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South Asian Composite Heritage is a way of life for the whole region. It is composite because it belongs to everyone living in the region. There is a sense of ownership among the people of South Asia towards their Composite Heritage. The publication of SACH is intended to highlight our Composite Heritage and make it a connector for the whole region as well as within national boundaries.

We are aware that in South Asia divide is wide and varied. Among communities. Within communities. Among sects and castes. Within sects and castes. Among ethnic groups. Within ethnic groups. Among nations. Within nations. Between two genders. Within two genders. The divide is age old and continues unabated.

Since our formative days we are told that we belong to one particular community or religion or ethnic group or nationality which is different from those who do not fall in this category. Seldom we are told about what we have common with 'others'. Gradually it becomes 'we' against 'others'.

Neither 'we' nor 'others' have any defined boundaries. According to time and situation, the boundary of 'we' either shrinks or widens which consequently has just the opposite impact on the boundary of 'others'.

Once a part of 'we' is made to be a part of 'others' and vice versa in a changed situation. We all are witnesses to this process.

Various efforts have been made to demolish the boundary that divides us in 'we' and 'others'. Efforts have been made mostly through dialogues. We value and respect that. At the same time we feel that we have to move beyond dialogues and look for something which connects everyone living in the region called South Asia. Something that is owned by everyone living in this region. We want this region to be a place:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls;*

Tagore

The South Asian Composite Heritage is strong enough to demolish narrow domestic walls and bind each one of us together. The inaugural issue of SACH has voices and opinions on Composite Heritage from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. There will be more. We look forward to you for your rich contribution in this collective effort.

*Speak, your lips are free.
Speak, it is your own tongue.
Speak, it is your own body.
Speak, your life is still yours.*

Faiz

Syncretism and Plurality

Institute for Social Democracy
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The twin elements of South Asia's social heritage – syncretism (Syn-together, cretain-to believe) and plurality-are not synonymous or interchangeable. It is possible, or certainly conceivable, for societies to contain features of syncretism without being plural, and vice versa. The strength of the traditions contained in the South Asian social structure is that they are plural and syncretic. Plurality here refers to multiplicity of traditions articulated mainly in terms of religions and languages. And *this* plurality is syncretic in the sense that they all share common elements; they interpenetrate each other like overlapping circles; they merge into each other at the edges; and yet they retain their

separateness.

Again this plurality is not inherently syncretic or composite; it is a uniquely Indian feature. It is precisely this Indian uniqueness that has baffled western scholars since the last century. The British ethnographers, at the end of the 19th and the beginning

of the 20th century, looked only at India's plurality, overlooked the interconnectedness of these traditions, and declared India to be a fragmented society. They focused only on the tip of the social structure, from where Sub-continent's plurality was visible to them, but the interconnections were not.

It is also not the case that *certain* institutions of South Asian social structure have been plural whereas certain others have been syncretic. Two instances would demonstrate how South Asia's social institutions have combined the two features. It is a truism to state that South Asia is a land of many religions. Whereas the indigenous ancient traditions of Brahminism, Buddhism and Jainism continued, many others arrived from different shores, like Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Christianity, it may

surprise some, arrived in South Asia before it took roots in Europe. Islam and Sikhism added to the list in the medieval times. The important thing is that whereas *all* (with the possible exception of Jainism) these traditions have remained intact, they have all developed common features. According to the *People of India Survey*, all the major Indian religions have a caste structure: Hinduism has about 3000 caste groups, Islam around 500, Sikhism and Christianity have 150 same number of caste groups. Caste has therefore emerged not just as a Hindu institution, but rather as an *Indian* institution. This alone makes Indian Islam different from the classical Arabic Islam;

it is more *Indian* than Arabic, yet it remains *essentially Islamic*.

Language is another area where both syncretism and plurality are manifested in a combination. According to the famous *Linguistic Survey of India*, conducted (by the leading linguist George Grierson) in the late 19th and early 20th century, Indians spoke a total of (at least) 179 languages that reached

out to include 544 dialects. This alone made India a truly multi-lingual society. But all the dialects and languages, it was pointed out, were products of only four language families (Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austric and Sino-Tibetan). What is more, most of the major Indian languages have sprung from a similar linguistic stock and share many common features. Yet there has been no linguistic fusion and it would be absurd, even today, to talk of only *one* Indian language.

It is *this* tradition, which has come under a systematic assault for the last two decades. This assault is geared towards undermining, and eventually destroying, all those institutions that have nurtured the elements of India's composite heritage. Hence the desecration of over 268 Sufi shrines in Gujarat.

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In order to protect and nurture this heritage, it is necessary (though far from sufficient) to first capture its essence, and this can best be done through the rubric of language and literature; Sufi and Bhakti traditions; fine arts, architecture, music and painting; and the freedom.

The world of literature and language bears a testimony to our composite culture, more than anything else. From the 12th century onwards, Indian literature flourished in most parts of the country in a continuous and unbroken chain. It was difficult, if not altogether impossible, to identify this literature on the grounds of religion and nationality. The only distinction that could be made was between the classical literature, written in Sanskrit and Persian, and the rest. Amir Khusro (1254-1323), the earliest and one of the most distinguished poets of the Hindavi tradition, wrote in both Persian and Hindavi/Hindui (a name designated to a cluster of languages/dialects spoken in the area of Hindustan from 11th-12th centuries onwards) but took great pride in his literary creations in Hindavi/Hindui. In one of his verses meant for his Persian speaking audience, he wrote: “*Chuman tooti-i-Hindam, ar rast pursi; Ze man Hindui purs, ta nagz goyam* (I am an Indian rose finch, if you want to speak to me; speak to me in Hindui, so that I may tell you beautiful things.)”. Baba Gorakh Nath, a saint from the 12th-13th centuries, described himself quite matter of factly in these words: “*Utpati Hindu jarna jogi akal pari Musalmani* (I have a Hindu origin, jogi appearance and a Muslim wisdom)”. Many poets of the Belgram region (part of present-day U.P., near Hardoi), like Mir Jalil, Raskhan, Abdul Wahid Belgrami, Mir Miran among others, wrote poetry that would simply not allow any religious stamp. One of them wrote: “*Pemi Hindu turak mein, Hari rang rahyo samaay; Deval aur maseet mein, deep ek hi bhay* (I am both Hindu and Muslim and completely engrossed in my God; Only one lamp is appropriate for both temple and the mosque)”.

Instances like this can be easily multiplied. It is important to recognize that the composite literary

tradition that is generally identified with Kabir, was not confined only to him. Kabir certainly represented its high point and also its finest expression. But it was a general pattern of popular literature from the 12th to the 18th centuries. Similarly in the field of languages, a number of speeches had overlapping boundaries and often a number of expressions were employed (Hindi, Hindui, Hindavi, Dehalvi, Zaban-i-Hindustan, Dakhani, Bhakha, Zaban-i-Urdu-i-Mualla, Zaban-i-Urdu, and simply Urdu) for the same linguistic stock. It would be unwise to trace a separate history for Hindi and Urdu, prior to the 18th century, for the simple reason that no such separate history existed. Modern Hindi and Urdu were created in the 18th-19th century out of a common language pool, and their separateness, often taken for granted today, was not a part of a normal linguistic evolution but a rather unnatural and artificial creation. (For instance, which language did Amir Khusro write in, Urdu or Hindi?). Very similar trajectories of such composite characters can be drawn in the realm of art and architecture, music and paintings.

