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Review

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Review by: Nur Yalman

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reviews

***Art and Life in Bangladesh.* HENRY GLASSIE. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. 511 pp., figures, glossary, notes, bibliography, index.**

NUR YALMAN
Harvard University

How is art related to life? What is the relationship among folk art, crafts, and fine art? Can a society be described through its popular art? How do these questions relate to culture, religion, history, and other weighty and murky matters? These concerns have propelled Henry Glassie on a great adventure through the maze of Islam and Hinduism as exemplified in popular art in Bangladesh.

The question of art's relation to life is large enough, but it becomes particularly compelling when set in Bangladesh, one of the most complex and sophisticated corners of the Indian subcontinent. Glassie, with his interests in Sufi Islam, could not have chosen a more evocative context in which to pursue his work on art and artists. He has written a book full of empathy and charm on a similar subject in Turkey. Here he returns to his illuminating conversations with artists, potters, painters, metalworkers, and carpenters in a country of brilliant culture but fragmented history. The general creativity of Hindu and Muslim Bengalis has been second to none through history, but recent times have taken a heavy toll. There was the nightmare of the partition of India in 1947, then the unhappy coexistence with Pakistan, the trauma of repression, and secession in 1971 followed by deep internal dissension.

Glassie comes to Bangladesh with genuine openness. He lets himself be led by his impressions. He walks the streets. He meets people, particularly artisans, potters, sculptors, and carpenters; he gets them to take him to their workplaces. There he turns on his tape recorder and allows them to express their thoughts. They talk about their work, their families, their hopes, their fears, their religious concerns. All this is then reexamined in the context of the actual production of objects, which allows Glassie to write on the expressive significance of materials used in everyday life: clay pots or clay figurines, gods and goddesses, decorated rickshaws with elaborate paintings, and similar matters.

The result is an evocative book in which the gentle side of Bangladesh comes to life. Colorful Dhaka, the sprawling city of millions, the potter villages, the market towns, and the artisan families are all vividly described. The intellectual men and the bright and creative women are encouraged to speak their minds. It is as if a sensitive novelist has decided to give us telling vignettes of a sweet country. The potters turn out to be poets; the image maker is in fact a worthwhile philosopher.

The author underlines the superficiality of the image of Bangladesh in the West. Of course there is poverty. But behind the poverty is a deep sense of

humanity. There is poetry, spirituality—many forms of expression of beauty; life is materially poor but culturally rich. People are in touch. Life is sociable and meaningful. The implied contrast is with the great rich cities of the West, where material opulence also coexists with wide swathes of cultural poverty bordering on spiritual malaise.

Much of the book is in fact about Hindu potters. Glassie remains silent on caste. However, the context of Islam allows the author to describe the interpenetration of Hindu and Islamic Sufi mystical ideas. Muslims and Hindus learned a great deal from each other during those long centuries of intimate relations starting with the great opus of al-Biruni. The preoccupation with love as the central emotion appropriate to people's relations to God and to each other is nowhere so clearly indicated as in the stories of Sufi saints and Radha-Krishna Bhajans on the subcontinent. Glassie is eclectic: at the end of Ramadan, he joins

eighty-five thousand men for prayer in the open field by the High Court in Dhaka. We wore snowy prayer caps and loose, new *panjabis* [the original pyjamas] in white, cream, ivory, fawn, buff, beige, and the most delicate shades of lemon, peach and apricot. An amplified voice led us through *namaz* [Islamic prayer] at a stately pace. It felt good to repeat the familiar postures, standing, bowing, kneeling, lowering the head in massive oneness. We sat for a long prayer of peace. [p. 54]

Later, he joins in the Hindu Sarasvati puja: "Reaching the front, each of us receives from the Brahmin a black dot on the forehead. There is an ornate dot on the forehead of the Goddess, the third eye that sees within, that looks beyond, and for a moment there is a oneness among us" (p. 160). He writes of the "earthen and bamboo village of Hashli [where] Saidur Rahman Bayati sings for Muslim farmers the songs of Radha and Krishna . . . of the earthly ardor of men and women through which a third power, simultaneously Radha and Krishna is created as a realization of the ultimate unity that is God" (p. 143).

Despite all the poetry, the gentle personalities, the deep friendships across communal lines, and the ancient syncretism, a sadness and a tone of despair haunt this beautiful book. Glassie does not dwell on it, but the story of Ayodhya and its nefarious effects, recently amplified, evidently continue to erode the trust and the old human links forged through long centuries of common experience. The book, graced with extensive notes and a good bibliography, is about aesthetics, but the fissures of communal tension continue to undermine individual lives so lovingly described.