CONCLUSION

PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF BENGAL: MORE ASPIRATION THAN ACHIEVEMENT

Hemchandra Ray Chaudhuri has observed in his ‘Foreword’ to Political History of Ancient India (1927) thus:

No Thucydides or Tacitus has left for posterity a genuine history of Ancient India. But the patient investigations of numerous scholars and archaeologists have opened up rich stores of material for the reconstruction of the ancient history of our country. 1

This observation is equally applicable to the history of ancient Bengal, which formed a part and parcel of ancient India. The first attempt to write the history of ancient Bengal was made by Mrityunjay Vidyalankar, a paṇḍit of the Fort William College, Calcutta. His book Rājatarātīga or Rājāvalī, published in 1808, is nothing but a string of fables woven round a number of historical, mythical and imaginary names. The nature of the work is indicated by the statement made in it that Vallālasena is described as seating on the throne of Delhi.

No history of ancient Bengal on modern scientific lines could be written before the opening decade of the twentieth century. Therefore, for about a century, the patient investigations of numerous scholars and archaeologists opened up rich store of materials for the construction of the history of ancient Bengal.

The patient investigations of scholars began with the foundation of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in 1784. The objective of the Society was to carry on researches for understanding and clear knowledge about ‘Asiatick’ civilisation 2. The study of the civilisation was broad-based, for, William Jones remarked that the Society’s objects of inquiry would be “MAN AND NATURE: whatever is performed by one or
produced by the other." In the Second Anniversary Discourse presented to the Society on February 24, 1785, Jones went on to describe various fields of knowledge like medicine, pottery, sculpture, painting and history, in which the members' labour would bear valuable fruits. He also had in mind a catalogue of oriental works and exhorted the members to do their best towards compiling it. History, referred to in this Discourse, naturally stands for Asian history in general and Indian history in particular with no prejudice against regional study of history. Therefore, it was expected that the scholars like Charles Wilkins, H.T.Colebrooke and H.H.Wilson would undertake an uphill task of collecting data for the history and culture of India in general and of Bengal in particular by exploring both literary and archaeological sources. Their contributions were regularly published in the Asiatic Researches. The Western methodology was imported thus in India through the works done by Western scholars at the Asiatic Society. Later on, Rajendralal Mitra, Haraprasad Sastri and Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay were closely associated with the Society and made remarkable progress in researches for constructing the history of ancient Bengal.

Further, the foundation of the Hindu College, later known as Presidency College, was a great landmark in the intellectual history of Bengal. Because, those who had been the students of that College, found an opportunity of being familiar with the Western ideas through the curriculum offered as well as discourses given by the Professors. The ideas of history were related to the fifteenth century Renaissance, sixteenth century Reformation, eighteenth century Enlightenment and nineteenth century Romantic Revolution. Significantly enough, some of the students of the College like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Romeshchandra Dutt and Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay made epoch-making contributions towards the historiography of ancient Bengal. Of course, some scholars have upheld the contributions of some Derozians like Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjea, Govinda Chandra Sen. Peary Chand Mitra towards making the people of Bengal historically conscious and also for reconstructing the history of Bengal.

The long-drawn controversy between the Anglicists and the Orientalists in the thirties of the nineteenth century regarding the Education policy of the Government
ultimately led to the formation of Macaulay's Minutes in 1835, by which English education was introduced in this country. The new Education policy as declared by the Government in 1835 offered for school-syllabus the histories of India, Bengal, Greece, Rome, England and the World. But, at that time no history of Bengal suitable for the school students was yet available. Therefore, individual attempts continued to be made for constructing the history of Bengal from 1839 to 1892. It should, however, be mentioned in this connection that the credit of writing the history of Bengal in 1813 should go to Charles Stewart. But his history covered the period from the first Mohammedan invasion until the virtual conquest of that country (Bengal) by the English in AD 1757. The history of Bengal suitable for the school students was, however, first written by J.C. Marshman in 1839. It was so popular that scholars like Vidyasagar, Ramgati Nyayaratna and Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay came forward to translate the work of Marshman into Bengali. The school-book series on the history of Bengal almost came to an end in 1892 with the publication of Romeshchandra Dutt's A Brief History of Ancient and Modern Bengal for the use of the Schools.

