

Resistance on the Stage and Beyond: The Role of Women in the Cultural Conferences of East Pakistan, 1948-57

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Abstract

Since the birth of Pakistan in 1947, there had been a consistent assault on the language, heritage and culture of East Bengal by the Pakistani government. The authoritarian and aggressive behaviour of the central administration of Pakistan and its adherents in the cultural sphere had pushed the Bengali community into a crisis of existence. In response, intellectuals, artists and cultural activists of East Pakistan became involved in the struggle to preserve Bengali cultural heritage and freedom. As part of this cultural resistance, literary and cultural conferences were organised in various cities of East Pakistan from 1948 to 1957. Women's participation was evident in these literary-cultural conferences. Despite their courageous participation in cultural activities that surpassed contemporary social conservatism, their role remained largely unexplored. Therefore, there is a need to evaluate women's role separately in the cultural movement of that period. The aim of this article is to explore and analyse the diverse and multifaceted contributions of women in the literary and cultural conferences of East Pakistan. This paper presents an analysis of women's participation and performance in the literary and cultural conferences of East Pakistan. The research utilizes both primary and secondary sources that include autobiographies, newspapers, interviews of cultural movement organisers and artists, books and scholarly articles. Following a historical research method, the paper concludes with the findings that nonconformist activism, spontaneity, unprecedented courage of Bengali-women were significant contributors in the cultural resistance movement against the oppressive government of Pakistan.

Key words: Women, Cultural conference, Cultural identity, Hegemonic statecraft, Cultural resistance, Bengali Nationalism

Introduction

In the final phase of British rule, the significant Muslim majority population of East Bengal enthusiastically contributed to the formation of an Islamic state, Pakistan. However, due to several reasons, their disillusionment occurred shortly after its establishment. While there was political marginalization and economic deprivation, it was primarily the cultural sphere where the central administration and its adherents' intolerant and aggressive behavior led to the cultural unification programme that immediately created a crisis of existence for the Bengali community. To preserve their Bengali identity and cultural individuality, the Bengali nationalist activists orchestrated

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several arrangements, i.e., establishing cultural organisations, initiating institutions, organising seminars-symposia, etc. Cultural conferences were one of these activities. Along with their male counterpart, women of East Pakistan, took part, and contributed in multiple roles to those conferences despite the presence of a discouraging conservative patriarchy in the then society.

From 1948 to 1957, several literary and cultural conferences were held in East Pakistan.¹ These literary and cultural conferences, held in Dhaka and other cities, played a significant role in fostering Bengali nationalism and contributing to its development in East Pakistan. These conferences created a strong foundation for nationalist consciousness, which spread rapidly through political movements and struggles. Each conference contributed significantly to the characterisation of the cultural progress of the eastern part of Pakistan. These conferences were organised amidst various political barriers and reactions. As a result, cultural conflicts in the society became more apparent through their debates and counter-debates.² These literary and cultural conferences had seen significant participation by women. East Pakistan Women's role in the conferences resembled as a protest against the hegemonic Statecraft. This paper sets out to discover the nature of women's participation in the literary and cultural conferences of East Pakistan. Other objectives of this research are to identify the fields in which the women contributed in the conferences, how far women participation contributed to the success of the conferences, and how much they contributed in the greater movement of Bengali nation to protect its cultural heritage and identity.

This research utilizes both primary and secondary sources. In this research, contemporary daily, weekly, fortnightly, monthly, trimestral reports of newspapers, periodicals, cultural organization's newsletters, magazines, memoirs, letters, and diaries have been used as primary sources. Additionally, interviews of cultural movement organisers and artists by researcher, narratives, autobiographies have also been used as primary sources. Research articles, essays, books, and websites on related subjects have been consulted as secondary sources. This qualitative research has been conducted following historical research methodology.

1 East Pakistan was officially started to be named in Pakistan's First Constitution of 1956. Before 1956, this eastern part of Pakistan was popularly called as East Bengal. In this Article, this region will be majorly presented as East Pakistan and in some cases as East Bengal.

2 Rezwan Siddiqui, *Purba Banglar Sangskritik Sangathan o Sangskritik Andolon 1947-1971*, Gyan Bitarani, Dhaka, 2002, p. 5.

The paper is divided into two sections. Theoretical framework being one of the two, includes how cultural resistance becomes a form of resistance, and women get involved. The other section covers the narratives of the conferences each of which has been separately presented and analysed in the light of the theoretical insights. Narratives and analysis of the cultural conferences will strive to showcase the role of the women in the greater Bengali cultural movement against Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

Resistance may be generally defined as 'to act against'. In a broader sense, resistance has been defined as 'a politics of contention on a more fundamental scale'³ that involves active efforts to oppose, fight, and refuse to cooperate with modes of control. Resistance is not in itself a right but constitutes the rightful defense of a right, of freedom or of property.⁴ According to postcolonial theories, resistance covers commonly four models and of those four, the third model advocates the liberation of the colonized people through the materialist and collective resistance against the colonial power. This model instructs struggle and even violent resistance against the colonizers.⁵ In the history of anticolonial struggle, we have fairly enough examples of both violent and non-violent resistance. Mahatma Gandhi, Daniel O'Connell, K. Nkrumah are the exponents of non-violent movements against the colonists. Cultural resistance is undoubtedly a non-violent form of resistance.

Cultural resistance is defined normally as a rejection of dominant culture of a society. This type of resistance may come out as subcultures or minority culture within a state against its dominant form of culture. In twentieth century, youth subcultures like Rastafarians, Rockers, Mods, Teddy Boys, Skinheads, and Hippies were a reaction against the dominant culture of USA and UK society.⁶ Apart from this, cultural resistance is defined partly as the rejection of foreign cultures and the celebration of indigenous traditions, spread across the globe as European colonies in Africa and Asia were overturned by struggles of national liberation. But in the case of a multi-cultural

3 Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*, Cambridge University Press, London. 2013, p. 4.

4 Robert J. C. Young, 'The Right to Resist', Oboe Annalisa and Shaul Bassi, eds., *Experiences of Freedom in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures*, London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011, p. 51.

5 N. B. Bhandari, 'Resistance and Postcolonialism: A Critical Review', *Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 22, February 2022, Department of Political Science, Prithvi Narayan Campus, TU, Pokhara, Nepal.

