and wealthy families tend to send their children to 'English-medium' schools, which predominantly teach an English curriculum. I became painfully aware of the fact that, especially among Bangladesh's youth, proximity to a colonizer's language often determines how a person's social, economic, and even individual value is perceived. English being held in such high regard means that Bengali is considered a

more casual, unserious, and 'inferior' form of communication.

Since 2017, my grandparents and peers have told me that Banglish has become the norm for many people as they try to navigate an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, a world where our mother tongue is constantly being put on the back burner. This sombre reality makes me wonder how much of the younger generation has internalized a subconscious negative attitude toward their mother tongue, a mother tongue that people died for only two generations prior.

Speaking in broken Bengali fills me with a sense of separateness from other Bangladeshis and gives me the impression that I will never be able to understand nor express the plight of my people. But as it turns out, both diaspora and natives are finding it harder to stay connected to their languages as English becomes more dominant. Linguistic imperialism did not end with independence from British rule.

My grandfather growing up would always tell me that speaking Bengali was a mark of claiming cultural and ethnic uniqueness, and that it was a precursor to eventual nationhood. Above all, I wonder if I am failing to live up to the sacrifices and teachings of those who directly fought for Bangladesh's linguistic and national independence. Honouring the historical struggle and grief of those who fought for Bengali is a challenge not only I face, but that Bangladeshis in Bangladesh face too. I am still in the process of learning my own history, having important conversations with my parents to make up for the things I've lost in translation, and realizing that no matter what pace I keep, it doesn't make me any more or less Bangladeshi.

(Originally published in The Varsity)

Finding Faith : The Lives and Rituals of The Lost Tribe Jews in Mizoram

By **DENIAL TEPPER**

I first learnt about Jewish communities living in India while traveling through the country in 2017. A friend from Assam told me about “Lost Tribe” Jews in neighbouring Mizoram. Those who identify as members of Lost Tribes believe that they are the descendants of the ten Jewish tribes that were exiled from ancient Israel after the Assyrian empire conquered it around 722 BCE.

I had previously been aware of the existence of Lost Tribe Jewish communities around the world but had not actively given it much thought. I was raised in a Jewish family—my parents are observant Jews, but I had never fully embraced the religion. However, I was curious to learn more about these communities in India who identified so strongly with the Jewish faith—something that I had simply taken for granted for most of my life.

In March 2017, I travelled to Mizoram and parts of Myanmar to meet the Lost Tribe communities and document their rituals and daily lives. The first thing I photographed was a Jewish funeral in Aizawl. What surprised me most were the personal interactions after the funeral when I had put my camera away. I experienced what would become a pattern through the rest of my journey—the Lost Tribe members warmly and wholeheartedly welcomed me into their homes and services. I was no longer a mere photographer documenting their rituals, but rather a fellow Jew from the outside world, the kind they had only limited contact with and looked upon with great curiosity. They were eager

to know about my upbringing and had many questions about what life was like in Israel, where I had briefly lived. Almost all expressed a desire to return to Israel.

Over the last two decades, Jewish-Zionist groups, with funding from private donors and evangelical Christian organisations, have facilitated the relocation of members of the Lost Tribe communities from northeast India to Israel. The communities are known as the Bnei Menashe, meaning Sons of Manasseh, one of the ten lost tribes. At present, there are about three thousand members of Lost Tribe communities from India living in Israel. Another seven thousand live and practice Judaism in India. As reported in the Israeli press, the Bnei Menashe require special government authorisation from Israel to move to the country. They are not automatically covered under the Jewish Law of Return which requires proof of at least one Jewish grandparent.

In 2005, Israel's chief rabbi officially declared that the Bnei Menashe are descendants of the original tribe of Manasseh. As a precondition to immigrate to Israel, they must formally convert to Judaism. After the ruling, Israel sent a team of rabbis to northeast India to facilitate the conversions. However, the process was halted at the time following complaints by the Indian government. In 2007, the Israeli government briefly stopped giving visas to the Bnei Menashe, but has since reversed the policy.

In my conversations with Lost Tribe communities, I found that many held an

idealised view of what it may be like to live in Israel and were mostly unaware of the challenges they may face in the country. Upon moving to Israel, the Bnei Menashe have sometimes joined the Israeli army. Yet, a full integration into Israeli society remains difficult, with the possibility of racial discrimination or economic hardship.

As I photographed the community in India, I would look for scenes that piqued my recognition of the familiar—being or representing something Jewish that I had known—entwined with another element that was an expression of indigenous histories and local practicalities of the areas they lived in. I found this aspect of my project to be the most interesting because it brought to the fore the malleability of Judaism when practiced by the Lost Tribe communities, and how something as old and self-contained as Judaism is actually not as monolithic as it may be considered. It is still evolving in the many ways that it is kept alive by different communities across the world.

