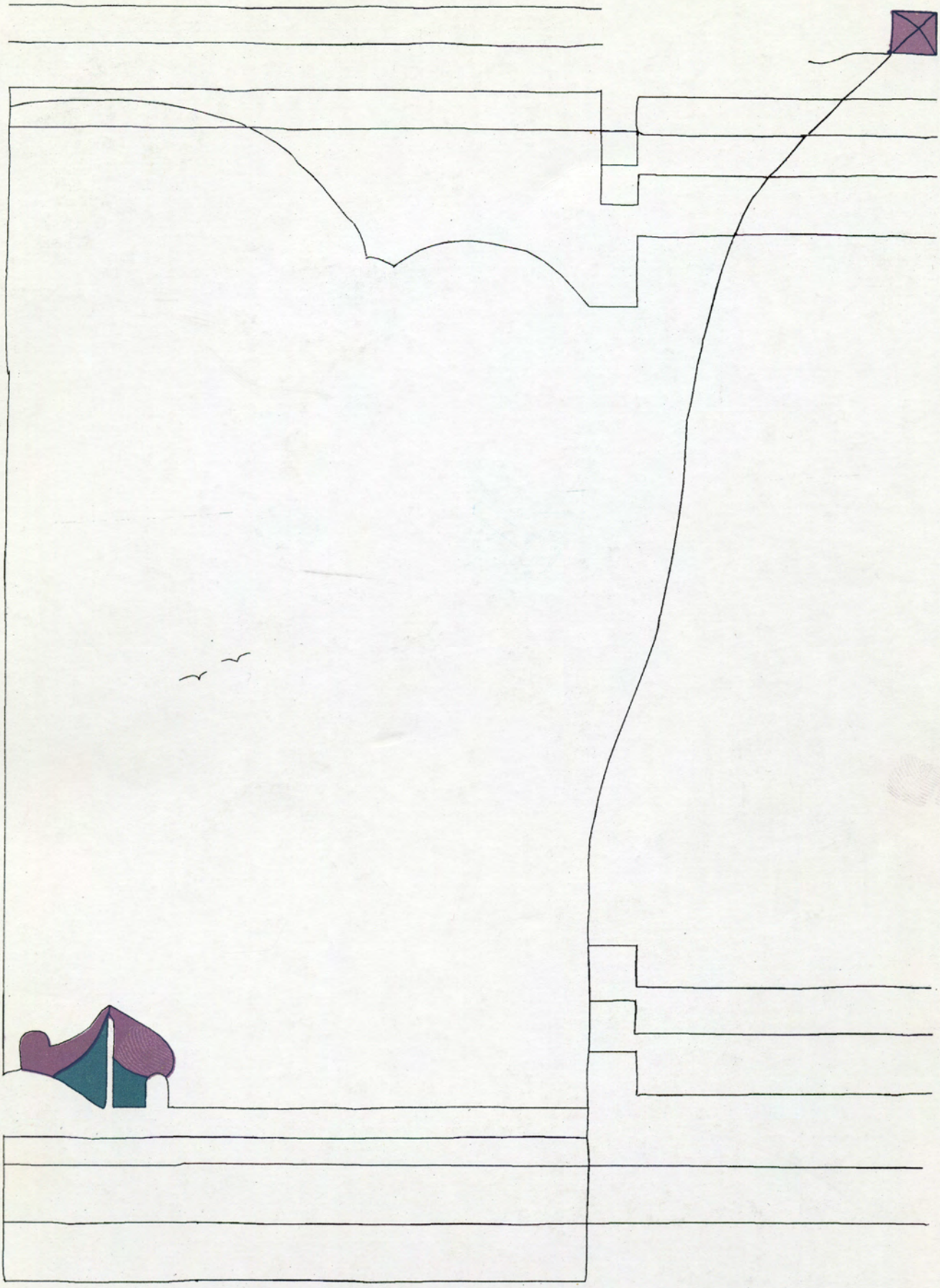

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Humanism and Culture: A Discourse of Architectural Continuity in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Culture can be thought of as a 'thread' that continues through generations and to which events and developments are tied to. This 'thread' can take many forms and can be, among others, religion, science, cosmology, myths, folk-lore, etc.

This paper seeks to examine the form which the Bangladeshi 'thread' of culture takes. In this regard it argues that **Humanism** is the main theme along which it propagates. Therefore, to understand and participate effectively in this culture, the creative person needs to consider human experience as his base of studies.

Introduction

The concept of culture, cultural continuity and humanism deals, at an abstract level, with the values, traditions and ways of living. The beginning of discussion on such matters should therefore be focussed on the definition and meaning of these concepts.