6 Stephen Duncombe, 'From Cultural Resistance to Community Development', *Community Development Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 4, Oxford University Press, October, 2007.

state, cultural resistance as a non-conformist reaction to state's cultural unification program, experiences quite a different scenario. Cultural majority may even face challenges of cultural extinction because of hegemonic state policy. In that case, question of cultural freedom within a state convincingly appears to be grounded. Nobel winner Albert Camus once wrote that, "Freedom is the concern of the oppressed, and her natural protectors have always come from among the oppressed... freedom is not a gift received from a State or a leader but a possession to be won every day by the effort of each and the union of all."⁷ So, freedom, cultural or otherwise, demands united response to its opponent. Antonio Gramsci observed very inquisitively that power resides not only in government institutions, but also in the ways people of the state make sense of their own world. Hegemony is certainly a political and cultural process. Being armed with culture instead of guns, he argued, one fights a different type of battle. Whereas traditional battles were 'wars of manoeuvres', cultural battles were 'wars of position'.⁸

Pakistan, since its inception has been a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural dominion. So, cultural unification was its State programme to preserve her identity and integration. That being the case, the State, from the very beginning, exercised its authority and power to ensure her 'hegemonic position' in people's psyche. In response to this undemocratic attitude, different local cultural groups of Pakistan reacted sharply. This reaction was in fact a clear resistance to the attack on culture, of which language is the most important part. Within this theoretical bracket, the cultural resistance movement of the Bengali nation which sought cultural freedom from Pakistan, can be explained. And certainly, the role of Bengali women, being an integral part of that united movement as well as a part of the society, could be examined.

East Pakistan Literary Conference (Purbo Pakistan Sahitya Sammelan) Dhaka, 1948

The first literary conference (December 31, 1948-January 1, 1949) in East Pakistan was organised at the Curzon Hall in Dhaka under the initiative of the then provincial Health Minister Habibullah Bahar Chowdhury. The reception committee formed for the purpose of the conference included Habibullah Bahar as its president and Ajit Kumar Guha and Syed Ali Ashraf as its secretaries. On December 5, 1948, during a meeting of the committee, various branches and their presidents were nominated for

7 Albert, Camus trans. Justin O' Brien, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, Vintage International, New York, 1995, pp. 89, 97.

8 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, eds., International, New York, 1971, pp. 229-39

the conference, among whom was Shamsunnahar Mahmud. She presided Children's Literature Session.⁹

On December 7, during the second meeting of the reception committee, a decision was made to organise a cultural event on the second day of the conference, i.e., January 1, 1949, and for this purpose, a committee was formed. This committee included Habibullah Bahar, Syed Ali Ahsan, Nazir Ahmad, Abdul Ahad, Abbasuddin Ahmed, Farrukh Ahmad, Fateh Lohani, Mujibur Rahman Khan, Shamsul Huda, Bedaruddin Ahmed, Leila Arjumand Banu, Momtaz Ali Khan, Mohammad Kasem, and Kazi Motahar Hossain as prominent members. The committee members convened a meeting at the Fazlul Haq Hall Auditorium of Dhaka University on December 17, 1948, at 3.30 o'clock in the afternoon to organise a discussion on cultural events. Leila Arjumand Banu was present at this meeting.¹⁰

On Friday, December 31, 1948, at 2:30 pm, the programme of East Pakistan Literary Conference commenced at Curzon Hall. Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah presided over the first session, where among others, poet Golam Mustafa and Habibullah Bahar delivered their speeches. Golam Mustafa spoke about the aspirations of the newly formed state and the future of literature and the responsibilities of writers. Habibullah Bahar discussed Dhaka's heritage and the arts and literature of East Bengal. Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, the session chair of the conference, in his speech, mentioned the historically amalgamated literature, culture, and heritage of Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists in Bengal. He further emphasized that Bengali language should be the medium of the literary practice of East Bengal.¹¹ Through his words, the individuality of Bengali language, literature, and culture in East Bengal became apparent. These words profoundly influenced public sentiment at that time.

On the second day of the literary conference, i.e., January 1, 1949, a proposal for the formation of an effective organisation was put forward. This proposal included the names of Habibullah Bahar, Syed Ali Ahsan, Syed Ali Ashraf, and Shamsunnahar Mahmud as members of the organisation. Due to the absence of the names of some prominent Bengali progressive young writers and intellectuals, both of Dhaka and beyond, Professor Abul Kashem with several other individuals opposed the names of the proposal. At that time, Habibullah Bahar withdrew his name from this organisation. Additionally, on the session of the second day, Professor Abul Kashem proposed the

9 Rezwan Siddiqui, *Purba Banglar Sangskritik Sangathan o Sangskritik Andolon 1947-1971*, Gyan Bitarani, Dhaka, 2002, p.169.

10 Ibid., p.170.

11 *Daily Azad*, 1 January 1949, pp. 1, 6.

recognition of Bengali as the state language of East Pakistan, and this proposal was unanimously accepted.¹² The concluding part of the conference featured a cultural event. Leila Arjumand Banu was among the others who contributed to organise the cultural event.¹³

Primarily organised in the backdrop of the declaration of Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan, this conference aimed at pacifying the burning resentment in the minds of Bengalis. However, its main objective was the revival of Pakistani literature.¹⁴ Through this conference, along with other achievements, distinct thoughts regarding Bengali language, literature, and culture in East Bengal were vividly reflected. It's very interesting to note that though this literary conference was organised under the initiative of the provincial minister as well as supported by the government, instead, this conference gave birth the unavoidable question of self-identity of the Bengalis of East Pakistan. This development was very indicative for the days to come. In the later conferences, this conflict became more pronounced and gradually progressed the end. Although the participation of women in this conference was limited, the role of women in conducting literary sessions and organizing cultural programmes of the conference is significant. It may seem very poor today, but in reality it was a ground-breaking phase on the part of the women as well as for the society which created the path for others to follow.

