Bonobibir Johuranama:
A Method for Reading Plural Cultures

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Abstract

This is a reading of texts that make up the genre called *Johuranama*. The texts from this genre are produced and circulated as literature and performances in the mangrove region of the Sunderbans that stretches across the border between India and Bangladesh. The paper begins from the premise that theoretical constructs which use 'borders', 'nations' and 'hybridity' as categories of literary analyses, divert the intent of literary expression, and proceeds to locate texts from the genre in the Bangla literary system, Bangla being the shared language despite the border. However, the use of the language is generally conceptualized as distinctively differentiated by religious beliefs and national 'identity'. Hence in the history of Bangla literature, texts whose form and language embody the Islamicate culture of pre-partition Bengal are categorized as Islamic Bangla, rather than simply as Bangla of a particular region. In this region too, as elsewhere, language and literature are shaped by the prevailing conditions of human life and the literary resources available to express them. The paper is grounded in a general principle that the literary culture of any modern sub continental language like Bangla is historically plural, as is its nesting culture. On this foundation, the paper proposes a method for a located reading of texts produced in this plural cultural field; in the process it also attempts to delineate 'plurality' as a category of analysis and a hermeneutic for studying sub continental cultures.

Keywords: Plurality, *Johuranama*, Genre, Bengali/Bangla comparative method.

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Johuranama is a genre comprising texts written in Bangla, a language spoken in two nation-states of the Asian subcontinent. They originate in a geographically contiguous area divided into two nationalities and two national cultures across an international border. I argue that the literary system of which these texts are a part is 'plural'. This 'plural' literary system is formed through the fusion of at least two literary language traditions which came into contact in pre-colonial times, one 'local' and the other 'received' as a result of contact with

others that lasted for many centuries and changed in nature, but did not approximate the contact that these areas later had with European colonizers. The texts are written and performed in what is marked as a minority culture in one nation and the state culture in another, and the practices associated with the texts' performance and transmission are common to the language, economy and livelihood of the inhabitants common to both nation-states.

Though nation and its related categories have emerged as discursive nodes for the theoretical formation of postcolonial studies, do the tropes of hybridity, displacement, fragment, margin, borders ad nauseam, so easily applied to read literature produced in places across the globe where the deep footprint of the empire has marked the earth, and to which the long arm of globalization now reaches, reveal anything about the process of textualization rather than about the theoretical proclivities of a reader? This is not a question that I propose to answer—rather I attempt to use another route to understand the construction of such texts operating across real and imagined borders, and use the question to draw attention to our own academic and intellectual practices.

The drawing of international borders in the subcontinent has served to divide a composite culture according to religion, state and cultural nationalities, based on what is perceived as a fundamental difference between parts of a composite whole.   Peter Gottschalk outlines the drawbacks attending the process of constructing and maintaining this 'difference' for specific purposes in this quote:

> The boundaries change as human constructions flex and vary according to the circumstances of
> their use by both the people who presumably fit within them and the people who view them from
> outside. Attempts to stretch contemporary categories too far back into the past unravel in the face
> of historical research and contemporary contestations (Gottschalk 2012: 8)

As Gottschalk points out elsewhere, the methods which proved so efficacious in naming and classifying animal species proved inadequate 'when applied to more complex self-constructed and malleable human identities' (2011: 37). His contention is that the classificatory systems put in place to understand Hindu and Muslim as separate and exclusive of each other evolved through the exigencies of colonial rule; the adoption and exacerbation of these categories by postcolonial rulers and politicians is grist to the mill for theory-literate students of postcolonial/commonwealth/etc. studies. But can they function as frames for reading literature produced in these areas?

