

PUTTING THE RAFTS OUT TO SEA: Talking of 'Bera Bhashan' in Bengal¹

Transforming Cultures eJournal,
Vol. 3 No 2, November 2008
<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC>

Rila Mukherjee²

Professor of History, Hyderabad Central University, Hyderabad, India.

Email: rila.mukherjee@gmail.com and rila1@vsnl.net

Abstract

Bera (raft) bhasan (sending out) is a ritual linking two societies and two landscapes: the maritime and the agrarian. After the monsoon, palm or plantain rafts are placed on the river to placate the gods. The *bera bhasan* that is practiced today is an amalgam of earlier practices of two communities—the Islamic and the Hindu. Arab merchants introduced this practice into Bengal when they prayed for safe passage at sea before venturing out. Similarly Hindu peasants would observe a variant of *Bera Bhasan* called *sedo* on the last day of *pous* or January, whereby they would placate the rain and river gods by setting out small rafts on water. On these flowers, sweets and lamps were placed to ensure a good harvest the following year. Therefore two worlds came together in this practice, the maritime and the rural, signifying two kinds of activity, mercantile and agrarian. In seventeenth-century Mughal Bengal it developed from a folk belief into a community practice. In eighteenth-century Nawabi Bengal it was co-opted by the state as pageantry and it is now a state-sponsored enterprise linking the Hindu and Muslim communities.

Introduction

Bera bhashan is a water ritual of rafts being set out to sea. As well as asserting political and economic control and promoting social harmony, the festival displays a desire to carve out a cosmic space through the seemingly endless negotiation between land and water by way of the raft or *bera*. *Bera bhashan's* significance lies in the fact that it plots a new space linking land and sea in the Bay of Bengal through the agency of the offering to the waters. Rafts made with palm, plantain or banana leaves, or sometimes with paper, are sent out on the river to placate water spirits. The performance is reenacted every year just after the monsoons (in the month of *bhadra* of the Bengali solar calendar or August-

¹ This essay is revised from the draft presented at the conference on Culture and Commerce in the Indian Ocean organised by the University of Technology, Sydney and IAS, Leiden in September 2006. My thanks to Stephen Muecke, Michael Pearson, Leonard Blusse, Devleena Ghosh and Lola Sharon Davidson—the organisers and hosts—as well as to Dirk Kolff and Jan Heesterman, for comments and suggestions.

² Rila Mukherjee is Professor of History at the University of Hyderabad. Her research interests include the mercantile history of South Asia, sacred geography and early modern European history.

September) in Bengal, even today. I have observed this practice in Murshidabad district, organised from the Deputy Magistrate's office at the district headquarter, Baharampur. *Bera* is unique to Bengal. To my knowledge there are no documents or photographs on *bera* in the archives. No substantive work has been attempted on *bera*.

We have no dates as to its origin. *Bera bhashan* acquired a political hue in late medieval Bengal. Patronised by Mughal *subahdars*, but possibly started by ordinary people, in the seventeenth century, around Dhaka in what is now Bangladesh, it was transformed into a political pageant through the initiatives of the *nawabi* state of eighteenth century Bengal at Murshidabad. Murshidabad lies today in West Bengal, India, but it was then the capital of Bengal *subah* which comprised Bangladesh as well. Let us see the historical and geographical contours of medieval Bengal so as to set *bera bhashan* in its physical context.

Initially an independent sultanate with borders stretching to Tirhut (Mithila in present day Bihar) and the powerful kingdom of Tripura (and sometimes Kamrup, now part of Assam but in medieval times a mighty independent state) to the north and east, Dhaka and Chattagrama in the southeast, Nadia and Hugli to the south and Jajnagar to the southwest, Bengal became a Mughal *subah* at the end of the sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century Mughal power extended into the delta area, up to Dhaka in the southeast, and Dhaka became the Mughal capital of Bengal *subah*. It is at this time that mention of *bera bhashan* in the area in and around Dhaka first appears in records. In the eighteenth century Dhaka became a subsidiary capital to the main capital at Murshidabad, and it also became the residence of the Chhota (Junior) Nawab, as he is referred to by the English factors. Dean Mahomet's quote further on in this essay refers to this personage, who was usually a close member of the ruling family, when he affirms the ruling classes' link with the maritime realm.

As far as we know from records dating from the latter half of the eighteenth century, the English East India Company officials continued the practice of *bera bhashan* in the lands under their control.³ More likely, they allowed the practice to continue rather than promoting *bera* themselves. It has now returned to being a community festival in West

³ See Mukherjee, Rila, 2006, *Merchants and Companies in Bengal: Kasimbazar and Jugdia in the Eighteenth Century*, New Delhi, Pragati Publications and Mukherjee, Rila, 2006, *Strange Riches: Bengal in the Mercantile Map of South Asia*, New Delhi, Foundation Books/Cambridge India.

Bengal and continues as a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity in Murshidabad district in that state. The connotations of the festival have changed over time, as have its functions. To the best of my knowledge, there is no similar state sponsored *bera* in Bangladesh. What follows here is an attempt at understanding the origins of *bera* and setting the festival within the context of the religious and political economy of Bengal from the late medieval period to present times. In the absence of a written archive, various other data have been used: environmental, linguistic, ethnographic and cartographic.

We should remember that southeastern Bengal, centred on Dhaka, underwent various phases of nation building since the eighteenth century. Bengal has been divided since the *nawabi* period; the first partition occurred in 1905 under British rule, thereafter the eastern part of Bengal became East Pakistan in 1947 and then Bangladesh in 1971. It is for this reason that the festival of *bera bhashan* - a festival of undivided Bengal - holds so many associations for both Bengali (that is, Indian) and Bangladeshi Muslims and, as will become clear in the course of this essay, for Hindus in West Bengal, in India, as well.

The Various Implications of *Bera* Within the Historical Geography of Bengal.