The East Pakistan Cultural Conference (Chittagong, 1951)

Progressive cultural organizations like Sanskriti Parishad and Prantik Nabonatya Sangha were established in Chattogram in the aftermath of the partition of India. Through the joint efforts of these two organizations, a four-day cultural conference was organised at the Harikhola Maidan in Chittagong from March 16-19, 1951.¹⁵ The main organisers of this conference were Abul Fazal, Syedul Hasan, Mahbub Ul Alam Chowdhury, Shawkat Osman, Harunur Rashid, TP Beg and several others. Professor Motaher Hossain Chowdhury and renowned artist Kalim Sharafi played significant roles in it. Professor Abul Fazal, one of the exponents of the Buddhir Mukti Andolon (Movement for the Freedom of Intellect), accepted the role of president in the

¹² *Weekly Sainik*, 9 January 1949, p. 1.

¹³ Badruddin Umar, *Purba Banglar Bhasha Andolon o Tatkalinn Rajniti*, 1st edition, Jatio Grantha Prakashan, Dhaka, 1995, p. 144.

¹⁴ Israel Khan, *Muktijuddher Potobhumi*, Kashban Prakashan, Dhaka, 1999, p. 62.

¹⁵ Mahbub Ul Alam Chowdhury, "Sanskritika Andolone Chattagrama", *Chattagrama sanskritika andolana pragatishila dhara*, [Ed. Mahbub Hasan], Smaranik, Chattagrama, 1991, p. 8.

conference.¹⁶ Although there were possibilities of the participation of many writers and intellectuals from Dhaka in this conference, *Morning News* and *Daily Azad* newspapers characterised the conference as a Communist gathering, which led to create confusion and opposition from writers and intellectuals from Dhaka to participate in the conference in Chittagong. However, Professor Abul Fazal remained undeterred. A detailed description of this incident can be found in his autobiography. He wrote:

I don't know by whose instigation suddenly 'Azad' and 'Morning News' started propagating against the conference. All the professors and dignitaries from Dhaka who had agreed to read papers or chair sessions at the conference were scared and backed out. Even at the last moment, they refused to come. The organisers of the conference were all accused of being Communists. ... I said: Even if only three people come, we will still hold the conference. We won't back down. Let whatever happens in the future happen. Workers seemed to regain their enthusiasm. Preparations began anew. I was told: If nobody comes from Dhaka, it won't look good. I said: Even if nobody else comes, Sufia Kamal will definitely come. ... The next day, I boarded a plane to Dhaka. It was my first time flying in an airplane, all funded by the conference. When Sufia Kamal heard everything, she said: Alright, I'll go.¹⁷ [My translation]

Abul Fazal on receipt of the approval of Sufia Kamal decided on March 16 and 17 as the date of the literary conference. In this conference, Abdul Karim Sahityavisharad was the main chair and Sufia Kamal was nominated as the chief guest. Alauddin Al-Azad, Mustafa Nur-Ul Islam, and many other prominent literary and cultural activists from Dhaka participated in this event. From Kolkata, Satyendranath Majumdar, Seababrata Biswas, Salil Chowdhury, Radharani Devi, Suchitra Mitra, and Hena Barman joined the cultural conference.¹⁸ The speakers at the conference included Abdul Karim Sahityavisharad, Satyendranath Majumdar, Sufia Kamal, Motaher Hossain Chowdhury, and Abul Fazal. The conference defined the literary heritage of East Bengal and its organisers claimed themselves as the successors of ancient Bengali literature and the modern works of Rabindranath and Nazrul.¹⁹ Abdul Karim Sahityavisharad emphasized the importance of acquiring knowledge about the history, culture, and traditions of the country. Sufia Kamal stressed the significance of prioritizing domestic literature and culture over foreign literature. In her keynote speech, she said:

16 Muhammad Ali Chowdhury, "Bhaṣa Andolone Caṭṭagrama: Rajanaitika, samajika o sanskṛtika prekṣapaṭa", *Bangla Akademi Patrika*, 1402 (Bengali calendar), Dhaka, p.25.

17 Abul Fazal, *Rekhachitra*, Gatidhara, Dhaka, 2015, p. 221.

18 Muhammad Ali Chowdhury, "Bhaṣa Andolone Caṭṭagrama: Rajanaitika, samajika o sanskṛtika prekṣapaṭa", *Bangla Akademi Patrika*, 1402 (Bengali calendar), Dhaka, 1402, p. 25.

19 Saeed-Ur Rahman, *Purba Banglar Rajniti-Sanskriti o Kobita*, Dhaka Biswabidyaloy Prakashana Sangstha, Dhaka, 2001, p.36.

... The development and expression of the mind lie in the arts and culture. Therefore, one must first understand the language of the country, its literature, and culture. In one word, to understand the essence that enriches the mind and soul, one must discover everything within oneself first. If one can discover oneself, then there is no need to rush towards internationality. Isn't it ridiculous to suddenly jump into internationality without knowing oneself, without knowing one's own mind, like swimming across the ocean? Literature and art have always created the eternal mind of humanity, whether at home or abroad, across continents. Know your home first, then everything outside will become easier for you. Look towards the nature of your country, towards the people of your country. Get acquainted with the joys and sorrows of the people of the country, love them. Only then will their joyful and sorrowful life be captured in your writings. There is no magic spell more powerful than love for creation!²⁰ [My translation]

Sufia Kamal, in her keynote address, firmly declared their unwavering stance amidst the ongoing conflict, indirectly hinting at the government's hostile attitude, saying, "Life's journey lies along inaccessible paths. So, when we see the frown of difficulty, we shall not retreat. Everyone can create chaos, but not everyone can create flowers. You have organised various events within this conference to bloom flowers. May your efforts be meaningful and successful."²¹ [My translation] Abul Fazal concluded his speech by saying, "Humanity and the practice of human values are culture. Only this practice can make life beautiful and healthy."²² [My translation] Some proposals were also accepted at the conference. Among the accepted proposals, highly mentionable was the creation of literature to advance social life and providing freedom for the development of language, education, and culture in favor of peace and against communalism. Even though unable to attend, Muhammad Shahidullah, Annadashankar Roy, and Muhammad Enamul Haque expressed their wishes for the success of the conference through messages. Notable events of the conference included art exhibitions and musical performances. The artworks of Zainul Abedin, Shafiuddin Ahmed, Quamrul Hassan, and Anwarul Huq were displayed in the art exhibition. In the musical performance, Salil Chowdhury's song 'War or Peace' was presented. Farida Hasin also participated in the musical performance. She presented the song 'Sheta Kopoter Pakhaya Pakhaya Shanti Ase' (Peace comes on the wings of white doves).²³

This conference had a profound impact on the cultural dynamism of East Bengal. It may be treated as the first anti-establishment and progressive cultural conference in former East Pakistan. Especially, this conference created a sense of awareness to uphold the dignity of the Bengali language, Bengali culture, and tradition. In this

20 *Weekly Begum*, April 1, 1951.