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay never forgot the bitter experience of reading a distorted history of Bengal at the Hooghly Collegiate School. As a result, he felt the necessity of a genuine history of Bengal. He ventilated his sentiments through his famous periodical Bangadarśan. According to him, the Bangadarśan was equivalent to Aimadarśan, that is, if a Bengalee could know the genuine history of Bengal, he might have known his own identity. Bankimchandra was the first intellectual of Bengal to point out distortions in the history of Bengal written by foreigners like Charles Stewart and J.C. Marshman. He raised objections against the stigma on the character of the Bengali people, against motivated attempts to prove physical and military weakness of the Bengalees. However, he had an expectation from Rajendralal Mitra, who had already proved his capability in reconstruction the history of the Pāla and the Sena dynasties, that he would be able to write a genuine comprehensive history of Bengal. But, the expectation remained unfulfilled. He had high praise for Rajakrishna Mukhopadhyay's Prathamā Sikṣā Bāṅgāḷār Itihāsa published in 1874. Although the book was meant for the school-going children, it covered almost all
aspects of the society and culture of Bengal. Bankimchandra himself, without being a professional historian, made an attempt to write the social history of Bengal. He appreciated Lalmohan Vidyanidhi’s *Sambandha Nirṇaya or A Social History of Bengal* (1875). He felt that a comprehensive history of Bengal should be written since earliest times to the annexation of Bengal by the Mughals. Be that as it may, Bankimchandra made an emotional appeal to the future historians to come forward for undertaking the sacred duty of reconstructing a genuine, comprehensive history of Bengal. Because, he deeply felt that without historical consciousness the Bengalees had no hope in future. The name of Bankimchandra thus occupies a position of prime importance in the historiography of Bengal, as he remained the perennial source of inspiration to the Bengalee historians of the twentieth century. Bankimchandra should be considered as the founder of the nationalist school of history in Bengal.

The foundation of the *Vaṅgiya Sāhitya Pariṣat* in Calcutta (1894) was an important landmark in the history of historical writings as well as the development of the Bengali language and literature. The main object of the *Pariṣat* was the development of Bengali language and literature. The *Vaṅgiya Sāhitya Pariṣat Patrikā*, however, published regularly brilliant research articles on the sources of the history of ancient Bengal and their interpretations. Among the eminent scholars associated with the *Pariṣat* mention may be made of Romeshchandra Dutt, Ramendrasundar Trivedi, Haraprasad Sastri, Nagendranath Vasu, Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay. It was Haraprasad Sastri who, for the first time, edited Sandhyākara Nandi’s *Rāmācharitam* with a historical introduction on the rise and the fall of the Pāla dynasty. Haraprasad Sastri also edited the Buddhist manuscripts brought by him from the Nepal Durhar Library and thus traced in them the beginning of the old Bengali language. He also traced the origin of the Bengali script. Nagendranath Vasu wrote *Vaṅger Jāṭya Itihāsa* in three parts. The main objective of the work was to reconstruct the social history of Bengal with special emphasis upon the position of the Kāyasthas. Like Lalmohan Vidyanidhi he also depended to a great extent on the information furnished by the *Kulajī* texts. Romeshchandra Dutt wrote a work entitled *The Literature of Bengal*. The objective of the work was to trace as far as possible the history of the people as reflected in the literature of Bengal, to throw light on the inner life, the thoughts, the feelings, the real
life of Bengal. Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay organised the Museum of the Vaṅgiya Sāhitya Pariṇat and made a complete Catalogue of the antiquities preserved in the Museum. The Catalogue proved to be of much value to the researchers. Although under the umbrella of the Vaṅgiya Sāhitya Pariṇat some worth-mentioning works were done, no scheme of reconstructing the history of Bengal was undertaken 11.

