



The Waterways of Precolonial Bengali Culture: An Ecocritical Study on Rivers, Folks and Literatures of Bengal

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Abstract

Ecocriticism, emerged in the late twentieth century as a new field of literary and cultural studies, primarily focuses on the innate relationship between humans and the natural surroundings. An ecocritical study of water bodies explores how the civilizational growth, both intellectual and physical, interconnected with its surrounding water sources and ecology. This paper seeks to analyze the symbolic significance of water bodies in the evolution of pre-colonial Bengali literature and culture, through an ecocritical perspective, to develop an inclusive and holistic understanding how the Bengal is not only a land of rivers but rivers and water bodies are in its soul, shaping its civilizational development throughout the ages.

This paper also can be considered as a foray into the new field of 'River Humanities,' analyzing how in the early and medieval times rivers were used as symbolisms related with divinity and divine activities, as well as portraying the contemporary socio-economic conditions of the land. By this analysis, the paper aims to connect the pre-colonial society with contemporary postcolonial Bengal to develop the essence of the shift in literature as well as the nature and to find the roots of Bengali literature and culture.

Keywords: Environment, Culture, Tradition, Literature, Ecocriticism, Folklores

Introduction:

Ecocriticism is a field of literary and cultural studies that explores the relationship between literature and the natural environment. It emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the increasing awareness of environmental issues and the need for a more sustainable relationship with the natural world. The term was first defined and propagated by William Howarth in his essay *Some Principles of Ecocriticism*. According to Howarth, "Eco and critic both are derived from Greek, *oikos* and *kritis* ..." (Howarth 69). He also adds "the *oikos* is nature," the widest earthly house, "and the *kritis* is an arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order ..." (69).

To analyze the literary development of any Indian text, especially in the pre-colonial period, via an ecocritical angle, water bodies play the pivotal role as it sustained each and every civilization on the Earth throughout the ages and became a tangible part of every policy, legends, writings, oral stories, folk customs, traditions, rituals.

The earliest known civilizations of the region of Bengal are way more ancient than even the Bengali script, and can be traced back to 2500 BCE. It was a saying in the early ages of Vedic period that if one should do atonement after returning from the lands of Anga, Banga, Kalinga, Saurashtra and Magadha, as these lands were considered as the land of sinners, or probably non-Aryan civilizations. But by the time of the Mauryan Empire, the Indo-Aryan culture and language blended into the culture and language of these regions. Archeological and linguistic evidence suggests that the earliest known language, spoken in Bengal, before the development of Bengali, might be developed from Magadhi Prakrit, which was influenced by Sanskrit and other regional languages. This linguistic evolution laid the foundation for the development of the Bengali language in later phases. But no language or literary tradition can be free from the ecological surroundings of the land. It is true for Bengali also. The word or name 'Banga' means low marsh. Since ancient times, Bengal is known for its rivers and marsh lands, and its literary tradition and linguistic development are coherently intertwined with them. To discuss this vastly in the literary tradition of precolonial period let's divide the literary timeline into two phases, i.e., (i) Earliest Bengali literature and culture and tradition and (ii) Medieval Bengali literature and culture.

(i) Early Bengali Literature and Culture:

The earliest known manuscript, written in the Eastern Indo-Aryan script, especially in the earlier forms of the Siddhamatrika script, was found by Sanskrit scholar and historian of Bengali literature Hara Prasad Shastri, in the year 1907 A.D., from the library of Nepal's Royal family, far from the mainland of Bengal. It was written on palm leaves, as a collection of 8th-12th century Buddhist mystic songs, composed by the followers of Buddhist mysticism. Hara Prasad Shastri named them *Caryācaryābinischaya*, later known as *Caryāpada* or *Charyaapada*. The Siddhamatrika script, a predecessor of the Eastern Nagari script, is assumed to be developed from the Siddham script of Sanskrit, blended with Prakrit and other regional languages. This literary script is also known as proto-Bengali, which later developed the Bengali script and literary tradition as a unique literary language separate from Sanskrit and other Indo-Aryan languages. But *Charyaapada* is not only about the development of the Bengali language but also about the evidence of how river-based ecology evolved the society, tradition and spirituality.

