

Historical sensitivity in Colonial Bengal

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There was absence of an authentically documented history of Bengal cum Bengalees even during the 80s of the nineteenth century. Bengalees did not have a history—this misconception had turned into a maxim.¹ The lack of interest among the Bengalees regarding historical practices had augmented the frustration of the Bengali intellectuals like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore. For these reasons we can find that Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay had not only pleaded for historical studies but also emphasized upon the importance of writing of history through his various essays like 'Bangaleer Bahubal' (*Muscle power of the Bengalees*), 'Bharatkalanka' (*The Disgrace of India*), 'Banglar Itihash Sammondhe koekti Katha' (*A Few Words Regarding the History of Bengal* and many others). Out of his frustration from the unavailability of any written history of Bengal, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay had lamented that the history of Greenland has been written; even that of Mawri people is on page; however, the land that was constituted of the places like Gour – Tamralipta -Saptagram etc, that land has no documented history in writing.

It is to be noted that the scientific documentation of history resulting from its emergence as an independent discipline, started evolving during the fifteenth-sixteenth century Europe.¹ In fact, in the fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe, as a byproduct of the European Renaissance, Humanism got evolved. This Humanism was the vital foundation of all cultural changes,

including the historical ideas pertaining to the Renaissance in Europe. The historians got powerfully influenced by the Secular Humanism particularly. In reality, there was a absence of the complete historical sense earlier. The beginning of the Humanist movement with Petrarch and Boccaccio, helped in germination of a sense of history.² Petrarch's *Letters to the Ancient Dead* cultivated an awareness among the writers of his time. The same attitude provoked them to approach the ancient art. This sense of distance exotically paralleled with development of a wisdom of perspective in the common interest in archaeology. There was an inclination to retreat back into the past, to restructure those types of thought and expression which had been the most characteristic of it.³ History was no longer a descriptive attachment to theology; slowly but surely history emerged as a discipline in its own right. The theological interpretation of history and the mystical ingredient in history were swapped by a new secular interpretation.⁴

But historical researches in Bengal as well as India, broadly speaking in scientific style, seem to have started with the establishment of British rule in India. The foremost initiatives were, however, taken up by the British scholars and it was gradually followed by the Indians. Sir William Jones may be regarded as one of the pioneer researchers in the discovery of India's past. Even though Jones was not the earliest among the Orient lists. Investigation, pertaining to the knowledge of history and heritage of Bengal in some degree had began with the very establishment of British rule in Bengal. In fact, the British East India Company employed a number of Supervisor who had been assigned to amass roughly, the indigenous customs, traditions, Socio-economic condition and history of different quarters of Bengal, along with their ordinary duty to inspect the performances of the employee of the department of revenue.

Still, Jones seems to be the primary one to think in terms of foregrounding an enduring institution for Oriental studies and researches at a grand scale in this country. In 1784, he founded the Asiatic Society "for enquiry into the history and antiquities, arts, science and literatures of Asia" (*Journal of the Asiatic society of Bengal*, 1832). Actually, Jones and other thirty founder members wanted to grow it as a centre for Asian studies together with nearly the whole thing in relation to man and nature inside the geographical confines of the continent.⁵ This Asiatic Society, undeniably, had inspired in establishing a few other research societies and institutions, government and non-government, in various parts of India. However, it took more than hundred years to originate such institutions. It is to be highlighted that even after the commencement of the Asiatic Society, the history of Bengal, particularly the ancient history of Bengal witnessed no major improvements. Hence after the formation of Fort William College in 1800, when a catalogue was prepared for the sake of familiarizing the British officials with the culture and civilization of India, then books like *Rajabali*(1808) , a work by Mrityunjoy Tarkalankar based on *Kulasastra* or *Pratapaditya Charita*(1801) by Ramram Basu or *Raja Krsnachandra Rahasya Charita*(1805) by Rajiblochan Mukhopadhaya had to be included as the references. William Kerry himself had written a book *Itihashamala*(A Garland of History was the sub title of this book in English) in that line. Despite the endeavour undertaken by some scholars to project this writers, Mrityunjoy Tarkalankar and Ramram Basu as the precursors who developed a new paradigm of hybridity of the view by amalgamating the old approach with the new in the task of history-writing. Yet the fact cannot be overlooked that whatever new experiments Mrityunjoy Tarkalankar or Ramram Basu or Rajiblochan Mukhopadhaya did, but

their works which were loaded with stories and fables can never be leveled as a historical account.

