

Anatomy of Agony

Selected Bengali Poems
A bi-lingual anthology

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Translated with an Introduction
by
Tito Chowdhury



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Homage to
my *Maa* on her birth centenary (1923-2023)

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

Rabindranath Tagore's 'Africa' is perhaps the first utterance in the Bengali language against apartheid. The poem singularly captures the spirit of the geo-socio-political history of Africa and speaks of a committed support to the continent's struggle to break the chains of imperialism. In a way Rabindranath's 'Africa' is also the first poem in Bengali protest literature. The poem breathes the spirit of humanism which in its articulation transcends the local and reaches the universal. In 'Africa' Rabindranath calls the future poets, 'poets of the new age' to join in the struggle to emancipate the subjugated.

Since then the call has been stirring the conscience of the modern Bengali poets, and inspiring them to write with a look into society, its fragility, and also into the world where injustice is an unleashed pandemic.

Epitomizing the agony as well as the spirit of protest in Bengali poetry, 'Africa', I think, is the proper introduction to the present anthology. Furthermore, though asymmetrical, it can be said that 'love and revolt' constitute the core theme of this anthology.

To grasp the inherent characteristics of such a paradoxical polarity in Bengali poetry, it would be helpful to look into the history of Bengal itself. Bengal's history has been full of vicissitudes. It is replete with innumerable changes of rulers and their dynasties. Some of the rulers were benevolent, others tyrannical.

'Instinctive love' in Bengali poetry has its origin in the tradition of *Sufism* in Bengal. It has deep bond with *Vaishnava Padabali*, the lyrics of theistic devotion (*Bhakti*) sung by Chaitannya, and written by Jayadeva in the thirteenth century. These two saints pioneered devotional *Vaishnavism*.

On the other hand, the theme of revolt in Bengali poetry has sprung from the feeling of protest against colonial ignominy and subjugation. History tells us that invaders, one after another, have tried to crush the socio-economic and cultural development in this region. The rise and fall of the rulers and their dynasties have affected the people negatively, to say the least. This dichotomy in the mind of the people in Bengal has manifested itself as 'love and revolt' in Bengali poetry, historically speaking.

From time immemorial Bengal has nourished secularism as the key component of its nationalism. The unity of Bengal was always considered to be a potential threat to the British colonizers who ruled for nearly two hundred years almost unabated. In a sinister way they tried to divide Bengal in 1905, but was forced to annul the division in 1911 owing to protests that spread throughout the land. But they succeeded in planting seeds of communalism and religious fanaticism in the soil. As a result, on the eve of departure of the British colonialists from the Indian sub-continent, a completely new phase of violence, mistrust and hatred hitherto unknown to secular Bengal began.

After the cruel partition in 1947 the eastern part of Bengal became a part of Pakistan to be called East Pakistan. The very architecture of Pakistan as a state was an absurdity both geographically and culturally. But it allowed the new West Pakistani rulers to oppress the Bengalis in East Pakistan.

In 1948, only a few months after the establishment of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of the new state, announced in Dhaka that "Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan," in his characteristic vitriol. Bengalis as one body protested in outrage. On the 21st of February in 1952, police opened fire on groups of Dhaka University students who brought out processions demanding recognition of Bengali as one of the state languages. This resulted in the martyrdom of five valiant sons of the soil, and the cumulative result of the protests that continued compelled the rulers to concede.

This noble paradigm of sacrifice is known in Bengalis' history as "The State Language Movement of 1952" (*Bayannor Rashtro Bhasha Andolon*). Indeed this martyrdom has singularly been archived in history as an epitome of supreme sacrifice to establish the right of the mother tongue.

It is the national pride of Bengalis that in the beginning of the present millennium, in 2000, UNESCO has honoured the spirit of this glorious movement, declaring 21st February (*Ekushe*) as "The International Mother Language Day" (Antorjatic Maatri Bhasha Dibosh).

The language movement eventually led to the rejection of the idea of religion-based nationalism in favour of a secular and linguistic nationalism. The new nationalistic movement in East Pakistan continued to grow in various phases under the leadership of *Bangabandhu* (a title meaning friend of Bengal) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-1975), a staunch nationalist leader.

From 1965, the nationalistic movement of the Bengalis started gaining momentum in moving towards the ultimate goal of getting Bengal freed from the neo-colonial rule of West Pakistani military junta. Another step ahead towards emancipation was participation in the general election of Pakistan held in 1970. The gaining of an overwhelming electoral majority by the Bengalis was a beacon of light, signifying the liberation of Bengal from Pakistan. In fact Pakistani military despots and their civilian allies got very shaky, partly in desperation and partly in vengeance; the junta perpetuated a genocide, one of the worst in history, beginning in the night of 25th March in 1971.

With minimal resource the Bengalis fought a total war against the powerful army of Pakistan. After a blood-bath of nine months, and a hard-fought war, the Pakistanis surrendered on the 16th of December 1971, giving Bengalis the Independent and Sovereign State called Bangladesh.

I begin with Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Next come two major poets, Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) and Jibanananda Das (1899-1954). Nazrul called himself a rebel and wrote fiercely against British imperialism and social injustice. Reversibly Jibanananda embodied, in his

seclusion, the serenity of nature in Bangladesh. Indeed Rabindranath, Nazrul and Jibanananda constitute a trilogy in Bengali poetry. I chose from Nazrul an atypical lyrical poem in praise of the deity, which, however, contains the characteristic marks of his self-confidence and sense of dignity. And the same has happened in case of Jibanananda. Instead of a poem of serenity, this anthology has selected a poem of morbidity in relation to the poet's self-exile from society and the world at large.

Bengali poetry has continuously metamorphosed with a progressive human trend and has come to stand firmly against occultism and religious bigotry. But it has never been without aesthetic beauty. Indeed an unending pledge and commitment to humanity has characteristically been ingrained in the lively soul of Bengali poetry. With all its distilled genres and styles, poetry has always been a powerful stream in Bengali literature. The flowers of Bengali poetry have blossomed not only in our moments of joie de vivre but also in our days of despair and melancholy. The present anthology seeks to reflect both.

July 2022

Tito Chowdhury
Dhaka
Bangladesh

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