A critical analysis of the *Caryāpada*, explores this ecological and spiritual traditions and their coherence in the cultural practices of ancient Bengal or the Bengal of pre-Turkish invasion. The central themes of the *Charyaapada* revolve around the natural surroundings, portraying them as allusions to depict the moral and spiritual teachings among folks or the audience. The writers of the scripts seemed to be religious and wrote more about their spiritual philosophies. They sensed the spirituality in the natural world and depicted them through their songs. For example, the fifth song of *Caryāpada* is alluding to a river bridge as the bridge between the mortal and spiritual realm: "Chatila made a bridge to achieve the sublime / ... / On the bridge don't lose your balance, / It can take you away to the sublime sense" ("ধামার্থে চটিল সাক্ষম গঢ়ই / ... / সাক্ষমত চড়িলে দাহিণ বাম মা হোহী।। / নিয়ডী বোহি দূর ম জাহী।।"; my trans.; Das; 53). The song is an allusion which symbolizes the bridge and the river as the medium and boundary between the divinity or spirituality and the human realm. Another example is from the thirty-eighth song: "The body is like the little boat / Hold the oar you preceptor" ("কাঅ ণাবডহি খান্টি মণ কেডুআল / সদগুরুবঅণে ধর পতবাল"; my trans.; 201). This theme symbolizes the body as a canopy or a little boat, which is moving through the stream of life

and only a true preceptor or master can guide the right path of life. Here the preceptor is depicted as the boatman or the sailor who guides the boat, the symbolism for life.

These instances are evidently portraying the deep and inherent relationship between the rivers and the folks of Bengal. The bridge and the boat are evidence that the land was depending on rivers, possibly they resided on the river banks and directly or indirectly associated with the river. The thirty eighth song also provides the evidence that the folks of Bengal used to work as sailors or boatmen. To analyze this text eco-critically it can be said that, since the early period, rivers served to provide both spiritual and mortal needs. The vivid examples of depicting the rivers as the hypothetical boundaries between the sublunary world and sublime spirituality explore the themes of interconnectedness among nature and mankind. Their culture, business, literature and psychic all were surrounded by the river. They shaped the transportation, the daily livelihood of folks as well as their spiritual growth. During the Pala empire, the famous Gambhira dance was introduced in Bengal, performed by the folks who resided between the banks of Ganges and Mahananda. Palas ruled from the lower bank of Bhagirathi, a tributary of the Ganges, but centuries before the Palas, during the sixth century, the King of the Kingdom of Gaud, Shashaanka, ruled the region. He followed Shaivism and under his rule, Shaivism emerged as the prominent faith system in the river banks between Mahananda and the upper bank of Bhagirathi. Later from that influence, Gambhira emerged as the prominent folk dance and culture associated with the Shiva. The river bank played a significant role in the formation and preserve the culture, as it is still performed by the riverside folks, whose livelihoods are predominantly based on the rivers. Even, the instruments and costumes, used in the folk dance were only found in this region, near river banks.

In the 9th-10th century, when Bengali script and literature were evolving in a far land, Nepal, in *Charyaapada*, Bengal, along with northern India, was tussled for power which was known as the Kannauj Tripartite Struggle. As a result of the century-long tussle, the Palas, the earlier rulers of Bengal, lost their ground in Bengal, and soon were replaced by the Sena Empire. With the emergence of the Sena Empire, Buddhism, affiliated by the Palas, gradually lost their influence to orthodox practices of Hinduism, especially the Vaishnavism. The literary influence was also shifted from the spiritual and mystic Buddhism. But the literature, folk tales and the culture, under the influence of Buddhism, didn't lose all of its past roots but restored and reshaped themselves with the divinity of Krishna, one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu. The writers of the era blended the two literary traditions: symbolizing the natural world as spiritual, influenced by the previous Buddhism and the activities of the divine powers what they do to or as mortal. And thus, in the medieval era, there emerged a new cult of literary tradition and culture, based on the divinity of Krishna and other Hindu gods and influenced by the previous Buddhist style and philosophies.

With the emergence of Vaishnavism, the *Bhagwat Purana* found its place among the folks of Bengal and gained popularity. By the end of the twelfth century, *Geet Govindam*, composed by Jaydeva, inspired by *Bhagwat Purana*, started to take its place among the folk customs and folklore of Bengal. Though it was written in Sanskrit, it inspired the literary practices of Bengal and began the cult of Vaishnava Padabali which influenced the later literary tradition, folk culture and Bhakti movement. *Geet Govindam* is based on the divine love of Radha (Arguably, the character Radha appeared here for the first time, since *Mahabharata*)

The Waterways of Precolonial Bengali Culture: An Ecocritical Study on Rivers, Folks and... Sobuj Sarkar and Krishna. Their love is portrayed by the natural activities like the emergence of black rainy clouds or the moonlit.