Humanism is a doctrine which is centered upon human interest and values. It is the philosophy which regards man as the central object. It takes human experience as the starting point for man's knowledge. This concept asserts the essential dignity and worth of man and his capacity to achieve self-realization through the use of human and scientific method. Characterised by a shift of emphasis from the religious to the secular concerns, this idea of devotion to human welfare developed primarily from the European Renaissance movement.

Cultrue is the result of the development of intellect through learning, education and training. It is the arts, beliefs, customs, institutions

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and all other products of human work and thought created by people or a group, at a particualr time. Culture is both an intellectual activity as well as a folk attitude. It is the complete way of life, of a person or of a society. Some of its more visual indices could be the arts, articfacts and architecture. It rises from the wisdom of the people and can have many things as its central focus. At one period European culture was centered around religion and all its activities were focused on that . Buildings, paintings, literature and all other efforts of human endeavour were straining to attain the highest religious passion. At some other time and place someting different might have been the central theme. Nature, environment, superstition, honour are some such themes of culture.

In this discourse, the evolution of Bangladeshi[1] culture and its continuous propagation through generations is investigated. This is done with the implicit idea of discovering the process by which the concept of Humanism attaches itself, breaks away from or even dictates cultural continuance. Since continuity is the thems, cross cultural analysis shall not be a major portion. Instead, the pressures upon subsequent generations shall be looked into togather the inherent forces of the wider Bengali culture in order to determine what makes it a continuous chain. From this , it is hoped, a direction form the architectural continuity of Bangladesh will emerge:

The European pre-industrial society had three concurrent culture types. They were:

a. Aristocratic culture . This was maintained , propagated and sustained by the feudal system.

b. Religious culture. Determined by the religious community, this was also supported by the rulijg class.

c. Popular urban and rural cultures. This was essentially folk and was crafts based.

The imposition of a mercantile economy and industrialization gradually gnawed at and replaced these. In this manner, a new culture of dominance developed where the traditional craft based culture became obsolete. Theoritician Leon krier maintains that quick consumption possibilities became the criteria for accepted values.[2] From this developed the concept of style. This replaced imagery in the old system. The hands were divorced from the spirit. "Traditional (artisan) cultures were concerned with the production of objects of long-term use. Modernist (industrial) cultures were consumption.[3] Krier suggests that at this point, obligatory education even wiped away the popular knowledge which was in the collective memory. In this process culture lost its meaning, its historical context, its social function and ethical significance. There had been an obsession with commerce instead of culture and with money instead of beauty. Therefore, Humanism as an essence of culture was obliterated.

Reference :

1. The term 'Bangladeshi' is a term associated with the present day political boundary of Bangladesh
2. Krier, "Somal dictator ship policy statement" in Archtectural Design, Vol57 No. 1/2, 198/ Post Modernism and Discontunity
3. ibid,pc 39

Theme; Bangladeshi Culture, A Dis-course of Its Continuity

With this introduction to culture and an exposure to at least one of the external disparaging forces, the focus turns toward the theme of this paper-the Bangladeshi culture. In the effort to map its development and changes, the idea of Humanism shall be resorted to as the 'sounding board' to test the reasons of reactions to the extremely bewildering forces that were exerted on it. Hopefully it shall make an interesting contrast to Leon krier's and also Prince Charles's tragic view of European culture.[4]

a. Language as a Vehicle of Continuity

Although Bangladesh is relatively young among the world's emerging nations, the history of its society and of the larger political and cultural systems on the Indian subcontinent of which the *Bangalee*[5] people have been a part, is long and complex. However, in spite of repeated ravages of political, social, cultural and other forces, a remarkable resilience has been shown by the language. It is the force that not only represents the essence of the Bangalee, but is also the pivotal factor on which events in history turned course. The fact that the language is the living representation of the *Bangalee* people and that it is the basis of folk culture, adequately signifies that countinuity of culture has as its common denominator, the language and it, in turn, is a metaphor of the common man.

Bangla[6] is a derivative of the Eastern *Prakrit* language. This language and its script is identified at about 1000 AD and then by the Hindu rulers for the next century.[7] From about 1200 A.D the Muslim conquests began. At this time one peculiarity is observed. It remains unclear as to how the transfer took place between the pre-Islamic and the Islamic; and how the desert-born religion took roots in the alluvial soil of Bengal. Compared to about ten years in North India, this process took nearly a century here. This was a time of turmoil. The evolution of literature in this period is not very clear and there is also a discontinuity in archaeological information.[8] Strangetly enough, when literature emerges at about 1350., it displayed a remarkable degree of maturity. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that it had existed and had developed verbally among the people, but in these troubled times, no attempts were made for documentation.