Undivided Bengal contained three distinct geographical zones. To the south and east lay the delta, to the north and west the Chhotanagpur Plateau and the hilly lands of Bihar, and to its northeast the eastern Himalayas. Although the littoral is long, Bengal also has the mountains, flat lands and passes characteristic of an inland state. Agriculture is an important activity. Fishing comes second.

So what is *bera* – a littoral ritual or the political pageant of an inland state? Was it purely religious in nature? Should we see it as an assertion of a symbiotic Hindu-Muslim identity, as it is practiced today? Or was it an economic statement by the *nawabs*? Dirk Kolff points out (verbal communication, Leiden, September 2006) that the *bhashan* underscores the fact that capital (either social or material) was seen by *nawabi* Bengal as becoming fluid. Was *bera bhashan* a reflection of the enormous productivity and trade of Bengal? Should it be seen as a changeover from a simple ritual of an appeasement of water spirits to an attempt by the Bengal *nawabs* to create a universal cosmic sphere of power – their own *mandala*, as it were – by asserting control over natural elements? The

association of *bera* with the Alexander myth that I discuss later on may be very relevant here.

Bera bhashan was held, and continues to be held today, in the months of August-September, the *bhadra* of the Bengali solar calendar. I think this period was chosen because it was the bridge period for sailing. Social and religious festivals as well as wind and current data corroborate that the mariners of the eastern coast – notably from Bengal and Orissa – commenced their journeys to Southeast Asia between November and February and returned between June and September.⁴ August-September was therefore a *bridge month* connecting both return and onward journeys.

This period also signified the end of the monsoon – ‘the sending away of the waters’⁵ - and the beginning of another agricultural cycle. The fact that it heralded the beginning of a new agricultural cycle meant also that the *bera* signified the start of the *fasali* (revenue) year. And these months also signified the harvest or the lean season. *Bera bhashan* completed the maritime cycle as well as the agricultural cycle, and this may explain its elevation into a political/social festival by the Bengal *nawabs* when they designed a *mandala* based on their rulership over both agrarian and mercantile domains.

But water rituals were also frequently linked to political expansion and military campaigns (Jan Heesterman, Leiden 2006, discussion).⁶ Is *bera bhashan* then held to herald not only the waning of the monsoon and the beginning of a new agricultural and marine cycle, but also the commencement of military campaigns? We have to remember that *nawabi* Bengal was a state under attack during most of its existence – by the Arakanese, the Portuguese, the Afghans and the Marathas. The *nawara* fleet was kept in a state of readiness to patrolling the coast. Most of Alivardi Khan’s reign was spent consolidating and defending his territory, the boundaries of which comprised present day West Bengal, Bangladesh, Bihar and northern Orissa.

⁴ Tripathi, Sila and Raut, L.N., 2006, ‘Monsoon Wind and Maritime Trade: a Case Study of Historical Evidence from Orissa, India’, *Current Science*, V.90. No. 6: 864-871.

⁵ Reid, Anthony, 1988, *South East Asia in an Age of Commerce 1450-1680*, V.1, The Lands Below the Winds, New Haven and London, Yale Press: 174-91.

⁶ Reid, Anthony, 1988 op. cit: 174-91. See also Francois Robine, 1998, ‘Les Immigrés Intha, La Transhumance des Buffles et la Circumnavigation Bouddhique du Lac Inle: Etat Shan de Birmanie’ in *Etudes Birmanes en Hommage à Denise Bernot, Réunis par Pierre Richard et Francois Robine*, Paris, EFEO: 330-70.

The *Bera* as Liminal

Victor Turner wrote in 'Liminality and Community'⁷ that 'the attributes of liminality are necessarily ambiguous...liminal entities...may be represented as possessing nothing'. Why are we applying the notion of liminality to *bera bhashan*? Because it seems particularly apposite in view of the fact that the *bera* is the liminal body that symbolises the site where some kind of change is effected. The liminal here is the link between inside/outside, transcending both private and public domains.

Such an entity may also form the core of a possible transformation. Therefore the liminal may not only be a void awaiting future transformation. I hope to show, in the analysis of the story of Khwaja Khizr further on, that Khizr, one of the impulses behind *bera*, is also regarded as the bridging element between two domains of consciousness. Khizr is the alchemist that effects this crossover. Does the *bera* then represent Khizr? I have as yet no clues to this but it is obvious that the *bera* is the liminal, and the *bhashan* the transitional, state between land (material) and water (spiritual). The liminal and the transitional are linked through the threshold, that is the moment when the raft is put out on water, the symbol of life, as is Khizr.

Paul Gilroy, in his study of African-American consciousness, calls the slave ship the 'middle passage'.⁸ He quotes Nietzsche: 'We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us – indeed, we have gone further and destroyed the land behind us. Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean: to be sure it does not always roar, and at times it lies spread out like silk and gold and reveries of graciousness. But hours will come when you realise that it is infinite, and there is nothing more awesome than infinity.'

The 'little ship' here is the *bera*. *Bera* on water was the 'middle passage' between two worlds: a flourishing agrarian community and the unparalleled fluvial network of Bengal on which this community depends even today. It was the middle passage between the agricultural community and the trading world whereby the prodigious riches of the province were shipped to the middle Gangetic plain as well as to the countries around the

⁷ In *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*, eds, Jeffrey C. Alexander and Steven Seidman, 1990, CUP: 147-154: 147.

⁸ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Harvard Press, 1993: xiii.

Bay of Bengal. It was again the middle passage between the diverse communities in Bengal who made a living off the land and sea – a threshold where religious and social identities crumbled in face of universal dependence on the material resources of the province. And finally, if we accept the Perso-Arabic implications of *bera*, the ship was the passage between the ‘two seas’ or the ‘place between’, that is, between the material and spiritual domains; which in turn reaffirms Turner’s thesis on liminality.

We see that there are various meanings and implications of *bera*. A clue as to which community started the practice may yield us some ideas as to its original intent. Was *bera bhashan* initially a festival only of fisherfolk? Did the shipbuilding community of late medieval Bengal also participate in this practice? Did ‘Arab’ sailors follow a parallel practice, and did the two merge at some point? When and how did the Islamic ruling classes promote/absorb this practice? We have, as yet, no answers.

