

AHMAD HASAN DANI

INDIVIDUALITY OF BENGAL ART

Bengal is a definite geographic region in the South Asian subcontinent, consisting of Gangeto-Brahmaputra delta. Climatically it is a warm monsoonic zone where river floods play havoc in the rainy season and during the late spring the cyclonic winds forewarn the people of the coming dangers from heavy monsoons. And yet the Bengalis have braved the harsh conditions of the four seasons and they have adopted their life pattern to the changing situations of their country's climate. Their rural settlements along the river beds and over the river islands derive their architectural forms from the technique of mud and brick and they see beauty in the curved hut roofs and in the bent eaves of the pavilions - a style of art that is the gift of bamboo architecture so common and natural to the land. It is the constant flow of river current that has bestowed soft and durable tone to the music of Bengal. And probably the same sweet melody underlies the softness in the Bengali language, as we find in French, Persian and Chinese. No wonder that the resources of the river supply the main fish food to the Bengalis, and the river beds, silted and fertilized by river floods, produce all kinds of rice, the main diet of the people. Along with these products we see coconut plantations and various kinds of juicy fruits that add variety to the food habits. Boats and boatmen, fishermen in rivers and ponds are common scenes in the countryside. As rivers are a constant companion so ponds are a centre of rural life and the rains refresh life year after

year. It is the rain drops that awaken the sprit and import a new sense of liveliness, from which takes birth the joy of dance and music. It is a familiar scene to see the children dancing in playful mood with downpour of rains. Flatness of country, bounded by the Rajmahal hills on the north-west and the Lalmai-Chittagong ranges on the south-east, creates a scene of low-lying land, gradually sloping from the high plateau of the north towards the Bay of Bengal. It is the black chlorite hillock of Rajmahal that supplies the raw material for stone sculptures of the Pala period, the muddy clay of the flats that is used for brick architecture and the fossil wood and stone from Lalmai-Chittagong ranges that go to make up the earliest tools of man. They stand as a great platform for the human settlement in this part. It is, however, the series of terraces with offset projections, that rise higher and higher above the floods, which provide solid foundations for temples and *stupas*. It is again the rich forest greenery, bent branches of trees and creepers that inspire the terracotta decorations in the *stupas*, temples and mosques, and all of them create a style of art that is unique to Bengal.

Ethnographically the population of Bengal has a peculiarity of its own and although the Aryan migration in the first millennium B.C. imposed their own socio-religious culture on the large majority of the non-Aryan population, yet it is mainly the upper Brahman class, about seven percent of the people, that tried to follow the pure caste regulations of the society. Even then looseness in their practices demanded the reintroduction of Kulinism during the Sena period. The force of the non-Aryan population derived from the ethnic elements of South East Asia, was so strong that the large majority of the people preferred to remain outside the pale of Hindu caste-ridden society. It is they who were dubbed as out-caste, or low caste, people, and it is they who accepted Buddhism in the early centuries of the Christian era. And finally it is they who underwent cultural change and accepted conversion from Buddhism to Islam at the hands of the Muslim saints who had replaced Buddhist monks and built their own *dargahs* on the top of Buddhist monasteries. It is strange to note that the advance of the Aryan culture purified only

one branch of the Ganges river that is known as Bhagirathi. It is along this branch that the Hindu holy places are seen while Padma and Meghna, which are the main arteries of the river system, hold fast to the traditions and cultural practices of *Vaigala*, a term abhorred by the cultured class of the Aryan society. It is from this latter source that during the Pala period a new sect of Buddhism, called *Vajrayāna* and *Tantrayāna*, took its birth and added new gods and goddesses to the Buddhist pantheon. This religious form spread throughout eastern India, and teachers, like Atiśa Dipaṅkara, went out to Nepal and Tibet and popularised there this form of Buddhism. As Gandhara was the home of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which spread to Central Asia, China, Korea and Japan, Bengal was the home of Vajrayāna-Tantrayāna type that added new feature to Buddhism in Tibet, China and the countries of the East. Similarly during the Muslim rule sufistic form of Islam, as preached by Muslim saints, caught the imagination of Bengali people and they created their own rituals and practices that distinguish their culture from the common trends seen in other Muslim countries. It is worthwhile to note how the worship of Buddha's footprint was transformed into veneration of the holy prophet's foot-print (*Qadam Mubarak*) and how the famous five Bodhisattvas inspired to create the new concept of *Pancha-Pir*.