A photograph of a hanukiah made with local wood, inside of a building occupied by a Lost Tribe congregation is an example of Judaism blending with indigenous culture. The hanukiah, a religious candle holder, is a common item seen in Jewish homes and temples, but I had never before seen one made out of a mix of wood and bamboo. A bamboo hanukiah perfectly symbolised the mix of Jewish iconography and ritual with the Lost Tribes members' own practices arising from their home environment.

A photograph of the graveyard where both Jewish and people of other faiths are buried is another scene of the familiar and foreign intermingling. In most places around the world, Jews are not buried with members of other religions. It would be very hard to find the symbols of the Christian cross and the Jewish star side-by-side on gravestones in a cemetery in any other place, as I did

in Mizoram.

Despite these indigenous nuances, all the Lost Tribe services seemed familiar to me because they were carried out in an almost identical manner to the way I had experienced them. Though I was in a different part of the world, documenting a group of which I was not a member, their services had a particular resonance with my own history—something that I had not expected.

While photographing members of the Lost Tribe communities, I began to dwell on my own relationship with Judaism. My family and I celebrated Jewish holidays and went to temple every Saturday for Shabbat services. As I grew up, I found myself uninterested in my religion and did not actively consider it a part of my identity. Photographing the Lost Tribe members during their prayer rituals was the first time I had been at a Jewish religious service in many years.

Through my conversations and the time I spent with them, I found members of the Lost Tribes communities to be firm in their belief and practices. I was moved by the way in which they were upholding the Jewish faith in a distant land. They were embodying a Jewish way of life that drew on multiple facets including ritual, fraternity and a shared sense of identity. Many I spoke to said that they sometimes found it difficult to get time off from their employers to observe Jewish rituals and holidays. It was ironic to explain to some of the Lost Tribe members that I thought they were more Jewish than myself—despite my having been born into a Jewish family—because they were actively living out a Jewish life in way that I was not. I began this project driven by a sense of intrigue about these communities. But by the time I left Aizawl, it had taken on a personal dimension too, presenting an opportunity to reevaluate my own relationship with Judaism.

(Originally Published in Caravan Magazine)

Tibetan Refugees in India Protect Language and Culture

By **ANJANA PASRICHA**

ALTHOUGH Migmar Tsering crossed the border into India when he was just six-years-old, he remained closely connected to his Tibetan culture and language at the school for Tibetan refugees in the hill town of Mussoorie where he studied.

Now as principal of TCV Day School Samyeling in the Indian capital, 29-year-old Tsering, and his staff ensure that the more than 100 children of Tibetan refugees enrolled here imbibe Tibetan culture just as he did.

"They advise [the children] about Tibetan situation not related with political we have beautiful country, we have good language, we have a good identity, we have good religion," he said.

Led by teachers dressed in the Tibetan traditional dress, the chuba, young kids learn to write the script and chant

nursery rhymes translated in Tibetan. And the noisy chatter as they run around and play is in their native language.

Amid fears that six decades of Chinese rule has resulted in Tibetan traditions being lost and its culture being assimilated into Chinese, the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama has frequently stressed the need to safeguard Tibetan culture. And as the Tibetan Exile Administration marks 60 years since the Dalai Lama fled to India, analysts say this goal has met with more success than the political struggle to gain autonomy for Tibet.

The heart of that effort is about 70 schools run by the Tibetan exile administration in India, which is home to the world's largest Tibetan refugee community. After the Dalai Lama fled to



India following the 1959 failed uprising against Chinese rule, New Delhi allowed the setting up of separate Tibetan settlements and schools where a third generation of Tibetan refugees now study.

These schools emphasize learning in Tibetan until grade three. Teacher Sonam Choedon at the Tibetan school in the Indian capital points out that Beijing has sharply scaled back the teaching of languages spoken by ethnic minorities.

"In Tibet, now Tibetan language, Chinese they are suppressing, even in class they are not allowed to talk in Tibetan," she said. "So to preserve our language here in exile, especially in school, everything we try to convert in Tibetan only."

All subjects from science to math and environmental studies are taught in Tibetan in the junior classes. A reading room is not just stacked with books translated into Tibetan children sit on the floor to peruse the books placed on low desks in keeping with Tibetan tradition. In an adjoining room, young girls and boys play music on traditional Tibetan instruments.

"With the unparalleled support from India we have from the ashes of destruction revived Tibetan civilization, rebuilt Tibetan Buddhism, revived Tibetan culture, and preserved and promote Tibetan identity in India," Lobsang Sangay, prime minister of the Tibetan exile administration, said recently at a "Thank You India" event held to observe 60 years of the Dalai Lama's arrival in India.

The effort has made its mark. In Majnu-ka-Tilla, the Tibetan settlement where the New Delhi school is located, prayer flags are strung across a central square, maroon-robed monks light candles inside a Buddhist temple, old and young come to turn a prayer wheel and Tibetan food is commonly available. Nearby Tibetan handicrafts made by those who know the craft are sold.

However challenges lie ahead as a younger generation growing up in India gets restless and many look for opportunities overseas where Tibetans are more dispersed. The number of refugees coming to India has also slowed to a trickle.