The *bera* was not the representation of a void, and the *bhashan* was not simply a passage. The *bhashan* represented either a threshold of being or a site where the changeover took place. Here one universe ceded place to another. Indeed, the very use of the raft symbolises the passage from one state to another in *bera bhashan*. *Bera bhashan* has so many implications. Let us now turn to its physical setting.

The Riverine World of Bengal

James Rennell noted of Bengal’s riverine network in the 1780s⁹:

This inland navigation gives constant employment to 30,000 boatmen – a large proportion of the food, consumed by ten millions of people, are conveyed by water, within the kingdom of Bengal and its dependencies. To these must be added the transport of its commercial exports and imports – the fisheries and the articles of traveling.

This utilitarian view of Bengal’s fluvial network by a company official is offset by a more poetic description of this waterscape. Haraprasad Sastri, in his novel *Bener Meye* or the *Merchant’s Daughter*, wrote of the merchant princess Maya standing at the window of her warehouse at Saptagrama, the great port of medieval Bengal.¹⁰

⁹ *Memoirs of a Map of Hindoostan or the Mogul Empire*, Calcutta, Editions Indian, 1976: 382.

¹⁰ Sastri, Haraprasad, *Bener Meye, Collected Works*, V.1, ed. Sukumar Sen, 1980, West Bengal State Book Board: 322-324. (my translation).

Maya faced the river which was almost an ocean. She felt that just as there was a city on land, so was there one on water. As far as she could see, boats filled the river. So many people lived and worked on these boats. (When) the boats sailed away she thought; how strange! Just a while back there was this great city on water, now there is only this vast expanse of water. One can barely see land on the other side. There is nothing, just the sky above and the water below (my translation).

Now read a description of this waterscape by an eighteenth century Indian.¹¹

Here (in Dhaka) is also the residence of a grand Nabob, who, at his accession to the throne, conformable to an old custom, something similar to that of the Doge of Venice on the Adriatic, enjoys a day's pleasure on the river, (in a barge) sheathed with silver.

Dean Mahomet thus echoes the traditional Venetian custom of March 24 when the Doge, in the Bucintoro ship, tossed a ring into the water to reaffirm the city's 'marriage with the sea'.¹² Metcalf and Metcalf comment:¹³ 'Bengal's wealth was thus at once made to appear nearly boundless and made familiar by evoking Italy's canal-laced 'mistress of the seas'.

The equation of boundless wealth with maritime riches is noted especially in Bengal. *Bera bhashan* links two societies and two landscapes: the inland and the maritime. This linking highlights three domains: the maritime, the inland/riverine and the agricultural, signifying three kinds of activity – mercantile, agrarian and sailing, and asserting the continuum of all three. It also asserts the material, social, and political implications of such a linkage. But it may also have indicated, at that time, a spiritual quest.

A Hindu-Islamic World

That water is an integral part of the Bengali landscape (and mindscape) is established. Fish, snakes, dolphins, tortoises, turtles and lizards occupy an important space in its iconography.¹⁴ When Bengal was absorbed into the Mughal empire in 1575, Akbar gave

¹¹ Dean Mahomet quoted in Metcalf, Barbara D. and Thomas R., 2006, *A Concise History of Modern India*, 2nd Ed., Cambridge: 51. See Letter 35 in *The Travels of Dean Mahomet, A Native of Patna in Bengal, Through Several Parts of India, While in the Service of The Honourable The East India Company Written by Himself, In a Series of Letters to a Friend*, ed. Michael, H. Fisher, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Available online at SARAI.

¹² Mukherjee, Rila, 2003, *The Lost Worlds of Europe*, Calcutta, Progressive Publishers: 71.

¹³ Metcalf and Metcalf 2006: 51.

¹⁴ Mukherjee, Rila, 2006, *Strange Riches* op.cit: 54-55.

the first *subahdar* of Bengal a silver standard with a fish on it as his emblem. This is still preserved in the Hazarduari Palace in Murshidabad.

How far does water play a role in Islamic cultures, a culture born of the desert? Surprisingly, we come across practices similar to *bera bhashan* from the Persianate world from very early times and Arab merchants on the west coast of India followed a similar practice (Fryer for Bombay in the seventeenth century¹⁵ and Varadarajan for Gujarat).¹⁶ In both these places they evolved into community practices incorporating both Hindus and Muslims, because the sea belonged equally to everyone.¹⁷ It is therefore necessary to clarify how and why *bera bhashan* is different from other practices of the appeasement of water spirits/sea monsters around the Indian Ocean.

Sometimes these rituals were centred around a particular saint or guardian spirit. Khwaja Khizr, the patron saint of Muslims at sea, was worshipped all along the Indian Ocean rim. This belief in Khwaja Khizr, or the Prophet Elias, was supposedly introduced by Arab merchants in Bengal when they prayed for safe passage at sea before venturing out. This is what received history tells us.

A Persian Origin

It is here that we run into difficulties. If it is *khezr*, it would be of Persian origin, because Arabic speakers would pronounce it as *khidr*. Sulayman Hayyim's *New Persian-English Dictionary* contains both *khezr* and *khezer*, that is as the 'noun *A Khezr*, or the prophet Elias (whose soul is transmigrated into other forms). [Khezr is said to have discovered and drunk of the Water of Life whence he became immortal]',¹⁸ but not *khedr*. It would be *khidr* in Arabic, but despite the assumption that the worship of Elias was introduced

¹⁵ Dr. John Fryer, *A New Account of East India and Persia*, London, Hakluyt, 1909-15, 3 vols, I, 197.

¹⁶ Varadarajan, Lotika 1980, 'Traditions of Indigenous Navigation in Gujarat', *South Asia: Indian Ocean Issue*, New Series, III,1, June and Varadarajan, Lotika, 1983, 'Indian Seafaring: The Precept and Reality of Kalivarjya', *The Great Circle*, 5, 1, April.