21 Ibid.

22 Rezwan Siddiqui, *Purba Banglar Sangskritik Sangathan o Sangskritik Andolon 1947-1971*, Gyan Bitarani, Dhaka, 2002, p.187.

23 Ibid., p. 188.

regard, Badruddin Umar wrote, "After the East Pakistan Cultural Conference was held in Chittagong, various cultural gatherings were held one after another in East Bengal on occasions like New Year (Pahela Baishakh), Rabindra Jayanti, Nazrul Jayanti, death anniversaries of Iqbal (Allama) and Sukanta Bhattacharya. Almost every event of recitation and musical performances enhanced the vibrancy of these conferences."²⁴ In this way, the cultural conference of Chittagong opened a new chapter in the progressive cultural movement of East Bengal. Sufia Kamal's presence and her speech as the chief guest at the conference undoubtedly served as a guiding light for the new cultural consciousness of East Bengal.

The East Pakistan Cultural Conference (Cumilla, 1952)

Organised by the 'Pragati Majlis' a cultural organization, the East Pakistan Cultural Conference was held in Cumilla on August 22, 23, and 24, 1952. Local Forward Bloc, Youth League, Communist Party, Revolutionary Socialist Party and some other progressive political and cultural organizations actively supported the organisers. Various regional cultural organizations also participated in the conference. From Chittagong, the Prantik Nabamatya Sangha, Railway Artists' Association from Sylhet, Muslim Literary Society from Dhaka, Art Group, Agrani (Pioneer) Artists' Association, and Dhaka University Cultural Society participated in the conference.²⁵ Cumilla Victoria College, Surlok, Shailarani Girls' School, and Kanya Shikshalaya also participated in this conference. A reception committee was formed to make the conference successful and meaningful. Prof. Ajitnath Nandi, Prof. Abul Khair Ahmad, and Prof. Ashutosh Chakraborty were elected as the chairman of the reception committee, general secretary, and treasurer respectively. A booklet titled 'Ahbana' (An Appeal) was published to propagate the objectives and purposes of the Cumilla Cultural Conference.

In response to their invitation, representatives from Cumilla, Chittagong, Sylhet, and Dhaka participated in the conference. Among the female representatives who joined the conference from Dhaka were prominent figures such as Sufia Kamal, Sanjida Khatun, Lily Khan, Noorjahan Morshed, and Raushan Jamil.²⁶ Among the female representatives who participated in the conference from Chittagong were Moni Imam, Arati Datta, Joushan Ara Rahman, Jahanara Jubilee, Deepti Khastagir, Sukti Khastagir,

24 Badruddin Umar, *Purba Banglar Bhasha Andolon o Tatkalin Rajniti*, 3rd edition, Jatio Granth Prakashan, Dhaka, 1995, p. 19.

25 Mahbub UI Alam Chowdhury, *Sanskriti: Jatio Mukhoshri*, Palok Publishers, Dhaka, 2006, p. 20.

26 Mamun Siddiqui, *Cumillai Bhasha Andolon*, Sahitya Prakash, Dhaka, 2015, pp. 123-24.

Meera Sen, Sadida Khanam, Juthi Parial, and some others.²⁷ Their participation in every event of the cultural programme of the conference, especially the folk music session, is noteworthy. In the conference, an art exhibition was arranged by Dhaka Art School at the Theosophical Building in Cumilla Town Hall. The responsibility for the art exhibition was undertaken by Quamrul Hassan, a teacher at Dhaka Art School. The inauguration of the art exhibition was done by Sufia Kamal.²⁸

The inauguration of the East Pakistan Cultural Conference held in Cumilla on August 22, 1952, was declared by principal Akhtar Hamid Khan. The flag was hoisted by Abdul Karim Sahityavisharad, the main chair of the conference. The students of Shaila Rani Girl's School performed the national anthem in the flag hoisting ceremony. Then, the chairman of the reception committee, Ajitnath Nandi, and the main Chair of the conference, Abdul Karim Sahityavisharad, gave written speeches. On the second day of the conference, that is, on August 23, Mahbub Ul Alam chaired the morning session, and Sufia Kamal chaired the literary session. In her speech as the literary session chairperson, she said, "... I love my language so much that I don't feel it lacks anything. Is there any deficiency in my language if it has produced so much literature and poetry? From Alawal to Daulat Kazi, from Rabindranath's era to the post-war era of Nazrul, haven't the poets of Bengali language contributed enough to Bengali literature, poetry, music, and culture?"²⁹

Actually, the commencement of the new victorious paths of the Bengalis and a new consciousness that was born through the Language Movement, has been repeatedly echoed in her speech. She highlighted the mother tongue to be the medium of literary practice and identified that the true meaning of literature was to create joy.

In addition to articles, poetry readings, and recitations, original discussions on various topics were also conducted at the conference. Women participated in the article reading sessions. In the assembly, Laila Samad presented an article titled "Culture-Crisis," Begum Hashmat Rashid on "Women's Progress," Raushan Yajdani on "Folklore of Mymensingh," and Mrs. Jinat Gani presented an article titled "On Dance." Abdul Gani Hazari, on behalf of Basudha Chakrabarty presented an article titled "In Search of Culture." Rashida Dolly Khan also participated in the recitations.³⁰

27 Mahbub Ul Alam Chowdhury, *Smritir Sandhane*, Palok Publishers, Dhaka, 2008, p. 457.

28 Rezwan Siddiqui, *Purba Banglar Sangskritik Sangathan o Sangskritik Andolon 1947-1971*, Gyan Bitarani, Dhaka, 2002, p. 194.

29 Mamun Siddiqui, "Sufia Kamaler ekaṭi duṣprapya abhibhaṣaṇa", *Sufia Kamal Smarakgrantha*, [Ed. Anisuzzaman and others], Sufia Kamal Smarakgrantha Sampadana Parishad, Dhaka, 2011, p. 293.