Language and script play a definitive role in the formation of human culture. Unfortunately it is difficult to trace the original language or languages spoken by the non-Aryan people who lived here before the coming of the Aryans. The whole linguistic treatment traces how the Aryan speech gradually spread in the country and how this evolution is evidenced in the Sanskrit and Prakrit records of the period belonging to pre-Christian and Christian era. It is only the Buddhists who, in their *Sahaja* and *Charyapada* compositions, are found to use forms that have become the base of the vernacular known today as Bengali. But as the phonetic sounds of this new language so materially differ from the same languages - Pali, Prakrit and Apabhraṃśa - spoken in north India, it suggests that the original sound values popular in Bengal were entirely different. It is these sound values that are current even

today and distinguish the pronunciation of the same words in Hindi, Urdu and Bengali. The local Bengali vernacular has preserved the characteristics of this old language system and their phonetic recording alone can tell us the true origin and development of the Bengali vocals in the language as popular among the people. What we have at present is the developed vernacular literature, known mainly after 1000 A.D., and their early beginnings in the Buddhist works. As has been said by Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the literary development is due to the patronage of the Pala rulers of Bengal but its final form and shape are known to us from the literature of the Muslim period. We have yet to build up the whole collection of sound literature from the popular speeches of the people that is likely to throw light on the formation of Bengali literary sounds known to us from their use in literature.

Similarly in the development of the Bengali script we have to understand the role of different artistic hands that popularised particular shapes from the background of the original Brahmi script. As the sounds have preserved the real spoken form, so the artistic trends have influenced the build-up of letter forms. In these letters rounded forms get precedence over the angular and vertical form of the letters. The latter are the characteristics of the proto-Nagari and Nagari but the rounded forms are the main feature in the eastern alphabets. In any case both language and script have left a tradition that has led to the survival of the original stock of the people although they are today completely submerged in the present population of Bengal.

From the bamboo huts to brick and stone construction is a long forward step to create an architecture that suits the land. The brick style is the commonest form in Bengal because brick, prepared out of alluvial clay and mud is readily available. However as the huts are never simple, free from ornamentation, so are the brick buildings which use the bricks for creating different designs and for varying the flat face of the monuments. The cut bricks, with their rounded forms, add beauty to the plain surface and the different depths and reliefs remove the monotonous nature of the walls. The temple is never plain square or rectangle because the angles are always cut

and projections added so as to produce a series of offsets in order to create effective impressions on the eye. Similarly the corner tops show a variety of spires which balance the main high spire (*śikhara*) in the middle.

In the case of Buddhist *stupas* a series of terraces rise tier after tier not only to provide circumambulation passage but also to restrengthen the foundation, on the top of which stands *stupa* like shrine, as seen at Paharpur - a model so faithfully copied and further embellished at Pagan in Burma and at the Borobodur temple in Java. It is on to their wall surface that numerous terracotta plaques are fixed to tell various stories and scenes in the life of the Buddha. These representative pictures are not just for the attraction of the people but they also narrate lessons of Buddhism and present the religion of the Buddha in visual form. While the temples attract for their variety in the cut angles and multiplicity in their spires, the *stupas* create an atmosphere of formal preaching by the direct pictorial representation. The forms of the temple and of the *stupa* are certainly derived from outside, but they are here adapted to the new taste of the people. This type of architectural creation is peculiar to Bengal. The same is true when we come to Muslim architecture. The main plan of the mosque, the composing elements and the orientation are all derived from outside but the way in which this type is adapted to the local conditions of Bengal is its own. Here the importance is given to the main prayer hall but the side *iwans* hardly find a place, except in the Case of the Adina Mosque. Such a closed type of mosque is most suited to the rainy climate of Bengal. On the other hand an open terrace in front of the mosque provides an added space for prayer in the cool atmosphere of the evening.