¹⁷ In Saurashtra and Kutch, Darya Lall Udayra, known variously as Sagar Dev and Hindawai Pir Jind, was identified with Varuna and worshipped by the Lohanas and Kharwas, and Khizr Pir is venerated by both Hindus and Muslims. Lotika Varadaraj, 1980: 31-2. Varadarajan notes that Khizr was also known as Darya Pir or Zinda Pir. See Varadarajan, 1983 : 6-8. Dariya Pir is also worshipped in Bengal, see Bhattacharya, Ashutosh, 1982, *Banglar Lok Sanskriti*, New Delhi, National Book Trust (in Bengali): 29.

¹⁸ See the Chicago *Digital Dictionaries of South Asia* available online. Georg Berkemer of the South Asia Institut, Heidelberg, introduced me to this valuable resource, while Hans Harder, also of SAI, Heidelberg, pointed out the two different pronunciations in Persian (*khizr*) and Arabic (*khidr*). I wish to record my thanks to Mr. Hossein Sadeghghli, PhD student from Iran now at HCU, who helped me with the Arabic and Persian pronunciations of *khizr*.

by Arab merchants, we find no references to *khidr* or *khedr* in English-Arabic dictionaries. This is because while the Persian language possesses four zed alphabets, with no major differences in pronunciation, the Arabs used all four zeds in varying grades of the harsh zed sound when they took over many Persian words. Hence, Arabs used a zed of *khezr/khezer* very similar to d, and in English translation this became transmuted to *khidr*. But an examination of Arabic and Persian dictionaries for the zed phoneme reveals that *khizr* and *khidr* are the same.

Remember that by the end of the ninth century the Arabs, in the shape of the Abbasid Caliphate, had already advanced into parts of Persia, especially in the Qazvin (Caspian) region.¹⁹ Many Persian words, beliefs and customs now found their way into Arabic vocabulary and cultural practice.

The fact that the Persian origin was retained may change substantively our notions of the chronology of Arabic and Persian presence in Bengal. It is supposed that Arab merchants arrived on Bengal's shores by the ninth century while the Persians followed in the seventeenth century. But it is also possible that the Arab merchants consciously used the Persian form when introducing the practice, and this may well be due to the fact that the term 'Arab' also comprised a very large portion of Tajiks who were chased out of Persia in successive waves from as early as the ninth century.²⁰ We shall study this aspect in due course. In Bangladesh now *khizr* has become Khowaj Khijir, the one who has control over water.²¹

The Enigma of Khwaja Khizr

The Persian saint, Khwaja Khizr, the Green One, symbolises the depth and purity of the waters of the seas. He is also popular in Arabic lore. As al Khidr (arabic: *ال خضر*, literally 'the green one', also transcribed as Khidr, Khidar, Khizr, Khizar) he has a disputed status amongst scholars; some say he is a saint (Abdan Saalih) while others say he is a prophet.

¹⁹ For the significance of Qazvin, see later. For Arab expansion into Qazvin, see El Hibri, Tayeb, 1999, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Harul-al-Rashid and the Narratives of the Abbasid Caliphate*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 183. See also Gutas, Dimitri, 1998, *Greek Thought, Arab Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd-4th and 8th-10th C.)*, London/N.Y., Routledge.

²⁰ See Ali, M.M., 1985, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, 2 vols., Riyadh, Imam Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud Islamic University Press: 35-40.

²¹ Banglapedia.search.com.bd

Others assert that he was a real person; some say that he was a wazir of a great conqueror who lived in the time of Abraham, while others regard him as an advisor of Alexander. He is assumed to be referred to in the *Qur'an sura as-Kahf* (18:66), in an encounter with Moses where Moses meets him and asks al Khidr to allow him to accompany him so Moses can learn from al Khidr's knowledge.

Al Khidr figures in the Alexander romance as an attendant of Alexander. He and Alexander cross the land of darkness to find the water of life. Alexander gets lost looking for the spring, but al Khidr finds it and gains eternal life. At Mahis, in Jordan, lies a mausoleum dedicated to al Khidr. On the island of Failaka, just off the coast of Kuwait, there is a shrine devoted to al Khidr which is of considerable antiquity and, if excavated, could yield more evidence of links with the Great Flood legend of Mesopotamia. A systematic study of folklore and festivals in maritime cultures, partnered with excavations along the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea region, should yield a network of shrines dedicated to Khizr. The study of such a network would reveal a web of commonalities among littoral communities around the Indian Ocean rim, as each adapted the Khizr legend within its own social and cultural context. In the littoral region of Bangladesh there was a medieval town called Khizrpur, in Narayanganj district (near Dhaka), which was Isa Khan's capital in the 16th century. After defeat at the hands of the Mughals this was turned into the administrative headquarters of a *pargana* (district) called Mughal sarker Bazuha Khizrpur.

Some scholars suggest that al Khidr is also represented as the Green Knight in the Arthurian tale, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It is highly likely that the tales of Khwaja Khizr/al Khidr travelled to Europe in the wake of the crusades and were then transmuted into the Green Man of Europe. I saw the statue of the Bamberg Green Man (c.1237) in Bamberg Cathedral in the summer of 2007, but here he denotes a fertility myth. In all events, the legend of Khwaja Khizr travelled far and wide, to east and west.²²

In Bengal, the festival of *bera bhashan* is generally attributed to Khizr. Salim Allah, in the *Tawarikh-i-Bangalah*, states:²³ 'Murshid Quli Khan also kept the festival of the

²² See Cheetham, Tom, 2004, *Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World*, New York, SUNY Press.