Our freedom syncretic and plural traditions got an impetus in the modern times by our anti-imperialist national movement. Sub-continent’s movement, in a larger sense, emerged as more than a battle against British imperialism. At a time when India’s plurality was threatened under the homogenizing impulses of modernization, the national movement stood up to preserve our social heritage. Out of this heritage was constructed the fabric of secularism and nationalism. Thus the traditional values inherent in our syncretism and plurality did not have to be sacrificed for the sake of modern impulses of secularism and national unity. Thus, we were able to embark on the path of political modernity (and take on the alien rule) without abandoning our traditional reservoirs. Our society was, thus, able to enter the first phase of modernity without paying too much of a price in terms of its traditional resources. If we have preserved our syncretism and plurality thus far thanks to the freedom movement, used it to our advantage, we simply must not allow this wealth to be destroyed now.

Syncretic Traditions Prior to Medieval Times

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Quite often discussions on subcontinents syncretic and composite heritage begin with the arrival of Islam and these traditions are seen as functioning in the Sufi and Bhakti movements that started during the medieval period. This was probably because of our exposure to a new type of culture and civilization that may have provided the impetus for syncretistic possibilities. But from this we should not assume that these elements were missing from our society during the ancient times. The pre-medieval syncretism in our society on different forms and manifested itself in religious and other social institutions.

We all know that Islam was not the first religion to come to subcontinent from outside the Indian shores. Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity all made their presence felt at various points in the first millenium. Christianity in fact came to subcontinent much before it established itself in England. All these

movements, mobility and cultural interactions created an atmosphere in which a spirit of assimilation became a general norm. But quite apart from the context that facilitated syncretism, the nature of our religious and philosophical traditions was such that they could receive and incorporate external influences, thus creating composite possibilities.

Man's relationship with the realm of faith and other worldliness has, generally speaking taken two

forms since earliest times – some form of monotheism (belief in the existence of one God) and some form of polytheism (belief in the existence of many deities and gods at the same time and within the same cosmic order). According to some scholars, the pattern of religious observances among humans has seen a kind of transition from idolatry to theism, or in other words from polytheism to monotheism. Some others have

observed a 'flux' and 'reflux' in human societies between polytheism and monotheism. But they all agree that there is much to distinguish one from the other: the semitic religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) are all monotheistic; Indic religious traditions are polytheistic. But the philosophical development of Indic religions (Brahminism, Buddhism, Jainism) has interestingly included strong elements of monotheism, while remaining polytheistic.

The Buddha and the Swan

I was born in Kapilavastu. My father, King Sudhodana brought me up in comfort and luxury. One day I was walking in the garden. Suddenly a white swan fell from the sky at my feet. An arrow had pierced its wings. It was gasping for breath. Its eyes were filled with tears and it was unsuccessfully fluttering its wing. I was overcome with pity. I took him in my lap and carefully removed the arrow. As I was taking him for dressing, my cousin Devadutta came over. He said: I have shot the swan. A prey belongs to the person who shoots it. Please give it to me." I said: "The swan fell in front of me. I will look after him until his wounds heal so that he can fly again." Devadutta was very angry. He complained to the king that I had stolen his swan. The king called both of us. I told the whole story. The king said: "One who saves a life is greater than the one who destroys it. So the swan shall stay with you." All the noble souls gathered here remember this story. Do not spill blood. Do not destroy life. Respect your elders and do not oppress your slaves. Good conduct is more meaningful than any sacrifice. Do not live in so much of a luxury that you lose fellow feelings with your friends and nature. At the same time do not unnecessarily punish your body by not eating and over-exertion. Follow the middle path.

Rig Ved, perhaps the oldest available text in the world, contains statements and references that can contribute to a human rights perspective even today. Two statements in the Rid Ved are: "**Truth is one. Wise men interpret it differently**" and "**Let noble thoughts come from everywhere.**" These two statements might well represent the oldest philosophical acknowledgement of the plurality of ways in which the universal truth can be interpreted

and understood. The second statement in addition attempts to create a pool of wisdom to which everybody can contribute and which is in the end beneficial to all.

Along with Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism were traditions that ran parallel to it. Buddha (564 BC-480 BC) rejected the infallibility of the Vedas and the Brahmin and provided their critique. According to him *Nirvana* (liberation from the cycle of life and death) was to be attained in this very world and could be attained by *anyone* should he or she follow the right conduct. The important philosophical contribution made by Buddhism is beautifully contained in the famous story about Buddha's life that he himself narrated to his disciples.

Similarly the Jain philosophy too contributed towards plurality and the possibility of attaining the truth only after a coming together of multiple traditions. A famous Jain philosophy Syad Vad argued that truth cannot be perceived in totality by anyone and so one should always provide enough space for the possibility of different understanding and interpretation of truth. A famous Jain story of seven blind men and the elephant conveys this sense very well.

Thus a spirit of plurality pervaded all the religious traditions. This plurality existed both at the real and the normative level. That is to say, plurality existed both as reality and as a preferred norm. General religious life recognized and incorporated plurality and also looked upon it as a superior way of organizing social and religious affairs. To return to mainstream Brahminism, it is now recognized that from the beginning of the Christian era most educated Hindus were either

Vaishnavites or Shavites. With the standardization of Hinduism in modern times, this division now seems redundant and has lost its focus but it was a crucial division within Hinduism in the first millennium AD. Although other gods were acknowledged but they were accorded the position of saints and angels. Sometimes the differences between the two led to friction and also some degree of persecution, but generally the two great divisions of Hinduism rubbed along happily together in the conviction that in the end both are equally right. Leading historian of Ancient India A.L. Basham says: "Hinduism is essentially tolerant and would rather assimilate that rigidly

exclude. So the wiser Vaisnavites and Saivites recognized very early that the gods whom they worshipped were different aspects of the same divine being. The Divine is a diamond of innumerable facets; two very large and bright facets are Vishnu and Siva, while the others represent all the gods that were ever worshipped." (Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, p. 309).

It was in this manner that Indian religious traditions remained open and receptive to both the monotheistic and polytheistic influences. A

strong streak of monotheism can be seen in the *Bhagwat Geeta* where Krishna tells Arjuna:

*If any worshipper do reverence with faith
To any god whatever
And in that faith he reverences his god
And gains his desires
For it is I who bestow them.*

Seven Blind Men and the Elephant

One day an elephant made its presence among seven blind men who could not see the whole elephant but only feel its parts. They were all curious to know what this strange object was. The first blind man felt the feet of the elephant and declared that the strange object was a pillar. The second blind man felt the trunk of the elephant and declared that it was a snake. The third blind man felt the tusk of the elephant and concluded that the strange thing was a spear. The fourth blind man felt the head of the elephant and informed everybody that it was a great cliff. The fifth blind man felt the ear of the elephant and told everybody that it was a fan. The sixth blind man felt the tail of the elephant and declared that it was indeed a rope. But the seventh blind man refused to conclude on the basis of a partial enquiry. He felt the strange object up and down, left and right and indeed from all other possible angles. Finally he concluded that the strange new object was indeed sturdy as a pillar, supple as a snake, wide as a cliff, sharp as a spear, breezy as a fan and stringy as a rope. But altogether that something was not a pillar, snake, cliff, spear, fan or a rope but ... an elephant. All the other blind men agreed with him. They also agreed that in part might give a partial truth but real wisdom comes from seeing the whole.

With this background attempts were made to harmonize Vaishnavism and Shaivism. Around the sixth century a trinity (trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh) was evolved which subsequently became popular among Hindus. Yet another element of syncretism was in the form of the god *Harihar* (Hari being the title of Vishnu and Har of Shiv), worshipped in the form of an icon which combined characteristics of both gods. The cult of *Harihar* developed in the middle ages and was successful in the southern part of the country where *Harihar* temples were patronized by the Kings.

It was largely because of these characteristics of *internal* plurality and syncretism that Indic religious traditions were able to interact with external religious forces with cordiality and maintain a spirit of dialogue. In the medieval times this spirit can be seen in popular interactions between Hinduism and Islam that manifested, among other things, in the Bhakti and Sufi movements. But in the ancient period also, interactions with Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism were characterized by a spirit of mutuality.