To begin with, let us define the literary field itself and locate the texts entitled *Bonobibir Johuranama* within it. These texts form part of the plural culture growing out of the worship of Bonobibi, the lady of the forest. This culture is shared by two communities historically defined in opposition to each other. Bonobibi's devotees, Hindu and Muslim forest dwellers, seek her protection as they go into the mangrove forests, the Sunderbans, stretching across the border between two 'post'colonial South Asian nations—Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) and India. Living across international borders they share a language which is differently contextualized in the histories of each of the communities in the two nations that they inhabit. The texts I present here form part of the plural literary field of

these communities. The cultures of which they are a part may be said to harbour elements gleaned from systems apparently opposed to each other. Let us pause to think whether the popular conceptual tool 'hybridity' is useful in understanding such a situation. Difference and similarity are mutually defining relations in life, located in negotiations of the present. Hence perhaps the more pressing question would be, what is 'purity' in the case of living formations which constitute culture? This question may frame our discussion, since it is the silent other of the theoretical discourse arising from hybridity.

The texts I consider are both titled *Bonobibir Johuranama*. They form part of the multidimensional 'nama' tradition that entered India through contact with the 'Persianate' culture (Hodgson 1974: 293–94). Hanaway (2012:4) describes this as 'The culture embedded in the use of Persian over the past millennium throughout an area much larger than any territory we could call Persia or Iran.' A survey comprising texts named 'nama' in classical Persian literature shows that the 'nama' as a form is the model for a literary record of historical and social conventions. The proposed method of reading includes within its purview the question: 'What is literary'? I will keep this question in view by stating at the outset that our object of study is a literary text. I assume that literary texts are verbal expressions brought into being through the fusion of the author's 'real' chronotopic horizon with the horizon of his imagination. This fusion is brought within a reader's horizon as 'text'. My aim in this essay is to understand the specific use of language for this process that we call literary, as language is the medium through which literature as an event occurs.

The story of Bonobibi, enacted every year in January on the Indian side of the border by Bengali speakers, both Hindu and Muslim, is the source of this culture. There are several versions of this story in play scripts for the Bonobibir *pala* (a specific type of performance popular in the rural areas of west Bengal in India and in Bangladesh), derived from the *Bonobibir Johuranama*. Two extant published texts by this name are by Abdul Khater and Muhammad Munshi. Besides these, handwritten play scripts are used by professional performers to stage the story told in the *Johuranama*—Bonobibi's birth, her arrival and establishment in the mangrove forest and the miracles she performs to protect her devotees from natural and man-made dangers that lurk therein. There may have been a number of *punthi* or handwritten manuscripts which form the source of the two printed texts. One of the authors, Abdul Khater, explains that all his acquaintances who live in the swampy Sunderbans often asked him to write the story of Bonobibi and get it printed so that they did not need to travel far to hear about her. 'Hearing this, I feel pain in my heart, I think it through and finally, decide that since the keccha of Bonobibi is one of the highest order, so I (shall) gradually try to compose it,' (Khater, no date). I will return to the word *keccha* in due course. Here we must mark that the act of 'composing' or bringing together material in an orderly and specifically written form seems to be the impulse behind the 'nama' as a literary mode. Perhaps the existence of an artefact, the book, made the worship of the forest goddess more legitimate—the power of a book and its compulsory availability to all in Islamic culture, in which Bonobibi is supposed to have originated, may well be the reason for this. The divinity of Bonobibi lies in the universal acceptance of her special powers by the people of the mangrove region and the existence of a book as an artefact consolidates this power.