²³ Salim Allah, *Tawarikh-i-Bangalah or a Narrative of the Transactions on Bengal*, Tr. Francis Gladwin, Calcutta, 1788: 111.

prophet Khizyr, when paper boats, decorated with lighted lamps, are set afloat upon the river'. B. Ray, in the *West Bengal District Census Handbook, 1961, Murshidabad* notes: 'Another old ceremony still observed at Murshidabad ... is the *Bera* or festival of Khwaja Khizr'. Charles Stewart's *History of Bengal* notes: The eastern parts of Bengal are intersected by rivers and creeks, navigable at all seasons of the year – the mode of travelling is by water – the veneration of the inhabitants for the tutelary deities, who are supposed to preside over the rivers and waters, is carried to an extreme, both by Hindoos and Mohameddians – even the present governors are obliged to comply with the superstition of their subjects by making, at Dacca, an annual offering to Khwaja Khizr (supposed to be the Prophet Elias) to propitiate his good offices in protecting their inland commerce.²⁴ Blochmann noted that *bera* was of Hindu origin and also an offering to Khizr- 'the guide of wanderers who lose their way in the darkness of the night.'²⁵ Bhattacharya (*Banglar Lok Sanskriti, 1982*) corroborates Blochmann's view. He sees it as a mixture of the Hindu practice of *sedo* and *nadi* or *ganga puja* (more later on this) and the Muslim festival of Khizr started by Nawab Sirajuddaulah.

The elements of water, rain, seafaring and commerce are emphasised in all these accounts. But we have two conflicting versions; the first two and the last two accounts state that it was a practice started by the Bengal Nawabs at Murshidabad, on the Bhagirathi, in western Bengal in the 18th century. The third account notes that it was started in Dhaka, on the Padma, in the east, by a Mughal *subahdar* named Mukarram Khan, much earlier, in 1626-27. In all versions it appears that it was first of all a community practice, fairly widespread and dedicated to Khizr, that was later adopted by the ruling classes. There is some confusion as to who started it. Blochmann and Bhattacharya are of the opinion that it was Siraj ud Daulah in 1756-57, but evidence points to Murshid Quli Khan, the first *nawab* of Bengal - (1704-1727), as the originator, as Salim Allah also writes.²⁶

We have already noted the predominance of piscine iconography in Bengal. It is worth remembering that Khizr is associated with fish in the *Qur'an* and in some legendary accounts (see figure) he is depicted as arriving upon the back of a fish at the place 'where

²⁴ Stewart, Charles, 1903, *The History of Bengal*, Calcutta, Bangabashi Press.

²⁵ Blochmann, H., 1867, 'Notes on Sirajuddaulah and the Town of Murshidabad, taken from a Persian manuscript of the *Tarikh-i-Mancuri*', *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, Part 1, No.2.

²⁶ Salim Allan, *Tawarikh-i-Bangalah* op.cit : 111.

the two seas meet' (i.e. the 'place between'). What is this place? It is the threshold between the physical and spiritual world, the point where the two seas meet. Therefore the colour green symbolises not just energy and renewal, but also spirituality. One should not lose sight of the fact that in early Islamic theology Khizr is a mythical representation/personification of the direct ontological relationship between the self and the guiding Spirit at the 'place where the two seas meet' (i.e. the spiritualised 'heart'). By ontological extension (i.e. macrocosmically), guidance from Khizr may also be seen as the direct contemplation of nature and the cosmos (as theophany) by virtue of the non-discursive, supra-rational intellect. The quest of Khizr is a metaphysical quest to uncover the true meaning of life.

Some ethnographers have associated Khizr with Darya Pir, but this is erroneous. In Saurashtra and Kutch, Darya Lall Udayra, known variously as Sagar Dev and Hindawai Pir Jind, was identified with Varuna and worshipped by the Lohanas and Kharwas²⁷ and Varadarajan notes that Khizr was also known as Darya Pir or Zinda Pir.²⁸ Ashutosh Bhattacharya notes that Dariya Pir is also worshipped in Bengal, but he does not make the identification with Khizr as Varadarajan does.²⁹ The equivalent words for sea in Persian are *darah* and *darya*, and therefore *darya* (or the sea) *pir* is a generic term for a variety of guardian saints of the sea, within which category Khwaja Khizr may be subsumed. However Darya Pir is not a synonym for Khwaja Khizr.

It has been suggested that Khizr is a pre-Islamic ('pagan') god, and I incline to this view, because we find the earliest annals of Khizr originating in Persia around the Caspian Sea, the area from where Tajiks migrated to South Asia. As I suggested at the start, the Tajiks may have introduced this practice into southeastern Bengal. In the pre Islamic Persian tradition, in the mystical tales of Ismaili Shi'ism, Khizr appears prior to the unveiling of the Hidden Imam or *mahdi*. Khizr is the messiah before the actual, and true, messiah appears. We will study Khizr's link with a particular water body in the next section.

²⁷ Lotika Varadarajn, 1980: 31-2. See Varadarajan, 1983: 6-8.

²⁸ See Varadarajan, 1983: 6-8.

²⁹ See Bhattacharya, Ashutosh, 1982, *Banglar Lok Sanskriti*, New Delhi, National Book Trust (in Bengali): 29.



Figure: Khwaja Khizr Arriving on the Back of a Giant Fish (image taken from David Catherine, 2007, 'Nature, Theophany and the Rehabilitation of Consciousness', Ufudu Medicinal Arts. <http://www.myspace.com/ufuduma>)

Darya-ye Khezer: Water, Life and Consciousness

It is more or less agreed that the legend of Khizr originated around the shores of the Caspian Sea. *Bahr* and *darya* are both synonyms for sea. The name Khazar Sea was mostly used by the Turks, Arabs and Persians and pronounced by Arabs as Qazvin, which became the Caspian of the Europeans. The Caspian Sea was also known as Tabarestan, Bahr-e (sea) Jorjan (Gorgan), Abskoun-e Deilam, Bahr-e (sea) A'ajem, Jilan (Gilan), Astarabad, Sari, Shirvan, Mazandaran, Moghan, Badkoubeh, Haji Tarkhan, Gol-o-Galan, Talisan, Kamroud, Zereh Ojestan, Akfoudeh Darya (Dera Akfoudeh), Kharazm, Khorassan, Jili, Bahr-ol-Ajam, Jebal and Bab-ol-Abvab. An Arab geographer, Naviri, called it Fars Bahr or Hoz (Persian Sea). This bewildering variety of names comes from the following origins: 1) the names of various tribes and nationalities residing in the surrounding areas; 2) the names of the surrounding towns and areas; 3) the names attributed to the coastal towns; 4) the equivalent words for 'sea' such as Deniz, Darah, Darya, Sala, Sihaie, Zarayeh, and Voroushka; 5) the names of other seas wrongly used to designate this waterway.

