

On Being a Bengali

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Preface

The Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK) is privileged to publish this lecture by Professor Amartya Sen, which he delivered on 27 August in Kolkata in celebration of our institute's foundation day. We are ever so grateful to Professor Sen for giving us the opportunity to host his lecture, which was attended and enjoyed by a large audience. I thank Professor Sen once again for allowing us to publish the lecture.

IDSK has had a long association with Professor Sen. He visited the institute a number of times on various occasions since its inception in 2002. He inaugurated the Rabindranath Tagore Centre for Human Development Studies at IDSK, which is a joint initiative of IDSK and the University of Calcutta, and sponsored by the University Grants Commission. In the seventeen years of its existence IDSK has been widely known for its research on development issues, especially on human development, the conceptual foundation of which has been

provided by none other than Professor Sen. Several areas of research of the faculty of IDSK have been directly inspired by Professor Sen's pioneering work.

I thank Professor Amiya Kumar Bagchi, the founder and former Director of IDSK, for chairing the Foundation Day Lecture. I thank Sri Kumar Rana of Pratichi Institute and Dr Abhijit Chowdhury of IPGMR for extending their helping hands. Shri Partha Ranjan Das volunteered to contribute the illustrations which have added aesthetic value to the monograph, for which I am grateful to him. I thank our MPhil student Shri Syamantak Chattopadhyay who has designed the wonderful cover. I thank my colleagues and students at IDSK for their help and cooperation. Thanks are also due to the members of the audience who helped us make the evening a memorable one.

Achin Chakraborty
Director, IDSK

For many people from Bengal, the identity of being a Bengali is evidently important. But what is so special about being a Bengali? And if there is some specialness there, in what way – and for what reason – may it command our attention, perhaps even our loyalty? These are not easy questions to answer, but before I try to have a go in addressing these difficult issues, I should say a few words on the idea of identity itself.

That a sense of community or of fellow feeling can be important for us all is difficult to dispute, and this perception of closeness may relate to the understanding of our own social identity. Looking outward, we may be able to classify other people, to a considerable extent, by their background and their community affiliations. The reading of people's identity has relevance to our understanding of how we might expect them to behave. The importance of social identity would be hard to ignore in the way human beings can be categorized and described.

And yet we have reason to entertain considerable scepticism about the significance of any identity which we take to be ours – or (looking outward) decide to attribute to others. Identity can be such a captivating idea that we can end up giving it much more territory than makes sense – or what can be justified through critical scrutiny.

One problem is the co-existence of multiple identities which we all have. Each of us belongs to many different groups, and can be seen as having many identities. There are many different procedures of partitioning people. A person can simultaneously have the identity of being, say, a Tamil, a Paryiar, a woman, a feminist, a vegetarian, a novelist, a physicist, a jazz-fan, and a resident of Calcutta. Depending on the context, any of these various identities may have some special descriptive or prescriptive relevance. If, for example, the person gets involved in the promotion of classical jazz in the world, her identity as a jazz-lover may be more relevant than her identity as a resident of Calcutta, which, on the other hand, may be more crucial when she makes a criticism of the way

public transport in Calcutta is organized. There is scope for choice in determining which of the various identities of a person can be seen to be relatively more important in a particular context.

Identity can also be more entangled with complicated histories. In Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Gora*, the brilliant but problematic hero, also called Gora, who champions popular customs and conventions, and is a staunch traditionalist conservative is placed in some confusion when his supposed mother tells him that he was adopted as an infant by this Indian family after his Irish parents had been killed by the mutineers in 1857. Gora knew none of that as he grew up and everyone saw him as the biological child of his supposed parents, despite his fair looks ("gora" can mean fair or white), acknowledging some chance variation there. He chose to identify particularly with Hindu conservatives and became a powerful exponent of the traditionalist points of view.

We do discover many things about ourselves, even when they may not be as foundational as the one that Gora had to face. He had to ask about what importance to give to the

tradionalist identity with which he had chosen to grow up, compared with other competing identities – of nationality, class, or of course his Irish parentage. Gora had to decide whether he should continue his championing of Hindu conservatism despite being of foreign origin (a fact that will tend to exclude him totally from many traditional Hindu temples) or see himself in some other way. The choice that emerges in his case – he decides to see himself as just an Indian without a caste or a sect – is a result of his reflected decision. Choices have to be made even when discoveries occur.