As an object, the printed book, *Bonobibir Johuranama,* is testimony to the fluidity of boundaries between religious communities, as well as between national cultures claimed by separate nation-states. In this case, a common culture is available on either side of the border which is preserved on both sides in the handwritten *punthi*. Khater's text begins 'from the end' as we, on the Indian side trained in the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian script forms, would say. This is because the Arabic script, used to write Urdu, reads from right to left. Urdu is the language identified in India with Islam since the birth of the two-nation theory that led to the formation of a separate state for Muslims. So all Urdu books begin from what illiterates in Urdu would call the 'end'. *Bonobibir Johuranama*, written in the Bengali script by Abdul Khater, like any other book written in Arabic or Persian or Urdu also begins from the end though it is not written in any of these languages but in Bangla, the language shared by Hindus and Muslims alike in the area that was cut into three parts by the partition of India in 1947. This international border remained when East Pakistan became independent as Bangladesh. The quest for national identity by Bangladesh was expressed as the right to use Bengali as the *matribhasha* or the mother tongue, contradicting the identification of Urdu with Islam, the religion followed by a majority of the people in erstwhile East Pakistan. Historically, in postcolonial nations, language consolidation requires state patronage until the market develops enough to sustain the vernacular booktrade. This politics of language-recognition and patronage by the state is a crucial factor in framing the literary systems of postcolonial areas. Tracing the history of pre-colonial contact and postcolonial patronage helpsin accessing literature written in local languages in the once-colonized areas. The dynamics between the mother tongue and the colonizers' language characterize the literary systems of these areas, but a set of other existing dynamics is already in play here as well. For example, in the case that we are considering, the contact from which the genre *Johuranama* is produced is not 'colonial' by nature. Though Persianate culture was identified with the pre-colonial rulers in much of the subcontinent, the contact and exchange that local languages had with it differed from the contact between English and local languages. This pre-colonial contact is the basis of the plural culture of the subcontinent.

Bangladesh indicates in its name its identification with Bengali, a language and a script historically appropriated for a specific religion. This nation came into being by defining the Bengali-speaking Muslim's identity as separate from the Muslims of West Pakistan, a majority of whom were Urdu speakers. Two decades after the subcontinent was partitioned on religious lines, the creation of Bangladesh was a direct contradiction of the commonly-held equation of Islam with a single language, Urdu. Though this equation is projected as the basis of irreconcilable differences between Hindus and Muslims in the subcontinent, in actual practice, Muslims conduct their daily lives in the local language of the area that they inhabit, worship in Arabic and may or may not learn Urdu. In *Johuranama* as a genre, two vital functions of human social life—language and religion—seem to be in manifest contradiction , leading to questions about the ethics of the identity discourse, and more pertinently its use as a literary tool for understanding how the stuff of life (known in thematology as *rohstoff*) is shaped into form. The discourse of identity may reduce the plurality of the socius to a single and homogenized symbol for the purpose of identity politics

if the plurality of sources in the pre-colonial literary cultures is overlooked. So a located reading of the Bonobibi culture may reveal that political agendas deeply connected to international borders and unidimensional identity formations are in practice often obstructed by the ethos of the plural societies of South Asia. We now turn to textual evidence of this ethos which contradicts the easy identification of language with religion and religion with national cultures in these societies, thus questioning the purity-hybridity opposition as categories of literary understanding.

The very name and form of the text *Johuranama* defy explanation if we equate religion with culture, and separate religious practices from 'cultural' practices. Let us take the case of the *Johuranama* as a genre. On the one hand, traditionally the Bengali language has a number of long narratives in verse describing the elevation of local deities to the ranks of the accepted Pauranic pantheon. On the other, among the Sufi sects popular in rural Bengal on either side of the border, hagiographies of saints and saint veneration play a large role in both literary and religious traditions. The *Mangal Kavya* in Bengali is a set of verse narratives, a form accepted as part of pre-modern literary traditions in a number of modern Indian languages. These narrative forms are derived from Sanskrit and shaped from local oratures, and used to record the elevation of locally worshipped deities into the Pauranic pantheon, thus claiming authenticity through an uninterrupted connection with the scriptures. The *Puranas* themselves evolved to establish and legitimize gods and goddesses sometimes, but not always, traceable to the *Vedas*. The *Seerapuranam* in Tamil by Umaru Pulavar is an illustration of similar generic plurality. It joins the Seerat tradition which narrates the life of the Prophet to the Tamil tradition of the Puranam or long narrative verse. Similarly, the *Johuranama*, in narrating the establishment of the glory of a deity, may be said to arise from an existing horizon within the literary system in Bengali, even though its name is derived from a form that belongs to the Persianate culture.