By all accounts, Christianity arrived in southern parts of India before it went to Europe. St. Thomas, a disciple of Christ, came from Syria to India. When Marco Polo visited India at the end of the 13th Century, he saw the tomb of St. Thomas (at a Cathedral at Mail Pur, a suburb of Madras) and remarked on its popularity as a place of pilgrimage. Many Hindu customs had been adopted by the Christians and the Malabar Christians, like the Budhists and Jains before them, were in a process of becoming a heterodox Hindu sect.

Like the Christians, small communities of Jews (followers of Judaic religion, having originally migrated

from a mythical land called *Yahuda*, therefore *Yahudi* in Indian languages) also settled in Malabar. India sources mention a 10th century charter according to which the King Bhaskara gave land and other privileges to a Jew named Joseph. This was followed by the settlement of the community. But the Jewish tradition refers to a large Jewish settlement in an area in present-day Cochin as early as the first century AD. In any case a small Jewish community has existed in India for well over a millenium (possibly two). One branch has mixed so closely with the local Malayali inhabitants so as to be completely identified with them. The other branch has retained its purity and is still visibly semitic. Likewise Zoroastrian (now called Parsis, named after their Persian homeland) merchants settled in the west coast of India very early. After the Arab conquest of Persia, many more refugees came to India and have lived on its soil. Like other groups they have enriched Indian culture and have been enriched by it. The dominant pattern of interaction has been that of dialogue rather than complete merger.

Thus the subcontinent, though always loyal to her indigenous cults, gave a welcome to those coming from outside. There is generally no evidence of any persecution, leave alone a religious war, of any non-Indic sect or religion. The followers of these sects and religions quietly pursued their own cults and made their small but significant contributions to the general religious life of the western coasts. The larger body of Hindus were aware of the alien faiths but were in no way antagonistic to them. This capacity for toleration and co-existence contributed to the characteristic resiliency of the Indic religious traditions.

Tradition of Harmony and Tolerance

Mehboob Sada

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Through centuries the Indian society was harmonious and tolerant where deeper inter-communal/occupational respect flourished. People from all faiths and beliefs lived together in a pluralistic atmosphere, where even the religion of the rulers did not effect the daily relations of the indigenous people.

Thus, the Indian people have been familiar with the spirit of secularism for thousands of years. The Chattriyas, the traditional rulers of ancient India, paid great respect to their Brahmin priests, and showered them with most valuable gifts and donations. They also recognized the political utility of this class, but they never allowed it to interfere in their day-to-day administration. The priestly class accepted this subordinate position and acted as the ideological wing of the State, preaching loyalty and obedience to the rulers as a religious duty of the subject people.

Even in the Vedic Age, we find sages challenging the authority of the Brahmin priests, ridiculing them for their servility and their greed for power and wealth. Notwithstanding the contention by Professor Radhakrishnan and other apologists of the Vedanta, that “philosophy in India is essentially spiritual,”¹ the fact is that except for the Vendantas, all major schools of Indian philosophy – the Dehvadi Asura practices of the Indus Valley Civilization, the Lokayata, Samkhya, Nayaya-Vaisesika, Purva-Mimamsa, and Buddism and Jainism – were secular in their content. The Upanishads, perhaps the most sacred book after the Vedas and the earliest treatise on Indian philosophy (8th – 6th century B.C), freely discuss the Law of Causation, Nature (Svabliava), Material Elements (Bhutas), Primeval Matter (Prakriti), Time (Kala), Mind, Life and Death, rationally and fearlessly of Svetasvatra and Chandogga Upanishads.²

However, with the arrival of invaders, the whole atmosphere was scratched, and people, in order to get closer to the rulers, preferred insignificant benefits. Though there were some serious thinkers who warned the people against any such steps, but they were not heard properly. This disunity was the major source in breaking the national harmony.

Later on the British Raj completely shattered the foundations of pluralism in Indian society. However, during those period and even now the traditions of

tolerance and harmony somehow existed. An incident-taking place in 1969 is worth mentioning in this regard:

In 1969 when Hindu-Muslim riots erupted in Ahmadabad (Gujrat) Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, leader of the Khudai Khidmatgar movement, was in India. In many of his public statements he expressed sorrow that India has trampled over the non-violent traditions left by Mahatma Gandhi. In these riots, houses were burnt, shops were looted, and innocent people were put mercilessly to death. It looked as if humanity had taken leave of the city of Ahmadabad. The majority of victims of the carnage were Muslims 6,000 of whose homes had been put to the torch. According to government estimates, 350 persons had been killed, while in fact 2,000 had lost their lives. But even during this bestial period there was an occurrence which proved that no attempt on the part of the state to create a rift among the people could do away with the centuries-old traditions of tolerance.

As narrated, in the Maimo Bai quarter of the city which had 35 Muslim homes and 120 of Hindus, rioters had burned down almost all the houses. A non-Muslim witness, Kalyan Singh, was asked, “Apparently, a Muslim mob came and set fire to the houses of Hindus, and then a mob of Hindus followed who did the same to the houses of Muslims. Isn’t that so?”

“No”, said Kalyan Singh, “the gangs setting fire were Hindus only”.

“You mean to say that Hindus burned the houses of Hindus”? “Yes,” replied Kalyan Singh.

“Which was your place”?

Kalyan Singh pointed to a charred building and said, “That one, from which the smoke is still coming out. It also housed my shop of motor and cycle tyres, that is why it is still smouldering”.

“Kalyan Singhji, what would be the value of your house”? “The house and shop must be worth a lakh of rupees each”. “Why did the Hindus burn the houses of Hindus”?

“The mob wanted us to pinpoint the houses of Muslims so that Hindu homes should not be affected by the torching. We refused. The rioters warned us that in that case our houses too would get burnt down. We told them plainly that they were welcome to do

what they liked but we would not indicate the Muslims residences. So they sprinkled petrol on the locality and destroyed it completely and only left when the fire was at its worst”.

“Kalyan Singh, why did you let your property worth two lakhs be reduced to ashes”

Kalyan Singh pointed at some Muslims standing nearby and said, “We and these two belong to the same village in Rajasthan. First we, the Hindus, came here and set up business. After a few years our Muslim neighbors asked if they too could come and settle here. We said yes, so they came here counting on our trust and support. They are very good artisans and soon became successful, and even put up their own houses. These people, with whom our connections go back centuries, and who came here relying on us, they are like our kith and kin, and we address them as uncles and cousins. If we had allowed their places to be burnt down, with what face would we have gone to our Maker”?³

The official accounts of the Ahmadabad riots simply state how many Muslims were martyred and how much of their property was laid waste, but the above event will find a prominent place in the history of the common people only. Similarly you can read details of the killing of Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs in the official records and in the accounts put out by the respective communities, but you will not get to know of how, during the madness of 1947, Hindus and Sikhs were protected in Pakistani areas and in what manner Muslim lives were saved in India.

What befell the Christian minority in Kerala and Shantinagar (Pakistan) is now more or less known to everybody. But even if there was just one single Kalyan Singh in these areas, his story needs to be recorded somewhere as these incidents are demonstration of pluralism that was the once the soul of Indian society.