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So any perceived identity, including that of being a Bengali, need not close people's options and lock them up with some unique bundle of specific characteristics. There are many different ways in which people can see themselves, but depending on the nature of our enquiry, the ascertaining of a person's cultural identity can help to throw light on the kind of questions that may get immediate attention in the evaluation.

The different cultural traditions in the world have evolved in many distinct ways, and the impact of these histories, those features of the past, can make a difference – at least a suggestive difference – in many situations.

The fact that there is no closing of enquiry with a firm cultural diagnosis, no locking up of feasibilities with one elementary identification, does not remove the relevance of what the chosen cultural identity may suggest to us. The fact that being a Bengali can be very important is relevant but not necessarily compelling, and this recognition may come at the beginning – rather than at the end – of an enquiry about oneself, or about someone else.

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Can we – perhaps roughly – consider some elements of the pool of particularities that being a Bengali may plausibly include? None of these features is powerful enough to drown the relevance of all other possible attributions. But even though the historically linked characteristics may not be, in any way, decisively consequential,

each of them may be useful to consider and think about when trying to focus on the general identification of being a Bengali.

So what makes Bengali history unusual in a big or a small way? First, when Buddhism disappeared from India after nearly a thousand years of being dominant in the country, it continued to remain powerful and influential in Bengal for some more centuries. The Buddhist Pala kings ruled over Bengal for four centuries and were ultimately subdued in the twelfth century. Since Muslim rulers took control of Bengal in the thirteenth century, there was only a rather brief interlude of Hindu rule in Bengal in between Buddhist governance and Muslim dominance. Many features of Bengali culture, including the all-important Bengali language, emerged in the ending days of Buddhist Bengal and were nurtured in the transition years. The importance of Buddhist influence on Bengali culture is very unlike – indeed generally much stronger – than in the rest of India. This can be observed in Bengal’s history of beliefs, language, literature, arts and architecture.

Second, the shipping routes to and from

Bengal were well established for a very long time. Even the early Chinese visitor, Faxian (Fahsien), who had come to India in 401 A.D. by the northern land route from China (he took two years to reach India, coming via Khotan and Afghanistan), returned through Bengal after his ten years in India, sailing from Tamralipta (or Tamruk, which is quite close to modern Calcutta), and he went first from Bengal to Sri Lanka, then to Java, and then finally got home to China (the trading connections with all these regions were well established in those ancient days).

The mouth of the Ganges near today's Calcutta was the point of export of many products of Bengal, particularly cotton textiles, which were well-known in the world, including Europe, but also of commodities obtained further north (like saltpetre from Patna), which were sent down the Ganges to be shipped out from Bengal. The lucrative trade and commerce of the region was, of course, the reason why the European trading firms originally came there. This included the East India Company, which would later go on to establish what would

become Britain's Indian empire. The English were not alone in seeking trade with Bengal. There were also the French, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Danish and other European trading companies in the same region, which were all operating in Bengal at that time.

Trade with east Bengal was more difficult in the early years, because of navigational difficulties. There is some evidence that the trading prospects radically widened as the original flow of the Ganges, through Hooghly (going past what is now Calcutta), got harder because of silting, and the flow of water going eastwards, into what is now Bangladesh, increased over time. Richard Eaton has described well this shift in the flow of water. As he notes, due to continual sedimentation, however, the Ganges in very early times began to spill out of its former river-bed and find new channels to the east – the Bhairab, the Matha-bhanga, the Garai-Madhumati – until finally, in the late sixteenth century, it linked up with Padma. This enabled its main course to flow directly into the heart of East Bengal. The change had the immediate effect of linking up the economy of east Bengal

to subcontinental as well as global markets, and led to a rapid expansion of economic activities in the east, reflected also in the fast rising revenue collection from the eastern side of Bengal, even for the Mughal treasury.

The energy and the enterprise of newly arriving Muslims coming into the region, working for economic expansion, were hugely celebrated by the leading Hindu poet, Mukundaram, in his Chandimangal, at the end of the sixteenth century. Mukundaram noted that these economic activities, apart from yielding the usual benefits, had even driven out the dreaded tigers from the region. In Eaton's translation:

From the West came Zafar Mian,
Together with twenty thousand men.
Sulaiman beads in their hands,
They chanted the names of their
Pirs and their Prophet.
Having cleared the forest,
They established markets.
Hundreds and hundreds of foreigners
Ate and entered the forest,

Hearing the sound of the axe,
The roaring tiger ran away in fear.