30 Mamun Siddiqui, *Cumillai Bhasha Andolon*, Sahitya Prakash, Dhaka, 2015, p.131.

During the second session of the conference, cultural events were held every evening at Mahesh Prangan's Natmandir. On the first day, the atmosphere was filled with Nazrul songs, inaugurated by Mahbub Ul Alam Chowdhury. The second day featured Rabindra Sangeet. After the musical event, the play 'Jobanbondi' (The Testimony) by Bijon Bhattacharya was staged by Dhaka University Sanskriti Sangsad. Despite oppositions in staging the play, it was successfully performed. Rokeya Kabeer, Laila Samad, and Nurunnahar acted in this play. Regarding this, Obaidul Haque Sarkar said, "In the play 'Jobanbondi,' Mrs. Rokeya Kabeer, Mrs. Laila Samad, and Miss Nurunnahar performed. These women were not only educated but also highly respected in society. Their presence on the stage in Cumilla naturally created a stir in the women's circle."³¹ Furthermore, the play 'Arunodoyer Pothe' (On the Path to Sunrise) was also staged. On the third day, there was a strong presence of folk songs. The Prantik Nabanatya Sangha of Chittagong presented folk songs composed in their local language. The East Pakistan Artists' Association performed the Dance-dramas 'The Farmer's Story' and 'The Laborer.' Notable artists from East Pakistan Artists' Association were Gowhar Jamil, Shipra Devi, Puspa and Mamata. Their performances were acclaimed during the cultural event. Among those who participated in the cultural event were Mira Das, Nilima Kar, Shipra Devi, Rani Roy, Mridula Chatterjee, Ayesha Siddika, and prominent figure Latifa Rashid.³² Through songs, plays and other cultural activism, women played a role in making the people of East Bengal aware of their cultural self as well as the ongoing cultural oppression by Pakistan government. A proposal was made at the conference to express mourning for the death of poet Mohitlal Majumdar and Urdu writer Rashid Bahar, and tribute was paid to the martyrs of the Language Movement. Another proposal condemned the attempt to suppress the cultural and Bengali Language Movement in the country.

The Cumilla conference was a pioneering step in the cultural development of the country. Anisuzzaman, participating as a representative of the weekly newspaper *Nawbelal*, wrote, "There was no doubt about the special expression of the non-communal Bengali consciousness acquired through the Language Movement."³³ This conference had a significant impact on the cultural workers of East Bengal. A generous, non-communal and humanitarian atmosphere prevailed throughout the conference, reflected through all activities. Ahmed Sharif wrote, "In songs, dances, dramas, speeches, articles, poems, and even in the competition of the poets, the same

31 Obaidul Haque Sarkar, "Prasanga: Cumillar Manche Meyeder Agamana", *Alakta*, May-October, 1978, pp.86-91.

32 Mamun Siddiqui, *Cumillai Bhasha Andolon*, Sahitya Prakash, Dhaka, 2015, p.133.

33 Anisuzzaman, *Kal Nirabodhi*, Sahitya Prakash, Dhaka, 2003, p.200.

tone resonated. That tone is the tone of humanity—the tone of mass awakening; the tone of the beautiful, healthy life."³⁴ Kolkata's daily newspaper *Jugantar* stated about the conference, "The initiators of the cultural conference have left their mark on every event, showing their acquaintance with this unique non-communalism. This conference has disseminated the inspiration of a new worldview among the youth of East Bengal. These culture enthusiasts are the carriers of the spirit of the new era."³⁵ In essence, the conference played a significant role in reminding the people of the country of their separate culture and their own language. The conference fulfilled a vital role in this regard. Among the speeches, presented articles, recitations, art exhibitions, and cultural events, there was an indirect focus on the emergence of nationalist consciousness. The participation and role of women in making the conference successful were particularly noteworthy.

East Pakistan Literary Conference (Dhaka, 1954)

At the initiative of the progressive cultural workers of East Bengal, the East Pakistan Literary Conference was organised in Dhaka from April 23 to 26, 1954. The most notable event in 1954, following the historic victory of the United Front in the general election of East Bengal, was this literary conference. Although the conference was scheduled to be held from April 23 to 26, it was extended until April 27. The Curzon Hall of Dhaka University and Bardhawan House were used as the main venues of the conference. Principal Abdur Rahman Khan was the president of the organizing committee of the conference, and Abu Jafar Shamsuddin and Abdul Ghani Hazari served as joint secretaries. The inaugural session of the conference was chaired by Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, and researcher Abdul Gafur Siddiqi presided over the main conference. The preparation for the conference was reported by the *Daily Azad*, stating that more than four hundred representatives from various districts of East Pakistan would participate in the conference, among whom more than fifty were women representatives. Accommodation for women representatives was arranged at Eden College.³⁶ Women from various districts of East Bengal and West Bengal participated in this literary conference. From Chittagong, Fauzia Samad, Kamela Sharafi, Maleka Azim, Jahanara Jubilee, Hosne Ara Makki, Deepti Khastagir, Supti Khastagir, Moni Imam, Bebi, Munni, Khaleda Rahman, and Jowshan Ara Rahman came to participate in this literary conference.³⁷ Furthermore, among the participants in the literary

34 Ahmad Sharif, "Ebarera sanskr̥tika sammelana", *Insafa*, 12 Ashwina 1359 (Bengali calendar), Dhaka.

35 Saralananda Sen, *Dhakar Chithi*, 1st edition, Muktohdhara, Dhaka, 1971, p.216.

36 *Daily Azad*, 23 April 1954, p. 6.

37 Jaushon Ara Rahman, *Smritikotha Ekti Ojana Meye*, Nobojug Prakashani, Dhaka, 2005, 84.

assemblies and cultural events were Sufia Kamal, Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Anwara Bahar Chowdhury, Saleha Mahmud, Meher Kabir, Hosne Ara, Laila Samad, Mahmuda Khatun Siddika, Sanjida Khatun, Farida Bari Malik, and Mahbuba Hasnat, among others. From West Bengal, Radharani Devi, Pratibha Basu, and Debi Prasad Chattopadhyay also participated the literary conference. Expressing regret for being unable to attend and wishing success for the conference, Suchitra Mitra sent her message.³⁸ A leading figure in this conference was Sufia Kamal. Pratibha Mutsuddi, being a student representative from Chittagong College, saw Sufia Kamal in different role and activities and thus remembered:

I saw the poet for the second time at the literary conference held at Curzon Hall in Dhaka in 1954. ...Poet Sufia Kamal was a leading figure in this event. I participated in this conference as another student representative from Chittagong College. Witnessing the poet's dedication and strong role in this grand conference left me impressed and inspired.³⁹

Like previous conferences, Sufia Kamal played a significant role in this conference as well. She chaired various sessions of the conference. It is worth noting that the participation of women in the early conferences was limited, but later the participation of women in the conferences increased significantly. The reflection of which can be seen in this conference.