INVASIONS

As mentioned earlier, invasions from outside India started breaking up the harmony and tolerance that existed within the society. Although Muslim Kings are famous for goodwill but it is also true that some of them shattered the same. Feudal States in India, whether ruled by Hindu or Muslim monarchs, were not founded by the priestly class for religious purposes but by warriors or tribal chiefs purely for worldly gains. Contrary to what our history books say, the fact is that the invasions of Mohammad bin Qasim and Mahmud Ghaznavi, too, were motivated by

mundane desires. According to ‘Chachnama’, when Jajaj bin Yusuf, the Governor of Iraq, asked the Omayyad Caliph Walid bin Abdul Malik (705-715 A.D) permission to send an expedition to Sindh, the Caliph first refused, but when Hajjaj in his second despatch assured him that he would remit to the Caliph’s treasury “twice, thrice the amount that would be spent on the expedition, the Caliph agreed”.⁴ Hajjaj fulfilled his pledge. He paid to the treasury 120 million Dirhams over and above the amount distributed in the army. Mahmud of Ghazna, during his 17 expeditions, not only looted Hindu temples, he did not spare the Muslims of Multan either. His avarice is proverbial.⁵

MUSLIM KINGS

The invaders played a very vital role in Indian history. Their role was only to disorganize the local system and get maximum manpower for any expected endeavor. As majority of men were hired in army, therefore, polygamy was popular in the society. The role of invaders was quite negative when they preached their own religion and wanted that the indigenous people should also follow the same. This competition also went against the pluralistic society because several preachers were invited from abroad. These missionaries were more involved in missionary work, which promoted further tension in the society. Among the invaders who ruled India, the Greeks, the Bactrians, the Parthians, the Kushans, and the Huns are famous. Later with the Turk-Aghan invaders who preached Islam in the region were most influential and who spent much time in the region. However, the most interesting part is that the long association converted the Hindu community and inter-communal marriages were a routine matter. Such joyful activities provided an atmosphere for a harmonious and tolerant culture. The similarities of Hindi and Urdu (majority of Muslims speak Urdu even before partition) were also a source of bringing these two religious communities together.

The role of Mughal emperors was also a source in promoting Islam. Their way of preaching was different. Mughal emperors like Jehangir, Shah Jehan took special interest in preaching, and they introduced new Shariah law, whereas, Akbar promoted the concept of homogenous society, and allowed people of all religions to practice their faith freely. This attempt of Akbar was very clear and gained popularity during that era. Later the Muslim scholars also condemned him only because the religion was

used as a tool for vested interests. Not only the politicians but also religious leaders used podium for their personal religious interpretation.

Muslim rulers, who founded kingdoms at Delhi, Lahore, Jaunpur and the Deccan, were intelligent enough to realize that they could not remain in power without the cooperation of non-Muslims who constituted an overwhelming majority of their subjects. Unlike the British, who pursued the policy of 'divide and rule', the Muslim rulers tried to follow the policy of 'unite and rule'. They also found out that cooperation of the local people would be achieved not by coercion but through tolerance and non-interference in their religion, culture and life-style. Since they had made India their permanent home, they, in course of time, became Indianized. They adopted her dance and music, her languages, her dresses and other features of indigenous culture.

They also managed to keep their State policy secular as far as it was possible in the feudal age. The Sultanate at Delhi was founded in the last days of the 12th century. Those were very turbulent times. The Mongol hordes had already overthrown the Muslim kingdoms in Turkestan and Iran and were also knocking at the western gates of India. The metropolis was swelling with Turkish nobles and Ulema who had their homeland. Religious feelings among the Muslims were, therefore, high when Sultan Altamash came to the throne in 1211 A.D.

But Altamash, although himself a Turk, did not lose his mental balance. When the Mullahs, whose number had considerably increased on account of the exodus after the Mongol incursions in Turkestan, approached the Sultan in a delegation and demanded that the Hindus should be ordered to embrace Islam or put to death because, in their opinion, the Hindus were not 'men of the Book' and, therefore, not entitled to the privileges granted in the Shariat to the Zimmis – Christians and Jews. The farsighted Sultan looked towards his Vizir, Nizamul Mulk Junaidi. The Vizir explained to the Ulema the delicate situation in which a tiny minority of Muslims were ruling over a vast population of the Hindus. He also reminded them that Islam was opposed to conversion under duress. Moreover, "We have not got swords to kill the Hindus". The orthodoxy received its first rebuff.

But when Altamash's favorite daughter, Razia Sultana, Queen to was the young throne, but the unmarried. She did not observe purdah, would go for horse ride in male attire and attend the Durbar unveiled. The practices were unheard off in the 13th

century among the Muslims. (Remember the opposition by the Ulema to Miss Fatima Jinnah when she stood for Presidential election against General Ayub Khan in 1965). The Turk nobles were also enraged because they were aspiring for the throne as well as Razia's hand in marriage. Their joint conspiracy succeeded and Razia Sultana lost her life.⁶

Sultana Ghayasuddin Balban, who came to power in 1266, was fully aware of the role that the orthodoxy had played in perpetrating the anarchic conditions in the formative period of the empire. He always ignored the Mullahs and their interpretations of the Shariat. He openly used to say that State matters were governed by political expediencies and not by the whims or religious jurists.⁷

After Mughals, British ruled Indo-Pak Subcontinent. Although their period is seen as multi-religious community, however, very little efforts were made for a pluralistic society. The mainly remain busy in trade, fighting at borders and evangelization. They had direct contacts with Muslims and Hindus, but they did not provide any room for interfaith dialogue, to flourish both religious as one community. It is said that the British followed the principle of divide and rule and it was during their period that the traditions of inter-communal harmony were shattered.

THE BRITISH RAJ

Despite the politics of strife and mutual friction, the ancient Indian state had become the heaven for conflicting religions – vastly different customs and cultures because of centuries of common existence. It had flourished on the principles of unity in diversity and collective welfare based on sheer numbers. The British rule sowed the seeds of division and transformed the concept of unity despite diversification into notions of majority and minority and laid the foundation of a new kind of sovereignty. Its mode of governance itself emanated from a very small minority.

Thus, the British Raj was keeping itself in power by making the majority and the minority antagonistic towards one another, and, at the same time, encouraging the majority to exercise the weapon of tyranny over the minority. It was this policy that gave birth to the Two Nation Theory, a theory based on disparity in faith, though it also resulted in victimization and repression of other religious minorities. Also born of this circumstance was the element of mistrust and suspicion that began to prevail between the various communities. It did not take long for this mistrust and

suspicion to turn into mutual hatred and enmity. So, when the British gained control over vast areas of the subcontinent in the 19th century, conflicting religious emotions sort of boiled over. The British had already consolidated their hold on Bengal. In 1843 they captured Sindh, and in 1849 the Punjab and the neighbouring Pushtun tribal areas were annexed to the Empire. Bengal and Sindh were snatched from their Muslim rulers, while the Punjab and the Pushtun areas they took over from the Sikhs. The Raj was determined to draw the maximum advantage from the religious implications of this peculiar situation. It looked for Muslim loyalists in Bengal and Sindh, while in the Punjab it chose Sikh and Hindu collaborators. Along with this it founded new alliances with the feudals based on private and ancestral ownership of land. This provided a strong foundation for the rulers. At that point they felt confident enough to deal adequately with any possible freedom movement and scotch it at birth. Now there was nothing to prevent a death stroke being dealt to religious tolerance and sectarian unity. This tolerance and unity, reared and watered by centuries of co-existence, was now an easy target, although, as later history showed, it continued to shine and inspire and was not entirely obliterated even by the bloody riots of 1947.

REPLACEMENT OF PANTHEISM BY RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

The attitude of Sufis towards the non-Muslims has always been very much different from religious hardliners. They used to attract large number of Muslims and Hindus on account of their nonsectarian beliefs.

Interestingly, at least three Muslim monarchs including Alluddin Khilji, Mohammad Tughalq and

Akbar the Great thought of founding a new religion as an alternative to Hinduism and Islam. They were against the irrational behaviour of the orthodoxy. Perhaps, they thought that, in his way, they would be able to bring the Hindus and Muslims together on the basis of the Oneness of God. They were taking a cue from the Sufis.