Industrial enterprises, including textiles involving high levels of specialized skills, such as the famous muslin of Dhaka, grew rapidly. Adam Smith described Bengal as one of the most prosperous regions of the world, and in this prosperity, the Hindus and the Muslims had a cooperative role.

Third, there is something very special about the Bengali calendar, called the “San.” It is the only extant calendar in which the influence of Emperor Akbar’s abortive attempt at establishing an all-Indian multi-religious calendar, the *Tarikh-Ilahi*, survives. As the end of the first millennium in the lunar Muslim calendar, Hijri, approached in the late sixteenth century, Akbar wanted a multicultural calendar for India, that would be solar, like the Hindu calendars, combined with some features of the Muslim Hijri calendar, including its lunar history. The zero year was fixed at 1556 AD (the year of Akbar’s ascendance to the throne), which corresponded to 1478 in Hindu Saka calendar

and to 963 in the Muslim Hijri.

Despite Akbar's lofty hopes, the *Tarikh-Ilahi* never caught on in Delhi or Agra, despite its use in Akbar's own court. But it had influence in Akbar's recently acquired province in his empire, namely Bengal, through emending the traditional Bengali calendar. The new Bengali "San" got renumbered at the zero year of Akbar's *Tarikh-Ilahi*, putting the clock back from the year 1478 in the Saka calendar to the Hijri 963. However it remained solar as in the earlier Hindu Saka calendar, so in the years since that time, the slow-moving Bengali San (as slow as the Hindu Saka calendar and the Christian Gregorian calendar) has moved rather less forward than the Muslim lunar Hijri calendar (with its shorter year of 354 day 8 hours and 45 minutes in solar reckoning).

So what does this year – it is year 1426 as we talk here today in this IDSK meeting – tell us? The answer is that it commemorates, in effect, Prophet Mohammad's move from Mecca to Medina, the origin of the Hijri calendar, in a mixed lunar-solar system of counting – Muslim lunar until 963 and Hindu solar since then. A religious Hindu may or may not be aware of this

connection with the Prophet of Islam when he or she invokes this date in a Hindu ceremony (the Bengali San is very important for many Hindu functions), but this is inescapable given integrated nature of Bengali traditions, going back many centuries.

Fourth, the Bengali language has some special features unlike most Indian languages, and to the development of these features, Hindus and Muslims both seem to have contributed substantially. A striking specialness relates to the non-use of gender in Bengali – the absence of male-female distinctions, particularly in the form of the verbs. In the emerging days of the newly born Bengali language, it lost the traditional features of gender division – so important in Sanskrit. The male and the female verbs – and often the nouns as well – seem to have a gender-neutral form in the emerging Bengali language – rather similar, in this respect, to the linguistic features of the Turkish language.

The dropping of gender (departing rather sharply from Sanskrit) is seen in the evolution of the eastern branch of Prakrit – the Magadhi Prakrit – in taking the momentous step of

dispensing with genderized articulation, including doing away with the distinction between male and female forms of verbs. A similar transformation was happening in Oriya and Assamese as well, which also derived from Magadhi Prakrit. The genderlessness of early Bengali classics was widely noted in that rapidly growing literature, authored both by Hindu and Muslim writers. I should add here that though the Hindus and Muslims cooperated in this linguistic evolution, so did many of the Adivasi parts of the local population, which had shunned genderized language, for a long time preceding the emergence of early Bengali. So there are contributions here of Hindus, Muslims as well as Adivasis.

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So there is a long history of inter-communal cooperation in Bengal, which was more than just mutual tolerance. My grandfather Kshiti Mohan Sen, who wrote the very successful book on Hinduism for Penguin Books (which was translated in many languages – from

French to Farsi) repeatedly made the important cultural point that the real issue in the good relations between Hindus and Muslim is not mutual tolerance, but cooperative joint work. In his heavily researched book on “Hindu-Mushalmaner-Jukta-Sadhana,” he forcefully argued that the history of joint work was much more important than the record of mere tolerance. Its quite a long history of close collaboration that we find in dealing with Hindu-Muslim relations in Bengal.

