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Romantic Archives: Literature and the Politics of Identity in Bengal

Dipesh Chakrabarty

1. Introduction

A letter from a friend in Calcutta recently put to me this question: Will the investment in Bengali literature that marked Bengal's colonial modernity survive the impact of globalization?

> Bengalis have lost their appetite for [Bengali] literature, [said my friend]. "The reading habits of the Bengali public have changed so much that were someone to write a *Pather Panchali* [a famous novel published in 1927] today, they would not be able to attract the attention of readers unless a well-known filmmaker created a hyped-up film version of it. . . . I am sure you will agree that literary work needs a certain environment for its growth. This environment that you have seen in Calcutta in the past is now disappearing. And nobody seems to care.[1]

The letter voiced a sentiment that is not uncommon among my literary-minded friends in the city. It seems plausible that Bengali language and literature do not possess the cultural capital they once did in the state of West Bengal. The magazine *Desh,* a periodical that for long has attempted to capture the cultural essence of the literary-minded sections of the Bengali

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1. Raghab Bandyopadhayay, letter to author, 26 June 2002.

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middle classes—the so-called *bhadralok*—suddenly changed a few years ago from being a weekly to a biweekly publication. Why? I asked another Bengali friend who seemed informed on these matters. I was told that the readership for the magazine was a declining and ageing readership. Younger people did not read the magazine, not in the same numbers anyway.

For a long time, the comportment of being a modern Bengali person has had much to do with certain kinds of personal investment in Bengali language and literature. Sometime in the nineteenth century, in the mist of times that for the *bhadralok* have been partly historical and partly fabulous, things happened in British Bengal that made books and literature central to modern Bengali identity.[2] Two factors helped to reinstitute the nineteenth century and its consequences into the cultural ambience of late twentieth-century Calcutta. One is the fact that the emancipatory optimism of the Left—elaborated in the revolutionary poetry and songs of the 1940s that retained their popularity into the sixties—drew heavily on the heritage of the nineteenth century until the Maoist Naxalite movement (c. 1967–71) began to question that inheritance. The other was the Tagore centenary year of 1961. The poet, and along with him the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were reinvented for my generation of educated Bengalis in myriad ways by the All India Radio, the Gramophone Company, the government of West Bengal, and a host of other major institutions in the city.

It is difficult to avoid the impression today that educated, well-to-do families are divesting from Bengali language and literature when it comes to their children's education. The new and global media help unfold new possibilities for cultural production. The more celebrated new Bengali writers often write in "global English." At any rate, a sense of distance from the nineteenth century and all that it stood for is now in the air among the young. Even the book, which perhaps became the most favored material-cultural object of educated Bengalis over the last two centuries, is portrayed as a thing of the past in the words of a song of a contemporary Calcutta band:

> Ananda Sen
> Used to read books.

2. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), in particular chaps. 5–7.

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The time was 1972.
Browning, Tennyson, Arthur Miller
Romance, travel, and crime-thriller
But devaluation made the rupee *bekar* (useless)
Sen only reads the newspaper[3]

There is something interesting—in the context of our present discussion—about this song, released in 2001. It ostensibly describes a cultural memory of a loss, the loss of the book, attributed in the song to the economic conditions of the country. The memory in the song goes back about three decades to 1972. Yet, in an unintended fashion, the song also describes the death of the Bengali nineteenth century as well. For this century, it would appear, had quietly left its mark on the reading habits of the fictitious Mr. Ananda Sen. Browning and Tennyson were, after all, two of the most popular poets among Bengali readers of English literature in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The long Bengali nineteenth century is perhaps finally dying. It may therefore make sense to treat its death as a proper object of historical study. In the context of the remarks made by my friend whose sentiments made me think of the subject of this essay, I want to ask: What was the nature of the *bhadralok* investment in literature and language that once made these into the means of feeling one's Bengaliness? Here it is useful to pay some attention to the works of Dinesh Chandra Sen, the pioneering historian and a lifelong devotee of Bengali literature.[4] Once hailed as the foremost historian of Bengali literature, he was lampooned by a younger generation of intellectuals in the 1930s who faulted his sense of both politics and history. It is the story of the early reception and the later rejection of Sen's work that I want to use here as a way to think about the questions raised by my friend.

A few biographical details are in order. Born in a village in the district of Dhaka in 1866, Dinesh Chandra Sen (or Dinesh Sen for short) graduated from the University of Calcutta with honors in English literature in 1889 and was appointed the headmaster of Comilla Victoria School in 1891 in Comilla, Bangladesh. While working there, he started scouring parts of the countryside in eastern Bengal in search of old Bengali manuscripts. The research and publications resulting from his efforts led to his connections with Ashutosh Mukherjee, the famed educator of Bengal and twice the vice

3. Chandrabindu, "Ananda Sen," *Gadha,* audiocassette, 2001.

4. Bengalis did not have second names until the coming of the British. During colonial rule, Bengali men began to split names made up of compound words in order to produce middle names. Thus Dineshchandra became Dinesh Chandra. I will simply follow this custom in spelling the name of Sen even in passages translated from Bengali. My focus on Sen also necessarily limits the aspects of Bengali literature I deal with here.

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chancellor of the University of Calcutta (1906–1914 and 1921–23). In 1909, Mukherjee appointed Sen to a readership and subsequently to a research fellowship in Bengali at the university.[5] Sen was eventually chosen to head up the postgraduate department of Bengali at the University of Calcutta when that department—perhaps the first such department devoted to postgraduate teaching of a modern Indian language—was founded in 1919. Sen served in this position until 1932. He died in Calcutta in 1939. Sen produced two very large books on the history of Bengali literature: *Bangabhasha o shahitya* (Bengali Language and Literature) in Bengali, first published in 1896, and *History of Bengali Language and Literature* (in English), based on a series of lectures delivered at the University of Calcutta and published in 1911.[6] He also produced many other books including an autobiography. All his life, Sen remained a devoted, tireless researcher of Bengali language and literature.[7]

Sen, today, is truly a man of the past. His almost exclusive identification of Bengali literature with the Hindu heritage, his idealization of many patriarchal and Brahmanical precepts, and his search for a pure Bengali essence bereft of all foreign influence will today arouse the legitimate ire of contemporary critics. It is not my purpose to discuss Sen as a person. But, for the sake of the record, it should be noted that, like many other intellectuals of his time, Sen was a complex and contradictory human being. This ardently and (by his own admission) provincial Bengali man loved many English poets and kept a day's fast to express his grief on hearing about the death of Tennyson.[8] For all his commitment to his own Hindu-Bengali identity, he remained one of the foremost patrons of the Muslim-Bengali poet Jasimuddin.[9] The inclusion of a poem by Jasimuddin in the selection of texts

5. See Supriya Sen, *Dineshchandra* (Calcutta, 1985), p. 39.

6. For a factual revision of Dinesh Sen's research findings, see the appendices added by Prabodh Chandra Bagchi and Asitkumar Bandyopadhyay to Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Bangabhasha o shahitya,* ed. Asitkumar Bandyopadhyay, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1991), 2:868–89.

7. Biographical details on Dinesh Sen are culled here from his autobiography, *Gharer katha o jugashahitya* (1922; Calcutta, 1969); Supriya Sen, *Dineshchandra;* biographical note entitled "The Author's Biography" published in Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Bangabhasha o shahitya,* 1:43–45; and "The Author's Life," in Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Banglar puronari* (Calcutta, 1939), pp. 1–32. A later reprint of this book (1983) says in a publisher's note that this short biography given in the first edition contains some factual errors. But the facts stated here seem to stand corroborated by other sources.

8. See Supriya Sen, *Dineshchandra,* p. 19.

9. Sen's relationship to Jasimuddin is the subject of the latter's reminiscence in *Smaraner sharani bahi* (Calcutta, 1976). Jasimuddin writes:

> Here was a man who took me from one station in life to another. My student life perhaps would have ended with the I.A. [Intermediate of Arts] degree if I had not met him. Perhaps I would have spent my life as an ill-paid teacher in some village school. I think of this not just only once. I think this every day and every night and repeatedly offer my *pronam* [obeisance] to this great man. [P. 71]

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for the matriculation examination in Bengali in 1929, when Hindu-Muslim relations were heading for a new low in Bengal, was directly due to Sen's intervention at the appropriate levels.[10] And his patriarchal sense of the extended family did not stop him from encouraging his daughters-in-law to pursue higher studies.[11]

2. Romanticism and the Project for a National Literature

What once made the word *Bengali* more than a mere ethnic tag and gave it a seductive ring for many was the phenomenon of a romantic, anticolonial nationalism in Bengal that flourished in the period c.1890–1910.[12] Its high point was the so-called Swadeshi (*swadesh:* "one's native land") movement (1905–8) organized to protest, and eventually reverse, the first partition of the province of Bengal executed by the British—ostensibly for administrative reasons—in 1905.[13] At the center of this romanticism was a perceived connection between identity and aesthetic activity in the realms of art, music, literature, and language. Perhaps the best intellectual expression of this outlook—colored, as the following quote will show, by a heavy tint of early nineteenth-century German talk of the spirit—comes from the pen of Aurobindo Ghosh, a revolutionary leader of the Swadeshi movement who wrote this in 1909:

> The needs of our political and religious life are now vital and real forces and it is these needs which will reconstruct our society, recreate and re-

10. Wahidul Alam writes:

> I was surprised when in 1929 I read Jasimuddin's poem "Kabar" in Calcutta University's selection of Bengali texts for the Matriculation examination. A poem by a Muslim writer in the Matriculation selections! And that too under the auspices of the University of Calcutta? . . . A teacher of mine told me a story about this. There was forceful opposition in [the University's] Syndicate to the inclusion of a student. But Dr. Dinesh Sen was the number one advocate for Jasimuddin. . . . Apparently, he countered the opposition by saying, "All right, please be patient and just listen to me recite the poem." He had a passionate voice and could recite poetry well. He read the poem with such wonderful effect that the eyes of many members of the Syndicate were glistening with tears.