In such a mosque there is hardly any need for an ablution pond but in the typical tradition of Bengal there is invariably a big tank that provides all purposive facility to the people who come for the prayer. At the same time in a brick style the restrengthening of the corners is absolutely essential. And that is what we find in these mosques where corner towers are an essential element. On the other hand it is again usual to find curvature in the cornice and roof of the mosques. And again the pre-Mughal mosques show not only

multiplicity of domes, supported by pillars, as in the case of Khan Jahan's Mosque at Bagerhat but also a series of *chauchala* type of domical roofs in order to give a particular stamp of Bengal. In the Mughal period the type changes and the horizontal parapets become common but the corner towers still continue. On the other hand the bent eaves over a pavilion, as we find in the Bengali huts, inspired a new taste to the Mughal emperors and we find this type copied in Agra, Delhi and Lahore forts. The havelis named after the daughters of Shah Jahan in Agra fort, the royal pavilion at the Dewan-E-Am in Delhi fort, and the most precious gem at the Shish Mahal compound in Lahore fort, called *Nowlakha*, deserve appreciation for the height of influence that Bengali art created on the Mughals. It is from this type that the common word Bangla, or Banglow in the English language, has become popular throughout south Asia.

Coming back to the sculptural art of Bengal, we can hardly forget the individual style of art created during the Pala and Sena periods. This new style developed out of the older specimens of the Hindu gods, Surya and Vishnu, belonging to the Kushana period. All these figures are in low flat relief but their sharp and rigid angles and lines show their linkage to Mathura school of art and yet the material is different from Mathura red sandstone. They exhibit an aspect of frontality, and linear effect is produced on the mind. In opposition to this school when we come to Paharpur, we find a great change. Talking about the first group of sculptures Dr. Nihar Ranjan Ray observes: «A considerable number depicts scenes from the life of Krishna, not the Krishna of the Brahmanical hierarchy, but Krishna of every Bengali house-hold - the eternal lover, the eternal pet child of the mother, - and some of his exploits as the divine hero». The sculptures as a whole are free from the iconographic details of the Hindu *śāstras* but they derive their inspiration directly from the life around through keen observation. It is to these stone sculptures that the terracotta art of Paharpur is intimately related. The character of this art is again derived from the local environment. Apart from the well-known stories of *Rāmāyaṇa*, life of Krishna and those from *Panchatantra*, their chief value lies in the interest shown for the daily life of the people' men seated on their haunches,

acrobats balancing their body, women with children in arms or drawing water from a well, or carrying pitchers overhead and on sides, warriors both male and female, and archers mounted on fourwheeled chariots, cultivators carrying ploughs, musicians with instruments and so on. In fact every conceivable object of ordinary human life as seen in Bengal, finds its due place in the terracotta plaques of Paharpur. Although in the stone sculptures many similarities may be found with the Gupta Classical art, yet the manner of depiction and the themes, together with the style, have earned for them a special name of "East Indian Gupta tradition" - a tradition that really led later to the Bengal School of art.

The rise of this school of art, in the opinion of Dr. Nihar Ranjan Ray is due to the common genesis of provincialisation in the post-Gupta period but that is no justification for the individuality of art in Bengal. Although the Pala and Sena rulers of Bengal gave a political asylum to this art and they also helped reach the art to its zenith, yet the art and culture of Bengal are more of popular nature than king-inspired. It has often been maintained that «the Pala Kings were professedly Buddhists, and though the Buddhist establishments seem to have received their direct patronage, the majority of the people remained within the fold of Brahmanism». Such an assertion needs revision in view of the fact that the large majority of the population never accepted the rigid caste regulations of the *Hindu Dharma*. Apart for the respect of higher priestly religion, it is the popular beliefs, practices and rituals that led to the change in sculptural iconography. The figure of Heruka with garland of human skulls in Buddhist iconography could hardly be imagined outside Bengal.