Still hopes are high in the Tibetan exile community that those educated and brought up in India will carry the Tibetan influence and tradition with them outside.

Twenty-three-year-old Tenzin Dekong migrated to Australia in 2014 with her family. In India recently on holiday, she said she misses the Tibetan ambience in communities like Majnu-ka-Tilla. But the culture she assimilated as she grew up and studied in Dharamsala, the seat of the Tibetan government in exile, remains strongly with her.

"I am very sad that I can't see Tibet, but through the elder stories and through our teachers, when we learn Tibetan subjects we learn a lot of histories and I do really feel very connected with Tibetan cultures and I do have some imagination how Tibet looks like surrounded by all mountains, all the monastery," she said.

At his most recent appearance at the event to mark his 60 years in India, the Dalai Lama again stressed the importance of saving Tibetan culture. "We are not demanding separation from China but the Tibetan people should have the autonomy to preserve their culture, language, environment and religion," he said.

And many like principal Tsering, hope one day to carry the cultural roots they are so carefully nurturing in India to the homeland they fled or never saw. "We have truth, one day we go back to Tibet, I just believe that," he said.

(Originally published in VOA News)

Displaced and Disenfranchised: Rohingya Refugees Strive to Preserve Cultural Roots

By **NAJMUS SAKIB**

Uprooted from their ancestral lands, a group of young Rohingya Muslims in southern Bangladesh are trying to keep their heritage alive among their community's children and teenagers.

Mohammed Rezuwan Khan, 26, is one of those high school graduates, shunned from higher education in his native Rakhine, a state in western Myanmar, due to his ethnic background as a Rohingya, despite having passed the matriculation exam there.

His prospects of attending university were dealt a final blow in August 2017, when him and his family had to flee their village because of a brutal crackdown by Myanmar's military. In what rights groups have since called a genocide, nearly 1.2 million Rohingya were forced into neighboring Bangladesh, where they have been living for years in overcrowded

refugee camps.

"Everyone lost everything they owned. The (Myanmar) military set fire to our villages and erased every last sign of our existence from the land where we lived for generations," Khan told Anadolu.

He is now working to keep the next generation of Rohingya acquainted with their roots, preserving cultural elements like folktales before they are lost.

With as much as 54% of the Rohingya population being children, members of the group fear their community's future is in peril as children and teenagers are deprived of knowledge about their culture, language, folktales and morals.

Members of the ethnic group are also not allowed to attend higher education institutes in Bangladesh, nor seek formal employment.

On Friday, Khan marks the Aug.



25 Rohingya Genocide Remembrance Day, renewing his commitment to his community.

"I started my refugee life with emptiness," said Khan, who lives in a tin shed bamboo shelter with his wife, daughter, mother and brother.

"I realized that every newborn in the refugee camps grows up without the touch of our own history, culture, folktales, and education. These are our roots, our identity, which the military junta wanted to erase."

PROJECT ROHINGYA FOLKTALES

Khan initiated the Rohingya Folktales Project to preserve their native culture, language, and stories.

In 2018, he had the opportunity to work with an American friend, Alex Ebsary, on another project, Music in Exile, in the Rohingya refugee camps, located in the district of Cox's Bazar.

Khan became a folklorist in 2020, translating folktales into English and sending them to Ebsary, who helps Khan edit the scripts.

"I collect the folktales from educated and older Rohingya from across the camp. I gather them by visiting the elderly on foot, which takes a lot of time and effort," Khan said.

These stories teach moral lessons from elderly Rohingya to children, he added.

"I've already published a book that contains those folktales," he said.

Khan also launched a website for his folktales project and is involved in teaching and managing an informal school.

"Our songs, language, culture, folktales, and education curricula are our assets, our identity," he emphasized.

"We need to preserve these before they are lost forever. Our new generation needs to learn them so that we can return to our homeland, Myanmar, with proper knowledge and education."

NOT ALONE

Khan is not alone in his mission to

educate younger Rohingya.

Aebad Ullah, a young man living in Cox's Bazar Camp 7, runs a school for about 600 children and teens from pre-primary to grade 11.

"After passing the matriculation (exam) in 2015, I applied to attend a university to study for a bachelor's degree in botany, but the Myanmar government did not allow me to enroll because I am a Rohingya," he told Anadolu over the phone.

Ali Jinnah Hussin, another resident of the camps, is no different.

Now 26 years old, he was deprived of university training years ago and today works as a humanitarian worker and communications director of the camp-based Rohingya Youth Association, involved in teaching and developing the skills of young Rohingya students.

Describing their situation, Khan said there were hundreds of community-based informal schools in the refugee camps that teach Myanmar's curricula, as well as their native culture and moral values.

RENEWED CALLS TO SOLVE CRISIS

However, working toward this cause has not been without obstacles for Khan and the rest of the group.

"We have to run my work and schools with our own funds. We don't get any assistance from others. It's getting harder to run these activities due to financial troubles," Khan said.

"We get only \$8 per month, which is hardly enough to feed a family. We have to completely depend on food assistance as we don't have work permits," he added.