(Wahidul Alam, "Kabi Jasimuddin," *Alakta* 5, no. 2 [1983]; quoted in Titash Chaudhuri, *Jasimuddin: Kabita, gadya o smriti* [Dhaka, 1993], p. 172).

11. See Sen, *Dineshchandra,* pp. 86–87.

12. *Romantic,* being a word of global provenance, is hard to define with respect to any particular national experience of romanticism. However, most Bengali romantics discussed here have shared with the Schlegel brothers the idea that "the truly Romantic" was constituted by "a certain radiance, or fluorescence, of the literary work which makes it transcend the necessarily limited scope of human language and open a vista into the infinite." Friedrich Schlegel's fragment that "'we should make poetry . . . sociable and society poetical'" would also have met with their enthusiastic approval (Ernst Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory* [Cambridge, 1993], pp. 78, 157).

13. Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908* (Delhi, 1973) is a rich account of the history of this movement.

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> mould our industrial and commercial life and found a new and victorious art, literature, science, and philosophy which will not be European but Indian. The impulse is already working in Bengali art and literature. The need of self-expression for the national spirit in politics suddenly brought back Bengali literature to its essential and eternal self and it was in our recent national songs that this self-realisation came. The lyric and the lyrical spirit, the spirit of simple, direct and poignant expression, of deep, passionate, straightforward emotion, of a frank and exalted enthusiasm, the dominant note of love and *bhakti* (sentimental devotionalism), of a mingled sweetness and strength, the potent intellect dominated by the self-illuminated heart, a mystical exaltation of feeling and spiritual insight expressing itself with plain concreteness and practicality—this is the soul of Bengal. All our literature, in order to be wholly alive, must start from this base and, whatever variations it may indulge in, never lose touch with it.[14]

It was sometime between 1872—when a scholar of Sanskrit, Ramgati Nyayaratna, published one the first histories of Bengali literature—and 1896—when Dinesh Sen came out with *Bangabhasha o shahitya*—that this literary-ethical project of being Bengali itself came into being. A quick comparison between Nyayaratna's history of Bengali literature and that of Dinesh Sen is telling in this respect. Nyayaratna's book, *Bangalabhasha o bangalasahityavishayok prastav* (A Motion Concerning Bengali Literature and the Bengali Language) (1872) used the word *Bengali* simply to refer to an ethnic group. As Nyayaratna himself said in his preface to the first edition, the entire first chapter of the book was dedicated to solving problems with the dating of Bengali language and the script.[15] The rest of the book did not in any way address the question of being Bengali. Sen's work, on the other hand, was all about the meaning of this question. Commenting on the difference between the two scholars, Dr. Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay, who edited a recent reprint of Nyayaratna's book, writes:

> The goldmine of medieval Bengali literature was discovered by Dinesh Chandra Sen. . . . His point of view was particularly different from that of Nyayaratna. . . . Ramgati's mind had been moulded by the heritage of Sanskrit language and literature. . . . For Dinesh Chandra was well acquainted with English literature of the Victorian period and had also

14. Aurobindo Ghosh, "The Awakening Soul of India" (1909), in *On Nationalism,* ed. Sri Aurobindo, 2d ed. (Pondicherry, 1996), p. 404.

15. See Ramgati Nyayaratna, *Bangalabhasha o bangalasahityavishayok prastav,* ed. Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay (1872; Calcutta, 1991), p. xv. This edition works off a later edition edited and published by Nyayaratna's son Girindranath Bandyopadhyay.

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> read with attention histories of English, French, and German literatures. . . . Educated Bengalis, who were searching for the roots of the distinctiveness and for pride in the Bengali way of life . . . welcomed him as the true historian of Bengali literature.[16]

Indeed, the impact of the publication of *Bangabhasha o shahitya* is captured in what Rabindranath Tagore wrote in praise of the book when it went into the second edition: "Dineshbabu ["babu" is an honorific term in Bengali] surprised us all when the first edition of this book came out. We never knew that there was such an enormous affair called ancient Bengali literature. We got busy familiarizing ourselves with the stranger."[17]

A project for a national literature looked on literature as an expression of the national spirit. This national spirit was expected to act as an antidote to all the mundane interests that otherwise divided the Bengali people—the Hindus from the Muslims, the lower castes from the upper castes, and the elite from the masses. Literature, in that sense, was seen as innately political. The Bengali intellectual's faith in the work of the spirit was articulated in what Aurobindo said in 1909 about the Italian patriot Mazzini—a veritable icon of romantic nationalism in India: "'Mazzini lifted the country from [a] . . . low and ineffective level and gave it the only force which can justify the hope of revival, the force of the spirit within, the strength to disregard immediate interests and surrounding circumstances. . . . The spiritual force within not only creates the future but creates the material for the future.'"[18] A similar appreciation of the national spirit animated all that was said about literature in the 1890s and 1900s. Dinesh Sen treated the "folk" literature of Bengal as "expressions of all the poetry of the race." They were "read and admired by millions—the illiterate masses forming by far the most devoted of their admirers."[19] In a lecture on "national literature" given at an annual meeting of the newly founded (1893) Bangiya Sahitya Parishad (Bengali Literary Academy), Tagore put an ingenious gloss on the Sanskrit/Bengali word for *literature, sahitya.* "The word 'sahitya,'" he said,

> is derived from the word "sahit" [being with]. Considered in its constitutional sense, then, the word suggests the idea of being together. This

16. Ibid., pp. vi–vii.

17. Rabindranath Thakur [Tagore], "Bangabhasha o shahitya" (1902), in *Rabindrarachabali: Janmashatabarshik shongskoron,* 13 vols. (Calcutta, 1961), 13:806.

18. Ghosh, "The Power That Uplifts" (1909), in *On Nationalism,* p. 456. Indian romantic-political readings of Mazzini and the Italian Risorgimento would make a fascinating area of research. Gita Srivastava, *Mazzini and His Impact on the Indian Nationalist Movement* (Allahabad, 1982) makes an indifferent beginning. See also N. Gangulee, introduction to Giuseppe Mazzini, *Giuseppe Mazzini: Selected Writings* (London, 1944?), p. 38: "It was in [a] . . . study-group in Calcutta that I first came to read Mazzini's writings."

19. Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature* (Calcutta, 1911), p. 167; hereafter abbreviated *H.*

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> togetherness does not simply relate to thoughts, languages, or books. No deep intimacies between human beings, between the past and the present, or between the distant and the near can be forged by means other than those of literature. The people of a country lacking literature have no ties binding one another. They remain divided.[20]

Sen's *History* actually offered some anecdotal evidence of this alleged spiritual bond between the educated elite and the nonliterate masses enabled by the shared pleasures of "folk" literature:

> In 1894, I was residing in Tippera. It was early in June; the clouds had gathered on the horizon, and round the [S]ataratan Matha [monastery] of Comilla, they had made the darkness of night a shade more black. An illiterate Vaishnava [literally, of the god Vishnu] devotee, an old man of seventy, was singing the following song of Chandi Das [a medieval Bengali poet], playing on a lute made of a long gourd.
>
> "Dark is the night and thick are the clouds,
> How could you, my beloved, come by the path in such a night? . . . "
>
> I suddenly heard his voice become choked with tears, and he could not proceed any more. On his coming to himself, . . . I asked him the cause of his tears. He said, it was the song. . . . He did not consider the song as an ordinary love-song. Here is his interpretation,—"I am full of sins. . . . In deep distress I beckoned Him to come to me. . . . I found Him waiting at the gate of my house. It cannot be any pleasure to Him to come to a great sinner like me,—the path is so foul, but by my supreme good fortune the merciful God took it. . . . The thought of His mercy choked my voice. . . . "
>
> Tears were dropping from the eyes of the old man . . . as with his right hand he was still playing on the lute. [*H*, pp. 127–30]

Sen considered this an "instance of [the] spiritualization of ideas even by rural and illiterate people in Bengal" (*H*, p. 127). Sen's anecdote allows us an insight into the romantic-nationalist construction of the past. In what he wrote on folk and national literature in the period 1880–1910, Rabindranath Tagore theorized just such a past. He expressed the hope that Bengali literature would act as "the live umbilical cord" helping to bind together the past, the present, and the future of the Bengali people "in all their intensity and greatness."[21] Such collapsing of different times would defy the

20. Tagore, "Bangla jatiya sahitya (1895–96)," in *Rabindrarachanabali,* 13:793.

21. Tagore, "Jatiya shahitya" (1895–96); quoted in Gautam Bhadra and Deepa Dey, "Chintar Chalchitra: Bangiya Shahitya Parishat (1300–1330)," *Sahitya Patrika* 38 (1994–95): 47; hereafter abbreviated "CC."