The Caspian has characteristics common to both seas and lakes. It is often listed as the world's largest lake, though it is not a freshwater lake. It is endorheic, i.e. there is no natural outflow (other than by evaporation) which renders it an unstable sea. The level of the Caspian has fallen and risen, often rapidly, many times over the centuries. There are several species of fish endemic to the Caspian Sea: kutum, roach, bream and salmon. It is no surprise that legends of guardian saints of the sea should emerge from such an exceptionally unstable geological setting.

In his regenerative form, Khwaja Khizr has been compared to Dionysus and Hermes (Idris) and to Osiris, and Skanda-Kumara. It has been noted that the *al-khidir* archetype was regarded by Sufis as representing the forces of nature and the power inherent in all things. It has also been suggested that the notion of Khizr evolved from South Asian Sufism which had taken the model from the Hindu God Skanda, son of Shiva. Shiva himself is the great destroyer and regenerator. And Skanda, in his turn, is linked by South Asians with al-Skanda who, like Shiva, is regarded as parallel to Dionysus. Al-Skanda becomes the Islamic Iskander, in which name Alexander the Great lived on in Asian memories. We have already seen the Alexandrine link with Khwaja Khizr.

There is yet another interpretation of Khizr. According to Carl Gustav Jung (in his analysis of the 18th Surah of the Qu'ran) Khizr reveals not just the greenness of the chlorophyll within the leaves, not just the sunlight / water responsible for their nourishment and liveliness, and not just the (secondary) green ray of light that is refracted as the "middle-pillar" within the light spectrum, but also the (primary) undifferentiated light of a pure and altered consciousness. According to Jung, Khizr resembles the inner self. At all events, Khizr becomes the guardian spirit of Islam, because there is no salvation in Islam as in Christianity, only revelation through a guide.

Khizr in a Rural Hindu Milieu

Local contexts and cultural settings often alter original contexts and intentions. *Bera* is no exception to this rule. There is a local origin for *bera*, as both Blochmann and Bhattacharya noted. Hindu peasants, mainly women, would observe a ritual called *sedo* on the last day of *pous* (in January) where they would placate the rain and river gods by setting out small rafts on the water. On these rafts flowers, sweets and lamps were placed to ensure a good harvest the following year. *Ganga Puja*, in Baharampur, followed a

similar practice. Can *bera bhashan* be called an amalgam of Muslim and the Hindu practices of *sedo* and *ganga puja*, the last two observed with great ceremony in Murshidabad?

The Moment of Bera

But there is yet another element that marks *bera bhashan* and which makes it something other than a *sedo* or *khizr* festival. *Sedo* takes place only in January, while offerings to Khizr were made whenever people ventured out to sea. (But it seems that with time the festival of Khizr became an annual festival cf. Salim Allah, Ray and Stewart). Moreover, in the Hindu model it is a harvest/river/rain festival while in the Muslim model it became a seafaring festival.

Significantly, *bera bhashan* is an amalgam of both. Moreover, it takes place in August-September. Why was this particular time chosen? This might have been due to the fact that Bengal was a sailing/littoral society and navigational aids (monsoon winds, currents) were very important here. Arab and Greek mariners sailed with the help of summer monsoon winds and were able to return during the winter monsoon, whereas mariners of the east coast of South Asia set sail during the winter monsoon and returned during the summer monsoon. During the period from October to February, the wind and current flows from the northeast helped ships to sail from eastern South Asia to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The onward journey during the northeast monsoon is corroborated by regional festivals like *Kartika Purnima* (full moon day of *Kartika* in the month of November) which ensures that traders have a safe journey. From June to September, the southwest monsoon wind helped ships to return from Southeast Asia. Historical memory supports this surmise. *Khudurukuni Osha* is still celebrated in September by unmarried girls in Orissa who wait for their brothers to return from Southeast Asia with gifts.³⁰

A fresh read of Goiten suggests another reason as to the day itself³¹. *Bera bhashan* was a time of giving and receiving. It was a kind of Bengali thanksgiving that actually lasted two days, Wednesday and Thursday, in *Bhadra* (August-September). If Ramadan coincided with this time *bera bhashan* was held just after it. The Bengal nawabs used the

³⁰ Tripathi and Raut 2006.

³¹ Goiten S.D. 1968, *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, Reimpression of the first edition.

day before *bera*, that is the last Wednesday of *Bhadra*, to settle the *punya* (prosperity, well being, wealth, goodness) or harvest accounts. That very day, *nazr* (presents/offerings from an inferior to a superior) was given at court in Murshidabad. The guests were entertained by music, dancing and refreshments. Why were Wednesday and Thursday chosen and not other days?

In Goiten's view³² there was an intimate connection between Ramadan, the market day and the Friday worship. And we can stretch his theory to explain the fixing of the time of *bera bhashan* as well. Ramadan, with the notion of gates of Heaven or Paradise, is the period when the demons are chained. It is also the period 'in which the Koran is sent down', and this is the reason for the fixing of the period of fasting.³³ Therefore, other than maritime and agrarian factors, the fact that August-September were holy months for Muslims may explain the fixing of *bera bhashan* around that period. Both Ramadan and the harvest signified the lean season, the Lent of the Christian calendar, a season of nothingness that preceded more bountiful times ahead.