"It seems we Rohingya will starve to death. There's no food, no work. It's hard to look at my wife, my daughter, my mother, when I'm so powerless to help," Khan said, his voice heavy with emotion.

He urged the global community to come forward to save the lives of Rohingya, who are quietly fading from the world's attention.

(Originally published in Asia - Pacific)

The Lost Histories of The Bengali Harlem

By **MOYUKH MAHTAB**

IT is difficult to do justice in summarising Vivek Bald's book *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*. An Associate Professor of Writing and Digital Media at MIT, the author was inspired by one Habib Ullah, an ex-seaman from Noakhali, who went to the US around the 1920s, eventually marrying and settling there. The scope of the book is staggering, as it reconstructs an almost forgotten narrative of immigration and assimilation of South Asians in America and covers a period from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

The stories of businessmen and sailors from Hoogly, Noakhali, Sylhet and other parts of Bengal travelling thousands of miles to get to the US,

setting up networks for business, integrating into the African American and Creole communities, and navigating the tricky socio-political situations of a largely xenophobic America were retrieved from old forgotten archives—from “ship’s logs, census records, marriage certificates, local news items,” as the author puts it. And the picture that emerges is of a community on the fringes that challenges the widely-held assumptions about immigration, race relations and the inception of a Bengali/Indian community in America.

The book describes the nineteenth century businessmen of embroidered silk, who travelling from British India, and landing at a newly built immigration processing centre in Ellis Island, are



faced with immigration officers. They build the first networks in the coloured communities of America. This would later pave the way for the hundreds of seamen who jumped ship to escape from the indentured working conditions to find work in the factories of Detroit in the early 1900s. As the US started closing its borders to South Asians, these Bengali men seeped into the coloured communities, marrying into and building lives in a new land. And it is in the description of their lives, and their businesses that Vivek Bald excels.

“Denied official belonging, they became part of another nation, a nation beneath a nation, in working-class neighborhoods of color from New York to Baltimore to Detroit,” he writes in *Bengali Harlem*.

In an email interview with *The Daily Star*, Mr Bald discussed the major themes of his book: immigration, racism, identity, and the overarching significance of lost histories.

The Daily Star: One interesting aspect of *Bengali Harlem* is the duality that existed in the US: the simultaneous love for the exotic and the xenophobia. Do you see any parallels or similarities in the US at the moment—not just regarding Indians or Bangladeshis, but with immigrants in general?

Vivek Bald: This is, in fact, a question at the centre of my current book project, which examines in greater detail the American craze for India at the turn of the twentieth century. From then until now, American ideas about South Asians have run in two opposing directions—at any point in time, South Asia and South Asians have been met simultaneously with desire and fear, excitement and derision. At the turn of the twentieth century, Americans desired ‘India’ for its exotic qualities—for what Americans saw as its sensuality

and colour, its freer spirituality, its less constraining modes of dress, its imagery of palaces, maharajahs, Mughals and dancing girls.

But at the same time, American travel writers and missionaries portrayed the subcontinent and its peoples as barbaric and uncivilised, and after Punjabi immigrants began arriving in the Pacific Northwest around 1904, in search of lumber mill, cannery, and railroad jobs, they were portrayed as dire economic and cultural threats, a so-called ‘Turban Tide’, and were the victims or orchestrated racial violence. In the present, South Asian Americans are caught between the image of the model minority and the image of the terrorist. (And on the desirable side of the binary, of course, the ‘exotic’ has never gone away.) These aren’t just media representations—they have real consequences in the lives of South Asians in the United States.

There are clear rewards—social, cultural, and professional—for those South Asians who enact the model minority image or provide the exotic, and there are clear risks for those who do not or cannot meet that ideal of desirability, or for those who display characteristics that have been portrayed as part of the image of ‘the terrorist’—whether these are modes of dress and self-presentation, or community and political activism, or open criticism of US foreign policy or immigration policy. What I am trying to make clear by looking at these dynamics one-hundred years ago, is the fact that this phenomenon of xenophobia/Indophilia is at the core of how South Asians have been racialised in the United States at the same time that it structures how we act, what we strive for, and who we do and do not identify with.

TDS: Given that the book is based

on archival research, what do you think enabled the fostering of kinship between the black population of America and Bangali migrants?

VB: On the cynical side, one might say that because they were dark-skinned in the era of segregation, Bengalis could live nowhere else other than Black neighbourhoods and that the existing groups in those neighbourhoods didn't have a lot of say in the matter.

On the idealistic side, one might think that Bengalis on the one hand and African Americans and Puerto Ricans on the other, recognised common experiences of oppression—under colonialism on one hand and a US society structured around white supremacy on the other. My sense is that from one case to another, people's experiences were somewhere in a spectrum between these two extremes.

