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Professor Dr. K.S. Krishnan, F.R.S., Padma Bhushana,
Director, National Physical Laboratory of India,
New Delhi,

Sir,

On the occasion of your visit to the Jadavpur University last year when you delivered the Convocation Address here, I had had the privilege to be acquainted with you and obtained your kind permission to send you an article of mine on Folk Literature after it would be published, which, however is still under consideration of the authorities.

Being a free-lance journalist, I am interested, among my studies, in arts and industry, folk literature and the motifs and methods embedded in tradition.

In the present it is proposed to submit herewith as enclosed a Press article entitled "The Cult of Nila and His Altar" relating to a festival custom of Bengal for favour of your perusal.

It may be noted that my article has been published in the esteemed Indian journal The Modern Review for September 1959.

The lyrical ballad or song, which the collector found in Faridpur, East Bengal (Pakistan), incorporated in my paraphrase of the Bengali-language text--now preserved in the Bangiya Loka Sanskriti Parishat's archives in Calcutta--may, it will perhaps be agreed, be referred to as a pointer to the old belief or dogma that efficacious folk music is apt to maintain essentially the same continuous benign influence among humankind in the spheres of art, literature and culture through the changes occurring in the sovereignty of a State or in effect in its geographical boundaries.

Perhaps the folklore materials herein provide an opportunity for the study of a literary account rather being in a condition of flux, if, as it may be presumed, at first it was no more than oral; wordings might be altered during rehearsals so that the verse in its entirety would be more likely to be either shortened or expanded. Thus this version would represent only the form in which a teller or tellers narrated the details of the circumstances as true for a particular or limited area.

My earnest hope is that in point of fact the collector's description of the festival as a whole will yet prove valuable and be approvingly received as a testimony to a living tradition, which, due to the partition of Bengal following India's independence, has henceforth become international.

It needs to be mentioned also that, through the kind courtesy of the authorities of the Bangiya Loka Sanskriti Parishat, (the Bengal Folk Culture Society), situated at Nattore House, 6, Lansdowne Road, Calcutta--founded in 1949--the requisite data and facilities for preparing the above article were made available to the present writer. I cannot be sufficiently grateful to the authorities for this generous step taken.

I shall be much obliged by having your beneficial reply, which, I hope and pray will indeed be in the most promising auspices.

October 27,
1959.

I have the honour to be,
Sir,
Your most obedient servant,
Sushil Kumar Deb,
(Sushil Kumar Deb),
6A Ashton Road,
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as the cult of patriotism will end their existence in a sudden and violent death." And in case of Japan how brutally it came to be true.

This sort of nationalism shows no regard to the finer virtues of man. It can do anything and everything without the slightest hesitation. It appears almost unbelievable to us when we see the news in the press that the surplus wheat stocks were burned in Canada, milk and apples were dumped into rivers in the U.S.A. and coffee stocks thrown in the sea in Brazil while millions were hovering between life and death due to starvation in other parts of the world.

The only way by which we can cure the malady of this mad world, gone astray through the cultivation of extreme nationalism, is to create an impression in the individual's mind that "the real unit of allegiance," as Laski pointed out, "is the world." It is to the total interest of humanity that we shall sacrifice everything near and dear to us. Nationalism, it is true, is the result of a long historical process and since it is instinctive it cannot be easily undone. But our main concern is how to control it in such a way that it can serve the interest of a particular country without jeopardising the interest of mankind in general. That is why Laski pointed out that "the problem, then, is the equation of nationalism with right," with the right of all people of the world. And if it is not possible for us to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and co-operation, progress and civilisation will be doomed. In a world threatened with A-bomb and H-bomb where a few of them is quite sufficient to exterminate all lives on our beautiful planet and to bring the peace of the grave we cannot but find an echo in our heart of what Laski said long ago, "Logically, the foundation of an approach to the common problem of civilisation is either international or it is worthless." In this regard it may be interesting to quote a few words of the father of modern nationalism in Italy, Mazzini. In his opinion, "Life..... was given you by God so that you might use it for the benefit of

humanity." In addition to the duties of man to his family and to his country he should have duties to humanity. Laski advised his countrymen to be "apostles of this faith, apostles of brotherhood, of nations and of the unity of human race." Every one should be given such education and training from childhood that he may realise that he is a man first before he is a citizen. "Citizenship" said MacIver, "is not the only duty of man." Children should be taught the lesson of interdependence among nations and groups and find out the folly of conflict in the atomic age. Centuries ago the poet put down:

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of
Heav'n.

The bad effects of the perverted nationalist sentiment can be checkmated if people try to train the younger generation in the light of universal brotherhood without poisoning their minds with false vanities. Thus in the preamble of the constitution of the Unesco it has been rightly said, "Since war begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." The Unesco and the UNO started with the hypothesis that the worst enemy of peace is the national ego to be found in the minds of men and hence it must be replaced by the universal ego. We should not lose faith in man and get frustrated on account of the failures in the past. Due to the development of communication our world has already shrunk considerably in size and we have begun to feel for each other. The news of a devastating flood in India bring sincere words of sympathy and material help from men living thousands of miles away in the remotest corner of the world. This is of no mean significance. Man has the instinct in him to become great, it only needs proper cultivation. Thus Shakespeare's Hamlet says, "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! In the form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel!