Muslim Sufis, who had settled down both inside and outside the Sultanate, were great humanists. Their

love for human beings was unalloyed and uninhibited as their love for God. They laid more stress on the essence of religion than on its form. They did not discriminate between believers and the so-called Kafirs. For them man, irrespective of his caste, creed or colour, was the highest manifestation of God. The secret of their popularity was that they practised what they preached.

It is noteworthy that Sufis contributed a lot to indigenous literature through their hymns and poetry. A number of outstanding works were produced in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when different ideological movements which opposed the orthodox

Islam and Hinduism under the flag of a religious reform (Bhakti) were on the upgrade. The most significant of such movements in the Punjab was Sikhism whose beginning was marked by the activity of Guru Nanak (1469-1538). The Sufis, who, like the Sikh Gurus strove to preach in a language clear to common folk, also did much in the development of Indian literature. The greatest Sufi poets at that time were: Shaikh Ibrahim Farid Sani (d. circa 1554), Madho Lal Husain (1539-1594), Sultan Bahu (1631-1691), and among the eighteenth century poets: Bullhe Shah (1680-1758), Ali Hydar (1690-1785) Fard Faqir (1720-1790). Other outstanding poets were Waris Shah (1735-1798), one of the founders of lyric-epic genre in Punjabi literature, and satirical poet Suthra.

The Bhakti movement was an offshoot of Sufism. It was a sort of new religion, that the Delhi Sultans also thought of Bhakti (from faith, devotion, love directed toward a deity) was the movement of urban artisans and tradesman. The most authoritative workers of it had come from the lowest castes of artisans and even from the untouchables.

The founder of the Bhakti movement was Swami Ramanand, who was born at Allahabad (U.P) in the early days of the Slave monarchs of Delhi. He rejected the caste system and welcomed both women and untouchables to his fold. For him, God was love and love was God. No one should be stopped from offering his devotion to God who was, in his opinion, both Rama and Rahim. His teachings became very popular among the low caste Hindus and Muslims. Most of his disciples, Kabir, Dhanna, Saeen, Rais Das, belonged to low castes.

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Unlike the priestly class, the Sufis and the followers of the Bhakti movement never involved themselves in politics or interfered in State affairs. Hence, they indirectly served as allies of the Sultanate in its secular and anti-orthodoxy measures. It is significant that all Muslim monarchs, without exception, belonged to one or the other Sufi order and showed great respect to them. When Sultan Sikander Lodhi (1488-1517) heard that the orthodox Pundits and Mullahs of Benares were persecuting Kabir for his 'heretical' views, he issued orders that anyone found molesting Kabir would be seriously dealt with.

Mughals played a major role in development of pluralistic society in the sub-continent. Their policy of keeping the State separate from the religious idiosyncrasies of the rulers was laid down by Emperor Babr, the founder of the empire. In his will to Humayun, he wrote; "My son! India is inhabited by people of different religions. It is God's great munificence that He has made you ruler of this country. Therefore, you should always pay great attention to the following:

1. Do not let religious prejudices dwell in your heart. On the contrary, always do justice, without favour, showing fullest regard to people's religious feeling and customs.
2. You should particularly avoid cow slaughter.
3. Never demolish any place of worship of any community and always do justice so that the relation between the king and his subjects remains friendly and peace prevails in the State.

4. The propagation of Islam should be done by the sword of kindness and service and not the sword of coercion and oppression.
5. Always ignore the Shia-Sunni differences
6. Consider the different propensities of your subjects as different seasons of the year so that the government remains free from ailments and weaknesses.⁸

The liberal and statesmanlike policies pursued by the Great Mughals and the Bahmani rulers of the Deccan not only proved successful but were also responsible for the blossoming of culture that was a most artistic synthesis of Indian, Persian and Turkish cultures. Never had architecture and sculpture, music and dance, painting and handicrafts, trade and industry, learning and literature in the sub-continent over touched the pinnacle of growth as in the days of the Mughals.

Akbar the Great's unorthodox views and practices are too well-known to be described here. He had collected in his court a galaxy of highly competent administrators and enlightened intellectuals, like Abdur Rahim Khan Khanan, Abul Fazl and his brother, poet Faizi, Raja Todar Mal, former Revenue Minister of Islam Shah Suri, Raja Mansingh, whose sister Jodha Bai was the mother of Jahangir, Abdul Qadir Badayuni, the famous historian, and several others. He invited for philosophical and theological discussions Muslim Ulema, Brahmin Pundits, Jain Teachers, Parsi Destours and Christian missionaries and listened to their debates patiently.⁹

But most importantly, his attempt to secularize education was a great contribution. Education those days, in India and elsewhere in the world, was conducted by the priestly class. Akbar opened a number of secular schools where mathematics, geometry, medicine, astronomy, principles of government, logic, physics and history were taught.¹⁰

In schools where the medium of instruction was Persian, Hindu and Muslim students were jointly taught purely secular subjects, such as logic, ethics, geometry, physics, medicine, political science, history and Persian literature.¹¹ But this process of secularization lost its momentum after Akbar's death.

The British never encouraged the Indian politics to develop along secular lines. While the Mughals had tried every means to bridge the gulf between Hindus and Muslims, the British used every method to sow the seed of enmity and distrust between the two communities. If Hume was asked to form the Indian National Congress in 1885, the Muslim League

was formed in 1906 at the instance Lord Minto, Viceroy of India. “Our endeavor should be”, wrote Lt. Col. Coke, Commandant of Moradabad, “to uphold in full force the (for us fortunate) separation which exists between the different religions and races, not to endeavor to amalgamate them. ‘Divide et impera’ should be the principle of Indian Government”.¹²

The British deliberately created conditions in which the religious differences between the communities grew. Although professing to be secular, they adopted anti-secular policies in order to maintain their rule over India.

Delhi, the capital of the Mughal empire and the biggest center of Mughal culture, was occupied by

Lord Lake in 1803. Thus, the entire upper Gangetic plain also came under the Company’s rule and the administration of this most fertile region was entrusted to British officers. Soon the impact of Western civilization became visible. In spite of the great theologian Shah Abdul Aziz’s Fatwas (edicts), that India under the British had become Darul Harb (land of war), hence Muslims should in no way cooperate with the alien rulers, a number of prominent citizens of Delhi, including Ulema like Maulvi Abdul Hayee, Maulana Fazle Haq Khairabadi and Sadruddin Azurda, entered the service of the Company.¹³

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Cultural Rights of Adivasi Peoples and the Indigenous Roots of Bengali Culture*

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Very few will perhaps disagree with me when I say that Bangladesh is blessed with a rich cultural heritage. The richness of Bengali literature, music, and other art forms for example, easily springs to our minds. The vibrancy of Bengali culture is felt everywhere in the country, not the least, of course, because the vast majority of the population of this country is Bengali-speaking. But the cultural heritage of Bangladesh has been enriched by the languages, traditions, literature, and arts and crafts of various other peoples as well, those whose mother tongue is not Bengali. I will refer to these peoples as *Adivasi*, and include both the “hill” or so-called “tribal” peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and the *Adivasi* and other “tribal” [sic] peoples in other parts of the country. Yet, what we normally see in the more visible aspects of our ‘mainstream’ cultural practices is scarcely reflective of this ‘pluri-cultural’ heritage. And even when we look at various elements of *Bengali* culture today, we see that many of its rich traditions are lost in the labyrinth of practices that deny a proper place to the indigenous roots of this cultural heritage.