In some cases, Bengali peddlers or ship-jumpers seem to have kept to themselves and did not intermingle so much with their Black neighbours, but in many cases, again to varying degrees, they became as much connected to the extended families of their African American or Puerto Rican wives as they were to other Bengali men. Whatever the dynamics were that brought Bengalis to US neighbourhoods of colour, I think there was something unique that these men and their neighbours and in-laws went through—they spent decades forging lives across the kinds of ethnic, cultural, and religious differences that are too often presumed to be insurmountable, decades sharing their experiences of daily life, love and labour across those differences. And even though those daily negotiations of difference were not always smooth, the fact that they happened, that they were possible, I

think, says something important today, when South Asian communities more often than not set themselves apart from African American, Puerto Rican and other communities of colour in the US.

TDS: It seems from the book that the communities and families that developed in the US were largely syncretic, if not secular. Class status rather than religion seems to have been the defining identity. Your thoughts on this aspect.

VB: The men from Sylhet, Noakhali and elsewhere in present-day Bangladesh who settled in Harlem and elsewhere varied quite widely in terms of their practice of Islam, and that translated to their children. So, for example, Ibrahim Choudry, who was one of the community leaders in the New York/New Jersey area from the 1940s-60s, was also at the centre of the Bengali community's religious life during that period. He acted in the role of an Imam, leading prayers, organising Eid celebrations. He built ties with other Muslim organisations and communities in New York, including African American Muslims, and was part of a series of inter-faith activities with New York religious leaders of different faiths.

He tried to teach the daily practice of Islam to his son and to the children of his Bengali friends. According to his daughter, if Choudry was running errands around Manhattan and it came time for prayers, he would duck out of the busy street traffic into a phone booth, close the door and do his prayers there. There were other Bengali Muslim men, however, whose observance primarily consisted of adherence to dietary strictures and the celebration of Eid each year.

In some cases, these men taught their children and in other cases they

did not, either because they wanted their children to 'be American' or because they had agreed with their wives that their children would be brought up in their wives' faith. And among the second generation, often 'identity' was more tied to the block they grew up on in Harlem than to anything else.

TDS: What role do you see or would want to see the retrieval of lost histories play today?

VB: In the US context, since the attacks of 9/11, South Asian Americans, and especially working-class Muslim and Sikh immigrants and their families, have dealt with an anti-immigrant tide that has only got stronger. There is a whole generation of Bangladeshi and other South Asian youth who experienced name-calling and bullying in their schools as they grew up, who witnessed or experienced harassment by government authorities during the roundups, detentions, and deportations; who witnessed or experienced threats and physical violence directed at members of their families and communities because of their brown skin or outward markers of their faith. Part of the narrative that Bangladeshis in particular face - part of the narrative that accompanies this violence - centres on the accusation that Bangladeshis are supposedly newcomers, recent immigrants who are undesirable and dangerous, don't have a place in the United States and should "go home".

The importance of the stories laid out in Bengali Harlem, I believe, is that they show that Muslim immigrants from regions that are now in Bangladesh and Indian West Bengal have been here in the United States, making their lives here alongside and as part of other communities of colour, for over

one-hundred years, and while small in number, they have been part of the United States for as long as so many other US ethnic communities rooted in the historic wave of immigration that occurred between the 1880s and 1920s. Will the publishing of early South Asian migration stories stop the violence and xenophobia—no—but my hope is that the book will prove significant, as a source of knowledge and strength, for some of the young Bangladeshi Americans and other South Asian and Muslim Americans who are negotiating the current climate.

TDS: Ethnic identities seem to have been very fluid South Asians during the time-span of your narrative. In contrast, the ethnic 'others' are largely exclusionary today. What change do you see in the portrayal or perception of South Asians beyond the role of professionals?

VB: Part of what I tried to highlight in the book was the way that oppressed and marginalised groups in the US (whether South Asians or African Americans) learned to use white Americans' ignorance of peoples of color, to some limited advantage. So undocumented Bengali ship jumpers, for example, 'disappeared' into Harlem by blending in with African Americans and Puerto Ricans, and some African Americans in the U.S. South wore turbans and took on 'Indian' personas in order to gain greater mobility through segregated towns and cities. The subjectiveness and illogic of 'race' itself had cracks and fissures that racialised groups had to learn to navigate in order to survive. And from the white perspective, neighbourhoods like Harlem were simply considered 'black' or 'negro' neighborhoods—there was little understanding for the vast heterogeneity of these neighbourhoods

that were home to people from all over the African diaspora, or for other groups, like the Bengalis, who made their home in those neighbourhoods.

Today, perhaps, what has changed is the number of South Asian immigrants—today much of the immigration from the subcontinent follows a more classic ‘ethnic enclave’ model in which Bangladeshis, Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Nepalis settle in neighbourhoods with people from their own regions. At its best, this pattern of migration helps new immigrants make the transition to the United States, at its worst, it creates a situation in which older immigrants might exploit newer ones. But what is lost, compared to the era that I’ve written about, is that South Asian immigrants that settle among other South Asians do not necessarily have to interact with, build friendships and relationships with, people from other racial, ethnic, or religious groups. This is something that the children of the earlier generation, who are now in their 60s and 70s lament—the fact that this makes South Asian immigrants of today more closed to and closed off from African Americans, Latinos, and other US communities of colour.