The 'namah' is a Persian word meaning epistle or letter or book. Abdul Khater says that the namah is spoken to someone implying that the *Johuranama* as a genre is an address to the goddess Bonobibi. The multivalency of the word 'nama' enabled it to be appended to a number of generic models. For example, the *saqinama* emerges as a genre embedded in Nezami Ganjavi's *Eskander nama*, where the hero Alexander/Eskander frequently calls to the cup-bearer to pour him a cup of wine as a prelude to a reflection on life. All the verses with this purpose, addressing the *saqi* and commenting on the state of mind and life of the speaker, can be detached from the main text. These verses stand on their own as an epistle or address to the cup-bearer, that is, *saqinama*. Or the *farsnama*, a long poem addressed to or spoken by a horse, one example of which survives in the oeuvre of Amir Khusrau. Or the *siasatnama*, which are books about government, a genre which began in 11th century Persia with Nizam-ul-Mulk's text of this name. Or the *pandnama*, following the style of the *andarz* or wisdom literature, part of the pre-Islamic Iranian documentary heritage. Like the *saqinama*, the *pandnama* can also stand alone as a separate text, but instances of the genre are also seen in episodes of royal fathers giving advice to their heirs, for example, in the *Shah Nama* of Ferdawsi. So the use of the word 'nama' in the text's title links it to the Persianate culture and indicates its membership in a specific literary category in that system. 'Persianate' cultures are characterized, as Yarshater says, by the existence of a body of writing 'beyond what was written in the Persian language to encompass works by those

who thought in Persian when it came to literature irrespective of their native tongues and ethnic origins' (Yarshater 1988: 15). Thus, texts under the rubric of *Johuranama* are modelled on two generic traditions existing in two language cultures that came into contact with each other—the Persian 'nama' texts and the Bengali *Mangal Kavya* narratives.

If we turn from generic models to vocabulary and repertoires of signification, the word *johuranama* itself is equally traceable to Muslim and non-Muslim religious and non-religious etymologies. In fact, the language of the text still preserves the Perso-Arabic residue that the Indian side of Bengal has succeeded in purging for replacement by more Sanskritized equivalents. This is a concession to the colonial classification of the Bengali language with Hinduism as a religion and a flat contradiction of the composite and dynamic nature of language. Bengali, ironically, still harbours words whose origins are in Persian and Arabic but which have escaped mechanical purification. An example of this multiple valency is the first half of the noun *johuranama*. There are two types of knowledge accepted by scholars of Islamic epistemology and theology—the *zaahir* and the *batin*, the former exoteric, the latter hidden by allegory and to be interpreted. Bengali does not have the sound 'z', so the word in Bengali is *jahir* to assert, to make obvious. A similar localized word is *keccha*. Bengali has no sibilant 's', so the word *qissa* is pronounced locally as *keccha*. Many words originating in the Persian or Arabic language have thus changed in local pronunciation.

In both Khater and Munshi's texts, the vocabulary and the repertoire of signification are derived from Persianate culture. Muhammad Munshi titlesthe opening section 'Hamd naat', the genre that is used for praise of the Prophet. The first two lines of his text read:

> With Bismillah on my tongue I take up the pen He who
> has given birth to all the universe
> Is very gracious to his bondsman (Munshi 1986: 1).