(ii) Medieval Bengali Literature and Culture:

The medieval history began with the successful invasion of the Turkish general Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji till the banks of Bhagirathi, the cultural and political hub of the Sena empire. As a consequence of the invasion, both Hinduism and Buddhism soon lost their power in the western part of Bengal, where the literary tradition had been emerging for a long time. To counter the pro-Turkish invasion the local folks started to hide the manuscripts, sculptures and cultural artifacts and to transmit the knowledge and literary tradition orally. In the later part of the 13th century, Sufism started to hold a significant position in the rural and folk life of Bengal, which had the similarity with the earlier spiritual belief system in these regions. But Sufism made a difference by decentralizing the idea to the mass. Sufism offered a more liberal and open discussion about the divine figures and divinity, showcasing them as normal human beings with divine power, like they also experience family problems, jealousy, love, affection and other issues like ordinary people face in their day-to-day life, but overcome their situation with some divinity. This tradition brought a revolution as the divine figures are not larger-than-life characters but neighbours with whom one can talk. This influenced the later literature like *Sri Krishna Kirtan Kavya*, *Sriram Pacali*, *Vaishnav Padabali*, *Annada Mangal*, *Manasa Mangal* etc., where the characters show emotions and act like ordinary human beings but they have something divine in themselves.

By the late 15th century, the Bhakti movement emerged throughout India, as a counter against the oppressive cultural imposition by the Turkish and Brahmanical orthodox practices. Influenced by Sufism and the Indian spiritual belief system, the Bhakti movement started a new cult in the literature and culture throughout the Indian subcontinent. By this time, Sanskrit became the language of the upper class and the emergence of Arabic and Parsic language significantly changed the regional dialects and literature. So, the movement started to re-write and re-tell the narratives of Divine realms and spirituality in the then contemporary language and customs, relating them to their then ecological and societal surroundings. And thus, several new literary works with a new style started to emerge throughout India. In the context of Bengal, *Sriram Pacali*, *Vaishnav Padabali*, *Annada Mangal*, *Manasa Mangal* etc. were written during this period.

Sriram Pacali, by Kritibas Ojha, is the re-written story of the classical epic Ramayana, according to the then Bengali society. The protagonist Rama is not portrayed as the larger-than-life character of the ultimate divine lord but as an ordinary person with some divine power, who has been banished from his kingdom and searching for his wife. The story of Valmiki, becoming a saint from a dacoit, also appears here, portraying the great saint as a normal human being who used to do wrong deeds for his family but ultimately attained sainthood by atonement and penance. This was written to give a moral teaching to the then society. But it also vividly described the ecological surroundings and routes of Bengal. It can be deciphered that the vast land of Bengal was then covered with forest and through which significant traveling and trading routes were passed. This also elaborates the dangers while traveling via land roads and why people often chose to travel via rivers, which can be seen when the former prince of Ayodhya, Lord Rama, along with his wife, Sita, and his brother, Lakshmana, asked Guhak, the boatman, to help them to travel to their destination via the

river, instead of choosing the quicker land ways, portraying the river as the cheapest and safest source of transportation. Also, the conversation between Guhak, the boatman and Lord Rama describes the lives and struggles of the then boatmen of Bengal. The famous tradition and festival of Bengali Hindus, the Durga Puja or the Akalbodhon, comes from this *kavya*.