TDS: The early Bengali community has largely dispersed. Based on your research, do you think that their descendants from their marriages see the immigrant/South-Asian factor as part of their identity? That is, in what way, if any, does the Bengali Harlem survive today?

VB: For the most part, I’d say that the second generation that grew up in the 1940s-1960s integrated into their mothers’ communities—African American, Puerto Rican, Afro-Caribbean. But I have yet to meet a member of that generation that does not still see

the South Asian part of their identity as central part of who they are—who do not hold a special place for the Bengali aspects of their family, identity, and childhood experiences.

As someone of mixed background myself (Indian and Australian) I can say that people who are not ‘mixed’ sometimes underestimate the multiplicity and complexity that all of us can and do hold within us. There is a saying that has been catching on over the past decade or so among various people of mixed heritage: “I’m not half, I’m double.” I think that very much holds with this group as well.

TDS: What projects are you currently working on?

VB: I’m now working on two projects connected to the book. The first is a documentary that I am working on with the East Harlem writer and actor Alaudin Ullah, whose father was one of the first Bengali men to settle in Harlem back in the 1930s (and whose story set me off on the path of historical research that came to fruition in the Bengali Harlem book).

The second is an oral history website, which I am for now calling The Lost Histories Project. It will be something between a web-based documentary and an archive where the children and descendants of the Bengali-African American and Bengali-Puerto Rican families of the 1940s-1960s will be able to contribute their stories and family photos. It will also include video interviews, archival documents, and dynamic maps. The idea is to create a space that will continue to grow as more and more people connected to these early histories come forward—a collectively-produced people’s history.

(Originally published in The Daily Star)

The Future of Poetry

By **CHRISTOPHER CAUDWELL**

...Continued from previous issue

POETRY expresses in a generalised and abstract way the dynamic relation of the ego to the elements of outer reality symbolised by words. This very generalisation is the source of its ability to voice with unique power the instinctive emotional element in man – the physiological component of the social ego.

Poetry begins, we recall, as the cries of primitive hunters and food-gatherers in which man attempts to master Nature by changing himself – by throwing himself into Nature so that his way of associated life conforms with the desired objects, just as his social perception expressed in art strives to conform with the track of the beasts, its special outline, its specific ferocity and vulnerability. This introjection of the self into Nature is conscious because it is social; man could only hunt and gather food successfully in co-operation even at this early stage. This is the poetry which summons from the breast of man a mimicry of Nature that is not a mere reflection, but Nature as man desires her woven from the strands of Nature as men share her in common effort. There is a tense bareness about the art of this stage.

This passes into the poem as myth and ritual, as chorus or chant, where Nature in the shape of herds and crops is taken into the heart of society. Men, instead of changing their associated perception and action to conform with the outline of Nature, change Nature's outline to

conform with their own. The world process is extravagantly distorted to suit man's whim. Yet the society into which Nature has been dragged is still undifferentiated and collective. Society is passive yet creative, like a pregnant woman. It has a certain closed complacency. Life is now in it – not outside.

In the next stage the introjection of Nature into society has led to society itself splitting into antagonistic parts or classes. Division of labour is reflected in a division of society. The development of agricultural and pastoral civilisation leads to the creation of a ruling class which becomes ossified and has as its counterpart a class of serfs and slaves. The struggle with Nature is transformed into men's struggle with each other. The first emergence of the ruling class is seen as the transformation of mythology into the epic, and into story, and in the evolution of ritual into play. The conflict of society is reflected in a poetry sombre and clouded with moral issues – questions of right and wrong – balanced by a poetry concerned with delight – with love and joy. Doubt, pathos, nobility, serenity, fear and a conscious beauty all enter the field of poetry. And the development of classes, by rendering possible the differentiation of function, gives more freedom to individuality. For the first time men speak personally in poetry. The lyric is born.

The bourgeois class comes to rule – a class the conditions of whose existence is the continual revolution of its basis. Poetry becomes dizzy, tragic, full of

contradictions. Its technique undergoes the most rapid transformations. Its law of formation decrees that each step it takes in revolt against the conditions of its existence only urge on the ripening of those conditions and its own fall. The continual revolt of poets against the negation of poetry and individual freedom by concrete bourgeois existence only calls into being a whole world of poetry precisely fulfilling the conditions of concrete bourgeois existence. It flies away from life into a heaven of pure art, whose assertion of personal worth and open denial of concrete living increase in proportion to the rate at which concrete living strangles the realisation of personal worth. This withdrawal in itself reflects the movement of the bourgeois class from reality, the development of the contradiction between bourgeois consciousness and proletarian reality, between the productive forces of society and the social conditions of existence of the capitalist class.

Poetry reaches technically an unprecedented competence; it draws more and more apart from the world of reality; it asserts with increasing success the personal perception of life and the personal feeling until it becomes so desocialised that at first perception and then feeling cease to exist at all. The great mass of men no longer read poetry, no longer feel the need for it, no longer understand it, because poetry has moved away from concrete living by the development of its technique, and this movement was itself only the counterpart of a similar movement in the whole of society.

