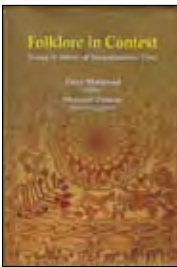


## South Asia

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**Firoz Mahmud, ed., Sharani Zaman, ass. ed., *Folklore in Context: Essays in Honor of Shamsuzzaman Khan***

Dhaka, Bangladesh: Dhaka University Press, 2010. xxvi + 436 pages, b/w photos, index. Hardcover, \$13.00/995 Bangladeshi Taka. ISBN 978-984-506-013-4.

THIS FESTSCHRIFT for Shamsuzzaman Khan, one of the most eminent folklorists of Bangladesh, is a collection of thirty-two essays in honor of his seventieth birthday in 2007. The varied topics and the disciplinary background of the authors also reflect the variety in the format, length, and quality of the single contributions. The editor Firoz Mahmud and the associate editor Sharani Zaman, the eldest daughter of the honoree, have categorized the large number of contributions into thirteen different sections.

The “Introduction” comprises three essays dedicated to the professional and personal life of Shamsuzzaman Khan written by the editor, the associate editor, and M. Shahinoor Rahman; “Cultural Impact on Civilization” comprises two articles by Amartya Sen and Amalendu De; “Esoteric Folklore Bengal” focuses on contributions by David G. Cashin, Lauri Harvilahti, and Syed Jamil Ahmed; and “Oral History and Discourse in Folklore” and “Folk Literature” each contain two essays concerning different regions by Margaret A. Mills and Jawaharlal Handoo, and Ülo Valk and Nabaneeta Dev Sen respectively; and “Jewish Folklore” contains only one essay written jointly by Dan Ben-Amos and Div Noy. The seven articles in the following three sections—“Urban Folklore,” “Performance in Folklore,” and “Folk Culture”—deal exclusively with topics concerning South Asia and are by Soumen Sen, Abhi Subedi, Christina Nygen, Sudipto Chatterjee, Frank J. Korom, Nihal Rodrigo, and Sitakant Mahapatra. And while section ten, “Folklife,” contains two

essays by Richard Kennedy and Shahida Akhter, the most extensive section “Folk Art and Material Culture” contains seven contributions by Henry Glassie, Clinton B. Seely, Pravina Shukla, Hameeda Hossain, Perveen Ahmed, Zinat Mahrukh Banu, and Lala Rukh Selim. Two sections, “The Role of the Museum in History, Culture, and Heritage” comprising articles by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Firoz Mahmud, and “Folkloristic Study in Bangladesh” with an essay by Saifuddin Chowdhury, conclude this multifaceted omnibus.

It is in the nature of a festschrift that the topics of the individual contributions need not be related to each other, and also that the volume on hand rather serves as a valuable overview of the numerous relationships the honoree has or had to other scholars (in this case from the USA, European, and South Asian countries) during his career. But although the subjects of some articles are more out of line than others, for example Mills’s interim report on her experiences regarding oral history in Afghanistan (133–43) or De’s worthwhile treatise on Fazlul Huq (77–92), one of the most influential East Bengali politicians during the first half of the twentieth century, the reader is led through the book either by his interest in folklore studies in general or themes related to various phenomena of Bengali folk culture. For the latter, the editors were able to call on eminent Bengal scholars such as David G. Cashin, Syed Jamil Ahmed, and Frank Korom. Other researchers, who are more or less also familiar with that region, add to this collection of a total of eighteen contributions focusing on Bengal. Due to the richness of essays in this festschrift only a very few shall be considered in this review.

Syed Jamil Ahmed (113–32) has contributed one of the most interesting and valuable articles on the subject area of Bengali. Ahmed elaborates narratives of Mānik Pīr, a legendary saint of East Bengal, that were produced during British rule, and his role in these representations as “a trickster who fools the colonizers and joins the subaltern in a struggle against the dominant classes” (130). As an eminent theater connoisseur—as a director and scholar—Ahmed is well conversant with the nexus of theater, religion, and social notions of performances centering around legends, for example, *Biṣād Sindhu* (AHMED 2001, 177–216), and proves with his essay in this volume once again that it is necessary to look behind the obvious—in this case “grandiloquent tales devoid of inner significance, philosophical knowledge, and ‘truth’” (130)—to discover the hidden realistic critique of the contemporary status quo. Ahmed criticizes scholars who underestimate the subaltern classes and the critical power of “their” literature, and does not refrain from using numerous quotes from Marx, Gramsci, and Deleuze to elucidate his ideological standpoint.