And because Friday was a day of worship and rest, in other words a holiday,³⁴ the merrymaking of *bera* could only take place on Wednesday and Thursday. Friday worship was held at noon in a public place and therefore, in most Islamic countries, Thursday was an important market day.³⁵ Market days were also used by the ruler to give public audience, to hear complaints and claims, as the occasion of a court of summary jurisdiction.³⁶ Goiten therefore traces the origins of the Thursday market and Friday worship from a purely secular institution (he emphasises the pre-Islamic Arab and Judaic traditions) to one for worship and instruction and finally as a religious institution.³⁷ But the Day of Assembly (the Arabic term is *yawm al-jum'a*)³⁸ was shifted, in the case of *bera bhashan*, from Thursday to Wednesday – the day the Bengal *nawab* held public court, accepted *nazr* and generally asserted his suzerainty over all subjects. Thursday night was party night. Why this was done is something that further research may illuminate.

³² Ibid: 100.

³³ Ibid: 100.

³⁴ See Goiten 1968, Ch 5 'The Origin and the Nature of the Muslim Friday Worship': 111-125.

³⁵ Ibid: 114.

³⁶ Ibid: 115-16.

³⁷ Ibid: 115.

³⁸ Ibid: 118.

Festival as Market?

On the actual day itself, a Thursday and a market day in traditional Islamic societies, the royal procession started from Mahinagar, the second city on the other side of the Bhagirathi river from Murshidabad. It was swelled by courtiers and officials along its route. Ordinary subjects formed the tail end of the procession. On reaching the riverside, the *nawab* offered a golden lamp/candle as *nazr* to the river, the Jagat Seth (the chief financier of Bengal, the controller of the Royal Mint and wealthy merchants) offered silver lamps, and the ordinary people offered plantain or paper boats to the Bhagirathi.

There was a hierarchy of *beras* and the order was maintained when they were put out to water. After the *nawab's bera*, the Jagat Seth let out their *bera* with a silver candle, and this was followed by the more modest *beras* of the common folk. The main *bera* was one of plantain trunks bound tightly together to form a square of some thirty square feet. On this were placed four boats made of bamboo reeds. These were covered in black paper with the front having a dolphins' head (*makar*) and the back that of an elephant. This was the traditional shape of royal vessels in Bengal³⁹. On each of the larger rafts a small mud fortress was erected. Each *bera* was decorated with pillars, flags, etc. so that they looked like miniatures of the royal place at Murshidabad. They contained garlands, flowers, bread, a gold candle and sweets. Fireworks were attached to the walls of the fortress and these were set off when the rafts sailed away, accompanied by canon shots, conch shells and *shehnai*, as both Stewart and the *Tarrikh-i-Mancuri* note.⁴⁰

Candles were lit on all sides of the platform or the original *bera*, and the sight of these rafts setting out on the river, accompanied by fireworks against a sultry monsoon sky, was a splendid one, observers recalled. After the ceremony was over, the procession wound its way back to the palace where a feast took place. This was the traditional thanksgiving to the elements for blessing the province. The festivities could go on late as the next day, Friday, was a holiday.

³⁹ *Voyage dans les Deltas du Gange et l'Irraouaddy*, 1521, Anon. Presented and edited by Genevieve Bouchon and Luis Filipe Thomaz, Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Paris, 1988 : 318.

⁴⁰ Blochmann, H., 1867, Stewart 1903, op.cit.

Conclusion

Bob Pokrant asked at Leiden why we have *bera bhashan* in Bengal and nowhere else. We remarked at the beginning of this essay that *bera bhashan* is similar in many respects to practices all over coastal South Asia. As to why it was not coopted into state pageantries in Malabar, Gujarat, Vijayanagar or Hyderabad, why this was done specifically in Bengal, is something that only further research can tell. After all, Cambay, Surat, Calicut and Masulipatnam had equally, if not more, distinguished seafaring traditions.

There may be, to my mind, various answers to this. First, no other state possessed as much agricultural productivity as Bengal. This agricultural bounty was reaffirmed by the enormous fluvial network of the province and we have seen that *bera bhashan*, *sedo* and *ganga puja* acted as nodal points on this fluvial network. Whether it was celebrated on the Padda (Dhaka) or the Bhagirathi (Murshidabad) was immaterial to the masses, as long as the continuum between land and sea was acknowledged. Second, because this riverine sphere was central to both land and sea, it was celebrated by the Bengal *nawabs* as the most crucial element in their *mandala*. Third, unlike other successor states, which were closer to the *ashrafi* culture of northern India, Bengal was marked by a distinct folk, or littoral, culture, which five centuries of Islamic rule had failed to eradicate. Consequently, *sufis* here were more attuned to folk traditions than in other parts of the subcontinent. Fourth, the Bengal *nawabs* took on this practice consciously to assert and affirm their political standing as Islamic rulers of eminence in a marginal part of the Mughal empire, both in the eyes of Delhi and of the people within Bengal. This was vital in the absence of other suitable cultural props, such as were present in Awadh or Hyderabad. And finally, the associations between river pageantry and royal power were most marked in the countries immediately to the east of Bengal – from Burma down to the Malay world and the countries of Southeast Asia. It maybe that Murshid Quli Khan adopted a Southeast Asian model to assert his suzerainty; but only further research will shed light on this aspect.

The primary implications of *bera bhashan* that come to my mind are its changing connotations over time. Let us trace these: 1) in the pre-modern world it linked three worlds and three kinds of material activity: the maritime, the riverine and the agrarian, denoting mercantile, fishing/sailing and harvest practices; 2) this practice became widespread in Mughal Bengal in the seventeenth century when it was transformed from

dispersed folk ritual into a community practice; 3) *nawabi* Bengal took over this community practice in the eighteenth century. It was now used by the state as pageantry, and a new calendar constructed whereby the practice was moved forward from the last day of *pous* (January) to the last Thursday of *bhadra*. The fact that it was thus transformed indicates that it was consciously used by Murshid Quli Khan, the first *nawab*, to promote the harmony of maritime and agricultural activities, forge a bridge between his Hindu and Muslim subjects and also use the day before *bera* as an occasion to display the might of the state to the diverse communities under his rule. We have already noted that on the day before *bera* an assembly was held at the durbar where the *nawab*'s prominent subjects, both Asian and European, offered him *nazr*.⁴¹ Officials of the European East India companies based in Bengal compulsorily attended court that day. As late as the nineteenth century, when the Murshidabad *nizamat*'s income was greatly reduced, *bera* was one of the eighteen festivals celebrated by the *nawabs*. *Bera bhashan* was no longer just a royal festival; it had become the royal cult. At this time, Ruis-un-nisa Begum started an independent *bera* of her own, ostensibly to pray for her ailing son.⁴² It was therefore no longer a seafaring festival; it had become a saviour cult. 4) It continued to be celebrated by East India Company officials: Stewart noted that the East India Company administrators at Dhaka too had to continue the practice; and 5) now by way of being a state-sponsored enterprise of the West Bengal Government of the Republic of India it links two communities, Muslim and Hindu (Murshidabad has a large Muslim population).