Thus the poet was forced by life – i.e. by his experience – to concentrate on just those words and organising values which were becoming steadily less meaningful to men as a whole, until poetry, from a necessary function of all society (as in a primitive tribe), becomes the luxury of a few chosen spirits.

The movement forward from bourgeois culture to communism is also a movement back to the social solidarity of primitive communism, but one which includes and gathers up all the development of the interim, all the division of labour which has made possible an increase in freedom, individuation and consciousness. It is a movement back to the collectivism and integrity of a society without coercion, where consciousness and freedom are equally shared by all.

Such a society primitively was a society which, because of its low productivity, had an integrity that was crude and bare, and a sum of consciousness and freedom so scanty that although shared by all each share was small. It was necessary for freedom and consciousness to be monopolised, to gather for a time at the pole of a ruling class, for man to develop all the productive powers that slumbered in the lap of social labour. And when this is given rise to a contradiction which can only be solved by communism, the productive powers based on division and organisation of labour have developed to a stage where individual differentiation can take place freely within the integrity of one society, where freedom and consciousness are sufficient for all to share and yet be rich in liberty; a society where freedom and consciousness, because it is general, is higher than in a class society, where it is perpetually maimed and torn. Individuality reaches a new and higher realisation.

This means a great expansion in the poet's public. As freedom and consciousness become the right of all and not the prerogative of a class, the poet's public must become gradually coincident with society, and poetry once more fulfil a function similar to that of poetry in the primitive tribe, but with this difference – that the tremendous growth of the productive forces has differentiated poetry from the other

arts, the arts from the sciences, and changed poetry itself from the poetry of a tribe to the poetry of individual men. By becoming collective, therefore, poetry in the era of communism will not become less individual but more so. This individuation will be artistic – carried out by the change of the social ego, not personal and dream-like – carried out by the reduction of the social ego to unconsciousness.

The increase of the poet's public can already be seen in the Soviet Union where poets have publics of two or three million, books of poetry have sales of a size unknown previously in the history of the world.

The same change is reflected in the poet's vocabulary. The vocabulary of the bourgeois poet became esoteric and limited. It was not limited in the sense of limitation of number of words but limitation of useable public values of words. In fact the number and type of words useable by the bourgeois poet increased, paralleling the continual revolution in technique which, because it is the condition of capitalist existence, continues right down to the end of capitalism. But this increase and enrichment in technique is paralleled by a decrease and impoverishment of the social associations in words which can be used by the poet.

One after another these associations became vulgar, common, conventional, insincere, trite, jaded or commercialised because the life from which they sucked their souls was becoming these things. Hence modern poetry grows barer and barer of life, of real social content, and the only word-values useable by poetry become increasingly personal until poetry is altogether esoteric and private. It was for this reason that poetry became no longer acceptable to most people, submerged in the conditions of bourgeois civilisation. It was too rebellious, too openly critical of concrete living. It was rebellious,

not revolutionary, but neither was it opiate. It did not take their vulgarised values and outraged instincts and soothe both in an ideal wish-fulfilment world like that of religion, jazz or the detective novel. It quietly excluded all those vulgarised values, but in doing so, it step by step excluded more and more of concrete living, and it was this process that called into being the world of art for sake, of otherness and illusion, the towering heaven of dream which ultimately became completely private and turned into an abyss of nightmare and submarine twilight.

Thus poetry lost that simplicity of outline, that grandeur and searching nobility which comes to it from being sited in the heart of concrete living and able to voice the most general and important experiences in the most universally meaningful way.

Though rebellious, poetry was not revolutionary, for revolution remains within the sphere of material reality and operates with the common values and outraged instincts of men. It does not organise them to soothe them in a phantastic heaven, but bends their hate and aspirations, however limited, to the task of wiping out the real cause of their misery here in the world of concrete life. The poet cannot be the leader of revolution though at a certain stage he can be its singer and inspirer, because his world has become by the pressure of alien values too small a part of the real world and it is part of the task of the evolution to widen it.

The change of values, the de-vulgarisation of life, the growth of collective freedom and the release of individual consciousness which takes place in communism, means the return of these social values, regenerated and ennobled, to the palette of the artist. His vocabulary may at first be even simplified as to number of words, precisely because the world of reality released by those words for poetry is complicated and

enriched. Now he can speak in the old noble way. The world of values behind language will expand for poetry in the same way as it did during the Elizabethan era – then by the revelation of a whole world of values, before personal to the Poet but for the lost time made social; now by the injection into poetry of a whole world of purified social values for the first time made personal to the poet. This change in the technique of poetry is a reflection of the way art returns into the life from which it has flown away, bringing back with it all the development produced by the cleavage.