~~in apprehension how like a God!" If a deliberate and determined effort is made to reshape man's mind, I think, Wendell Willkie's one world will not remain an Utopian concept for ever and nationalism will gradually cease to be a menace to civilisation.~~

THE CULT OF NILA AND HIS ALTAR A Festival Custom of Bengal

By SUSHIL KUMAR DEB

In popular nomenclature, Nila means Shiva, the primeval god of the Hindu pantheon. Literally, Nila means 'blue,' the divinity who obtained this name because of his supernatural powers. At some aeonic time out of memory, when the Kalakuta poison churned out of the ocean stuck in the throat of Shiva he came to be known as the blue-throated Immortal, who saved all creatures without discriminating the gods from the demons by drinking this deadly drink. He is surnamed Nila-lohita, dark blue and red. This name positively suits his complexion: blackened by poison, he is actually flame-coloured, bright yellow. In the Sanskrit lexicon "shabdakalpadruma," the exposition of this appellation incorporates details of the pertinent rite being performed through fasting, sacramental meal-taking and the delights of festive proceedings on into the last day of the month of Chaitra (the closing month of the Bengali year, corresponding to a part of March and of April). Celebrations start off from the first day of the month that heralds the summer season.

Out of an uncomeatable, sequestered spot where it remained or was deposited for the major part of the year, an emblem of Nila is brought to the gaze of the common humanity only during the festival. Probably this emblem is no more than a lookout platform, a sacred altar, from where the god reigns in the hearts of his worshippers, and accepts their homage amid a medley of musical airs. Apart from the song of chorus on the occasion of his installation or enthronement, a conservatory of music includes in its repertory a

number of arias appropriate to ritual bathing and robing, burning incense, and cooking, etc.

Shell-cutting invests this cult with the aura of art-in-industry. It is the minstrels' obligation to focus the activities of shell-cutters, the artisans whose birth-right it is to put into service the bracelets made of the sea conch, cut out with fine saws into thin circular pieces joined end to end. Some of these arm-bands or rings are white, while others, dyed with lac, yield a crimson colour in the ornaments that arouse deep religious sentiments among the married womanhood of Bengal. There is no bar to the shell-cutters' playing the minstrels' role. The latter are artists alike in locution and gestures.

As is the custom in some parts of Bengal, four or five minstrel-singers would chant homely hymns, that is, a set of favourite strains in public worship, make gestures, and cut shells. On the designated day at the turn of the month, a shed or temple outside the perimeter of the homestead is fabricated. At night, burnt fish, bhang, ganja, wine, and a variety of delectable food are offered to the deity. On the morrow, a shell-cutter goes the round of the houses, impersonating the ascetic-god Shiva and his spouse Gauri. Villagers whack him with the shoots of hemp that supplies the god, leading a cynobitic life, his usual narcotic drug. Gauri, too, is credited with drubbing him with the same hemp. It seems a sore grief to all that Shiva should remain an incurable bhang-addict. To free community life of the stigma of worldly-mindedness, stoic

worshippers, for the span of a full month, desist from eating either fish or meat, and are reconciled to a vegetarian diet. By no means until the thirtieth day of the festivities arrive would Nila partake of the consecrated fish. Not till then, with an otherwise absorbed, indifferent god to shepherd them along, the worshippers are permitted to feed on the fish diet.

One needs in this context to remember Faridpur's folkways bearing on an engrossing travelogue. Strolling players, i.e., theatrical parties, here, visit the houses and give currency to the countryside's wandering refrains. They would dance with obvious native virtuosity. They might mimic Hara (Shiva in a conspicuous mood) and also Gauri, his spouse, or Kali, the goddess of eternity. Even so, they might act as mimers very earnestly. Ultimately, they come trumping back, laden with rice, discarded garments, and cash money—spoils of their many days' continual hunt. In this way, the display of Bengali arts and craftsmanship fits into the pattern of an annual village function.

Below is an English transcript—a prose comment or paraphrase—of a Bengali lyrical ballad of the Festival. The lines in Bengali show versification with irregular metre. The rhapsode apparently did not abstain from reciting or writing disjointedly. Thus, one might imagine, was accorded a place to composed or impromptu tunes in folk art. "Gauri Gets Her Bracelets" is riddled with vernacularism. The leitmotif for delineation of the scene of Gauri's wearing armlets is to stress the excellence—as has been brought into the light by tradition—of the Bengali Hindu wife's privilege to be honoured at home with gifts of jewellery of sorts, presumably since an early period of civilization. The convolutions of the story describe, first and foremost, Shiva's masquerading as a nimble-witted shell-cutter and peddler of jewellery. The main question for the fabulist or the rhythmist is: Will Gauri, born in the purple, tolerate a slant on earthly glory? Shiva, the wonder-worker was fain to profess he was poorest in worldly goods.