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logic of the historian. Tagore remarked once with respect to the literature of the rural "folk": "One or two hundred years do not make much difference to the age of these poems. Looked at from this point of view, rhymes put together by a village poet, say, fifty years ago may be seen as contemporaneous with the compositions of Mukundaram [sixteenth–seventeenth centuries]. For the waves of time cannot assault with any force the place where the soul of the village survives" (quoted in "CC," p. 57).[22] Or as he put it elsewhere: "Fragments of many ancient histories and memories lie dispersed in these [rural nursery] rhymes. No archaeologist can put them together in order to make them into a whole. But our imagination *[kalpana]* can attempt to create out of these ruins a distant-and-yet-close relationship with that forgotten and ancient world" (quoted in "CC," p. 57).[23]

If literature was indeed so inherently political, one can then look on Sen's passionate wanderings in the Bengal countryside around Chittagong and Tripura in his twenties—looking for old manuscripts—as a variety of romantic-political activism. His narrative highlights the spirit of sacrifice that Aurobindo spoke of in his praise for Mazzini. On occasions, Sen seems to have received support from interested officials who sent their liveried assistants along to help him. But often the search was lonely, all his own, at his own expense, and at great risk to his health and safety. In Sen's own words:

> The sight of liveried government orderlies or peons would frighten villagers. [The presence of] such personnel in fact hindered the collection of manuscripts, so I would [often] go alone. Sometimes I would be travelling in the hills until nightfall. At times I would simply have to summon up . . . courage and trek through rain and storm or through terrifying jungles at night. . . . Only a person as wretched as I would go around collecting manuscripts in this manner, abandoning all hopes for living. How often I would hurt from all the travelling I did and would cry [from pain] if I touched the wounded part of my body.[24]

3. Colonial Romantics and Their Anxieties

Sen's work makes visible two major—and related—anxieties that drove the romantic-political project of a national literature. The first, as we have seen, was the concern to find a spiritual ground on which to erect national unity.[25] This quest for unity made it necessary to use literary material to

22. See Tagore, "Gramyo sahitya," in *Rabindrarachabali,* 6:642.
23. See Tagore, "Chhele bhulano chhora," in *Rabindrarachabali,* 6:585.
24. Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Gharer katha o jugashahitya,* pp. 124–25.
25. This indeed was one of the reasons Tagore welcomed *Bangabhasha o shahitya.* Sen's book had "brought to life" the true history of Hindu–Muslim relationship by showing that "a close

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create a family romance of the nation. That romance, in turn, was deeply marked by some other male anxieties concerning home, gender, and sexuality. This, as such, is not surprising. Feminist historians have often documented such anxieties for nationalisms generally, both in India and elsewhere.[26] What is interesting about this particular story, however, is what Sen's writings tell us about the reception of European romanticism in the Bengal of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As historians of modern Bengali literature well know, poets such as Byron, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth—as well as Milton (introducing a note of classicism) and Shakespeare—were enduring icons in the worlds of nineteenth-century Bengali poets.[27] I do not have the space here to discuss the topic in any detail. We know Michael Madhusudan Datta, Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, and Biharilal Chakrabarty–important names in nineteenth-century history—were influenced and inspired by these poets.[28] This history awaits detailed research, but anecdotal evidence suggests that well into the early part of the twentieth century Bengali poets remained enthusiasts of English romantic and classicist poetry. The following description of a literary exchange between the romantic-nationalist poet Dwijendralal Roy (1863–1913) and his friend Lokendranath Palit, a well-known and colorful personality of the day, could be considered typical:

> Loken has an amazing and unending capacity to understand poetry! He understands Byron without any effort. Shelley he is even more at ease with. The other day I had a big argument with him about Byron and

relationship existed between Hindus and Muslims, that there was a path of friendship between them in spite of many troubles and disturbances." This, Tagore added, was "truly historical, something that should always be made known. For this is the story of the land, it is not a fact concerning some specific people" (Tagore, "Bangabhasha o sahitya," *Rabindrarachabali,* 13:807).

26. See, for example, Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1992); Carla Hesse, *The "Other" Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton, N.J., 2001); Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (Delhi, 2001); and Rochona Majumdar, "Marriage, Modernity, and Sources of the Self: Bengali Women c.1870–1956" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2003), esp. chap. 2, "Debates on Dowry in Colonial Bengal."

27. See Priyaranjan Sen, *Western Influence in Bengali Literature* (1932; Calcutta, 1966); Harendra Mohan Das Gupta, *Studies in Western Influence on Nineteenth-Century Bengali Poetry, 1857–1887* (1935; Calcutta, 1969); Ujjvalkumar Majumdar, *Bangla sahitye pashchatya probhab* (Calcutta, 2000); and Clinton Seely, *The Slaying of Meghnada: A Ramayana Revisioned in Colonial Calcutta* (forthcoming).

28. That the young Michael often modeled not only his writings but even his personal letters in the 1840s on those of Byron has been noted by a couple of recent commentators. See Ghulam Murshid, *Ashar chhalane bhuli: Michael-jibani* (1995; Calcutta, 1997), pp. 55–56. Murshid credits William Radice of the University of London with having been the first to notice similarities between Byron's letters published in Thomas Moore's life of the poet and those written by the young Michael; see p. 9. The other poets mentioned here often simply inserted lines translated from English romantic poets into what they wrote in Bengali.

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> Shelley. I started reading out from *Manfred.* Listening to it, he suddenly jumped out of his chair with sheer enthusiasm and said, "*Oh, maddening!* [in English in original] No more, no more, please don't read any more. Let me think." Saying this, he remained self-absorbed in a serious mood for about a quarter [of an hour]. What a connoisseur he is! You cannot compare him with the likes of us. A Bengali man gets all excited if he can rhyme three lines using words like "*mondo* [gentle], *mondo, shugondho* [fragrance]" and thinks to himself: "What a poet I have become!" . . . Good writing requires . . . truly good education. . . . Shelley, Byron, Keats, Shakespeare, our Vaishnava poets, Vyas [the mythical writer of the *Mahabharata*], Valmiki [the mythical writer of the *Ramayana*], Kalidas, Hugo—unless you read these great poets with sincere devotion you cannot any longer become a great poet by dint of any magical "abracadabra," not today.[29]

Dinesh Sen came from the same cultural stock as Dwijendralal Roy. His enthusiasm for Scott, Milton, Tennyson, and for the Lake poets is well known; he could even recite some of their poetry from memory.[30] I have not had the opportunity to investigate in more detail Sen's reading practices. But references to the heroines of Byron, Shakespeare, and others in some critical passages in his *History of Bengali Language and Literature* allow us to see how an intimate, yet troubled, relationship to European romanticism determined the nature of Sen's pursuit of the folk. Consider, for instance, the following passage from Sen's *History* in which he is seeking to argue with his own English-educated Bengali readers as to why they should not seek their ideals of romantic love in European poetry. They should instead look in the direction of Behula, Khullana, and Ranjavati—all heroines from the so-called middle period who were to become household names thanks, in large part, to Sen's own writings:

> The enlightened section of our community who are fond of displaying their erudition in English literature, who are never weary of admiring a Cordelia, a Haidee or even a Donna Julia and who quote from the English translation of Virgil to shew their appreciation of Dido's love, would not care to read the story of Behula—the bride of Laksmindra, whose unflinching resolution and sufferings for love rise higher than many a martyrdom; or of Khullana, the loving damsel of Ujani, whose beauty, tender age, sufferings and fidelity all combine to make her one of the finest creations of poetic fancy; or of Ranjavati—the wife of King

29. Quoted in Debkumar Raychaudhuri, *Dwijendralal: Jibon* (Calcutta, 1965), pp. 404–5.
30. See "The Author's Life," in Sen, *Banglar puronari,* p. 14.