It is also important to recollect how integrated the Muslim courts in Bengal were in including Hindus. It is not only that the translation of the Sanskrit epics – Ramayana and Mahabharata – into Bengali was commissioned by Muslim kings of Bengal. This seemed to have begun in the fourteenth century, and these early Bengali translations are still among the most read versions of these ancient epics. There are moving accounts of how one of these Muslim kings wanted to hear those old Sanskrit stories again and again every evening. The Muslim kings were not, of course, abandoning their own Islamic beliefs in any way whatever, but they

were also establishing non-religious affiliations in addition to their own religiosity, showing – seven hundred years ago – that a person’s religious identity need not overwhelm every other aspect of a person’s life and attachments. That largely secular understanding of Bengali jointness seems to have been well seized by the Muslim kings who ruled Bengal, with very few exceptions. And this extended even to the last independent ruler of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daula, who was defeated in the battle of Plassey in 1757 by Robert Clive’s British forces. When Clive was marching towards Plassey and still pretending to be seeking peace with Siraj (this deception was, of course, a part of Clive’s cunning – and not particularly candid - strategy), he wrote to Siraj proposing that their disputes could be placed for arbitration by people whom the young Nawab trusted, namely, as Clive put it, “Jagat Seth, Raja Mohan Lal, Mir Jafar, Rai Durlabh, Mir Madan and the rest of your great men.” This is a list of one Muslim and four Hindus in what Clive saw as the inner circle of the last independent Muslim king of Bengal.



There is clearly a long history of Hindu-Muslim cooperation in Bengal's past, and yet the sad fact is that this history did not succeed in preventing communal violence when hostile divisions between the two communities were powerfully promoted in the pre-independence political atmosphere in undivided India. Violence did come plentifully in the 1940s, just preceding the partition of India. There was resistance – even in the local elections of 1937 the secular parties won handsomely in Bengal – but the pushing of communal poison through the early years of the 1940s broke the resistance down. The first election that the Muslim League won was in 1946 – immediately preceding the partition. But, then, by 1952, East Pakistan – later to become Bangladesh – was already getting increasingly committed to focusing on language rather than religion. Bhasha Andolan shifted the attention back on the commonality of the Bengali identity, rather than the separatism of religious identification, but in the period in between hundreds of thousands lost their lives in senseless communal violence.

Rabindranath put the principal diagnosis in very clear terms in his Hibbert Lectures at Oxford in the early 1930s. When he stated, with some evident pride, that he came from “a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan and British,” this was both an explicit negation of any sectarian identification, and an implicit celebration of the dignity of being broad-based, rather than narrowly confined. That historic understanding was widely appreciated in Bengali literature and culture. Kazi Nazrul Islam, who was undoubtedly the most successful Bengali poet after Tagore, immortalized some verses denouncing communalism that nearly all Bengalis knew. Nazrul combined his universalism with left-wing political sympathies. A left-leaning literary magazine called *Langol* (“the plough”), which was established in 1925, carried Nazrul’s poems on a regular basis (Nazrul shared space in the first number with a biography of Karl Marx and a translation of Maxim Gorky’s rebellious novel, *Mother*). *Langol*’s chosen motto, which appeared regularly as a kind of a masthead, was from the fifteenth-century Bengali poet, Chandidas:

Please hear me, my brother human being,
Humanity is the highest truth we have,
There is no truth above that.

The underlying idea was very much Nazrul's own, but the fact that those poetic lines could be picked up from a 500-year old treasury of Bengali literature, also tells us something about the nature of Bengali culture.

Nazrul's influence on Bengali thought was profound. His reputation as the "bidrohikabi" ("rebellious poet") had secured for him a very special place, and in many political contexts, even great fans of Tagore would look for the strong Assam tea of Nazrul, rather than the delicate flavour of Tagore's Darjeeling. There were very few Bengalis in my young days who could not recite spontaneously a Nazrul poem that goes by the name "kandari hushiyar," which can be freely translated as "careful, the pilot of our boat." A particular admonition to the pilot warned him: "Is this drowning person a Hindu or a Muslim, asks someone. Captain, tell him that the person is a human being – the child of my mother."



The fact remains, however, that being a Bengali does not give any kind of immunity from organized use of communal divisiveness – or any guarantee of security against communal bloodshed. This is important to remember right now when the recent advocacy of the politics of Hindutva is making strong incursions into the social life of Bengal. Serious dangers can escalate rapidly. In the 1940s, the cultivation of communalism may have begun with rather mild advocacy of divisiveness, but violence and bloodshed found their way of spreading rapidly over the years that immediately followed. In the new India of today the promotion of flammable doctrines of the RSS and the Hindutva movements, with minorities under attack for alleged misbehaviour seen in a very sectarian perspective (for example, through wanting to punish the eating or storing of beef), violence can erupt easily enough. With tension building in some neighbouring states as Assam, about the checking of citizenship, and the temptation to use the religious card to lure people into more and more divisiveness in Bengal itself, the dangers of slipping into raw violence in

communal lines (whether or not mediated by the politics of the cow) can be very real. Our political scrutiny has to be strong enough for us to see clearly the implications of sectarian incitement as opposed to reasoned consideration of our political concerns, including the dangers of picking up a cause with superficial attraction that can ultimately destabilize and devastate the long history of co-existence and collaboration of Bengalis.