In the morning of April 23, 1954, at nine o'clock, the announcement of the East Pakistan Literary Conference was made at Dhaka University's Curzon Hall, which lasted for five days. The inaugural ceremony of the literary conference began with the rendition of the song 'Rashtrobhasha Bangla Chai' (we want Bengali to be the state language) by Abdul Latif. Then, two minutes of silence were observed in homage to the martyrs of the Language Movement. Among the various programs of this five-day conference were lectures on Bengali language, literature and culture, recitations of articles, group songs, folk songs, dances, folk dramas, solo performances, shadow plays, exhibitions of art and books, and poetry recitations. On the first day of the conference, nearly two hundred representatives, participated from Chittagong, among whom approximately twenty were women.⁴⁰ It must be understood that in the conservative social environment of the 1950s, participation of twenty women was a very remarkable feat.

At the inaugural ceremony of the conference, Mohammad Shahidullah delivered a speech. On the first day's second session of the conference, essays and articles were

38 *Daily Azad*, 24 April 1954, p. 6.

39 Pratibha Mutsuddi, "Smritite Kobi-Janani Sahasika", *Sufia Kamal Smarakgrantha*, [Ed. Anisuzzaman and others], Sufia Kamal Smarakgrantha Sampadana Parishad, Dhaka, 2011, p.194.

40 *Daily Azad*, 24 April 1954, p.6.

read by Showkat Osman, Munir Chowdhury, Mohammad Hossain, and Jasimuddin. At eight o'clock in the evening, the announcement of the cultural event came from session chair Ajit Guha. The rendition of the song "Ekushe February Ami Ki Bhulite Pari" was the first among other performances. Abdul Latif and his team, along with Chiranjib Sen, led the Chittagong-based Prantik Nabanatya Sangha's artists' group in the cultural event. Sheikh Lutfur Rahman, Malay Ghosh Dastidar, the Agrani artists' group of Dhaka, and the Prantik Nabanatya Sangha of Chittagong presented group songs. Among the artists of the Prantik Nabanatya Sangha, Kalim Sharafi, Chiranjib Das Sharma, Achintya Chakraborty, Haripal, Jahanara Rahman, and Deepti Khashtagir earned praise for their performances in group songs.⁴¹ At the end of the cultural event, the local artists of Prantik presented a dance drama titled "Shilpir Nobojonmo" (The Birth of the Artist).

On the second day, April 24, the first session began at half past eight in the morning. The topic of this session was folk literature and children's literature. Poet Ramesh Shil presided over the session on folk literature, and Bande Ali Mia was the chairman of the session on children's literature. Ahmed Sharif, Alauddin Al Azad, and Habibur Rahman read articles at this session.⁴² The second session started at three in the afternoon. Munir Chowdhury presided over the session on contemplative literature. Essays were read by Mofazzal Haider Chaudhuri, Sayed Ali Ahsan, Nazmul Karim, and Kabir Chowdhury. At eight o'clock in the evening, under the chairmanship of Mohammad Barkatullah, the cultural event began. The chief guest at this event was Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani. In his speech, the chief guest encouraged literary figures to unite for the literary movement. At the cultural event, Prantik Nabanatya Sangha performed a new play called 'Bibhaav.' Mani Imam and Kamela Sharafi acted in this play.⁴³

On April 25, at half past eight in the morning, the third day's session began. Muhammad Abdul Hye presided over the session on language and literature, and Muhammad Quadrat-i-Khuda was the president of the science branch. Meher Kabir read an article along with others at this session.⁴⁴ In the evening session, Zainul Abedin chaired the session on fine arts and handicrafts. Essays were read by Shafiqul Hussain, Quamrul Hassan, Nazir Ahmed and Laila Samad. Laila Samad read an article on literature and women's society (Sahitya o mahila samaj).⁴⁵ Kazi Motahar Hossain

41 Rafiqul Islam, *Dhaka Biswabidyalayer 80 Bochor*, Anannya, Dhaka, 2012, p.146.

42 *Daily Azad*, 25 April 1954, p.6.

43 Mahbub Ul Alam Chowdhury, *Smritir Sandhane*, Palok Publishers, Dhaka, 2008, p.412.

44 *Daily Azad*, 26 April 1954, p.2.

45 *Daily Azad*, 28 April 1954, p.1.

chaired the session on contemporary arts and literature. At half past seven o'clock in the evening, Shamsunnahar Mahmud chaired the cultural event. Artists from Dhaka and Chittagong presented Nazrul songs at the cultural event. Alongside others, Mahbuba Hasnat also participated in the Nazrul song performance. Then, the Prantik Nabanatya Sangha of Chittagong performed the 'Nabajiboner Gaan' (Songs of New Life), and Lokosanskriti Parishad (Folk Culture Council) of Chittagong performed the shadow play 'Itihaser Chhera Pata' (Torn Pages of History), which captivated the audience. This shadow play depicted scenes of high price hike of salt, the famine in Khulna, the language movement, and the region's recent general elections. After that, the play 'Kafer' (The Infidel) by Khan Bahadur Aminul Haq, directed by Fazlur Rahman and Laila Samad, was staged.⁴⁶