The second line in translation does not convey the quality of the language used here. *Paida* for birth and *alam tamam* for the whole world are neither in colloquial nor in standard literary usage in Indian West Bengal. Neither is the word *banda* (literally bondsman), but specifically referring also to he who submits to Allah, that is, Muslim. Either meaning serves the purpose here. All these are words more commonly used in varieties of 'Hindustani' spoken across central India, but not common in the Bangla spoken in West Bengal. In Bangladesh, however, these words are common in colloquial and official or formal Bengali. The identification of language with religion is clear in this divided usage of a single language across national borders. But the Bonobibi culture, spanning the area across the borders, maintains plurality in its source. An example is the idiomatic transfer attempted by Muhammad Munshi, when he translates the idiom *khushi mein baag baag hona* to bloom like a garden with happiness. This is not a common idiom in Bangla, but Munshi (1986: 1) uses it to depict happiness: 'keho khoshey baagey baag ferey phool baagey', literally, 'some wander in the garden, blooming like a garden with happiness'. After the *hamd naat*, Muhammad Munshi has a section titled 'The Beginning of the Story'. Whether this is an interpolation, we cannot tell. Here is the story of how Dakkhin Ray, the villain of this tale, came to establish himself in the mangrove forests or the *bada ban* (ibid: 2). His lineage is traced to a 'deo' (dev means god in many Indian languages and div is demon in Dari in which the classical Persian texts are written). This is the story of Dandabakkha, a *deojaat* entity, born of the 'dev', and a 'pandit' in his own 'qaum' (ibid). This pandit had a terrible son, Dakkhin Ray, a tyrant who took the

shape of a tiger and ate the people he met in the mangrove forest. Here, the Sanskrit word *rakshas* meaning demon, is used to describe Dakkhin Ray: he is of the *rakshas* species. People began to worship him out of fear. But Allah is *mehrbaan*, merciful, towards the race of Adam. So he sent Shah Jangali and Bonobibi to the land of the 18 tides, that is, Sunderbans. Both writers link the story of how Bonobibi came to be, how she made her power 'jahir' on earth to the highest sources of authority in Islam. In Khater's text, the story begins from her birth, as a result of a boon granted to her father the fakir Ebrahim by the Prophet and his daughter Fatima. Muhammad Munshi shows that Ebrahim and his wife had gone on a pilgrimage to Medina to appeal for a child. There, the Prophet promised to convey their prayer to Gibreel who, conveyed god's decree to his messenger. Ebrahim follows the directions and Bonobibi and her brother Shah Jangali are born. This narrative genealogy is comprehensible to both Hindus and Muslims through a general acquaintance with the oratures derived from the *Mangal Kavya* and the Sufi hagiographic traditions respectively.

In the *Johuranama* as a genre, after the veneration of the creator and Prophet and a genealogy of the deity, comes the account of the miracles performed by him or her for the devotee. This section is found in a number of *Mangal Kavya* and also in shorter narratives, that is, the *panchali*, read or recited during the observances of *brata*, a vow made to serve the deity in exchange for a specific blessing related to the worshipper's domestic wellbeing. The worshippers who make these vows are generally women performing the ritual 'for' the men and children in the family. When the period of observance is over, the vow is abrogated through a ceremony where the *panchali*, containing the story of the deity's establishment and power, is ceremoniously recited. The middle section of the *Johuranama* follows the same narrative structure as the *panchali*—the emergence of the deity, her initial exploits that led to her being singled out as divine and then the story of how she helped an individual and the results of her support, thereby establishing her as a deity to be worshipped by similar individuals with similar needs and desires. This function is here fulfilled by the story of Dukhe, a poor orphan boy abandoned in the dangerous tiger and crocodile infested mangrove forest. Dukhe's mother had told him that whenever he found himself in trouble, he should call upon Bonobibi, the lady of the forest, who as we have learnt from the first part of the story, has been sent by Allah to the forests of the Sunderbans to protect the weak and poor. Dukhe does so, and is saved from the clutches of the tiger, also referred to as Dakkhin Ray, as we have seen above. The ascendance of Bonobibi over Dakkhin Ray and his mother Narayani adds doubly to her legendary power—Khater shows Shah Jangali and Bonobibi calling out the *ajaan* as a prelude to the battle between the forces of good and evil. Bonobibi defeats Narayani and her son, and protects the forest dwellers from the forces of nature as well as from the oppressive might of poverty, regardless of their religion or caste. The power of chanting the name of god when adversity strikes is traceable to the Hindu Vaishnav belief in *naam*, common to forms of worship in the Bhakti tradition. Also, the tradition of *dhikr*, or chanting the divine name, is a Sufi practice believed to connect a devotee with the divine. This is another instance of the shared repertoire of signification in a plural society. The preponderance of Vaishnavism is simultaneous with the influence of Sufi teachings in rural Bengal from pre-colonial times and the Bonobibi culture uses elements from both religious repertoires even though they are perceived by colonial administrators and thinkers as