The appearance of Rabindranath Tagore in the field of Bengali literature towards the end of the nineteenth century made the possibility of awakening in Bengal a reality. He did not always confine himself in the world of poetry but engaged himself for sometime in public life and developed mature thoughts on the historical process in India. The essays written by him on Indian history emphasise that the perspective of European history is not applicable in case of India. While European historians in general deal with political, military and constitutional history, the sources available for Indian history indicate that its keynote is the origin and development of the culture based on the principle of 'unity in diversity'.

The Western historical tradition goes back to Herodotus and Thucydides, the historians of ancient Greece, Livy and Tacitus, the historians of Imperial Rome. In their histories, emphasis was laid upon political life. In the post-Classical period, the tradition was left almost exclusively in the hands of monkish Chronicles, whose accounts were annalistic without any analysis. Renaissance historians revived the classical tradition of course with a rational and secular approach. Machiavelli brought to history a genuine inductive method. His Prince is a work of political philosophy as well as history, for there is no sense of complete autonomy of history till the nineteenth century. Throughout Europe, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were marked by great scholarly enterprises, which brought together precious collections of original documents. The latest advances in historical scholarship created "the science of history and placed new tools such as palaeography, archaeology and diplomacies in the historians' hands" 12. In European historiography, emphasis was naturally placed on the brilliant achievements of Voltaire and Gibbon who were 'interpreters' responsible for creating the first, great narrative histories of high literary and artistic quality and also for introducing analysis of the development of the human civilisation.
Voltaire was regarded as one of the front ranking French Enlightenment historians. Gibbon's *Decline and Downfall of the Roman Empire* was prefaced by the statement:

> Wars and the administration of public affairs are the principle subjects of history.\(^\text{13}\)

In the nineteenth century, history as an academic discipline was born. The hitherto neglected ideas of Vico and Herder gained a wide currency among the historians. The desire to see the past, "as it actually was", in the celebrated words of Ranke, characterised the Romantic imagination of the nineteenth century\(^\text{14}\). The concept of history was explained by the words 'genetic relationism'. History is described as 'genetic' because of the stress laid on origins and the notion of every phase developing out of a previous phase. Again, history is also said to be 'relationist' because of the insistence that every person, every activity, every situation must be seen *in relation* to the age in which it was set. Ranke in the preface to his first book *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations: 1494-1514* (1824) observed thus:

> To history has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices this work does not aspire: it wants only to show what actually happened.\(^\text{15}\)

It was Ranke who impressibly related the critical use of primary materials to a profound sense of historical change ('genetic relationism'). For this, he was regarded as a founder of the modern discipline of history.

Whatever that might be, the above sketch of European historiography in the end of the nineteenth century does not indicate that historians of Europe were much attracted towards social and cultural history. Even Hegel stressed the importance of development of the political state. Therefore, Rabindranath Tagore was quite justified in observing that the criterion of European historiography was not applicable to the historiography of India. Although he did not, like Bankimchandra, made an appeal for reconstruction of the history of Bengal, for development of historical consciousness of
the Bengalees, stood, however, by the side of Akshaykumar Maitreya when he began to edit the first historical journal of Bengal, Aitihāsik Chitra (1899). Tagore not only encouraged Akshaykumar in editing the journal but also highly appreciated Maitreya’s work like Siraj-ud-daulah in which the views of Western scholars were refuted by suitable counter-arguments.

The Aitihāsik Chitra, published with the blessings of Tagore in 1899 under the able editorship of Akshaykumar Maitreya, was expected to usher in a new era of free historical investigation. Maitreya showed the path of prosecuting research in Bengali, the research that might pave the way for national glory. This quarterly journal did not survive because of its unpopularity. The Aitihāsik Chitra generally published the results of independent inquiry and discussion on historical problems. But the number of readers interested in the results of researches was very small. The journal had, therefore, to be discontinued. Five years after, the second phase of the Aitihāsik Chitra at this stage was to popularise history among the people, especially among the students, the symbols of future hope. The second phase, however, did not survive more than a year. It was revived again three years later. The Aitihāsik Chitra was again published in 1907. In the third phase, the journal survived for six years and helped to generate historical inquisitiveness among the Bengalees and enlarged their sense of history. The purpose with which Nikhilnath Roy edited this journal was also served by the Itihasa, the journal of the Vaṅgīya Itihāsa Parishat in the middle of the twentieth century. It may, therefore, be reasonably assumed that the Itihasa was the logical successor of the Aitihāsik Chitra. Because, the writing of history in Bengali for the Bengalees in a popular way that was begun by the Aitihāsik Chitra was continued by the Itihasa.