Another significant and possibly the major text of this period, based on the river and riverside folks, is *Mansa Mangal Kavya*. This is the story of Behula and Lakhinder, the daughter-in-law and son of a wealthy merchant Chaand Sadagar. Chaand is the worshipper of Lord Shiva but denies worshiping Mansa, daughter of Lord Shiva and goddess of snakes, who has a defective eye. Mansa orders one of her snakes, KaalNagini to kill all the sons of Chaand on their first night. After the death of Lakhinder, his newly wedded bride Behula travels through the rivers and reaches the divine realm, where she finds Lord Shiva who returns the life of Lakhinder under the condition that Chaand should have to worship Devi Mansa. And from then Mansa gains her place among the other gods and goddesses. The struggle of Devi Mansa to validate herself as one of the lead goddesses is portraying the once ongoing tussle between Aryan and non-Aryan cultures. The river is depicted both as a means of travel for Behula and Lakhinder and a journey to seek salvation for Lakhinder's soul. Here the waterways serve as a barrier, both spiritual and physical, that must be crossed to reach their desired destination, symbolizing the obstacles and challenges of life or material worlds one must overcome. Through this the river can be seen as the life-giving force, which plays a significant role in evolving and sustaining a civilization as well as elevating the human beings from their limited known world. The story also depicts the problems of the folk as they faced due to the marsh land, as people often died of snake poisons. This showcases the eternal struggle between the human and nature. It also shows the sea and river trades of Bengali merchants and the civilization which used to reside on the river banks, as Behula sees various cities while traveling through the river on a boat. It also depicts the flora and fauna of rivers. The interesting fact of the story is that the women become widows, not Sati. So, the burning ritual of Sati was not a crucial part of the then society. Though it also depicts some of the conservative rituals, a married person must follow such as never disclosing the names of the husband and the family. This also can be seen in another literature *Annada Mangal Kavya*. Written in 1752, it is another interesting and important literature from this era. The text is based on the mythical story of Devi Annapurna and Lord Shiva and their married life. One day Devi leaves Lord Shiva in anger and comes to a river, through which she can travel to the mortal realm or another world. The famous conversation between Ishwari Patani, the boatperson, and Devi Annapurna shows the other rituals and struggles of the river side folks. Patani says to Devi Annapurna: "If you don't reveal your identity, I shall not take thee / I fear if anyone can do something wrong to me" ("পরিচয় না দিলে করিতে না পরি পার। / ভয়করি কি জানি কে দেবে ফেরফার।।"; my trans.; Gunakor; 153). This shows the fear of the dacoits or robbers of then Bengal who used to rob the boatmen in the middle of the river. This is probably the reason why a woman shouldn't completely disclose her family as the boatman can rob her and also the boatman couldn't trust the passenger as he/she can be a robber. So, a unique type of conversation appears during the Middle Ages. The boatman also says that the river has crocodiles so the passengers should be careful about that which portrays the ecosystem of the rivers of Bengal. The text also depicts the female character not as submissive, modest and yielding but as dominating and self-esteemed who

can oppose his husband and can travel alone and independently without her husband's consent.

Another prominent culture that emerged during this period was nagarkirtan and the Bhakti movement of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. This was also associated with the river as the center of the movement was Nawadweep, nine river islands. The folk tales associated with the birth of Chaitanya tell that after the great penance of a devotee of Krishna, the Lord granted the boon that he would be reborn as mortal and gave him a tulsi or basil leaf and said to leave it in the river Bhagirathi and whoever takes the leaf the Lord will born in their house. The devotee did so and thus Chaitanya came to earth. The story also depicts the river as the medium or bridge through which the divine beings used to visit the mortal world and vice versa. These examples show how the rivers of Bengal were its major source of transportation and economy, as well as its spiritual culture.

Conclusion:

The river bodies like, Ganges, Brahmaputra, played a pivotal role in crafting Bengali tradition and literature, serving as the source of inspiration and creativity. In the themes of Bengali folklore, the water bodies are frequently pictured as the source of life and energy which give fertility to the land and sustainability to its people. It has provided the means of transportation, communication, and trade, connected communities and fostered cultural exchange and influenced the economy and social structure of the region, with fishing, agriculture, and water-based industries. It is often revered as a goddess who always influences the language and aesthetics of Bengali literature and gives generational inspiration to poets and writers.

The ecocritical analysis of the water bodies and the culture and literary traditions of the folk who reside in these regions help us to speculate the complex but inherent interplay between man-made world and the environment.

Through the ecocritical discussion of the early Bengali literature and writings it can be concluded how the relationship between the natural world, spiritual realm, and Bengali folk culture was interconnected and crafted the history and tradition. The medieval Bengali literary traditions are no less than the previous texts but more expressive to delve into the coherent relationship and dependency on rivers in every aspect of life. They did not limit it only to depict spirituality and morality but also to the emotions and hardships of contemporary people. This worldview reflects the deep spiritual and cultural beliefs of the Bengali people, who have long seen themselves as part of a larger, interconnected web of life that includes the natural world, the spiritual realm, and their own folk traditions.

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