radically opposed to each other, and are categorized as such (Gottschalk 2012). In fact the cross-translations of concepts and practices in everyday life   which I have been attempting to explore, is the very basis of a plural society.

It appears that Bonobibi does not belong to any one religious denomination. Her worship, her powers and her origin are simultaneously located and legitimized in two cultures. Her devotees, belonging to both religions, live in quotidian intimacy sharing the dangers of the difficult terrain and the struggles of poverty. In these circumstances, the historical plurality of these societies are lost through the politicization of religious differences by the discourses of national identity in a supposedly homogenous nation. The Bonobibi culture provides an example of shared faith expressed through a common repertoire of signification in response to a common life situation in which worship, literature and entertainment have common roots in two supposedly contradictory systems of belief. Ultimately, plurality is spawned not by abstract belief, but by actual life conditions and practices, with each party negotiating and rearticulating specific taboos so as to be able to participate in quotidian community life.

One instance of such negotiation is the matter of idol worship. An integral part of the Bonobibi culture is the establishment of the image of Bonobibi at her *thaan*, a place sacred to her. Idol worship is common amongst Hindus, but taboo to Muslims. The existence of Bonobibi idols for worship in both Bengal in India and the Sunderbans regions in Bangladesh may prove grist to the mill for the assertion of syncretism, that is, improper borrowing from other cultures or incomplete conversion to Islam. But this would be taking a limited abstract view of the actual practice. The tradition of saint veneration is of long standing amongst Sufis and among her Muslim devotees, Bonobibi is looked upon as a Sufi saint (Uddin 2011), having been the *murid* or disciple of the Prophet himself. The *Johuranama* records that she was instructed by him about her duties in the region to which she was sent to protect his followers. This narrative genealogy, linking her with Allah makes the Hindu worshipper describe her as a Muslim goddess, and the Muslim worshipper venerates her as he would a Sufi saint. If we must seek legitimization, or at least a tradition to which this apparently unusual community of worship may be connected, we may invoke Dara Shukoh's *Majma' al bahrayn*, which works out a synthesis between Hindu esoteric polytheism and Muslim Sufi monotheism. Shabistari, in *Gulshan-i Raz* has this simple logic which connects the idol and the idolater to god's will and work:

> Who else but god [Allah?] could gild its face Or give an
> idol such finesse and grace?
> Unless it be his will, who'd be an idol's votary? (Shabistari 1920)

Shabistari's text is seen as a poetic expression of the theory of emanations (Nasr 2012), derived from the neo-Platonist thought of Plotinus and used in an analysis of Sufi practice by Ibn Arbi.

In drawing attention to these facts, I want to raise the issue of 'post'coloniality, 'nation' and 'Islam' as categories of literary analysis. Can these categories be replaced by literary categories from the languages in which the literature is composed? Can a common repertoire defining 'literature' and the literary be gleaned from verbal arts in the many languages of the Asian subcontinent, which have interacted with one another from pre-colonial times? In the present case, the *Johuranama* is written in a variety of Bengali rooted in the symbolic and cosmological order introduced to Bengali-speaking regions by Sufi teachers. Discussions regarding the purity of Islamic practice, or the nature of Hindu belief in a deity originating in Islam are as much to be eschewed in the literary context at least, as the imposed ideal of religion-eschewing secularism. Rather, the plural culture which is the

ground for the genesis of texts like the *Johuranama* is formed through contact between different systems of belief, practice and expressive modes, resulting from negotiations of the realities of living with diverse, sometimes radically opposite beliefs.