A new phase in the historiography of ancient Bengal had its beginning with the foundation of the Varendra Anusandhan Samity or the Varendra Research Society in 1910 at Rajshahi. The Society was founded at the initiative and with the financial assistance of Saratkumar Roy, the Prince of Dighapatiya. Akshaykumar Maitreya became its Director and Ramaprasad Chanda its Secretary. The objective of the said Society was to explore the antiquities in different parts of Northern Bengal
and preserve them for study in a Museum attached to the office of the Varendra Research Society. Efforts made by the scholars attached with the Society proved to be fruitful and within a short time a very rich collection of art-objects and antiquities was made. Even Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay, Superintending Archaeologist of the Eastern Circle of Archaeological Survey of India, joined hands with Maitreya and Chanda in the programme of exploring antiquities in North Bengal. As a result, Rajshahi turned to be a recognised centre of research like the Asiatic Society and the Vaṅgīya Sāhitya Parisat. Akshaykumar Maitreya prepared a blueprint of a comprehensive history of Gauḍa to be published in several parts. Of course, Gauḍa, for all practical purposes, stood for the whole of Bengal. According to Maitreyā, North Bengal was the modern representative of ancient janapada of Gauḍa. However, the plan of Maitreya to write the comprehensive history of Gauḍa in collaboration with contemporary scholars, researchers and archaeologists may be judged by the divisions into which he worked out the framework of history. The parts of Gauḍāvivarana were the following:

1. Rājāmāla (Dynastic History)
2. Silpakalā (Art History)
3. Vivaraṇaṃāla (Antiquarian Topography)
4. Lekhamaḷa (Inscriptions)
5. Granthamāla (History of Literature)
6. Jātittattva (Descriptive Ethnology)
7. Śrimurtitattva (Iconography)
8. Upāsakasampradāya (Religious Sects)

But the plan ultimately did not materialise. Akshaykumar Maitreya edited Gauḍāvijāmāla (1912) and N.G. Majumdar edited Inscriptions of Bengal, volume III (1929). While Akshaykumar Maitreya edited the Pāla inscriptions, Majumder edited the Sena, Varman, and Chandra inscriptions. However, Gauḍāvijāmāla, written by Ramaprasad Chanda, was recognised as the first history of Bengal written as per the principles of scientific methodology. Ramaprasad Chanda was highly critical about the authenticity of the Kulaji texts, which had been depended upon by some previous
writers. He made use of the epicographic and archaeological sources that had been available at that time. Although the work bore the title \emph{Gauḍarājamālā}, that is, the dynastic or political history of Bengal. Akshaykumar Maitreya in his ‘Preface’ to the work laid stress upon the necessity of constructing the history of the Bengali people. It was implied that Chanda’s \emph{Gauḍarājamālā} was the political and chronological background in which the history of the people was to be constructed in future. While the political history was supposed to be the skeleton of history, the social and cultural history might provide it with flesh and blood to give a final and complete shape to it.

Those who were interested in the reconstruction of a comprehensive history of Bengal made a choice of co-operative efforts among the contemporary scholars. Although such an attempt made by Akshaykumar Maitreya had failed. Lord Carmichael, the first Governor of the newly created Presidency of Bengal, took the initiative in the matter and invited in 1912 Haraprasad Sastri to prepare a scheme. But nothing came out of it. A similar attempt was made a few years later at the instance of Raja Prafulla Nath Tagore of Calcutta. He undertook to bear the entire financial burden on the project and requested Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay to undertake it. But this attempt also proved abortive. Therefore, individual efforts of the scholars continued to be made in reconstructing the history of ancient Bengal. Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay, who had been working for ten years, published in Bengali \emph{Bāṅgalārītilīhāsa}, volume I, in 1915.

Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay’s contributions constituted a distinct phase in the historiography of ancient Bengal. Although his intellectual \textit{guru} was Haraprasad Sastri, Rakhaldas differed with him on many points, especially on the authenticity of the \textit{Kulajī} texts. Rakhaldas had acquired knowledge in palaeography, epigraphy, numismatics, art and iconography, and even ethnography. Therefore, a well-equipped talented historian like Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay proved to be a pioneer in reconstructing the history of ancient Bengal. He had collected all the available relevant materials, critically assessed their genuineness and then made an application of the data culled from them and thus produced the first history of ancient Bengal in the background of North Indian history. He also wrote separate monographs on the
Pañas of Bengal (1915), Origin and Development of the Bengali Script (1919) and on the Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculptures (1933). He also popularised the history of ancient Bengal by writing historical novels like Saśānka and Dharmapāla. Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay was fastidious by nature in making choice of materials for history and laid stress on the so-called pathure pramāṇa, that is, most substantial and dependable proof, which, according to him, could be provided by archaeology. In spite of this, he remained dissatisfied for the reason that he could not provide the people of Bengal with a comprehensive history of their country due to the paucity of materials. Whatever he constructed, was nothing but a skeleton of history according to his own admission. But the style of his writing history was highly disciplined and almost free from any bias or prejudice, although it is alleged by some that he was at heart a Bengali nationalist Hindu. Without going into arguments, it may safely be assumed that Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay was inspired by the ideal set up by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. He began the history of Bengal with an ethnographic background in order to indicate the social and cultural base of the Bengali people. Because, Bankimchandra was ever anxious to trace the origin of the Bengali people. Again, Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay did his best to explode the myth that Bengal was conquered by seventeen horsemen under the leadership of Bakhtiyar Khilji. Because, Bankimchandra wrote a number of articles in the Bangadarśan protesting against a motivated attempt on the part of the foreign writers to underestimate the military strength of the Bengali people. However, the chronological framework that had been adopted by Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay was revised at a later period in the light of the new materials discovered. This does in no way minimise the value of Rakhaldas’s contributions towards the reconstruction of the history of ancient Bengal. It is difficult to ascertain whether Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay was familiar with the German historian Ranke’s methodology. But, like Ranke, he always laid stress upon the authenticity of the sources of history and searched for reply to the question ‘what actually happened in history’. Besides, the political history of Bengal that was traced by Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay since earliest times to the sixteenth century, because. Bangalār Itihāsa, volume II, incorporated the history of the period from the beginning of the Muslim rule to the Mughal conquest of Bengal, represented the political aspect of the social history of the Bengali people.
Although an unwritten convention of writing the history of Bengal in Bengali for the Bengali people was followed since 1839 with a few exceptions till the time of the publication of Rakhaldas's *Bāṅgālār Itihāsa* in two parts, it was discontinued from the second decade to the fourth decade of the twentieth century. It was probably due to the reason that some foreign writers involved themselves in the task of constructing different aspects of the social history of Bengal and also probably due to the fact that some Bengali scholars considered it desirable to expose the results of their researches in English in order to attract the greater number of reading public and also probably to set up a model of investigation before other provinces. However, during this period, individual efforts were made towards advancing the studies in physical anthropology, cultural anthropology, linguistics, archaeology and art history, which had a positive bearing upon the historiography of ancient Bengal. Dineshchandra Sen wrote in Bengali *Bhārat Vaṅga* (1935) in order to give an account of the social and cultural history of the Bengali people since earliest times to AD 1757. Although the work has been criticised by modern scholars for lack of historical discipline and for some factual mistakes, there is little doubt that Dineshchandra put in hard labour with a deep insight into the folk elements in Bengali culture. Again, Pramode Lal Paul wrote in English the *History of Bengal* (in two volumes, 1939, 1940) covering the political, social and cultural aspects. In the meantime, Dacca University made the first successful attempt to cater to the need of a comprehensive political and cultural history of ancient Bengal to be written by the joint efforts of specialists in different branches on the subject. In 1935 the plan was sanctioned and the first volume of the *History of Bengal* dealing with both political and cultural history of the ancient period was published in 1943 under the editorship of Rameshchandra Majumdar.