Frank Korom, too, dedicates his article to a phenomenon of colonial Bengal: the rise of folk studies and its relevance for Bengali nationalism elaborated by means of a portrait of an important Bengali folklorist, Gurusaday Dutt (257–73). Dutt contributed largely to the revival, preservation, and reconstruction of folk arts in Bengal in the first half of the twentieth century through his extensive writing on Bengali folklore and his cultural and social activism, which led to the establishment of several organizations concerned with spreading folklore and strengthening the national sentiments of urban Bengalis by bringing them closer to the cultural rich-

ness of the “authentic” rural Bengal. Interestingly, Dutt, like many other nationalists in colonial India, was heavily influenced by “sources rooted in colonial British scholarship” (270), namely by E. B. Havell’s *The Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival in India*. Unfortunately, Korom’s essay ends too early with a quote from Havell, and the remark that this influenced Dutt to chose the Paṭuṃyās, the scroll painters and performers of Bengal, “as the cultural representatives of Bengal” (270). Since Korom himself is well known for his work on the Paṭuṃyās of Bengal (KOROM 2006), the reader might at this point long for a critical self-reflection by the author on today’s role of a foreign or a local researcher who clearly contributes to the real or felt importance of the Paṭuṃyā folklore by means of his own work. Seely, who adds another essay about Paṭ paintings in Bengal (324–42), does not raise this kind of self-critical question either, but nonetheless offers the reader a worthwhile introduction to this fascinating folk tradition.

Other introductory articles on Bengali folklore worth reading are Nygren’s comparison of the Yātrā theater performances in West Bengal and Bangladesh (227–41), Glassie’s essay on clay Hindu sculptures in Bangladesh (305–23), and Hossain’s thoughts on the Nak’ṣi Kāṭhā craft (357).

Hossain’s short treatise is followed by a longer essay written by Ahmed on the same topic (363–78). But this begins with a long introduction which proves that Korom’s idea on folklore studies as an important instrument for nationalism is still prevalent: “Bangladesh’s folk and ethnic crafts stand out as the outstanding embodiment of Asia’s handicraft heritage. The ethos of the Bengali people, reflected through handmade art crafts, points to the roots of its culture, and mirrors the genius of its inhabitants. Craft skills, preserved through memory and the ‘inner eye’ of the gifted artisan, do not happen in watertight compartments; they represent the collective glory of man’s civilized history of over five thousand years.” Ahmed, in fact, extensively quotes Dutt, whose work has only one hundred pages before been critically examined by Korom, and nurtures Dutt’s approach of creating a long and precious national folk tradition (369): “Kantha art holds the key not only to understanding a central ethos of Bengal’s rural culture but also underlines a direct link with the Indus Valley and Indo-Gangetic civilization.” After reading Korom’s essay on Dutt the reader might at this point be astonished about the contrasting academic approaches and quality of some contributions.

Finally the question arises whether it was apt that the editors opted for such a large number of contributions differing so widely in size, format, quality and topic. With thirteen in total, not only is the arrangement of the contributions in so many sections questionable, but additionally it must be pointed out that some essays might not fulfil the aspiration one might combine with a festschrift. Is a festschrift an omnibus of works with which academics want to pay tribute to a colleague, or a collection of write-ups which could until now not find its way to an audience? Some contributions, unfortunately, leave the aftertaste of the latter. Some essays were published before, for example Ben-Amos and Noy’s article *Numbers as Meta-Language in Jewish Folklore* (191–203) in German, some are speeches put into writing, for example Amartya Sen’s contribution (61–76), some are just reports, for example Akhter’s report on the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 2008

(293–304), and some seem to end before they even begin, for example Harvilathi's short six-page write-up, "The Folklore of Majvandar's [sic] Mystics" (106–12). But it is comforting to know that the latter topic at least has been recently extensively researched upon by HARDER (2011).

The title of Harvilathi's essay furthermore makes clear what the whole volume suffers from: a lack of strict editing and a stringent rendition of Bengali terms. Only Syed Jamil Ahmed prefers diacritical signs, which make it easier to trace back the Bengali original, whereas other authors use makeshift transcriptions which furthermore diverge from each other.

Nevertheless, the festschrift for Shamsuzzaman Khan offers the reader interested in folklore predominantly useful essays, and can serve as an introductory reading book on folklore in general, or the folklore landscape of Bengal.

Carmen Brandt

*Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg*

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