A shared identity may ultimately be very important in creating and sustaining an integrated and cooperative society, but it is not an insurance and it cannot protect us from the cultivation of dissonance and hatred. The force of Bengal's integrated traditions may ultimately overcome the violence that is generated by flammable sectarian rhetoric, but a lot of bloodshed – and certainly a good deal of hatred – may affect our lives before that correction, which can be quite slow-moving, actually takes place. Along with the history of Hindu-Muslim cooperation and the joint cultivation of a good and integrated society, Bengal's history also includes the terrible violence of the 1940s – short-lived as it may have been, followed by bhasha-andolan and other uniting movements.



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The possibility of tragic violence does not, of course, remove the potential for a just and peaceful society that various ingredients of a Bengali identity brings to us through hundreds of years of history. It may not be an insurance against calamities, but it continues to carry the resources for building a good society, once the demons of hatred and violence are subdued. The glowing picture of a constructive Bengali identity has tempted Bengalis for a very long time.

As I approach the end of this talk, let me briefly recall an amusing – if somewhat frivolous – incident, with a possible moral. This is from about a hundred years ago. It concerns a real event reported by Kshiti Mohan Sen, my grandfather, whose work on joint and cooperative activities of Hindus and Muslims I have used before. The story draws on the common Bengali scepticism of priests and pretensions. The event occurred on an evening in the village of Sonarang in Bikrampur, when Kshiti Mohan's elder brother, Abanimohan, was chatting with a close friend of him – a Muslim priest – called Mahafizuddin, at the home of the latter, while sharing a smoke from a hubble-bubble together.

They saw a Hindu priest, called Chakravarty, going past, and Mahafizuddin warmly invited him to join them for a smoke. “We are having a great time – please join us!” said the Maulavi. Chakravarty declined, and pointed to the difference between him – a spotless Brahmin priest – and his inviter, the Muslim Maulavi. “Remember, I am a holy priest – and you are not: we are altogether different,” Chakravarty insisted. The Maulavi replied: “My friend, there is no real

difference between us. You live by exploiting the vulnerabilities of poor, ignorant Hindus, and I live by exploiting the vulnerabilities of poor, ignorant Muslims. We are engaged in exactly the same business.” Being a Bengali may not give us an insurance against a calamity (and that is a warning particularly worth remembering in the present difficult times), but it does encourage many attractive ideas, including the sharing of some harmless amusement.

I end, however, on a more serious note on the search for a Bengali identity. About a thousand years ago in the eleventh century, a Bengali poet, travelling eastward on the river Padda (or Padma), tried to explain in a poem what he thought about being a Bengali. The poet was a Buddhist Sahajiya thinker called Siddhacharja (or “Siddhacarya”) Bhusuku, speculating in one of his elegant Charjapad poems about his becoming a true Bengali, despite coming from elsewhere. He expresses his sense of triumph in having been robbed of his wealth (“good riddance”) during his river journey, and also in having married a woman from a very low caste, striking a blow for equity. As Siddhacharja Bhusuku puts it:

I have steered the thunder-boat along
the course of Padda.

The pirates have robbed me of my misery.
Bhusuku, today you have become a
true “Bangalee”

Having taken a Chandal woman as your wife.

A sense of detachment from property and caste seemed to be central to Bhusuku’s idea of being a Bengali. There is a big influence of Buddhist thought here, but that is generally true of early Bengal in many different ways.

I should explain that there is an ambiguity here, because in those days in the eleventh century, Bengali (or Vangali, as it was denoted then) often meant residents of a specific part of Bengal – in particular Dhaka and Faridpur – rather than people from anywhere in Bengal. But there is clearly an attempt here to perhaps think about how a true Bengali should consider living. There certainly is a vision here – something to cherish and seek. That thousand-year old search has interesting and important implications for our time as well. There may be no insurance here, but perhaps some inspiration in being a Bengali