*Dacca History of Bengal*, volume I, edited by Rameshchandra Majumdar, marked a new chapter in the historiography of ancient Bengal. Rameshchandra Majumdar, the editor of the volume, adopted as the standard and model of his work the series of historical works published by the Cambridge University. Aiming to "meet the scientific demand for completeness and certainty" the *Cambridge History* was to be, as are most important advances in natural science, the work of many hands.
Increasing use of sociological techniques had provided greater opportunity for joint enterprise in historical research. In this connection an observation of Arthur Marwick seems to be relevant:

Characterised by brilliant individual chapters, they (that is, the Cambridge Histories) served as invaluable works of reference, but they do not and cannot, satisfy the demand for a recreation of the rich texture of the past.19

However, Rameshchandra Majumdar had justified his position by quoting a passage from the Preface to the first volume of the Cambridge Ancient History 20. In the Preface it was said that in a joint enterprise of this kind it was difficult for the editor to avoid a certain measure of overlapping; when there was wide scope of divergences of views, elimination of the differences of opinions between different writers were not desirable in such a work, although inconsistencies might sometimes prove to be inconvenient to the reader. However, it was expected by Rameshchandra Majumdar like the editor of the first volume of the Cambridge Ancient History that such a co-operative work would be found serviceable to both professional students and the general readers. The Cambridge Ancient History model was adopted by the editor of Dacca History of Bengal, volume I, in order to argue in favour of the editor himself that it would be impossible for him to avoid overlapping that might cause inconsistencies, because of the differences of the opinion of scholars participating in a collaborative work. However, one might raise the question as to why the expression `Hindu Period' had been used as the sub-title of the volume, although the Cambridge historians adopted the division of history into ancient, medieval and modern period. Be that as it may, the copious footnotes, bibliography, substantial number of Appendices and a large number of illustrative plates along with two maps made the volume really serviceable to the professional students. But it is doubtful whether it proves to be serviceable to the general readers. Because, Rameshchandra Majumdar himself felt the necessity of publishing an abridged version of the volume in Bengali for the general readers. The serviceable work for general readers was prepared by him under the title Bāṅglādeśer Itiḥāsa (Prāchān Yug) published in 1946. In his Preface to the Dacca History of Bengal, volume I, Rameshchandra Majumdar had stated that "in
view of the present state of our knowledge any exposition of the history of ancient Bengal must be regarded as provisional". Again, in his Introduction to Bāṅgālēṣeṛ Ithāṣā (Prāchīn Yug), Rameshchandra Majumdar modestly admitted that he had done nothing more than a construction of the skeleton of political and cultural history of ancient Bengal. In fact, in view of new evidences continually and rapidly accumulating, it was customary on the part of the historian like Rakhaladas and Rameshchandra to make candid confession that the work they had done was not yet comprehensive. There is least doubt, however, that the Dacca History of Bengal, volume I, laid the foundation of further researches in the social and cultural history of ancient Bengal.

_Dacca History of Bengal_, volume I, edited by Rameshchandra Majumdar was no doubt the precursor of Niharranjan Roy’s Bāṅgāḷr Ithāṣā, Ādiparva (1949) which is supposed to have marked a new epoch not only in the historiography of Bengal but also in the historiography of India. No historian preceding Niharranjan Roy had adopted the sociological method that recognises the priority of the society to the state. In other words, the history centering round the state or polity is to be given much less importance than the history centering round the society. Society is constituted by individuals, that is, a group of people. An individual is the basic unit of the society. Therefore, the historian who aims at constructing social history actually deals with the history of man. In Niharranjan Roy’s own language it may be said:

> Government, society, religion, art, literature, science, economics — those are all created by people; hence, real history is the history of _Man_.