The period between 1350 to 1800 AD is known as the Medieval period *of Bangla* literature. It should be noted here that in this period all literary activities were in poetry. Alaol, Krittibas, Chandidas, are some well known poets of this period.[9] The medieval writings were mostly eulogistic extended poems. The Hindus depicted the tale of Radha-Krishna and the Muslims narrated the tales of Muharram and Lady Julekha. Sufiism was very strong at this time and since this was not essentially different from Tantric Buddhism and Sakthi Brahmanism, there were numerous exchanges between the Hindu

4. "Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate" in Architectural Design, Vol 59,No. 5/6, 1989.
5. Bangalee is the collective name of the people living in the geographical area known as Bengal. At present, Bengal is divided into West Bengal in India, and Bangladesh.
6. Bangla is the language of the Bangalee.
7. Nyrop, .R.F.Benderly, B.L, Conn, C.C Cover, W.W,Eglin,D.R.Area Handbook for Bangladesh.
8. Haque, E.I.Islamic Art., Heritage of Bangladesh, Dhaka 1983 P. 37
9. Department of Films and Publication *This is Bangladesh*

and the Muslim poets.[10] This reflects the religious harmony which exist between Hindus and Muslims based on cultural similarities.

Prose in *Bangla* literature only started when English style education and the English language were introduced. Bengali writers, being influenced by these, started writing in the prose form in novels, short stories and journalism.[11] At this time a remarkable phenomenon took place. Before the advent of the prose form in the written language, the two religions co-existed peacefully. With the introductin of prose, scholars from both the religions took it to extremes. Rejecting *Bangla* as too barbaric for literature, the indus proposed a Sangskritised pendantic version while the Muslims came up with a Perso-Arabic one.

Meanwhile., the common people were speaking in the well known vernacular Bangla. They rejected both the proposals and opted for the writen form of the verbal language. At this period,.British missionary William Carey and the Bengali scholar Raja Ram Mohan Roy developed a written form of the verbal Bangla with a detailed grammatical base. This proved to be the middle ground between the pedantry and the vernacular and was quicklyaccepted by the people. Another good reason was that it was the most effective way of expressinig the folklore and folk traditions which was previously carried verbally. Also, it was the most direct way of intellectural activity, expression of free thinking and cultural consciousness. Gradually, this flourished into a cultural revival which happened due to the powerful appeal to the senses of the common man by literary stalwarts like Rabindranath Thakur, Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra, Kazi Nazrul Islam. Michael Madhusudhan Datta, Meer Mosharraaf Hossain etc. Rabindranath Thakur deserves special mention here because of his excellence in novels, short stories, poetry, plays, songs, dances, art and nearly in all other conceivable forms of cultural expressions ad is evern today, an almost 'one-man' symbol of the *Bangla* culture.

This remarkable revival merged with incipient nationalism which ultimatedly lead to a cultureal renaissance. It happened not because of the influences of the elite and the so-called intellectuals, but because of the strength ofthe common person. It was a clear victory of Humanism in the cultural continuity of Bengal.

The formation of modern *Bangla* is not the only instance of the triumph of humanism. Just after independence from the British in 1947, the present Bangladesh became the eastern section of a two-part country called Pakistan. here again a cultural crisis began. The West Pakistan-based authorities declared Urdu to be the state language. As before, the common people did not accept the imposition of trestrictions of their language and started political movement. This was led by the intellectuals and the students. During a particularly severe upsurge on the 21st of Feburary 1952, some students were shot dead near the Dhaka Medical College. To

10. Dimock, E. C. "Muslim Vaishnava Poets in Bengal" in David Kopfed *Bengal Regional Identity*, Asian Studies Center, East Lansing, Michigan, 1969
11. Nyrop et al ibid.

commemorate this incidence, a *Shaheed Minar* or a monument to the martyrs was built on the site of the killings. Since language is the thing most dear to the *Bangalees* the symbolism associated to this structure was so intense and its appeal so herculean, that it became the symbol of Bangladeshi nationalism. The very fact that it was the structure which, despite its abvious lack of high architectural or sculptural characteristics[12] has become the most replicated structure in Bangladesh, indicates the overwhelming scope of the force it represents— the language. The contention between East and West Pakistan encompassed many more factors: social, economic, political and everything else except religion. But when the issue came to language, the people were quick to mobilize and make a statement. In fact, it was the language movement which led the then East Pakistanis to the greater movement of independence which resulted in the free and sovereign country in 1971.

Once again it was Humanism, manitested in the language of the people which played the nost important role in the sequence of events and led to the continuity of cluture. It must be remembered that it is the force of the common man, and its strength had been tested. Its unique accent started because it could best depict the tolklore and folk traditions— and the essence of Bangladshi culture is folk.

b. Architecture as a Vehicle of Continuity

Bangladesh is a agriculture based riverine country set in rich alluvial soil. The structure built by the people are flimsy huts of mud or bamboo and covered by thatch. This gossamer like structure has however, a remarkable persistency and has remained unchanged in shape and structure for thousands of years. It has a curvilinear roof shape which is generated by the bent form of bamboo and is also a response to the torrential rains of the area.