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> Kadna Sen of Maynagar whose resignation was as great as her austerities that stripped even death at the stake of its natural horrors. [*H*, pp. 397–98]

Cordelia, Haidee, Donna Julia: all names of heroines with strong imprints of individuality on their personalities. They were characters who made their own choices in matters of love, individuals—as a recent commentator on Byron has put it—"in possession of the means of erotic self-assertion."[31] Besides, Donna Julia and Haidee were even portrayed as proactive seducers of Don Juan in Byron's long poem of the same name, as part of the politics of what, to quote a contemporary critic, "Coleridge might have called Byron's 'sexual Jacobinism.'"[32] For Byron, surely, sexual liberty was part of liberty as such and formed a core of his critique of emerging bourgeois domesticity in his own country.[33] It is important to note that Sen does not deny the appeal to Bengali men of sexually and politically "liberated" women. He indirectly documents that for the "modern," romantic, English-educated Bengali man, European literature portrayed women who were exciting and attractive. Why, then, should Bengali men turn to their "own" folk literature that they, said Sen, were "naturally best fitted to appreciate"?

Sen's argument, as it unfolds, expresses a fear of that which also seemed attractive. It was an argument that appears to have arisen from a sense of erotic, if not sexual, despair. Bengali men's "appreciation of the romantic motives of European literature," said Sen, was "fraught with disastrous results to our society." Why? Sen's answer did not in the least glorify actually existing Bengali families. These families, he wrote, left "no room for the betrothed pair to have the slightest share in the mutual choice" (*H*, p. 398). Sen's romantic critique of Bengali domestic arrangements takes an even more searing form in a few other sentences in his *History*. "In this country," he said,

> a blind Providence joins the hands of a mute pair who promise fidelity, often without knowing each other. When the situation grows monotonous, losing colour and poetry, both men and women are treated to lectures on the purity of the nuptial vow, and to promises of rewards in the

31. Charles Donelan, *Romanticism and Male Fantasy in Byron's "Don Juan": A Marketable Vice* (London, 2000), p. 48. See also the discussion in chaps. 3 and 6.

32. The expression "sexual Jacobinism"—and the idea that this is how Coleridge might have described Byron's politics—come from Malcolm Kelsall, "Byron and the Romantic Heroine," in *Byron: Augustan and Romantic,* ed. Andrew Rutherford (New York, 1990), p. 57. Moyra Haslett, *Byron's "Don Juan" and the Don Juan Legend* (Oxford, 1997), p. 185, employs a very similar expression. The comments are inspired by, among other things, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria,* ed. Nigel Leask (London, 1997), chap. 23.

33. See, in particular, Haslett, *Byron's "Don Juan" and the Don Juan Legend,* chaps. 1–3, 5.

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> next world. They fully believe in the sanctity of marriage, and are ready to sacrifice sentiment to stern duty. But human passion cannot be altogether repressed, and where it over-rides the ordinances of the Shastras [scriptures], it rushes forward with extraordinary strength, all the greater for the attempt at forcible suppression. [*H*, p. 117]

This was *not* the language of a conservative believer in tradition.

We now begin to see Sen's predicament, and clearly it was not his alone. Byron was exciting, but Sen was scared of the consequences of his sexual politics. European romanticism had given rise—among Bengali men—to a critique of the Bengali home and its conjugal arrangements. Part of this critique was indeed a desire for "liberated" women, which Sen had taken to heart. However, like many of his contemporaries, Sen feared that the emphasis on the autonomy of the individual in domestic and conjugal life could only make men profoundly unhappy in a land where the bonds of the extended family with its own long history seemed indissoluble. This is one of the few places in the book where Sen admits both his despair as a romantic individual and the practical utility—from a pragmatic point of view—of the ideal of self-sacrifice that he found elaborated in Bengali literature. That is why his idealization of the Bengali family—his family romance that underpinned the "national literature" project—ultimately rests on an impulse that is far from romantic. For he says, quite plainly: "Indeed, in a place where a joint and undivided family system required a man to live and eat together with all his near kinsmen, it would be impossible to live in harmony without elevating the domestic duties into the highest virtues" (*H*, p. 879). This was not a spiritual defence of the arrangements that *actually existed* within Bengali homes. It was more a desperate search for a romanticized "tradition" that would make room for the new individual, both male and female, while allowing the pursuit of happiness in a land in which the past did nothing to validate the European-humanist ideal of the individual. For Sen and his cohorts the only solution seemed to be a romanticized notion of the extended family itself. It would be harmonious enough to accommodate within its regime the companionate form of marriage, and yet it would tame any potential for mixing sexual liberty with political liberty. Such a family would act as a metaphor for the nation. Without families of this kind, as Sen put it, "it would be impossible to live in harmony." His talk of "elevating the domestic duties into the highest virtues" was actually making a virtue out of perceived necessity (*H*, p. 879).

In Bengali literature, Sen reasoned, the "virtue" of domestic duty had been preached for generations. This literature—and not the existing arrangements in the family—seemed to offer spiritual solutions to what ailed

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the spirit of the English-educated, romantic Bengali man. Sen writes: "No other nation has ever given so high a value to domestic duties, identifying them so closely with the spiritual" (*H*, p. 879). It was literature—its folk, medieval, and Vaishnava traditions, and the translated Puranas in particular—that had supplied "inexhaustible examples" of "obedience to parents, loyalty to the husband, devotion to brothers and sacrifices to be undergone for guests, servants and relations" (*H*, p. 878). In fairness to Sen, it must be said that he did not preach patriarchal values—the examples of Sita, Savitri, Damayanti, Shakuntala, and Behula—only to women. He preached to all, both men and women, ideas of a harmonious system of hierarchy and of voluntary and willing submission to authority facilitated by the feeling of devotion (*bhakti*) to duty. "Rama who left the throne . . . , and Visma, who took the vow of celibacy, . . . Hanumana [who] typif[ied] devotion to a master, and Ekalavya to the religious preceptor" were the ideal characters he held up to his male readers (*H*, p. 879).

With hindsight, we know that the fear that Sen and his contemporaries had of "unbridled" individualism in conjugal life destroying the social fabric of the extended family overstated reality. But that is the wisdom of hindsight. What we have to notice is that the desire for harmony in the extended family and in national life in general may itself have been a modern ideal that developed only after the coming of British rule. Pre-British Bengali literature surely does not fight shy of conflict between family members, nor does it preach any general message of harmony. The ideas that allowed many to see the caste system, the patriarchal extended family, the village, and other collectivities as potentially harmonious entities owed themselves, I suspect, to European education. To press into the service of domestic harmony the "virtue" of self-sacrifice and loyalty to one's social superiors was a modern development. While it battled what it saw as Western individualism it was itself most likely a product of the romanticism and classicism that came with the West.

4. From the Ruins of "National Literature"

The romantic project of a "Bengali national literature" came apart in the 1920s and 1930s as demand for a separate Muslim homeland gained momentum in the subcontinent as a whole. The politics of Bengal now got drawn into the politics of the rest of India. Besides, women, the working classes, and the lower castes all increasingly asserted themselves in political and public life using the language of rights. Literature alone could not produce the "national spirit" anymore. That the formation of a Bangiya Sahitya Parishad (Bengal Literary Academy) in 1893 did not address the needs of Bengali-Muslims became clear from early in the second decade of the twen-

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tieth century. A near-absolute breach between Hindu and Muslim intellectuals took a long time to develop. But as early as 1911 Muslim intellectuals in Calcutta set up a separate Muslim Literary Association (Muslim Sahitya Samiti) as they found the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad too Hindu for their taste. The renowned linguist Muhammad Shahidullah, who was one of the organizers of the new association, thus remembered the circumstances leading to its formation. His prose clearly speaks of Muslim and Hindu Bengalis as "us" and "them":

> I passed the B.A. examination in 1910. I came in contact with several enthusiastic young men at that time. Among them were Mohammed Mozammel Huq, Mohammad Yakoob Ali Chaudhuri, Maulvi Ahmad Ali, Muoinuddin Hussain, and others. . . . Some of us were members of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad. There was no discrimination made there between Hindus and Muslims. Yet our literature was so poor that taking part in their meetings made us feel like the way the poor feel inside the houses of their wealthy relatives. We felt wanting in spirit. We thought we should have our own literary association without cutting off relations with the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad. With this purpose in mind, a meeting was convened on 4th September 1911 at No. 9, Anthony Bagan Lane, Calcutta, at the house of Maulvi Abdul Rahman Khan. . . . I was unanimously elected the secretary.[34]

The formation of the University of Dhaka in 1921 gave a further boost to Muslim literary activities and aspirations. Besides, constitutional reforms initiated between 1919 and 1935 by the colonial government introduced limited but critical forms of electoral politics that only deepened and intensified the competitive currents between Hindus and Muslims and between the upper castes and the so-called "Depressed classes."[35] During this period the Indian National Congress became a "mass" political organization under the leadership of Gandhi, and the Muslim League found "mass" political methods for pressing home the demand for Pakistan. Politics itself was no longer—except in the idealist proclamations of Gandhi and Gandhians—about transcending interest. It became more a calculus of creating "general" interests around class, caste, religious, or "secular-Indian" communities. Attributed more to interest than to spirit or virtue, politics would increasingly come to be seen as arising not from "spirit" but from the dynamic of

34. Muhammad Shahidullah, "Bangiya muslim sahitya patrika," in *Shahidullah rachanabali,* ed. Anisuzzaman, 4 vols. (Dhaka, 1994), 1:471. For more details on this event and on later developments, see Khondkar Siraj ul-Huq, *Muslim sahitya samaj: Samajchinta o sahityakarma* (Dhaka, 1984), pp. 93–177.