I feel that a lot has to do with politically-oriented cultural trends that have come from abroad during colonial times whose hangover we are still suffering from. Let us take the origin of our peoples, say the Bengali-speaking people. So many people take pride in an external origin: that they are descended from conquerors or other immigrants from the Arab-speaking countries, or from Iran, or from Northern India, and so forth, where the people are generally tall and fair of skin, and consequently, from a “superior” culture. Thus it is not surprising that the most sought-after bride must be a *ranga bou*, a bride that is *fair* or pale in complexion. Whatever happened to Tagore’s *Krasihnakoli*, one may wonder.

As I have suggested above, I think that this hangover of an inferiority complex concerning our indigenous roots has a lot to do with the continuing dominance of mainstream and elitist perspectives of our histories that have been written largely by the former political elite of the country, whose ancestry was rooted in a foreign country, or at least supposedly so. Thus when we take a bird’s eye look at official

versions of the history of this country, or even that of some of our neighbouring countries, we can hardly fail to note a recurring theme: a series of invasions from abroad, of the establishment of ruling dynasties from foreign countries, and of the patronage of the language, culture, music, history, traditions and so forth of the people or nation who ruled the concerned country at any given period in history. But what about the culture and heritage of the people who were in our country, and in the south Asian sub-continent in general, before the arrival of the British, Mongol/Mughals, Persians, etc? What about the *Kiratas*, for example, about whom Suniti Kumar Chatterjee has written so eloquently about? Have we totally forgotten about them? Because the British during their imperial period were a conquering nation, they had a political interest in portraying the history of this subcontinent with an emphasis on the series of invasions by foreigners so that they could say that they were only one among many other foreign invading nations of the past.

But do we still have to continue such trends? Certainly not, some would say, and they could point to, with justified pride, the Bengali Language Movement of the 1950s and the freedom struggle of that fateful year of 1971; the struggle of the hill peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of the 70s through to the 90s, and other examples as well. Yes, we do have positive examples, but let us look a little deeper.

Independence in 1971 led to the adoption of a national constitution that sought to emancipate the toiling masses and to protect the rights of the peasants, workers and the “backward” [sic] section of our citizens. The Constitution also sought to protect and promote the cultural heritage “of the people”. But at the same time, the Constitution speaks about our national culture and language, and gives to Bengali the status of a “state” language. Given the chauvinistic attempts in the 1940s and 50s to impose Urdu as the sole state language of Pakistan and the sacrifices made by the Bengali leaders and activists of 1952, the prominent place given to the Bengali language in the national constitution is quite understandable as a

natural development from a political struggle that sought to defend the people of Bangladesh who had been grossly discriminated against. But today, we have an independent country where the Bengali-speaking people form the overwhelming majority of not only those who are placed at the highest echelons of government, but are also leading the major *civil society* organisations, and leading the major *civic* movements for human rights and democracy across the country. Let us therefore pause now and reflect on the situation of those peoples whose mother tongue is not Bengali, and who too played their share of the role in the anti-British-colonial movement and in the independence movement of 1971. What of their language, culture and heritage? Since members of these peoples play only a peripheral role in the governance of the country, is it not their culture and heritage which is far more threatened than the language and culture of the more than 120 million Bengali-speaking people of this country? And what are we doing to safeguard the culture of these peoples? Yes, the Hill Tracts Accord of 1997 has expressly or impliedly recognised - although not constitutionally - that the Hill Tracts is a “tribal” [sic] area and that there is a need to protect and promote the language, culture, etc. of these “tribal” [sic] peoples. But is this enough? Sadly enough, I do not think so, and I am sure that I am not alone in believing this.

I need hardly state the more than obvious fact that the culture and heritage of the *Adivasi* peoples of the country hardly finds any place in mainstream writings. There are so many aspects that need to be acknowledged: the historical role of these peoples in the struggles against oppressive governments, their contribution to the national economy (past and present), their contribution to the language, arts and crafts of the country and so forth. In fact the heritage of many of these *adivasi* or indigenous peoples has not only enriched the multi-cultural heritage of our country as a whole but even the culture and heritage of the Bengali-speaking peoples. Let me give a few examples.

Apart from the few people who can genuinely trace their ancestry (or a part of it) from countries to the west of Bangladesh, most Bengali-speaking people both in Bangladesh and in West Bengal in India are known to have traces of *adivasi* peoples in their ancestry. Classical anthropologists say that the majority of the members of the Bengali race are either of *Austro-Mongoloid* or *Mongolo-Dravidian* origin. If this is true, then the average Bengali may

well have traces of such peoples as Santal, Munda, Oraon, Garo, Rakhaing and other indigenous or *Adivasi* peoples. Let us also look at the origin of Bengali words. Words that are classed as of *Desi* or native origin are all those that are not derived from Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic or from modern European languages. No doubt some of these words may be of *Prakritic* origin, having links with Sanskrit and other Indo-European groups of languages, but many other *Desi* words are clearly originated from many *Adivasi* languages such as Santali. Yet, these facts are seldom acknowledged other than by linguists and a handful of anthropologists. Let us also look at other contributions of the *Adivasi* peoples to the national heritage. Few perhaps know that one of the most important sources of raw material for the world-famous Bengal muslin was hill cotton from the greater Mymensingh area and from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Of course, on the other hand, the *Adivasi* or indigenous peoples too have accepted many elements from the language and culture of the Bengali people, the Santal, Chakma, Rajbangshi and Tripura, being prime examples. Over the centuries many of these peoples no doubt inter-married amongst themselves and with the Bengali people, or with their ancestors, as there is surely no “pure race” in Bangladesh, as anywhere else in the world. But given the overwhelming influence of our national educational curricula and the media, although cultural intercourse is no doubt a two-way affair, there is little doubt as to which direction the flow is stronger.

Let us now turn to the romanticised and clinically packaged - not to mention the prejudicial - perspectives of the *Adivasi* peoples. No doubt many find their culture to be “exotic” or “simple” and even as “primitive” and “frozen in time”. Actually, if one were to live among these peoples for a considerable length of time, I am sure that many of their traits would not appear to be either exotic or simple or “primitive”. These peoples too have dynamism in their societies, which are far from “static” as many seem to believe. Many of their traditions and practices may then appear to be based upon sheer common sense and rational considerations. And if we are truly respectful of these peoples and their cultures, we would do well do more than just admire their “colourful” dresses, songs and dances and keep them as aesthetic “exhibits” for foreign and local tourists, or worse still, merely emphasize on preserving their artifacts and other material objects to be preserved and exhibited in museums and ethnological centres. And I need hardly mention that with such perspectives

the languages of these peoples are considered as mere “dialects”, their literatures are relegated to mere folklore, and so forth. But these people are a living part of Bangladeshi society. They have differences as well as similarities with the Bengali people. We should strive to promote the things that bind the Bengali people and these peoples together, but not by trying to make them pseudo Bengalis.

But all is not lost, I think. In fact, when we look at some of the actresses and women models on Bangladesh television, for example, we see many who don’t fulfill the criteria of the classical concept of an Indo-Aryan “beauty” (I apologize that I only mention women in this context). Classical concepts of such “beauties” invariably portrayed them as having not only pale skin, but with aquiline noses (Bengali: *baanshir moto nakh*), large eyes (*dagor dagor chokh*) and long wavy tresses, unlike many of our currently popular television artistes. One well-known Bengali-speaking litterateur of Bangladesh once told

me that he was proud to have discovered his ancestors were *adivasis* or aboriginals, Santals, in fact. I wish we had more people like him: not people who are necessarily of Santali “stock”, but people who are not ashamed of a family lineage that cannot be traced to a western origin. The same also goes for the Bengali language and other aspects of our “national” [sic] culture.