Abdul Khater and Muhammad Munshi's texts are a part of the genre of *Johuranama*, just as the *Shah Nama* of Ferdawsi was part of the eponymous genre: the word 'nama' in both cases denotes a fixed scope inwhich the received content is organized. In pre-Islamic Persia, the stories of the kings of old, collected from royal records deposited in the treasury, from temple records, from lists and proclamations and legislative documents were usually compiled in prose. The act of compilation is referred to as *nama kard* or making it into a book (Minorsky 1964). This links the 'nama' with the physical act of writing in a literary culture. In Persianate culture, as in local cultures of the subcontinent, forms of writing existed in tandem with numerous forms of oral compositions and transmission. Before Persian became the court language in large parts of the subcontinent, it was already one of the formative resources for the development of many of the 'modern' Indian languages. The example of Bangla is therefore representative of a language-literary system growing in a plural linguistic milieu not only in terms of its interaction with neighbouring languages in whose formation it claimed an active role, but also in the plurality of its own resources. We can consider different aspects of textual material and form in order to further elucidate the case for analytical categories grounded in the plural language-literary system to which the text belongs, rather than sociological or historical or psychological themes around which to read South Asian literature. The *Johuranama* is a written document, rooted in the local Bengali and received Persianate script cultures. The performance form, Bonobibir *pala* or Bonobibir *jatra*, stage the same content using local performance forms like the *pala* and *jatra*. The scripts of these performances are not printed. They exist as handwritten exercise books meant to help the performers with their lines and the production team with the requirements of the performance space. They are not seen as having any literary value independent of the performance. The literary vehicle of the culture of Bonobibi is the written *Johuranama*, with extant printed texts by two writers dating to the late 19th century. This may be compared to the *toomars*, scrolls that recorded parts of Ferdawsi's great epic designed for performance by the *naqqals*, some of whom specialized in *Shah Nama khwani* or the reciting parts of the *Shah Nama* cycle (Page 1991). In the case of the *Johuranama*, only a written text would hardly serve the purpose of dissemination among the illiterate poor inhabitants of the locality in which the legend is both relevant and popular. Hence, entertainment through performance with dissemination as the aim ensures the continued survival of the tradition of Bonobibi. The means of this survival exist in many media and span a number of domains: the religious, literary, performative and practical converge in the Bonobibi culture.

The word 'nama' here marks the difference between transmission forms: the written text uses the associations of the 'nama' as a form with antiquity, history and religious authority. Besides the permanence of a record and the power of the written word in a culture that venerates a book, also lend their weight to the establishment not of the purity of either religion in question, but to an assimilation of the practices of both. The antecedents of the deity are authenticated with language, textual structure and a structure of feeling unique to