Hence some part of the dialogue savours a trifle of an ostensible conflict and declamation as usual. Yet perhaps the whole choral work has produced a synthesis of so much diversity, found in the rights and wrongs of the disputed issues.

Gauri Gets Her Bracelets

Gauri longed to get what her heart bid. It was not just a quaint fancy. With folded hands, she exhorted Shiva: "Be sure, you give me the bracelets. Can a wife subscribe allegiance to her lord without such?"

"Dearest!" rejoined Shiva, "I know not where can I have riches to buy bracelets with. Your father and other near kinsmen are quite well-off. Aye, they have enough and to spare. Go up to them. Behold I have nothing to give."

Thus was Gauri counselled and sent adrift—while Shiva turned the matter over in his mind. He was set athinking lest any harm befell her as she went up the mountainous highway—a perilous journey far to the glacial North. Forthwith the mysterious god found wisdom, and resolved upon outpointing Gauri by setting a snare.

Leaving on silent feet his hermitage of the woodlands, Shiva made his way across the cliffs of rocks to a region which Gauri would surely have to pass. And, lo, he proceeded at once to cross her path.

He mused: "Go where she may in quest of the invaluable shell-ornaments, she, with her proven sagacity, must not pass me by."

Then, looking the very picture of a dealer in shellware he shouted out professional slogans, "Bracelets on sale, bracelets on sale!" and attracted her attention.

Without the least cause for feeling any misgivings about the reality of the merchandise Gauri greeted him, and made answer: "Ah, indeed! Have you bracelets to sell?"

The merchant-man's voice called out again: "If you only care for such of the precious stuff I have in stock! Pray, come forth, and choose yourself."

However, Gauri had no intent to get into needless sundry conversations. She

extended one of her arms promptly towards him; she would certainly try the bracelets, and make a bargain.

The merchant-man now uttered a platitude: "These ornaments in truth are unsurpassed for their marvellous beauty in all the three worlds." And he begged her to try them on. He had, as it were, the decorative artist's instinct to ensure that she did not have to trouble at all to wear those fine offerings.

"I am still such a distance away from my father's realm in the mountain fastness," she explained her circumstances, and pleaded with the decorator to set the bracelets on the wrists expeditiously. "Time has slipped away. It bodes ill for me to wait here."

Yet the merchant-man smiled, as he performed his allotted task. A murmurous complaint smote his mind: "But she would not be discomfited even in an unequal contest!"

Aloud, he repeatedly praised the deft art of the ornament's construction, inasmuch as they were perfect to the minutest detail, saying: "Mine is the indisputable right of being their maker. None else could claim that right. Signs are there for all to see: subjected to strain and stress they will never crumple, fold or be broken."

"Pray, do not stay me from my routine peddling programme," he continued solemnly. "Time flies past." And so he wanted to be paid the price.

"Listen, merchant-man," Gauri demanded. "Follow me as far as my father's mansion-house. Right off you will obtain compensation there."

This request astonished the merchant-man who met it with a straight refusal. "Can I have misjudged you, do you think?" he cried. "Woe to such a customer! I tell you what, take this chance of doing right. Clear the dues—if you are not lacking in pride in your family."

Thus blew the blast of an argument, which slandered Gauri's conscience.

Ruefully she declared: "What is the sense of taunting me, merchant-man?"

None too practical a salesman appeared Shiva. It came about that, before long, mortified and humbled, he craved her pardon.

Meanwhile, the goddess hastened to draw out the enchanted bracelets from her wrists, but failed. "Take these back," said she.

With baffled indignation, she struck hard at the bracelets. She then dealt them a blow with a scimitar, which splintered. Next moment, she hit them with a club, which became simply match-wood.

On the other hand, the almighty god could not help laughing to think that he must now calm her fears by telling her that she could fetch him the price at that spot on the following day,—that the jewellery, of course, belonged to her, as she set her heart on it.

Gauri was so impressed with the challenger's change of mind and quiet grace, both, that she asked: "Who—who are you?"

"My home is in Kailas," came the cryptic reply.

Unvanquished, Gauri smiled and said with some temerity: "If this hostile campaigning on your part was a deception and anathema, why take to it?"

"Ah, with all the simplicity of your unpretentious nature, you have passed the tests," replied Shiva impartially. She had convinced him: Not that he was the least belittled or any more slighted.

Carrying the present—as though a trophy of victory, a symbol of her faith and dedication—once more, the goddess trekked through the icy vale with a cheerful message for her ageing father, the King of the Mountains.

The God's parting words rang in her ears: "Gauri! Be unswerving in your devotion to the eternal things. And remember me—ever more."*

*Based on the archives of the Bangiya Loka Sanskriti Parishat (the Bengal Folk Culture Society), "Natore House," Lansdowne Road, Calcutta.