Sir Jadunath Sarkar thinks that ‘the why and how of people’s evolution’ has been explained by the author of Bāṅgāḷr Ithāṣā. In Jadunath’s own language it may be said:

> In discussing politics, daily life, art, literature, learning or religion, his chief aim is to consider whatever connections there may be with society and its
development in general, and this is one of the most important features of the book. As a result, a complete, vivid picture of the evolution of the Bengali people has emerged.22

Niharranjan Roy did not claim that he had discovered new materials in the light of which he adopted a new perspective of history. In fact, the materials utilised in the Dacca History of Bengal, volume I, were made use of by Niharranjan Roy in a revised framework of history. Naturally, the question arises as to why the social perspective of history or the sociological method was not adopted by the historians previously. The reply to the question suggested by Niharranjan himself. Upto the second quarter of the twentieth century, the practice and approach of the historical research had been influenced by the methods and standards of the contemporary European, especially English, historical interpretation. Those standards and methods were not enlightened by sociological awareness. On the contrary, the kings and their regimes constituted the central theme of history. Besides, the previous historians could not attempt to construct the history of the society with special emphasis upon the common man in the evolution of the society due to the absence of suitable materials. But Niharranjan Roy imbibed the historical methodology adopted in Europe, notably in Austria and Germany, from the latter half of the nineteenth century. The standards and methods of research into the nature of society based on scientific principles seemed to have been more acceptable to the author of Bāṅgalī Itihāsa. In the early part of the twentieth century, the scientific approach towards the history of the society gradually came to be established in England. The historians in Europe from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the early part of the twentieth century accepted the theory that the broader social system of various countries at various times depended on the system of production and distribution of wealth in accordance with which different castes and classes developed. Regarding the sources or materials of history, it is argued that one has to reconstruct the history of the Bengali society on the basis of epigraphic records, Smṛti or Vyākhyātu literature, literary sources of other regions, foreign travellers’ accounts and manuscripts from Tibet and Nepal. For Niharranjan there was no alternative but to depend on such sources and interpret them from a new perspective.
As it has been pointed out by Arthur Marwick, in Europe the nineteenth century witnessed a revolution in historical studies brought about by Ranke. It produced 'Diplomatic History' and 'Constitutional History'. The continuation of this revolution, produced 'Economic History' and 'Intellectual History'. There was really no social history. Social history was either seen as a further refinement of economic history, or else as the impressionistic 'polite chat' about the past of such writers as G.M. Trevelyan. Effectively, all history, that is, the study of man and the society in the past, is really social history. To speak of social history is a means of emphatically denying an exclusive interest in diplomatic or constitutional or, for that matter, economic and intellectual history. This analysis of Marwick helps us to understand of the following statement of Niharranjan Roy:

Whether or not we accept the argument for an economic interpretation of history, it has been recognised since the middle of the nineteenth century in the human sciences that his society is the source of all Man's work and achievements, and that the history of change and development in society in a given place and a given time determines the changing nature of history of Man.

In other words, Niharranjan is not in favour of exclusive dependence on the economic interpretation of history, although the material foundation of the social institutions is to be recognised. Therefore, it is unfair to introduce him as a Marxist historian. His sociological method aimed at understanding and explaining interaction and interrelationship between different social institutions, which moulded the fortune of man.

When we consider the literary flavour in Niharranjan Roy's historical account along with reasonable speculations or hypotheses based upon authentic documents, we are reminded of the methodology adopted by Trevelyan, author of English Social History. Trevelyan distinguished between three distinct functions of history: the scientific (collecting and weighing evidence as to facts), the imaginative or
speculative (selection and classification, interpretation and generalisation) and the literary. The last function has been defined by him as “the exposition of the results of science and imagination in a form that will attract and educate our fellow countrymen”. The above three functions of history may be traced in Bāṅgalīr Ītihāsa. Besides, the last chapter of this book has been so designed as to derive education from the past and find out the path for future.