But if we are to really take effective measures to protect the multi-cultural heritage of Bangladesh, I feel that we should start by considering amendments to the national constitution to both recognize the cultural integrity of the *Adivasi* peoples to adopt measures to protect and promote them. To label the *adivasi* peoples as members of a “backward” [sic]

section of citizens is not only disrespectful towards them but it also totally disregards their cultural identities, since “backwardness” connotes a disadvantaged situation with regard to social and economic opportunities only. And surely, the *Adivasi* peoples’ unique identities contain many other features than just their marginal and peripheral situation with regard to social and economic justice. Labeling the Hill Tracts unrest as an “economic” problem did not bear any fruits in bringing peace, as we all know. Recognising the *Adivasi* peoples in the Constitution

will not threaten the integrity of the country; rather, their recognition is more than likely to make them feel a far more “integral” part of Bangladeshi society. And when I say “integration”, I mean it in the sense of a positive and substantive role in “mainstream” activities, by keeping their cultural integrity intact, and not my assimilating themselves in an artificial manner.

Demands of *Adivasi* peoples for self-government through constitutional safeguards have

been termed by many reactionaries to be attempts with “secessionist” motives. I would suggest the opposite. If the *Adivasi* peoples, such as the “hill” peoples of the Hill Tracts for example, were to have nurtured secessionist sentiments, they would have sought to obtain a political settlement outside the purview of the Bangladeshi constitution, rather than within it. Therefore, I would say that the struggles of these peoples were “integrationist” rather than secessionist. Secessionist sentiments are fueled only when integration in the positive sense, as mentioned above, has fails to provide justice through a truly democratic process.

Prejudicial perspectives play a large role in denying their due cultural and other rights to the

if we are to really take effective measures to protect the multi-cultural heritage of Bangladesh, I feel that we should start by considering amendments to the national constitution to both recognize the cultural integrity of the *Adivasi* peoples to adopt measures to protect and promote them. To label the *adivasi* peoples as members of a “backward” [sic] section of citizens is not only disrespectful towards them but it also totally disregards their cultural identities, since “backwardness” connotes a disadvantaged situation with regard to social and economic opportunities only.... Recognising the *Adivasi* peoples in the Constitution will not threaten the integrity of the country; rather, their recognition is more than likely to make them feel a far more “integral” part of Bangladeshi society. And when I say “integration”, I mean it in the sense of a positive and substantive role in “mainstream” activities, by keeping their cultural integrity intact, and not my assimilating themselves in an artificial manner.

Adivasi peoples. We can try to attempt to remove these tendencies, at least partly, by following - to the extent that is appropriate to our country - the themes set by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Populations (Convention 107 of 1957), all of which have been ratified by the Government of Bangladesh. A few small measures could start a trend in the right direction. These could include: (a) steps to remove discriminatory and incorrect portrayal of *Adivasi* peoples and their culture in the national educational curricula; (b) by including write-ups on *Adivasi* peoples and their culture in a respectful and accurate manner in the national curricula; (c) by providing autonomy to “Tribal” [sic] Cultural Institutes and Academies with adequate funding; and (d) by providing necessary training to all government functionaries dealing with policies and programmes that affect the lives and cultures of the peoples concerned; and most importantly, (d) by promoting their social and economic welfare by recognising their land and resource rights and by giving them a meaningful say in governance at various levels. The protection and promotion of *Adivasi* peoples must be looked at in a holistic manner, because their culture will be threatened unless their basic rights and ways of living are not protected from externally imposed development programmes that are not acceptable to the people concerned.

I have mentioned that the 1997 Accord on the Hill Tracts has at least partly recognised the need to protect the cultural integrity of the hill peoples of the region. But if the global trends of profit-oriented economic processes are allowed to envelope the economy of the Hill Tracts in an unrestricted manner, then there is little doubt that the peripheral and marginalised situation of the hill peoples, especially those living in the “remoter” areas, is bound to

deteriorate further. It should also be borne in mind that some of the hill peoples of numerically small indigenous groups the hill region have not been provided adequate and direct representation in the CHT self-government system. Even apart from political representation, if measures are not undertaken to provide them a real say in the governance of the region and in the “development” process, then in the foreseeable future these peoples and their communities may well wither away or migrate to our neighbouring countries (as has happened in the past).

Let me now turn to issues concerning *Adivasi* women. Although women from most *Adivasi* or hill peoples of the country face less discrimination with regard to social issues than in the lowlands of the country, they are still a long way away from achieving social and economic justice and in being politically empowered. Even in the case of cultural matters, it is difficult to deny that women have in many instances upheld and protected our cultural heritages far more than our menfolk. This applies both to the *Adivasi* women and to women from the numerically majority peoples and communities of the country.

Turning to a more positive note, we can recall with justified pride that the Bengali people of this country have set a unique example in the world by successfully protecting their language and culture from foreign aggression as has been recently recognized by the United Nations. No people will perhaps better understand the pains of cultural aggression than them. It is to be hoped that enlightened leaders from the mainstream Bengali community will show their magnanimity by supporting the *Adivasi* peoples in their just struggle for cultural rights. And that will not only bring all our different peoples a little closer to each other, it is also likely to deepen our sense of pride in the indigenous roots of the cultural heritage of this country.

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Special Interview on South Asian Composite Heritage

Jahanara Pervin (A Peace and Harmony Activist in Bangladesh)

The need of this interview had arisen when the Pakistani group of participants went outside and wanted to play volley ball with the Bengali teenager boys who refused to play with Pakistani people. Also the attitudes of common people towards Pakistani people. Thus, a special interview on hatred, prejudices, friendship, values and composite heritage among Bangladesh and Pakistan reflecting the causes, history and future of the South Asian Countries and people regarding peace and brotherhood.

Interview was conducted by the Pakistani peace activists (journalists) panel including Mehboob Sada, Pervaiz Mohabbat, Sajid Christopher and Fr. Sohail.

“Our elders, history and syllabus have taught us about the injustices done to the people of Bangladesh by Pakistani army and politics. It has stubborned the attitudes and thinking of our people. It has created a huge gap and an environment of enmity”, said Jahanara Parvin.

About her family she said, “I have three sisters and a brother. My father served as a teacher and mother is a housewife. I belong to the middle class family that is strongly attached with the traditions, culture and societal bounds”. She further said about the country’s overall situation, “Literacy rate is about 64% and gender mobility is comparatively easy. Now a days a custom of inter marriages is rising which is a good sign of mingling of people that will ultimately unite people”.

Answering to the question of Bangladesh’s separation from Pakistan, she said, “Language and identity was the main issue on which Bangla people wanted to be separate but latter due to the injustices, it became a freedom movement. The incidence of 1971, we call it independence. We are taught this hatred by our parents, freedom fighters, dramas, films, media, syllabus and the evidences we have now. It is a common notion of every Bangali”.

Responding to the question on common issue of being Islamic state (Pakistan & Bangladesh) she said, “Our independence was not the issue of Islam, there are number of Buddhists, Hindu’s and many others but they are Bangali. It was the issue of identity language, and the aspiration to get rid of autocratic Pakistani military regime”.

Regarding composite heritage she said, “This training on composite heritage and interaction with Pakistani common people has changed my perception. I had deep hatred and had very negative

view about Pakistan but this education of tolerance, acceptance and composite heritage has helped me to change my view. Besides the political tension, we have a number of good things, which are composite and now I believe that a new world is possible. As a peace activist I urge to work for composite heritage which is obviously the same in South Asia”.

view about Pakistan but this education of tolerance, acceptance and composite heritage has helped me to change my view. Besides the political tension, we have a number of good things, which are composite and now I believe that a new world is possible. As a peace activist I urge to work for composite heritage which is obviously the same in South Asia”.