Similarly various forms of Tara derive their origin from the local ritual practices. It is again from the same source that we get the importance of the Hindu goddess Kali that has caught the imagination of the Hindu Bengalis. In the sculptural material we have not only local black chlorite stone but also metal and wood. Usually the sculptures all have stela base with reliefs on them though some figures are modelled in the round. The human figures stand out flat in the background of the stela and it is only later that the two-dimensional effect develops into three dimension. However,

the common feature in all of them is the realistic vision of physical charm and beauty, almost to the point of sensuousness that is the main attraction in Bengal School of art.

In the case of female figures heavy round breasts and bulging hips over-emphasize the femininity and in the case of the male figures the broad shoulders gradually attenuate to a narrow loin-waist. Such a sensuous appeal is special to Bengal and may have its origin in the sexual *yoga* or from Tantric inspirations. In the Pala period we note a definite evolution of the art style which shows a soft modelling of the face and the upper part of the body but as far as the legs are concerned, they drop down pillar like. Even then they have their knees carefully modelled and they give an impression of softness and elasticity. The weight is generally placed on one side only, or one of slightest *tribhanga*. Later in the tenth century A.D. the soft flashiness of the body evolves in to a power fully massive form. But all the same throughout the Pala and Sena periods we note a gradual transformation from the strength and vigour of bodily form into one of gracefulness and elegant mannerism. In the last stage the legs further stiffen to a great extent and elasticity but the face still has a blissful happy expression, the upper part and the lower making a clear contrast. One thing is quite clear that facial features of the sculptures bear stamps of various ethnic elements that compose the people of contemporary Bengal.

This figural representation came to an end with the coming of the Muslims but the artistic tendencies never died out. The terracotta art continued more vigorously though it gave up representing figures. At the tympanum of the arches, the terracotta decorations are profusely found and here the designs go for their forms into the forest greenery of Bengal. The creepers, the trees, the leaves, the floras all found their due place along with geometric motifs borrowed from outside. It is along the frame of the entrance doorways that wavy scrolls move in different bands and they also give varieties to the friezes that we find on the facade of the mosques. In addition the art of *stelae* representation continues during the Muslim period. Here in place of the iconographic figure in the middle we have plants and flowers growing out of the flower

pot a design that we find right from 13th century A.D. onward. Such ornamental *stelae* decorate the outer face of the walls. Greater attention is paid to the ornamentation of the *mihrabs*, the interior of which is apportioned in to tiers of designs, sometimes alternating with calligraphic writing. As the mosque style makes for local school of art, so is the peculiarity of decorating the wall surface, the pillars, the *mihrabs* as well as the ceiling and comers where stalactites and pendentives present a marvel of decorative patterns. As far as the calligraphy is concerned, over and above the normal Kufic and Naskh types, a new variety of Tughra was developed in Bengal, which shows arrow and bow forms, derived probably from the long verticals of *thulth* writing. This *tughra* style is the unique contribution of Bengal to Islamic calligraphy. At the same time it bestows an individual character to the Arabic writing in this country.

There is another medium of art that shows an early development in Bengal during the Pala period. This refers to the miniature painting in the palm-leaf manuscripts of the Buddhists. The earlier examples of wall painting are very well known from Ajanta and Elora in India, but miniature painting's an entirely new technique that is first seen in Bengal and Nepal and later in Gujrat. Attempts have been made to trace the origin of this miniature paintings from the earlier wall paintings. It has been generally assumed that the miniature style continues the style of wall paintings in a smaller scale. This idea is generally based on the survival of the Buddhist gods, Goddesses and also similar themes in these miniatures. But the miniature paintings in Bengal are different from the western style known in Gujrat. These miniature paintings follow a tradition common to a practice known on paper and manuscripts of much later period. During the Muslim period the art of book keeping was very well known and there in works like *Shahnamah* several examples of miniature paintings are preserved. But here during the Pala period illuminated manuscripts of the 11th and 12th centuries have been discovered for the first time in Bengal. From the point of iconography the paintings belong to the Vajrayāna-Tantrayāna pantheon and represent gods and goddesses of the cults, such as Tara, Lokanatha, Chunda, Mahakala, Avalokitesvara, Amitabha, Maitreya, Vajrapani etc. A few of them depict stories from the