It is quite unfortunate that till the middle of nineteenth century, neither in Bengal nor in India there was an ambiance of historical culture in the truest sense. At that time, since historical research based on the study of original documents was hardly known, the history of Bengal, specifically the ancient history of Bengalees, has not been composed. Moreover at that time the Bengalees were quite unaware of utilizing archaeology as the major ingredient⁶ of writing the ancient history. Although a few disjunctive surveys were conducted by the Britishers like Charles Wilkins, Buchanan Hamilton, Alexander Cunningham, Creighton, Ravenshaw, and Westmacott, those hardly contributed to the composition of the early history of Bengal. They were also indifferent towards Northern Bengal which has been central to ancient history of Bengal. And consequently there was no major explorations made at this region. This, however does not imply that there was no existence of any significant Bengalee archaeologist at the 2nd half of the nineteenth century. As an evidence one can name Rajendralal Mitra. Yet his two significant essays were focused on Orissa and Bihar. Rajendralal Mitra, who had initially been the librarian, and later on secretary, assistant president and finally the first Indian president of the Asiatic society, published articles on inscription and subsequently researched the antiquities of Orissa and the ruin of Bodhgaya under governmental patronage. Due to all these, thinkers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, even during the eighties of the nineteenth century had to lament and crave for the history of Bengal vis-à-vis the Bengalees.⁸

Roughly around the eighties of the nineteenth century the consciousness about history seemed to have got a greater flow. As a result the controversy emerged out regarding what would be the proper scientific way of writing history. This debate continued not only in Bengal but rather it was a pan Indian controversy. Another important matter that seemed to have bothered the contemporaries was that Indian history ought to be written by its own natives and at the same time it has to be unbiased.⁹ The scholars were the major participants in this debatable issue were mainly Akshaya Kumar Maitra from Bengal, Nilkantha Sastri from Madras, Ghyanshyam Ojha from Rajasthan and many others. Akshaya Kumar Maitra created carved a niche for him as the pioneer of writing the history of Bengal in scientific style. The British scholars of Bengal , from their biased and motivated outlook had painted a bleak image of Sirajudaulah and Mirkashim and strangely enough, none felt doubtful and accepted it as a genuine history. But Maitra challenged the accuracy of it and formulated his own view with the formidable array of facts culled from old and authentic documents. Not only he had rejected the notions fueled by the British writers but Akshaya Kumar had also refuted Bankim Chandra's standpoint regarding Mirkashim and wrote a correct history.

Thus in such ripened circumstances a number of research societies and institutions gradually got growing in Bengal from the last decade of Nineteenth and first decade of Twentieth century. The then Viceroy, Lord Curzon too, certainly contributed to generate a momentum towards historical research in this country by escalating curiosity towards the preservation of Indian monuments. Curzon's initiatives resulted in the founding of at least 30 archaeological museums(government sponsored) in India, including those at Sarnath(1904), Agra(1906),

Ajmer(1908), Delhi Fort(1909), Bijapur(1912), Nalanda(1917) and Sanchi(1919).¹⁰ Accordingly, the Bengal Academy of Literature(though it was a literary society, it had interest on history and heritage) came into being in 1893, which was changed to Bangiya Sahitya Parishad on 29th April 1894.¹¹ In the first decade of twentieth century some significant development occurred. Calcutta Historical Society, an organization of the British officials was formed in 1907 to congregate a goodly pile of information and afford the stuff in favour of a full and enduring history of old Calcutta.¹² Similarly, the Varendra Research Society was founded in 1910 in Rajshahi, now in Bangladesh, with the “avowed object of promoting and encouraging the study of Archaeology, History, Literature and Art in relation to India and with reference to Bengal.”¹³ It is to be cited that through its multifocal activities (Exploration, excavation, preservation of artifacts in its museum, research and publication) Varendra Research Society has played a significant role in the resurrection of the history and tradition of Bengal as well as the Bengalees, at a time when research in this subject based on the original documents was hardly known. Thus the society became beacon bearer who showed the path of writing the ancient history of Bengal on the basis of stone and copper inscriptions. Mention may be made of works like *Gaudarajamala*(1912), *Gaudalekhamala*(1912), *Inscription of Bengal(Volume-III)*(1929) and *The Indo-Aryan Races*(1916). The last three books are purely source book for the early history of Bengal. But the first work was essentially the history of Ancient Bengal composed by Ramaprasad Chanda on the basis of stone inscriptions and copperplates. Hence *Gaudarajaramala* has been considered as the path breaking work concerning the ancient history of Bengal, to have been ever written in scientific procedure.

It should be mentioned that inspired by the success of the multifocal activities of the Varendra Research Society institutions like 'Dhaka Chitrashala' in Dhaka, 'Radha Anusandhan Samiti' in Radh, Gauda Research Society of Howrah¹⁴ and in Birbhum 'Birbhum Anusandhan Samity' established themselves in Bengal; But none of them had vaguely similar competence like Varendra Research Society. Only the 'Dhaka Chitrashala' got the recognition of a museum, and the others mentioned were nothing but proper nouns of an institution.¹⁵

Besides Varendra research society, the individual historians like Rakhaldas Banerjee (*Bangalar Itihas* Vol-I(1914)& Vol-II(1917); R. C. Majumdar(*Early History of Bengal*(1924) & *The History of Bengal*(1943); Jadunath Sarkar(*The History of Bengal* , Vol-I(1943) & Vol-II(1943) and some others made crucial contribution in Colonial period in the reconstruction of early history of Bengal. In the post independence period Niharranjan Ray composed *Bangalir Itihas*(1949).

Notes & References

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