Responding to a question on changing the minds of younger generation, she said, “I feel a strong need now to educate our young generation on composite heritage rather than the black political history. I also believe that it will not be possible to do it with the existing two generations who have practically seen the inhuman act of 1971 incidence but if we work now it will be possible in near future and the coming generations will live in complete peace and solidarity. It may also require educating individuals first and then creating group sense and ultimately the total scenario will be changed”.

Personalizing it she said, “I am committed to educate young generation and make deeper links which can create an atmosphere of brotherhood and unity reflecting composite heritage of SA. Peace does not come from outside, it springs from within. Let us search for our peace and establish a peaceful world”.

Partition of the Subcontinent : Tragedy or Challenge

Institute for Social Democracy
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Among other things, 20th century can be identified as the century of partitions. We are using the term 'partition' in the sense of a redrawing or reworking of geographical boundaries that were earlier treated as permanent or 'given'. New faultlines emerged as the old ones subsided. We in South Asia tend to treat the partition of the sub-continent in 1947 as a unique event of the 20th century. But the 20th century is replete with such examples of drawing new national boundary lines over old ones. Germany (partitioned and re-united), Korea, creation of Israel from Palestine, creation of Kuwait from Iraq, creation Bosnia, Croasia and Serbia from erstwhile Yugoslavia, division of Czechoslovakia into separate nation-states are all glaring examples of partitions in the 20th century. With so many partitions taking place, is there any justification in treating the South Asian partition as unique?

On the face of it, yes. Purely at the level of facts and statistics, South Asian partition experienced violence, brutality and displacement at an unprecedented level. Consider the following: the partition violence claimed human lives the estimates of which range from anything over two lakhs to around two million. Most of these two millions were not killed in acts of personal vengeance. Quite often the killer had nothing personal against the killed. Many of the killers were also not professional criminals. The killers of partition violence would have passed off, in normal times, as ordinary respectable citizens. Many people killed because they felt killing was the only way to save their lives. They killed primarily in order to survive. Violence at such a scale could also not be called genocidal because there was no distinct pattern to it. The killed did not constitute any single religious community or ethnic group. Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims were all involved in killing and destroying each other.

Killing was not the only form of violence. Thousands of families were divided; homes were destroyed; crops left to rot; villages abandoned. Around 12 million people left their homelands and settled in places alien to them. This is easily the biggest migration recorded in the entire history of mankind, revolving around a single event. Migrations in history have generally been driven either by

climatic factors or opportunity. This migration was motivated only by the instinct to survive. People migrated not to seek a good life, but in many cases they left a good life behind and settled for a life of penury. They left homes, wealth, property, friends and familiar surroundings to settle in strange lands they had never seen before. They did not choose migration; it was forced upon them. People travelled in buses, cars and trains but mostly on foot in caravans some of which could stretch for many miles. The largest recorded caravan consisting of 40000 refugees travelling east to India from west Punjab took eight days to pass any given spot on its route.

Women were subjected to brutalities, the full extent of which is difficult to measure. Something like 75000 women were abducted and raped by men of different faith. There are examples of groups of women jumping into wells to avoid rape or forced conversion. Many fathers beheaded their own daughters to save them from ultimate humiliation. A few months after the partition, after many abducted women had reconciled with their fate and settled down to live their lives in the homes of their abductors, the newly created nation-states of India and Pakistan decided to exchange abducted wives on a mutual basis. This exchange of population amounted to treating these women as prisoners of war. These women were dislocated yet again with bleak prospects of them being taken back in their old families and surroundings.

In addition to the trauma and brutality accompanying the birth of two, and later in 1971 three, independent nation-states, there was also an irony to it. The partition failed to solve any of the problems it was expected to solve. The struggle for the making of Pakistan was born out of an acute anxiety related to the plight of religious minorities and a determination to solve their problems. But the minority problem was far from resolved with the drawing of new national boundaries and the making of Pakistan. If anything the minority problem actually got more accentuated. Both the new nation-states were minority-haunted. Muslims in India and Hindus in East and West Pakistan appeared doomed to live a life of persecution and marginality. The emigrants in the new lands (Hindus settling in East Punjab and Delhi and Muslim

migrants from U.P. and Bihar to Pakistan, derogatorily called Mohajirs`) also faced discrimination and insecurities.

This was not all. The newly created nation-states of India and Pakistan went to war with each other four times, in 1948, 1965, 1971 and 1998. Pakistan faced a civil war in 1971 culminating in the creation of yet another nation-state of Bangladesh. The partition story, it can be argued, contains within itself monumental losses of lives, identities, honour, dignity, opportunities, and much more

Yet it is important to recognize that there is more to the partition story than just the losses. The initial crisis was also like a challenge and the three societies under discussion – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – soon set about consolidating themselves. Dissolution of older identities was followed by the structuring of new identities along national lines. The displaced and dislocated groups, after initial years of struggle and anxiety, settled down and some of them gained affluence. India elected a refugee from West Punjab (I.K.Gujaral) as its prime minister. Pakistan, not to be left behind, found an immigrant from Delhi (Pervez Musharraf) as the head of the State. Bangla Desh undertook a successful democratic experiment that has continued in spite of its economic backwardness and other handicaps.

In a way the city of Dhaka, where we have all gathered, symbolizes the transformation of a crisis into an opportunity. The story of Dhaka has been that of fluctuating fortunes. Over the last four centuries, the city has gone through a kind of flux and reflux between growth and decline. Dhaka experienced its first round of expansion in the early 17th century (1608) when it became the capital of Bengal under the Mughal emperor Jahangir after whom the city got a new name Jahangir Nagar. It soon developed into a prominent trading centre. However in the early 18th century the capital was shifted to Murshidabad and Dhaka lost its glory and eminence. As a trading centre it still continued to grow. But the decision by the British to make a new town of Calcutta as their capital city, again dealt a blow to Dhaka. Through the 18th and the 19th centuries it was Calcutta and not Dhaka that was the administrative, commercial, educational and cultural mainstream. Dhaka's fortunes were revived again in 1905 when the British decided to partition Bengal. Dhaka was made the provincial capital of

the newly constituted province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. The British set about developing its infrastructure by laying out a formal new city adjacent to old Dhaka. But once again Dhaka's fortunes went into a decline when the partition of Bengal was revoked in 1911 and the capital moved back to Calcutta.

After many rounds of rise and fall, it was with the second partition of Bengal (as part of the partition of sub-continent in 1947) that the fortunes of Dhaka were revived once again. The city became the capital of the eastern wing of Pakistan. It acquired a new infrastructure and also a cantonment. The aviation facilities were upgraded and Al Baitul Mukarram, the largest mosque in East Pakistan accommodating 40000 faithfuls at a time, was constructed. In 1962 Dhaka was elevated to the status of the second capital of Pakistan. The city of Dhaka actually benefited by partitions. Finally it was yet another partition in 1971 that saw the creation of Bangladesh and the establishment of Dhaka as the national capital. Dhaka is a good example of how a crisis can also provide opportunity for growth.

The story of Dhaka can play a very instructive role in the legacy of partition. Is it possible to reconstruct the legacy of partition in such a manner that it creates room for a new opportunity for the people of South Asia. Can the people of South Asia jointly evolve a sub-continental identity? That is the challenge. The events of 1947 and 1971 brought into being three independent nation-states. These nation-states were successful in carving out separate national identities – Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi – for their people. Can these national identities jointly push ahead a South Asian identity, not at the expense of the national identities but feeding into them and building upon them? Surely there is no contradiction between separate national identities and a joint sub-continental one. It is in this manner, and in this manner alone, that the trauma and tragedy of the partition can be creatively harnessed to create an opportunity for the people of the sub-continent. For that reason it is important *not* to forget partition or put it under the carpet. It is important to engage with the memory of partition and negotiate with it in such a manner that far from becoming a haunting ghost, it becomes a catalyst in the evolving of a south Asian consciousness and identity.

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