Islam professed as her culture of origin. At the same time, the narration and enactment of the story of her powers is in locally popular forms used for similar expositions of 'Hindu' deities or historical personages. During the month of her ritual worship, the reading of the *Johuranama,* much like the reading of the *panchali* marks the end of a period of observance of a vow, known locally as *hajot*, made to a deity as reciprocation for fulfilling a wish. If we trace the 'nama' as a genre in the Persianate culture of Bengal, then we may recall that the didactic 'nama' genre, used to preach tenets of Sufi belief, became common in Persian from the time of Sanai's *The Walled Garden of Truth* (the earliest manuscript, copied at Konya in 552 hijri (1157 CE) also known in one of its manuscript forms as *Fakrinama* perhaps referring to Sanai's patron the Ghaznavid Bahramshah, one of whose titles was Fakr al-Dawla. Sanai began the tradition of the didactic *masnavi* in the *khafif* or philosophical metre, one of the seven earmarked for the *masnavi*, the long narrative. This narrative may be heroic, historical/epic, romantic, instructional. All these are genres belonging to the broad nomenclature 'nama'. Indeed but for the existence of the *chakkinama* and *charkhanama* songs of Kerala, we could have concluded that the 'nama' is a long written narrative in poetry or prose, or a written epistle addressed to somebody. The *Shah Nama* of Ferdawsi is the literary artist's poetic compilation of historical documents which already existed in prose models. Ferdawsi literalized the documentary and introduced a new composite mode to Persian literature. The form is poetic, the *mutaqarib* metre chosen for the heroic or epic *masnavi*. The *Johuranama* follows the narrative scheme of the *masnavi*, beginning with the praise of the maker and his Prophet and the teacher. Then the texts recount events leading to the 'birth' of the particular deity in relation to the pillars of the faith. As we have seen above, the form and the content come from literary cultures associated with two different systems of belief, which both contradict and converge. Textual resources are drawn from both cultures. So ultimately, divine power itself despite belonging to a formed idol, is traceable to the Prophet and his daughter, or to Gibreel, some of whom also serve as role models for all humans who submit to the will of Allah.

Thus we encounter a literary field formed of contactual exchanges regulated by historical factors from which a plural system of signification develops through usage. Literature written in these situations, which includes almost all language literature of the Asian subcontinent, is crafted out of such thematic kernels and formal and linguistic materials that are common to two different religious and 'national' cultures. Such a literary field by its very complexity upsets neat formulations, but can be methodically traced to the history of language-literary systems in contact. Comparative literature uses the tools of reception studies to delineate these literary fields formed as a result of contact, locating the text within a plural field and then reading it as a fusion of horizons.

Having made an attempt to limit myself to literary categories for reading a text located in the heart of intersecting non-literary discourses, I would use this exercise to ask whether these sociological and political discourses, for all their importance in regulating literature, can still be retained for literary pedagogy and scholarship. For example, can the idea of a nation born as a homogenous 19th century construct to combat imperialism, now be retained as anything other than a political boundary in the face of overwhelming evidence of exchange, flow, translation? If we take this further, the question arises whether South Asia is anything more than a geographical category peculiarly resistant to homogenization.

Gottschalk (2012: 8) points out that religion as a 'specific set of commitments to belief and practices that create a traditional community apart from a secular existence among individuals and their society', did not form in South Asia until the colonizers introduced the tenets of civilized western society, which became identified with the 'modern' amongst colonized Indians. The *Johuranama* provides an example of a community in which certain boundaries seem to be set aside in practice; but contrary to Gottschalk's observation, this is not done by/in a modern secular community. Rather, it is a way of life in a 'traditional' rural poor community.

When reading texts produced in times, places and languages differently and often distantly affected by European colonization, through critical repertoires constituted by labels like postcolonial, third world, South Asia etc., the open question remains whether these labels provide any clue to understanding the text as an affective construct outside the set tropes of these disciplinary formations. Yet these are texts that constitute both the past and present of the language-literary systems of the South Asian subcontinent. Though this may not cancel the validity of thematic readings for ethnographical, anthropological or sociological purposes, the study of Indian language literature requires different frames of reference and different categories gleaned from the discourse of literature itself.

But let me end by acknowledging the complicity of people like myself, academics placed physically in a geographic rather than an imaginary South Asia, who are eager enough to partake of academic labelling that flies in the face of our lived realities. Are we, as academics in South Asia, too detached from these realities and wedded by choice or compulsion to labels originating elsewhere? Perhaps we must remember here the protagonist in Sa'adat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* who did not know to which side he belonged and died spread-eagled across divisions, singled out by the dividers as insane. If literature has the power to thus absorb boundaries into the flesh of its being, should not the categories for its analysis also dare to shrug off a few?

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