From the seventeenth century therefore *bera bhashan* changed from a social or religious ritual, into an expression of the sovereign authority of the state. At that time Dhaka, where the festival was first noted, and not Murshidabad, was the capital of Mughal Bengal. As Mughal Bengal ceded way to Nawabi Bengal in the eighteenth century, the festival was celebrated with great pomp at the new capital, Murshidabad. As the founder of Murshidabad, Murshid Quli Khan (1704-27), had originally envisaged, *bera bhashan* reflects even today the ruler's *mandala*, or circle of power, in both the worldly and cosmic realms. And since Bengali Islam is known for its syncretism and eclecticism, *bera bhashan*'s importance lies in the fact that it is a noticeably Bengali-Muslim festival, one of the more enduring signs of Muslim rule in eastern India. And because Bengal split in

⁴¹ See *Kasimbazar Factory Records*, G/23 Series, British Library, St. Pancras, London.

⁴² Local history. See Das, S. and Pal, R., 1998, *Hazarduarir Nabab: Sube Banglar Shesh Nazim*, Khagra, Murshidabad, Itihas Parikrama (in Bengali).

1905 - and again and again since then - *bera bhashan* may well be an affirmation of all that once existed as shared community practices and as a reminder of what was lost through the political process of partition and nation building. *Bera bhashan* is a symbol of a united Bengal, perhaps not cartographically, but in spirit at least.

Bibliography

- Alexander, Jeffrey C., and Seidman, Steven (eds.) (1990) *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ali, M.M. (1985) *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, 2 vols., Riyadh: Imam Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud Islamic University Press.
- Allah, Salim (1788) *Tawarikh-i-Bangalah or a Narrative of the Transactions on Bengal*, (trans.) Francis Gladwin, Calcutta.
- Bhattacharya, Ashutosh (1982) *Banglar Lok Sanskriti*, New Delhi: National Book Trust.
- Blochmann, H. (1867) 'Notes on Sirajuddaulah and the Town of Murshidabad, taken from a Persian manuscript of the Tarikh-i-Mancuri', *Journal of the Asiatic Society* 1: 2.
- Bouchon, Genevieve, and Thomaz, Luis Filipe (eds.) (1988) *Voyage dans les Deltas du Gange et l'Irraouaddy, 1521*, Paris: Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian.
- Cheetham, Tom (2004) *Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World*, New York: SUNY Press.
- Das, S. and Pal, R. (1998) *Hazarduarir Nabab: Sube Banglar Shesh Nazim*, Khagra, Murshidabad: Itihas Parikrama.
- Digital Dictionaries of South Asia* available online at <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/list.html>.
- El Hibri, Tayeb (1999) *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Harul-al-Rashid and the Narratives of the Abbasid Caliphate*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fryer, Dr. John (1909-15) *A New Account of East India and Persia*, London: Hakluyt.
- Gilroy, Paul (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Goiten, S.D. (1968) *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions*, Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Gutas, Dimitri (1998) *Greek Thought, Arab Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd-4th and 8th-10th C.)*, London/N.Y.: Routledge.
- Metcalf, Barbara D. and Metcalf, Thomas R. (2006) *A Concise History of Modern India*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Michael, H. Fisher (ed.) (1997) *The Travels of Dean Mahomet, A Native of Patna in Bengal, Through Several Parts of India, While in the Service of The Honourable The East India Company Written by Himself, In a Series of Letters to a Friend*, Berkeley: University of California Press. Available online at SARAI (South Asia

- Research Access on the Internet) at
<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/web/indiv/southasia/cuv1/>.
- Mukherjee, Rila (2003) *The Lost Worlds of Europe*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers.
- (2006) *Merchants and Companies in Bengal: Kasimbazar and Jugdia in the Eighteenth Century*, New Delhi: Pragati Publications.
- (2006) *Strange Riches: Bengal in the Mercantile Map of South Asia*, New Delhi: Foundation Books/Cambridge India.
- Reid, Anthony (1988) *South East Asia in an Age of Commerce 1450-1680*, New Haven and London: Yale Press.
- Rennell, J. (1782, 1976) *Memoirs of a Map of Hindoostan or the Mogul Empire*, Calcutta: Editions Indian.
- Robine, Francois 1998, 'Les Immigrés Intha, La Transhumance des Buffles et la Circumnavigation Bouddhique du Lac Inle: Etat Shan de Birmanie' pp. 330-70 in *Etudes Birmanes en Hommage à Denise Bernot, Réunis par Pierre Richard et Francois Robine* (Paris: EFEO, 1998).
- Sastri, Haraprasad (1980) *Bener Meye, Collected Works*, (ed.) Sukumar Sen, West Bengal State Book Board.
- Stewart, Charles (1903) *The History of Bengal*, Calcutta: Bangabashi Press.
- Tripathi, Sila and Raut, L.N. (2006) 'Monsoon Wind and Maritime Trade: a Case Study of Historical Evidence from Orissa, India', *Current Science* 90(6): 864-871.
- Varadarajan, Lotika (1980) 'Traditions of Indigenous Navigation in Gujarat', *South Asia: Indian Ocean Issue*, n.s. 3: 1.
- (1983) 'Indian Seafaring: The Precept and Reality of Kalivarjya', *The Great Circle*, 5: 1.