35. See Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-Century Bengal* (New Delhi, 1999).

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the social structure. This was a dynamic that emergent new disciplines of the social sciences were far more suited to study and address than art or literature. One could politicize literature, distinguish political from so-called nonpolitical literature, or read literature politically in the interest of social justice. But that was different from literature itself being by definition a fount of the political. The rational procedures of the social sciences now seemed much better suited to address national-political needs.

It is not surprising that Dinesh Sen's works should lose their charm for many younger Bengali intellectuals in this period. To them, Sen seemed like an intellectual dinosaur, representing increasingly obsolete methods and assumptions of research in reconstructing the past of the Bengali people. More than that, he seemed out of step with the moves the main nationalist party, the Indian National Congress, had taken. Sen's politics of projecting a "national Bengali identity" now sounded to some as a special plea for a Bengal that excluded from its territory other Indians who did not speak Bangla. His position would thus be seen by some as opposed to the ideals of a pan-Indian nationalism with which the Congress increasingly confronted the Muslim demand for a separate homeland. The linguist Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay strongly criticized the idea of "Greater Bengal," an expression that Sen used as the title of his last book. "We cannot afford to forget," said Chattopadhyay, "that the land of Bengal is part of India; that Bengalis are part of a cluster of Indian nationalities and have no other identity separate from India." "Bengali culture," he said, himself forgetting the Bengali Muslim, "is part of Indian culture—there is no Bengali culture opposed to the latter."[36]

Perhaps the most severe criticisms of Sen came in the columns of a Calcutta-based journal started in 1924, *Shanibarer chithi* (Saturday's Mail), devoted to humorous, witty, but often hurtful criticisms of writers and literary fashions.[37] The poet Jasimuddin in his reminiscences of Sen in this period captures with sympathy and compassion the extent of Sen's marginalization and his harassment at the hands of young and irreverent researchers.[38]

36. Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay, "Brihattara banga," *Bharat-sanskriti* (Calcutta, 1939), pp. 155–75. This essay was dropped from the second edition of the book. Thanks to Gautam Bhadra for bringing this essay to my attention. The same criticism was made (probably by the same author) in an unsigned essay entitled "Itihash noy" (Not History) that ridiculed Sen's *Brihat banga.* See Anon., "Itihash noy," *Shanibarer chithi* (Aug.–Sept. 1936): 1301–15. Bengali Muslim nationalism that repudiated both Hindu-Bengali nationalism *and* any idea of a larger "Indian nationalism" eventually gave the lie to Chattopadhyay's contention as well.

37. An informative account of the history of this journal is provided in Shonamoni Chakraborty, "*Shanibarer chithi*" *o adhunik bangla sahitya* (Calcutta, 1992).

38. Jasimuddin mentions Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay among the leaders of the group opposed to Sen. See Jasimuddin, *Smaraner sharani bahi,* pp. 61, 68. For a recent critical appreciation of *Brihat banga,* see Gautam Bhadra, "Itihashe smritite itihash," *Visva-Bharati patrika* (July–Sept. 1994): 134–43.

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Around 1928–29 and 1936–37, the journal published several articles virulently criticizing Sen, including a long essay published in installments and sarcastically entitled—in mock-Persian—*Dineshnama* or the "The Tale of Dinesh." These essays and reviews sometimes acknowledged the pioneering role that Sen had played as a historian of Bengal. But they made fun of his many factual errors, faulty argumentation, his tendency to go on publishing new editions of *Bangabhasha o shahitya* without familiarizing himself with recent research, and, above all, the obsolete sentimentalism of his method. The accusations amounted to the charge—and the *Chithi* said it literally in some of its issues—that what Sen had written was not objective and scientific history; it was more like imaginative literature. Sen's book *Brihat banga* (Greater Bengal), they asserted (not altogether unreasonably), was not history but "a novel."[39]

The language of criticism in *Shanibarer chithi* was often harsh and sometimes vicious.[40] But the charges stuck and were repeated by others. Nalinikanta Bhattashali, a respected historian of Bengali literature, acknowledged the value of Dinesh Sen's pioneering work in his introduction to a 1936 edition of the Bengali *Ramayana.* But that was about the only praise that Bhattashali could offer Sen. "The gap," he added,

> between histories of literature written at the time of the first publication of *Bangabhasha o sahitya* and those written now is as large as the gap between the year 1837 in the reign of Victoria and 1901. . . . *Bangabhasha o sahitya* is now in its sixth edition. It is true that Dineshbabu has attempted to mend [the book] clumsily—and within the limits of his knowledge and intelligence—by adding some recent findings here and there. But the structure of the book has not changed and it has, as a whole, acquired an appearance as terrible as that of the patchwork quilt of a *fakir.*

Bhattashali's colorful prose did not stop there:

39. See the following entries: "Dineshnama" (The Tale of Dinesh), "Bangabhasha o sahitya," *Shanibarer chithi* (Mar.–Apr. 1929): 142–80, 214–26, and "Dineshnama" and letter by Bhimrul Sharma, *Shanibarer chithi* (Apr.–May 1929): 312–36, and (May–June 1929): 440–44. These essays described Sen as a "flatterer" of powerful people at the university while also being a "tyrant" to his subordinates. His "histories" were termed fables and his autobiography mocked. The letter from Sharma described Sen as "moon-struck" and pointed to several factual errors in his books. Among the other issues of *Shanibarer chithi* that targeted Dinesh Sen were (Oct.–Nov. 1928): 826; (Dec. 1928–Jan. 1929): 994–1004; (Feb.–Mar. 1929): 998–1004; (Apr.–May 1936): 1002, 1022–23, 1143–44; (June–July 1936): 1128–31; (Aug.–Sept. 1936): 1301–15, 1338–42; (Sept.–Oct. 1936): 1612–13; and (Nov.–Dec. 1936): 192–93. *Shanibarer chithi* used to be dated according to the Bengali calendar. I have converted the months and years into those of the English calendar.

40. The essay on *Brihat banga,* for instance, indicated the "thickness" of Sen's head by suggesting that it be used as a nutcracker. Some of the articles referred to in note 39 accused him of stealing other people's research and of committing academic fraud.

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> Dineshbabu blithely ignores the majority of researchers and their research of the last thirty years. He does not discuss if he has read them, discussed them, or why he considers them unacceptable. Without including any of these [discussions] in the book, Dineshbabu simply tows along this worn-out, sluggard boat of his—filled with goods whose time has expired—from the station [in English in original] of one edition to another! Such a strange phenomenon can happen only in a lifeless country like ours.[41]

5. A Question of Method

Let us put aside for the moment the harshness of the criticism that Sen faced.[42] Bengali intellectuals are, after all, no strangers to vicious criticism. Let me at the same time ignore the lack of wisdom in Sen's indefensible refusal to update research and methods and in his tendency towards sentimentalism. Nor do I want to pursue here the point that Muslim nationalists never fully identified with the Hindu-romantic project. I want to focus instead on a question about method that the criticism of Sen, in effect, raised. It seems to me that what was at issue in this story was an important question about what constituted the archives for collective pasts and how such archives could be accessed. For those who, like Sen and others of his generation, had seen literature as quintessentially political, the past was constituted, ultimately, not merely by historical evidence but also by emotional and experiential recollections of the past. The past in that sense could fuse with the present. It was inhabitable in spirit. Sentiments and emotions were thus a part of the method of both constituting and accessing a collective past.[43] For the generation that painstakingly built up the principles of "scientific" history and dispassionate analysis, however, the archives lay in

41. Nalinikanta Bhattashali, introduction to *Mahakabi krittibasrachita ramayan,* ed. Bhattashali (Dhaka, 1936), pp. i–viii. I owe this reference to Gautam Bhadra.

42. For the sake of record, I should mention that Sajanikanta Das, the founding editor of *Shanibarer chithi,* later repented his action in print. His posthumously published book, *Bangla gadtashityer itihash* (History of Bengali Prose) (Calcutta, 1975), says in its dedication: "Once, driven by the frivolity of youth, I wrote 'Dineshnama' in *Shanibarer chithi.* Not only did the generous-hearted Dinesh Chandra forgive me in his old age, he even blessed me from his heart. Sadly, I could not make amends when he when he was alive. I do so now." Thanks to Gautam Bhadra for this reference.