The individuality developed by bourgeois economy, which became anarchic and stifled itself, is still further elaborated by the categories of communism, and at the same time integrated, given a collective wholeness and sanity. This is likely to be expressed in two ways. On the one hand the development of broadcasting will give to poetry a new collective appearance, on the other hand the individuality of the actor will no longer conflict with the poetic instant, and poetry can return to drama making it once more collective and real. It seems also (though this is bare conjecture) that the film, because it realises the highest possibilities of the bourgeois stage in a more collective, more richly powerful and more flexible form, will only come into its own in communism.

As conductor is to orchestra, so producer is to film, the incarnation of the ego in which the story takes place, but his power is far greater than that of the conductor. It must not be supposed that communism involves the stifling of actor, “star” or author. On the contrary, it is just then that their individuality will be given a more elaborate and deeper meaning because in will be a collective meaning. It is no accident that the final period of bourgeois culture, which raised individuality to its height, produced no “heroes,” no great authors, artists, actors

or poets. The great man is not just an individuality but an individuality given a collective embodiment and significance. The shadow is so enormous because it is cast over the whole of society. Bourgeois culture mocked the proletariat because it had in its first struggles produced Marx, Lenin and Stalin, while according to bourgeois culture communism “does not believe in great men” or “in the individual” and so had here contradicted its own teaching. In this mockery bourgeois culture only exposes the fallacies in its own conception of the relation of the individual to society.

It will be seen that the final movement of society has this parallel to primitive communism, that once again man turns outward from the ego to reality, and looks the world steadily in the face. But now the world is not the world of a few beasts and crops and a wandering sun, but a world enriched by the taking in of Nature into society during the period of class formation. It is a reality elaborated by centuries of interpenetration of Nature and man, evident in the division of labour in society, and due to the attempts of man to change Nature, at first solely by drawing her into himself without regard to the whole world of social relations this movement necessarily produces.

When this period is ended men can look steadily at this whole world of social relations with all its richness and complex values. Before it was only known to them by distortions in their cognised world, as secret presences or forces or gods, as a mere abstraction – man, the “human essence,” civil society. This concrete world of life which gathers up within itself as a rounded, developing whole the divorced and simpler abstract worlds of man and Nature, is the peculiar concern of the communist poet. He is interested in his own individuality, not in and for itself – a conception which conceals the contradiction that wrecked bourgeois society – but in its developing

relation with other individualities in a communicating world that is not just a fluid amorphous sea, but has its own rigidity and reality. The communist poet is concerned to a degree never known before with the realisation of all the values contained in the relations of human beings in real life.

Every phase of art, every stage of culture, has its moving principle which is the source of its tragedy, its Beauty, its satisfaction and its creative power. To primitive culture, the tragedy of the strong and savage beast; to pastoral society, the tragedy of gods and myth; to all class society, the tragedy of the will of the hero. To early bourgeois society, the tragedy of the will of the prince; to late bourgeois society, the tragedy of the will of Joyce's "Ulysses" and Proust's "I" living in a world wholly of personal phantasy. Tragedy is not in itself tragic; it is beautiful, tender and satisfying – in the Aristotelian sense cathartic. But there is also the spectacle of culture tragically perishing because its matrix, society, has become dispersed and sterile. This is the pathos of art, which cannot be tragic because it cannot resolve its problems in a tragic way, but is torn by insoluble conflicts and perplexed by all kinds of unreal phantasies. This is the tragedy of art to-day in all its dissolution and futility. It is the tragedy of will that does not understand itself; of the unconscious individual who is slave to he knows not what. Art is the privilege of the free.

All art is conditioned by the conception of freedom which rules in the society that produces it; art is a mode of freedom, and a class society conceives

freedom to be absolutely whatever relative freedom that class has attained to. In bourgeois art man is conscious of the necessity of outer reality but not of his own, because he is unconscious of the society that makes him what he is. He is only a half-man. Communist poetry will be complete, because it will be man conscious of his own necessity as well as that of outer reality.

That everything which comes into being must pass away; that all is fleeting, is moving; that to exist is to be like the fountain and have a shape because one is never still – is the theme of all art because it is the texture of reality. Man is drawn to life because it moves from him; he has desires as ancient and punctual as the stars; love has a poignant sweetness and the young life pushes aside the old; these are qualities of being as enduring as man. Man too must pass away.

Therefore the stuff of art endures as long as man. The fountain dwindles away only when men are rent and wasted by a sterile conflict, and the pulsing movement of society is halted. All this movement is creative because it is not a simple oscillation but a development unfolded by its very restlessness. The eternal simplicities generate the enrichment of art from their own bosoms not only because they are eternal but also because change is the condition of their existence. Thus art is one of the conditions of man's realisation of himself, and in its turn is one of the realities of man.

Courtesy : Illusion and Reality

Your support and contribution will help ISD spread its message of Peace.
For queries regarding donation and support write to us at notowar.isd@gmail.com

Your stories are valuable to us. Share them so that others can also read.
Mail us at notowar.isd@gmail.com

INSTITUTE *for* SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

New Delhi, India

E-mail : prakashan.isd@gmail.com / Website : www.isd.net.in