Jātakas or from the life of the Buddha. Different colors have been used in these paintings and their arrangement is determined by iconographical requirements. As these paintings reveal an already developed form and technique, they appear to have been introduced by Buddhist monks who were moving from place to place. The miniature techniques may have been borrowed from outside but the individuality of this art in Bengal is stamped by the Buddhist themes which had a longer duration in this part than in the other regions of India. As the localities of Samatata and Pundravardhana are mentioned in the texts, it is clear that miniature painting tradition was very well established in Bengal. The credit for starting this art tradition goes to the Buddhist monks whose missionary activities must have been responsible for the popularity of this art. Very often in the manuscripts of the later period ordinary wood cover is replaced by painted lacquer covers, a technique of art which may have been derived from China but the whole theme painted on them is borrowed from local traditions. It is primarily the theme which individualizes the lacquer work to Bengal.

In the field of folk art there is a vast scope to study the different media used in Bengal for expressing the popular life of people, their taste for enjoyment and their love of decoration in dress and ornaments. Rich variety of designs can be seen in fine cotton and silken saris, which take their origin from the concepts in the mind of the people. As far as the ornaments are concerned, they are abundantly seen in gold, silver, conch-shell and ivory. In the precious metals the local designs have become traditional in all kinds of ornaments from head to foot. Filigree work is a special kind of art that has been worked in this land. Conch-shell has been used in different countries of the world for bangles, buttons and for other decorations but the credit goes only to Bengal to create a professional caste, known as *shankhari*, who continued the tradition of conch-shell working in the city of Dhaka. As far as ivory is concerned, it has been used for combs, pins, studs and other decorative purposes, particularly by women. But the three other media, clay, bamboo and reed are no less important. Clay is the cheapest media for making dolls and toys for children. Here both methods, modelling and moulding have been followed for centuries.

Sometimes appliqué technique is also seen, but very often these dolls are painted, particularly to show the eyes, lips and other features on the face and the body. What is very essential is to note the physical type expressed in them which, after borrowing some types from outside, center round the features known in Bengal. Bamboo, cane and reed are the God-given material to the Bengalis who have used them from household architecture to all kinds of beautiful furniture, tools and plants, baskets and mats, bowls and plates, storage jars and luxury items for the poor as well as for the nobility. One can hardly imagine a Bengali home without some products in these materials. Above all it is the floor and wall painting of the village houses that keep the ladies busy at home. These paintings follow a tradition which does not speak of great artists but point to a popularity of folk art that has been carried on from generation to generation. Sometimes the rice husks and rice grains are collected together to add to the variety of designs seen in village homes. Of a little finer type is the art of carpentry, in which the carpenters exhibit their skill in carving and creating new forms of beauty with the help of their tools.

In conclusion it may be said that in the different fields of art, as expressed in different media, Bengal developed its own particular style which bears the stamp of their people. Whether it is the art of the Hindus, or of the Buddhists, or of the Muslims, the character of Bengali art can be clearly recognized. This individuality is seen not only in the art of the nobility and men of high priestly class but much more so in the art practices of the common people, whether the expression is in sculpture, or it is in decorative motifs, all of them bear a stamp that can be called Bengali. The source of this individualism is the ethnic people who compose the population of Bengal, and the inspiration is taken from the monsoon green land which presents a true picture of the country. The rivers and boatmen move and flow, the floods come and go but the spirit of the Bengali man keeps steps in tune with their own world. As they enjoy the life in music and mirth, they dance to the tune of nature, and present to the works their own worlds in order to show that this is Bengal as built by the people of Bengal.