43. Scholars who have continued in Sen's footsteps have never felt embarrassed about treating literature sentimentally. See, for instance, Shankariprasad Bosu, *Chjandidas o bidyapati* (1960; Calcutta, 1999), p. 28:

> It was in his heart, and not his head, that our teacher Dinesh Chandra received the inspiration for writing a history of literature. So the history he wrote was marked by a certain indispensable element of sentimentalism. What looks like uncontrolled sentimentalism from one point of view, sounds like a song [celebrating] the surrender of the self when approached

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pieces of objective evidence coming down from the past. One's subjective feelings were merely personal. I am not suggesting that this change happened in a day. Nor do I mean to say that "objective" history writing did not have its own share of romances. I am simply drawing a contrast between two different modes of constituting and accessing the past in order to highlight a point in my argument.

That sentiments were a part of the romantic method Sen employed in constituting the past can be demonstrated easily with reference to the problem known as the Chandidas puzzle in the history of Bengali literature. For a long time, the name Chandidas was known among students and other readers of "medieval" Bengali literature. It was known from the biographies of the popular fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Bengali religious saint Chaitanya that he loved listening to song-poems composed by a Chandidas. The discovery of new texts in the second decade of the twentieth century, however, and a growing appreciation of historical methods of research produced a problem for historians of Bengali literature. It began to look likely that there had been many different poets who signed off their compositions with the same name of Chandidas (with different prefixes). Their proper identification, therefore, called for historical circumspection and careful collection and reading of evidence. Manindramohan Bose, a lecturer at the University of Calcutta, posed the problem in a series of essays published in the journal of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad around 1925 or 1926, pointing out ways in which some aspects of this puzzle could be solved by attending to particular aspects of the evidence.[44]

Sen refused to see the problem in historical terms. It was not that he was intellectually incapable of appreciating the methodological issues under discussion. In endorsing the first volume of Bose's edition of the poems of Deena Chandidas (one of the Chandidases), Sen referred approvingly to "the famous historian at the University of London, Professor L. D. Barnett" who allegedly advised "students to exercise skepticism in historical discussions" so that they did not accept any existing conclusions without proper examination. Skepticism, and not sentimentalism, said Sen, was central to "scientific research." "Writing guided by emotions and enthusiasm," Sen wrote almost echoing his critics, "may be poetic and attractive to the heart but it does not amount to scientific research." He commended Bose for following the path pointed out by Barnett.[45]

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from another. In entering the world of Chandidas's life, I will respectfully follow my predecessor Dinesh Chandra.

44. See Manindramohan Bose, introduction, *Deena chandidaser padabali,* 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1938), 2:9. See also the chapter called "Chandidas shamashya" in Muhammad Shahidullah, *Bangla sahityer katha: Madhyajug,* 3 vols. (Dhaka, 1966), 2:40–68.

45. Quoted in Bose, "Opinions on the First Volume," *Deena chandidaser padabali,* 2:1–2.

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Yet consider his own response in *Bangabhasha o shahitya* to the charge that the identity of any particular Chandidas needed to be established through careful research and that, by treating the different Chandidases as though they were one person, he had in fact distorted history. Sen retreated into a passage he had written in the very first edition of the book and dug his heels further into, as it were, the treacherous grounds of sentimentalism. In the very first edition (1896), he had said, with reference to Chandidas: "The reader will forgive me. The historian is meant to hide his own opinion in describing a subject. I am unable to follow that rule. . . . I would not have discussed ancient Bengali literature if it had not been for the enchanting power of Chandidas's poems. Hence . . . the many digressions."[46] In the second edition (1901) he made a few changes to this paragraph. After the sentence, "The reader will forgive me," he added: "Chandidas's poems have been the source of many a tear of joy and sorrow since my childhood. I cannot tell if the intense emotions of my heart will make it impossible for me to present a proper discussion of his poems."[47] The rest of the paragraph more or less remained the same. But faced in the 1920s with growing discussions of the need to deploy historical and linguistic methods of reasoning, particularly in relation to Chandidas, Sen made his defiance of history ever more obstinate and willful. This particular paragraph was now expanded to incorporate the following: "For many years now I have recited the name of Chandidas as if it were the Gayatrimantra [a mantra Brahmins are expected to recite every day]. No one, not even my wife and sons, are as close to me as this great poet. Nobody in the world has given me more pleasure than he. From this acquaintance cultivated over half a century, I can now tell if a poem bears his [characteristic] 'tune.'" And then came the final antihistoricist declaration: "I have no desire to undertake linguistic analysis and solve the Chandidas-puzzle by distinguishing between the 'real' Chandidas, Boru Chandidas, Dvija Chandidas, the Chandidas who worshipped [the goddess] Bashuli, or the Chandidas who loved a young woman. To me, there is only one Chandidas and one alone."[48]

Again, overlooking for now the stridency of Sen's tone, it seems clear that sentiments or emotions were quite central to Sen's method of constituting the past. The past had to be made palpably present.[49] This is precisely

46. Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Bangabhasha o shahitya,* 1:121.

47. Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Bangabhasha o shahitya,* 2d ed. (Calcutta, 1901), pp. 186–87.

48. Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Bangabhasha o shahitya,* 6th ed. (Calcutta [?], 1926[?]), pp. 213–14.

49. There seems to be an interesting overlap—or maybe a homology—between this romantic way of collapsing the analytical distance between the past and the present and what is sometimes observed in studies of religious practices. I have in mind Carolyn Dinshaw's stimulating discussion of "queer history"—"where past and present collapse in a now" connecting lives that are only "queerly co-extensive." Dinshaw discusses the case of the medieval saint Margery Kempe who literally treated Jesus' death "as if he died this same day" (Carolyn Dinshaw, "Always Historicize? Margery Kempe Then and Now" [unpub. ms.], 2003).

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what would be resisted by the new science of history. It was not that the historian was not allowed any sentiments, but these could not be part of his or her method. If social-scientific rationality was what was political, then the nonrational could only be part of the personal. It could have a public life, but not as part of one's method. This is best shown by contrasting Sen's methods of approaching the past to those of the younger historian Niharranjan Ray. Ray's magnum opus *Bangalir itihash: Adiparba* (A History of the Bengali People: The First Phase), first published in 1949, is now considered a classic. As an individual, Ray appears to have been as romantic a person as Sen. Indeed, in explaining the genesis of his book, he writes a paragraph (in the preface) that is strongly reminiscent of a certain passage in Dinesh Sen's autobiography. It begins on this note: "Whatever the amount of study, observation, reflection, discussion and research that has gone into this book, it was not a quest for knowledge that led me to write it." Ray continued:

> The intoxicating, irrepressible and restless urges and the intense emotions of the vow of patriotism made me travel from one end of Bengal to the other in my early youth. In the peasant huts of this vast Bengal, at her river-ghats, in her paddyfields, in the shadow of her banyan trees, at the heart of her cities, on the sandbanks of the Padma, or on the crest of the waves of the Meghna—I saw a particular form of this country and its people and I loved it. . . . It was the inspiration of this love that made me start writing this book. . . . Ancient history is as true and alive for me as today's present. It is that live and true past, and not just a dead skeleton, which I have sought to capture in this book.[50]

A romantic nationalism thus propelled Ray just as much as it had Sen in their respective endeavors. They both saw in the beauty of the Bengal countryside the "home" of the Bengali spirit that romantics had celebrated in the songs and poems they wrote in the 1890s through the 1910s. Yet there was a profound difference between their methods. Sen's sentiments, as I have said, were also part of his academic method. The two could not be

50. Niharranjan Ray, *Bangalir itihash: Adiparba* (1949; Calcuta, 1993), p. xix; hereafter abbreviated *BI*. The corresponding passage in Sen's autobiography reads:

> The sound of conch shells and bells every morning and evening, the sweet smell produced by burning of incense and sandalwood, the ever-emergent red colour of lotus flowers—it was as if they all filled up Bengal villages, their marketplaces, fields, ghats, and pathways, with an atmosphere of devotion to God. I began to consider the dust of every village of my motherland sacred. This was nothing like the [new-fangled] emotion of nationalism or patriotism on my part. Nor was it a feeling produced by simply copying the English. Truly did every particle of dust of this land make my tears flow. An indescribable feeling of attraction made me fall in love with the land of Bengal. [Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Gharer katha o jugashahitya,* p. 120]

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separated. Niharranjan Ray, however, clearly separated them. What he said in the preface was no doubt a part of his motivation for doing the research he did, but it was not a proclaimed or conscious part of his method of analysis. Ray began his book explaining why Bengali histories written by his predecessors such as Haraprasad Shastri, Akshaykumar Maitreya, Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, Ramaprasad Chanda, and others did not quite amount to a "history of the Bengali people." For a "true introduction" *(jathartho porichoy)* to the history of the whole "way of life" of Bengalis needed the application of a properly "historical form of reasoning" *(itihasher jukti)* and a self-conscious framework of "cause and effect relationships" (*BI*, p. 5). Man was both a product and the creator, said Ray, of "state, society, religion, art, literature, science, economic organisation and so on" (*BI*, p. 5). Hence the key to the past could not be just a sentimental apprehension of it. Sentiments had to be replaced by a sociological and a secular-humanist sensibility insofar as methods were concerned. When he uses poetry to enliven his discussion—as at the end of the section discussing the "geographical destiny" *(bhougolik bhagyo)* of the Bengali people where he cites some lines by the poet Premendra Mitra—Ray takes care to distinguish between a historical fact and poetic fancy. Poetry lends flourish to his exposition, but it is not an inherent part of his method. "This geographical destiny [of the Bengali people]," writes Ray quoting Mitra, "has assumed a beautiful poetic form through the pen of a twentieth-century Bengali poet" (*BI*, p. 71). But the "beautiful poetic form" was still poetry and not a "fact."