On the fourth day, April 26 of the East Pakistan Literary Conference, the session began at half past eight in the morning. Abul Mansur Ahmed chaired the session titled 'Our Cultural Crises'. In this session, Laila Samad presented an article on 'Literature and Women's Society.' The delegates' session began at three o'clock the same day. Abdul Gafur Siddiqui chaired the delegates' session. At this meeting, a committee was formed to organise a literary conference every year and to maintain communication and support for various literary and cultural movements in different districts of East Bengal. In the evening, Showkat Osman chaired the cultural event. At the event, artists from Dhaka University Cultural Society presented a portion of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Meghnadbadha* under the direction of Shariful Alam. Then, under the direction of Kalim Sharafi, Sanjida Khatun, Farida Bari Malik, and Maleka Aziz participated in Rabindra Sangeet. The play 'Kabar' (The Grave) was staged by the Cultural Society. Afterward, Chittagong artists performed folk dances, and artists from Prantik Nabanatya Sangha performed group songs and a drama titled 'Arunodayer Pothe'. Kamela Sharafi and Mani Imam acted alongside others in the drama.⁴⁷

The main objective of the fifth day's conference, on April 27, was to hold an open discussion among the literary figures of East and West Bengal. They discussed issues and solutions related to poetry-literature, philosophy, and science. Debiprasad Chattopadhyay discussed 'Issues and Solutions of Philosophy and Science' in the conference. Radharani Devi spoke at this meeting. In the evening, the conference concluded with a cultural event featuring poetical songs by Ramesh Shil and his team.⁴⁸ In the light of progressive Bengali nationalist consciousness, the East Pakistan Literary

46 Ibid.

47 *Daily Azad*, 28 April 1954, p.1.

48 Ibid, p.6.

Conference was a significant step at that time. Women who participated in the literary society and cultural events played an important role in earning the success of this conference.

Pakistan Cultural Conference (Tangail, 1957)

On the 9th and 10th of February 1957, a two-day Pakistan Cultural Conference was held in Kagmari of Tangail, under the leadership of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani. This historic conference came to be known as the Kagmari Cultural Conference. At the same time, on the 7th and 8th of February, there was also a council assembly of the Awami League, chaired by Maulana Bhasani. The preparation committee for the conference was chaired by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, and Abu Jafar Shamsuddin was appointed as the coordinator. To give the Kagmari Conference an international dimension, artists from various countries were invited through various embassies, including renowned intellectuals from all over Pakistan, as well as representatives from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, India, and Egypt. One of the prominent features of this colorful conference was the creation of memorable and descriptive archways or entry gates bearing the names of notable personalities. Around fifty attractive archways were constructed along the road from Mirzapur to the conference venue at Santosh in Kagmari. An archway for Mrs. Roquiah Sakhawat Hossain was constructed by the organisers.⁴⁹

The cultural conference began on the evening of February 8th. It was inaugurated by the former Chief Minister of East Pakistan, Aaur Rahman Khan. On February 9th and 10th, important articles on literature, culture, economics, philosophy, medicine, science, and technology were presented and discussed in three sessions. In the morning session on February 9th, among others, Begum Jebunnessa Hamidullah participated in article presentations. She presented an article titled 'The Role of Women in the Modern Society'. On February 10th, under the title 'Cultural Relations between East and West Pakistan', Kulsum Huda presented articles. In the 1950s, among the progressive women of East Bengal, Kulsum Huda was one of the most prominent. At that time, she was a student of economics at Dhaka University. Kulsum Huda was the daughter of Speaker Tamijuddin Khan and later became the wife of Professor M. A. Huda, the Finance Minister. In the same session, Madam Azuri presented an article titled 'On the Art of Dance'. Shamsunnahar Mahmud of East Bengal and Mrs. Sofia Wadia and Radharani Devi from India participated in oral discussions.⁵⁰ On the final day of the conference, in the evening, Ashapurna Devi gave a brief speech. Apart from above

49 Syed Abul Maksud, *Kagmari Sammelan*, Prathoma, Dhaka, 2018, pp.107-08.

50 *Daily Sangbad*, 7 February 1982, pp. 6-7.

mentioned names, several other progressive and educated Bengali women of East Bengal also attended the Kagmari conference. Among them were Laila Samad, the editor of the women's magazine *Ananya*, Begum Jibunnessa Ahmed, the editor of the magazine *Khelaghar*, Begum Jebunnessa Khanam, poet Nurunnahar, and political activist and journalist Kamrun Nahar Laili. From the inspiration of the Kagmari conference, a few months later, Kamrun Nahar Laili started a weekly publication for women called *Abaruddha*. One of the patrons of the weekly was Maulana Bhasani. Dr. Nandi and his wife Shanti Nandi joined the conference, along with their two daughters, Indira Nandi and Mandira Nandi.⁵¹

Women also participated in the overall management of the Kagmari conference. Although many attended voluntarily, Maulana Bhasani personally requested some to be present during the conference. Among them was Begum Fakhrun Nesa Chowdhury, the wife of Abdul Matin Chowdhury. Mawlana Bhasani invited her through a letter. Alongside Begum Fakhrun Nahar Chowdhury, Ittehad editor Kazi Mohammad Idris's wife Aziza Idris also participated in the management of the conference at the request of Maulana Bhasani.⁵² Awami League leader Mahmud Ali's wife Hazera Mahmud and Awami League parliamentary member Selina Banu were also appointed to manage the conference. It was through their collective efforts that the conference was organised so meticulously.

At the Kagmari cultural conference, the concluding event of each day featured a cultural programme. Among the participants were Baul artists from Kushtia, Bhawaiya artists from Rangpur, Dhaka's Youth League and Kallol, music team of Chittagong, Karachi's dance artist Madam Azuri and her team, folk dancers from West Pakistan, and Sherpur's Jarigan artists, among others. Notable attractions at the conference's music sessions included performances by Abbasuddin Ahmed, Sohrab Hossain, Shah Abdul Karim, Srikanto Das, Porimal Das, and Ramesh Shil, as well as presentations by Radio Pakistan artists. Local artists from districts like Sylhet, Mymensingh, Rangpur, Cumilla, and Chittagong presented music at the event. Throughout the cultural conference, arrangements were made for film screenings every day, featuring titles like 'Sat Ma' and 'Kanchan Jatra'.⁵³ In addition to other arrangements at the Kagmari conference, a splendid display of Bengal's cottage industry was organised.

51 Mondira Nandi, Interviewed by the writer, Gulshan, Dhaka, 21 November 2015.

52 Syed Abul Maksud, *Kagmari Sammelan*, Prathoma, Dhaka, 2018, p. 109.

53 Mohsin Shastropani, "Kagmari Sammelan: Pariprekshita o Tatparya", *Kagmari Sammelaner Smarak Grantha*, [Ed. Mohsin Shastropani], Kagmari Sammelane Panchash Barsha Puri Committee, Dhaka, 2011, p.63.