When the Muslims came to Bengal they already had a highly developed architecture of their own. Their conquest of Bengal was not one of violence and destruction but of gradual influence and submission. This was something which had a two-way process attached to it. While the *Bangalees* gradually adapted Islam as a religion, Islam as a culture was also adopting the *Bangalee* traditions.

The mosques of Bengal soon took the shape of the curvilinear roof as an echo of the common man's hut. Their roofs changed to *do-chala* and *chau-chala* shapes and curved cornices appeared in the scene. Admittedly, it was a response to the intense rains of the region, but the form so painstakingly copied in brick was also a salute to the common person. So profound was its assertion, that it acted even on people outside the region and so the shape was imported to distant places of North India and beyond where there is no apparent climatic reason for it.[13]

12. Ali, M. M. "Sthapatyar Proyojo o Bibortan" (in Bengali), in Shamsur Rahman ed. *Muldhara* Year 1 No. 5, 28 Jan. 1990.
13. Brown. I. Indian Architecture (Vol.), Bombay, 1956

Later on, these huts were also found to be instrumental in forging a new house type for the colonialising British. The 'Bungalow' is a derivation from the same origin and it is a type which has spread not only all over the Indian subcontinent, but to most other countries of the world as well.[14]

In this manner, the image of the simple rural hut— a testament to humanism, has remained over the centuries as the symbol of the strength and continuity of *Bangla* culture.

One authoratative index of a culture's valuation of nature is its attitude and means of transforming the natural into the cultural.[15] Bangladeshi culture has displayed an association with the environment in not only its architecture, but in its folk traditions, its philosophy and in its everyday attitudes.[16] Contemporary architects operating in this scenario should be sympathetic to this fact of culture. This means essentially rethinking their position and establishing a new base of studies which is based on the common man. The success of the language and the form of the common man's hut remains exemplary in this regard. Only by starting a new from a folk base can the *Bangalee* assert themselves as a dynamic, and appropriately creative society.

c. Building Material as a Vehicle of Countinuity

Brick as a building material never had any difficulty in asserting itself. Made from the soil of the land, it was a representation of the land itself. The earliest remains of Buddhist architecture which goes back to the third century B.C. show remarkable techniques in the use of good quality bricks. The production methodology and the techniques have developed during the centuries and the material has almost become a representation of the culture itself. Therefore, there is a continuity of culture in the use of this material and in the resultant morphology of the structures.

Unfortunately, with the advent of modern materials and the acceretion of foreign values, acceptance of brick as an aesthetically pleasing material has deteriorated Therefore, whatever details that were developed from the Buddihist times are slowly being forgotten by the people.The splendid brickwork in the Buddhist monasteries, the Sultanate mosques and inthe everyday buildigs of the past are ignored, little studied and about to be forgotten.

This is a very serious issue for the contemporary architects who should concentrate on design and detaling with bricks. Manufactures too should research on quality, size, shape and color of this material, while the social reformers and scholars should focus on turning the direction of our acquired western aesthetic values into the traditional track.

14. King A. D. *The Bungalow: The production of a global culture,* London, 1984
15. Glassie Honry. "Vernaoilar Archyitecture and Society" in material culture, Spring, Vol. 16, No. 1,1984
16. Tagore, R. "The Philosophy of Our People" *in The Calcutta Review,* Vol XVIII, No 1-3, Jan-Mar, 1926.

d. Outdoor Spaces as a Vehicle of Continuity

Buildings hardly ever played an important role in the everday life of the *Bangalee.* He built his thatched structure in the most simple way and was content with it. If it was blown away or was washed out, he simply built another. This attitude, when taken in a collective manner resulted in non-structures as tehidentifying spaces. The *vitti* of land for the home became the courtyards and open spaces became significant[17]. Trees became the places for outdoor gatherings and the symbol of collective activity.

Architects and planners must realise that both forms and spaces acquire meaning in very special ways.anthropological and psycho-analytical studies relating to the building profession should be sponsored so that more elaborate results could be applied during design.

FINAL NOTES

There are many more factors that could be studied to understand the thread of culture as it propagates through the generations. Painting. sculpture, dance, music, behaviour are some examples of these .Due to the limited scope of this paper, only those aspects that were of pafrticular interest to the architecture community were discussed.It should be noted that this paper is not an end but essentially a beginning of the investigation into the idea of **Humanism** and cultural continuity in Bangladesh

17. Haq, Saif-ul (*Meaning In Architecture : An Investigation of the Indigenous Environment in Bangladesh"*S. M. Arch. S Thesis, *1992* Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, USA