Ray's prose was thus part of a group of writings that inaugurated the moment of social-scientific history in the historiography of Bengali identity. He himself showed an awareness of this. He writes:

> From towards the last third of the nineteenth century, beginnings were made in some parts of Europe—in Austria and Germany in particular but to some degree in France as well—in the study of the history of social development from a scientific point of view. Consequently, scholars everywhere have accepted that the larger social arrangements of different countries at different times depend on the mode of production of wealth and its distribution. Varieties of race, class, and social stratification grow up according to this mode. [*BI*, p. 8]

Was this a mild statement of certain Marxist principles? Perhaps. But it was mild enough to be considered a general statement of a "scientific" approach to history by the doyen of Indian historians, Sir Jadunath Sarkar, no Marxist himself. Blessing the book with a foreword, Sir Jadunath made it clear that what made this book properly historical were its attention to evidence and its focus on change and evolution. He welcomed the idea of historical de-

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velopment that underlay the book and praised its "attempt to understand how the Bengali people have gradually evolved into the modern-day Bengalis."[51]

Arguments about sociological laws, about evidence and objectivity, about crafting—but not experiencing—the past eventually won the day in Bengali debates about historical methods. Prabodhchandra Sen's classic study of the history of Bengali historiography remarked that the sense of the past that informed Bengali nationalists until about the Swadeshi movement (1905) had a dreamlike quality to it. Those histories, said Sen, were inspired more by a "dream-filled" (*shvapnomoy*) vision of Bengal than a "truth-filled" (*satyamoy*) one.[52] Dinesh Sen was seen as one of the major practitioners of this genre. Acknowledging his many qualities as a researcher, Prabodhchandra Sen found the following major fault in Sen's method: "his litterateur-like proneness to being sentimental swamps the disinterested objectivity of the historian in many places." On the other hand, he praised Niharranjan Ray for his capacity, precisely, to "free" his methodological objectivity from "the lure of the sentiment of patriotism and other feelings."[53]

In the end, Dinesh Sen conceded defeat. In 1935, a few years before his death, an old and retired Sen published two very large volumes entitled *Brihat banga* (Greater Bengal), a history of Bengali culture from its mythical beginnings and its alleged spread to far outside India. The book was badly received by the contemporary critical public in Bengal. Sen's own preface to the book shows how apologetically he now offered his writing to his readers, aware that academic fashions had moved on. So had the politics of knowledge changed that called such fashions into being. He realized that the question of methods was a question of how one related to the larger world. He could see that the talk about "scientific" history bespoke a certain sense of cosmopolitanism—a sense that one was part of a global research-community—that his older, once equally global and cosmopolitan but now-discredited, romantic methods could no longer evoke. "I am not a lover of the world," he said now, "I remain hopelessly provincial." "If that makes someone think that I am not suited to this age, that I am a [proverbial] frog-in-the-well left behind by the ever-increasing and ever-progressing [surge of] civilisation, then I will not protest for I am indeed that." Sen was now forced to recognize the disciplinary distinction between literature

51. Jadunath Sarkar, foreword to *BI*, p. x.

52. Prabodhchandra Sen, *Banglar itihash-sadhana* (Calcutta, 1953–54), p. 132.

53. Ibid., pp. 88, 135. See also Shyamali Sur's discussion of romantic, nationalist histories in her *Oitihashik chinta o jatiyotabaader unmesh: Bangla 1870–1912* (Calcutta, 2002), chap. 3.

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and history. "I have spent my life with Bengali language and literature. I am unknown in the field of history," he said. "[The new] professors [of history] will find fault with me at every step. . . . Perhaps the language of this book is not that of the scientific, judicious, disinterested historian. . . . This book, in particular, has not been written only with the historians in mind." The nation now was a profoundly unstable category in his prose. Notice, for instance, within the space of the same paragraph the figure of "the ordinary people of Bengal" that metamorphoses into "Hindus"—a minority among the Bengalis, even though Sen refers to them as the majority:

> One of my aims is to arouse in the hearts of the ordinary people of Bengal a love for their own country. They will not be attracted to dry and arid research. . . . European writers generally pass in silence over the play of the supernatural in accounts of Christ's birth. . . . [But] they become overly scientific while discussing our history. . . . This kind of research only hurts the sharp sensitivities of the mute majority of our common people. But it behooves the Hindu writer to keep in mind the way the Hindu people look on the Tulasi plant or the iron bangle on the hands [of the married woman]. Otherwise the educated will get cut off from the rest of the community.[54]

6. Romantic Archives

I come to my final point. Archives, it seems to me, are politically constituted. Bengali literature, for someone like Sen, was a very special kind of archival resource with which to remake society. It had three characteristics. By self-consciously idealizing life, literature acted as a repository of time-tested virtues and values and thus furnished material for the making of the self. Second, by its very nature it tended to be popular and therefore national if not always democratic. And, finally, it was different from the cold facts of the history recorded in official documents, stone inscriptions, and coins in that by appealing to a continuity of emotional experience it defeated any attempt at an objectivist separation of the past from the present. However, it was not Sen's personal will that made this stance powerful when he first wrote *Bangabhasha o shahitya.* It was the romantic nationalism of the day that gave validity to his position and made literary endeavor an intrinsic part of a national project. It was similarly a change in the understanding of what was innately political (that is, in the best national interest) about knowledge—the rationality of social-science procedures—that made Sen's

54. Dinesh Chandra Sen, preface, *Brihat banga* (1935; Calcutta, 1993), pp. 30–33.

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method look quixotic, if not downright "lunatic" (as his critics said), in the twentieth century.

The romantic sentiments of the Swadeshi period—once political and later merely personal—continued to live on as poetry, as precisely the expression of deep but personal emotions. A host of poets who rose to prominence between 1900 and 1920—among them Kalidas Ray, Jatindramohan Bagchi, Karunanidhan Bandyopadhyay, Kumudranjan Mallik, and later, of course, Jasimuddin—found in the countryside an eternal Bengal to celebrate in their poetry.[55] Quite a few poems of this genre found their way into our school texts. One abiding theme of this poetry was a haunting desire on the part of poets to return in their future lives to the land of Bengal. How commonplace this sentiment of return was may be judged from the opening lines of a popular love song of the 1940s: "In a hundred years, may you and I return to a home in this very land."[56] Poetry and songs thus remained critical to the transmission of romantic sentiments once forged in the workshop of nationalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A critical nodal moment in this history of transmission of certain kinds of sentiments remains Jibanananda Das's book *Rupasi Bangla* (Bengal the Beautiful), a collection of poems composed in the early 1930s and published posthumously in the mid-1950s. Clinton Seely's sensitive study of Jibanananda Das, *A Poet Apart,* helps us to see the connection between the literary movement and sentiments that Dinesh Sen stood for in the 1890s and the 1910s and the poems on the subject of Bengal written by Das in the 1930s. The poems of *Rupasi bangla* are famous for expressing the poet's desire to be (re)born in Bengal. This motif recurs through many of the sonnets: "When I return to the banks of the Dhansiri, to this Bengal, / Not as a man, perhaps, but as a *salik* bird or white hawk."[57] Notice how, in these lines, Bengal has a palpable presence. The poet could point to it as it were and say, "*this* Bengal." But where was *this* Bengal to which Das yearned to return? It surely was not the Bengal of the realistic or "scientific" historian or the geographer. "*This* Bengal" had the same kind of presence as Chandidas had for Dinesh Sen. In fact, the sense of Bengali history that marks these poems is in part the one that Dinesh Sen espoused. Further, research and interpretation of the kind pioneered by Sen had a critical role in fostering the

55. A discussion placing Jasimuddin's poetry in this context is to be found in Selima Khalek, *Jasimuddiner kabita: Alankar o chitraprakash* (Dhaka, 1993), chap. 1.