Those who played pivotal roles in the success of the cultural event included Najmi Ara. She was responsible for organizing the cultural program meticulously.⁵⁴

The Kagmari conference deeply influenced the political and cultural struggle of East Bengal. Abu Jafar Shamsuddin, who was actively involved from the announcement to the conclusion of the conference, wrote about the significance of the conference. According to him, The Kagmari cultural conference is one of the three most important and significant historical events in building the foundation of Bengali nationalism and its outcome, the independent Bangladesh. The Bengali nation is the heir to an ancient joint culture. In this culture, there are unique contributions from various communities and castes, including ethnic minorities, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, etc. The Kagmari cultural conference attracted the first attention of the world's political eyes towards the individual status and culture of Bengalis within the Pakistani framework.⁵⁵

Before the Kagmari cultural conference, there had been no such extensive and significant cultural conference in East Bengal. Therefore, this conference is remarkable in the history of the cultural struggle of pre-independent Bengal or Bangladesh. Notable was the substantial presence of women compared to that era at the conference. Women were present in all areas of conference management, essay reading, and cultural events. The conference witnessed the enlightened gathering of progressive and educated Bengali women.

The literary and cultural conferences held in East Bengal from 1948 to 1957 claimed the distinctiveness of its language, literature, and culture. The Dhaka conference in 1948 first reflected independent thought on this matter. In the Chittagong conference of 1951, emphasis was also placed on the importance of Bengalis own literature and culture. This conference succeeded in raising awareness about the preservation of the Bengali language and culture, which had a significant influence on the later part of Language Movement. From this conference, the demand for Bengali to be one of the state languages became louder and gained a broad public base. The participation of women in various segments of the Chittagong conference later inspired them to actively take part in the Language Movement. One of the participants, Farida Hasan, played a pivotal role in the Chittagong Language Movement. In the 1952 Language Movement, women of Chittagong contributed to forming public opinion, writing posters, campaigning, and participating in meetings and processions, all of which accelerated the movement. Moreover, being inspired by this conference, women's

54 Selina Hossain and others [eds.], *Sangrami Nari Yuge Yuge*, Bangladesh Nari Pragati Sangha, Dhaka, 1999, p. 156.

55 *Daily Sangbad*, 7 February 1982, p.6.

participation in numerous cultural events such as New Year celebrations, Rabindra-Nazrul anniversaries, and commemorations of poets Sukanta and Iqbal increased significantly throughout East Bengal. Immediately after the Language Movement, the 1952 conference in Comilla demonstrated the non-communal Bengali consciousness that emerged from the Language Movement. Students from Shaila Rani Girl's School, who had a notable role in the 1952 Language Movement, participated in this conference. Additionally, many women who had taken part in the Language Movement in Chittagong also attended the Comilla conference. Through these literary and cultural conferences, a cultural awakening was observed among contemporary women. Also in the Dhaka conference of 1954, the Bengali nationalism got another level of boost. Many of the women who participated in the Language Movement in various regions of the country joined the Dhaka conferences. The notable activist Pratibha Mutsuddi, who led the Language Movement in Chittagong in 1952 and in Dhaka in 1955, was one of such women participants in the Dhaka conference. The consciousness gained from these literary and cultural conferences gradually spread among many women, leading to an increase in their participation in such events. In the 1957 Kagmari Conference, presence of significant number women was noteworthy, marking an enlightened gathering of progressive and highly educated Bengali women. Through their involvement in these conferences, women became aware of the distinct culture of Bengalis within the framework of the Pakistani state. Furthermore, women's writings in newspapers and magazines on various cultural issues accelerated the cultural movement. Their writings also reflected a nationalist consciousness. The women's participation and activism in these literary and cultural conferences created a sense of courage among them which led to their further involvement in the cultural movement of later days including the cultural front of Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971.

Conclusion

Pakistan statecraft has seen unprecedented resistance of Bengali nationalist cultural activists against all actions to establish her cultural hegemony. The Bengali women of the East Pakistan, being Albert Camus's 'each' and part of 'union' i.e., member of organisations, joined the 'effort' to preserve Bengali culture. They came forward spontaneously, and contributed as the frontline activist to the cultural resistance movement organised against West Pakistan.

The cultural and literary conferences held in East Pakistan, particularly the East Pakistan Cultural Conference in Chittagong in 1951, the East Pakistan Cultural Conference in Cumilla in 1952, the East Pakistan Literary Conference in Dhaka in 1954, and the notable presence of women at the Kagmari Cultural Conference in

Tangail in 1957, surpassed social conservatism and adversity. These conferences had a profound impact on the cultural activists of East Bengal. Particularly, they created awareness for the protection of the Bengali language, Bengali culture, and heritage. The conferences featured important and illustrious discussions and essays on various aspects of Bengali literature, alongside cultural events every day. Cultural events included folk songs, Rabindra Sangeet, Nazrul Sangeet, dramas, dances, and solo performances.

East Pakistani women participated as chief guests, session chairs of various sessions, creative essayists, musicians, dancers, and actors in literary and cultural conferences. Some women contributed to the conferences as organisers and volunteers. Others were responsible for overall management remaining in the background and less focused. Many more participated as delegates in the conferences from different corners of the country. And needless to say, women's cultural activism was gradually increasing during this time, noticeably after the Language Movement of 1948-1952. At the same time, the non-communal character of Bengali nationalism against communal Pakistani nationalism forged deep roots among the members of society. This phenomenon may very well be attributed to the participation of a good number of women. Their participation and activism from the front certainly influenced and encouraged many more to even experience the authority's reactionary steps against the Bengali non-conformists. These conferences succeeded in transforming some pro-Pakistani people into Bengali nationalists, like Shamsunnahar Mahmud. It happened to prove the famous quote of Badruddin Umar 'Bengali muchholmaner ghore phera' (the return to home of Bengali Muslims). In fact, these conferences heralded a new chapter in the progressive cultural movement of East Pakistan. Women's participation in the overall management of literary and cultural conferences, literary discussions, and cultural events played a significant role in earning the success of the conferences as well as creating some courageous activists of counter-hegemonic culture, i.e., Bengali nationalist culture.