56. The song was written by Mohini Chaudhuri, a well-known songwriter of the period. The singer Juthika Roy recorded it to a tune composed by Kamal Dasgupta. See *Abismaraniya gitikar mohini chaudhuri,* ed. Pabitra Adhikari (Calcutta, 2000), p. 79.

57. Quoted in Seely, *A Poet Apart: A Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das (1899–1954)* (Cranbury, N.J., 1990), p. 92; hereafter abbreviated *PA*.

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imagination embedded in Das's poems. These poems are replete with references to "folk" stories of the kind Dinesh Sen collected and to the medieval *mangal kavyas,* in particular to *chandi mangal* and *manasa mangal,* literary texts devoted to celebrating the powers of the folk goddesses Chandi and Manasa. The characters Chand and Behula from these *kavya*s and stories of their journeys live in an intimate relationship to the poetic sentiments expressed in *Rupasi bangla.* Experience is indeed what fuses the past with the present into an eternal history. As Seely says: "Chand from Champa and Behula establish a community of experience [with the poet], for back then they had seen Bengal's beauty just as the poet sees it now" (*PA*, p. 93). A mythical sense of a continuous Bengali history helps Das to create a Bengali present. Seely writes:

> Jibanananda also refers to historical and mytho-historical figures: Ballal Sen, a king of ancient Bengal; Rajaballabh, whose glory was destroyed by the Kirtinasa river; Arjuna, from the *Mahabharata* epic; the Buddha and Confucius; the renowned medieval Bengali poets Mukundaram, Chandidas, Ramprasad, and Rayagunakar (Bharat Chandra Ray); and the man in whose memory Jibanananda had written one of his first poems, "Deshabandhu" Chitta Ranjan Das. [*PA*, pp. 94–95]

However, this was, of course, not a simple return of the spirit of Dinesh Chandra Sen. If Das's sonnets recuperated and rehearsed some of the sentiments underlying Sen's description of Bengal's pasts, they also displaced them on to a new context. For Das's enunciation of these sentiments had none of the nationalist, programmatic, and optimistic fervor of Dinesh Sen's exposition. These poems also carried an acutely historical sense of a twentieth-century "crisis" in Bengali lives. It was as if by holding the historical and the nonhistorical together that Das could heal the wounds of the historical present. It also has to be noted that Das's sentiments remained personal. He never thought of this healing as a collective project:

> When the evening breeze from the Aswathha tree touches
> the blue forests of Bengal,
> I wander alone in the fields: it is as if the crisis in
> Bengal's life
> has ended today.[58]

It is interesting, however, that despite Das having been described as "the most solitary poet" of Bengal, these poems, so distant from any properly historical or political sensibility, should, from time to time, enjoy a public-

58. Jibanananda Das, *Jibanananda Daser kabyagrantha* (Jibanananda Das's Books of Poetry), 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1981), 1:201.

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political life that Das himself never coveted. "Certain readers," writes Seely, "consider *[Bengal the Beautiful]* Jibanananda's most successful book. In 1971, during the Bangladesh liberation war, poems from this collection became viewed as expressions of the quintessential Bangladesh for which the Mukti Bahini ('freedom army') fought. Twice during the war's nine months, new editions of *Bengal the Beautiful* were published" (*PA*, p. 97).

We do not know how Das's Muslim readers in Bangladesh read these poems during their liberation war. Did they read into his poems the folk-yet-Hindu literary allusions that filled them? Perhaps not. The return of Das may not have signalled the return of an interest in the Bengali literature of the so-called middle period. What, then, did return with Das in the 1970s, about forty years after these poems were written? An answer is suggested by an obscure poem by a not very well-known poet, Narayan Sarkar, who penned the following poem in Calcutta in the tumultuous sixties. The poem was published in 1973 in a Bengali collection of contemporary revolutionary poetry. It was entitled, echoing Das, "I Shall Return" and thus foretold a return of Jibanananda Das himself to a political context very different from that of his own time. Sarkar himself named this context. He described his poem as voicing the desire of those who had been killed by police during the "recent [1964] food movement in [West] Bengal". Here is the poem:

I shall return again to this Bengal
From the dark of sleep has called the Ichhamati [river]
The soil is moist with our blood
It is as if the Bhagirathi has drawn the outlines of a
mother's kiss
On the green, sad banks of Bengal wet from the waves of the
Jalangi.

Return I shall.

When the smell of paddy
Surrounds the taste of sun—and the Ichhamati
The Bhagirathi
The Jalangi
Of March
Wild with the offerings of life
Call like some eternal friend in the darkness of sleep

I shall return
"Smitten by Bengal's rivers and fields."[59]

59. Narayan Sarkar, "Abar ashiba phire," in *He swadesh agnimoy swadesh,* ed. Kamalesh Sen (Calcutta, 1973), p. 60.

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A political presence of the poetry of *Rupasi bangla* speaks through the entire body of this poem. The title quotes from the famous sonnet by Das: "When I return to the banks of the Dhansiri, to this Bengal." The Jalangi is one of the rivers mentioned in this sonnet that describes Bengal as "moistened by the Jalangi River's waves." Expressions such as "the taste of sun" are strongly reminiscent of Das's poetic idiom. And the last sentence of the poem is a direct quotation from the same sonnet in *Rupasi Bangla:* "When again I come, smitten by Bengal's rivers and fields" (quoted in *PA*, p. 93). Note how a political moment—the liberation war in Bangladesh or the 1964 food movement in West Bengal—can bring back a romantic access to a collective past, for the sentiments expressed here are no longer merely personal. It is precisely through these sentiments that one inhabits a time that collapses the past and the present. It is true that in Sarkar's poem there is no reference to characters from Dinesh Sen's literary world, characters remembered in the lines of Das's original sonnets. No talk here of Chand the merchant or of Behula the truly chaste and devoted wife of medieval Bengal. Bengal here is represented by the poetic names of her rivers—Jalangi, Bhagirathi, Ichhamati. The Bengali past itself combines with death in the image of a dark depth from where the rivers, now constituting some kind of primeval past, send forth their primeval call. That call does not belong to the past. It comes from the future, a future that at the same time is a return. The martyrs will return from an ancient darkness, the poet tells us, when they hear the call.

Bengali poetry thus, I suggest, acts as the place where a collective memory of a now-discredited romantic sense of the political—the sense that once enabled Dinesh Sen to look on his history of Bengali literature as a nationalist, that is, political, exercise—is archived. But, in likening this historical process of transmission of sentiments to the process of archiving, I do not mean to say that this archive is simply there in any objective sense for us to make use of it. It is, in that sense, not the archive the historian usually draws on in writing exact and accurate narratives of the past. Nor is it an archive in a metaphorical sense. Bengalis on both sides of the national divide unwittingly make a political archive of their romantic legacy only in the process of their involvement in actual political struggles. Otherwise, the legacy is simply there, as printed words, as aesthetics, as historical monuments to Bengali romanticism, once alive but now dead and cold. In this mode, they can only be revived as merely one's personal sentiments. To proclaim an individual sentiment as something political would indeed be sentimentalism. It is only during "mass" political struggles—be it the freedom struggle in Bangladesh, the Naxalite movement in West Bengal, or the Swadeshi movement that desired but failed to mobilize the masses—that the legacy of the romantic moment of our fraught nationalism, mediated by a long

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line of Bengali poets, may come back to haunt our own political sentiments. When such haunting happens, our being-political can no longer be reduced to any one understanding of what it means to be political. Both romantic and social-science imaginations jostle in that space.

The legacy of romantic nationalism, however, cannot mean yet another quest for a Bengali identity. As I have tried to show, there never was a stable Bengali identity. A quest today for the Behulas and the Kalketus of yore can only come to grief. The question is: What politics can we reconstitute out of our romantic investment in the language? The politics I have in mind, however, is not programmatic. The making of a romantic literary legacy into a political archive is not something we can will into being. Romantic thoughts no longer furnish our analytical frameworks, but the inheritance of romanticism is built into the Bengali language. Our everyday and unavoidable transactions with the poetry of the language may thus be compared to a practice of vigilant waiting—waiting *actively* for the return of the moment of a political yield. This vigilant and active waiting can itself be political—listen to the romantic voice of a Bengali communist poet who captures its spirit:

This condition of life
is not for the whole year—
only the few months when it rains.

The blazing fire of the dry wood
will cook rice in no time.
And
whatever is there
will come back into view
sharp and clear.

When the rains depart
we will put out in the sun
everything that is wet
woodchips and all.

Put out in the sun
we shall
even our hearts.[60]

60. Shubhas Mukhopadhyay, "Rode Debo," *Shubhas Mukhopadhyayer srestha kobita* (Calcutta, 1976), pp. 116–17.

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