The remarkable change in the historiography of ancient Bengal has been undoubtedly made possible by the historical writings of Niharranjan. He seems to have derived his inspiration both from Bankimchandra and Rabindranath. He did not forget the emotional call of Bankimchandra to the future historians urging them to construct a comprehensive history of Bengal with the purpose of inspiring historical consciousness and self-confidence among the Bengali people. The author seems to have been influenced by Tagore’s historical thoughts. With his deep insight into the course of Indian history Rabindranath realised that the history of India was characterised by the progress of human culture, while the European history contained stresses upon the political changes. This approach of Tagore might have inspired Niharranjan to adopt a sociological method of studying the history of the Bengali people. Although in recent times, it has been observed by some that Bāṅgalīr Ītihāsa represents the final stage in the historiography of Bengal, Niharranjan himself never claimed that he succeeded in giving a final shape to the history of the Bengali people. Rather, it has been said:

New information has gradually been accumulated to produce what is today just a skeleton, but perhaps it will be possible that future discoveries of further material will cover that skeleton with flesh and give it a more abundant form.26

In fact, more than half a century has elapsed since the publication of Niharranjan’s magnum opus, but no historian has yet come forward to provide a total history of the Bengali people. Because, in order to give a final shape to the history and to make the expression ‘history from below’ meaningful, the historian has got to be trained in the discipline of cultural anthropology. Although it has been claimed by
some on behalf of Niharranjan that he had gone a long way in tracing the history of
the backward section of the society, it is reasonably difficult to subscribe to this view.
The historian might have been conscious of the fact that without the history of the
common people, the history of a country must remain incomplete. But unfortunately,
he handled very few tools for tracing the folk-elements in Bengali society and culture
and for making their assessment on a wider scale.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Europe had made remarkable
progress in developing the concept of total history under the intellectual leadership of
Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. Both shared an interest in geography and in collective
psychology. Bloch sought to borrow from sociology an exactness of method and a
precision of language. He studied archaeology, agronomy, cartography, folklore and
linguistics with particular reference to the genealogy of language. Bloch was a
believer in both the comparative and regressive method. Comparative study involved
comparisons within a single country or between different countries. In highlighting
both similarities and differences this method can be a source of new synthesis, new
questions and sometimes convincing answers. Regressive method involves using
evidence drawn from a large edge of matters — customs, traditions, place-names.
field-patterns — which may well have endured from an earlier age, in order to
illuminate that earlier age. It seems that the author of Bāṅgālīr Ithāśa was, in all
probability, familiar with the methodology referred to above. But, he had little access
to the folk songs, folk tales, riddles, proverbs, legends, ballads, myths, folk-dramas.
and even nursery rhymes, which constitute the folk-literature. Again, until and unless
the tribal language and literature is satisfactorily explored, it would be difficult to
construct the 'history from below'.

However incomplete Bāṅgālīr Ithāśa might be in view of the methodology of
total history, there is little doubt that the historians of other parts of India "will have a
model for the composition of the histories of their own people such as does not yet
exist in the literature and historiography of this nation."
In the middle of the twentieth century, the historiography of Bengal in general took a new turn with the foundation of the Vaṅgiya Itiḥāsā Pariṣat and the publication of its journal Itiḥāsa. The main object of the Pariṣat was to popularise historical knowledge, to make the people historically conscious and thus to educate the common people through the vernacular. In this regard, Itiḥāsa carried on the tradition that had been introduced in the beginning of the twentieth century by the journal Aitiḥāsik Chitra under the editorship of Nikhilnath Roy. It seems that side by side with exploring new materials for history, the process of popularisation of history among the common people, who are generally addicted to entertainment through short stories and novels, should go on without any break. It is a pleasure to remember that the Vaṅgiya Itiḥāsā Pariṣat was founded at the instance of two eminent historians, Sir Jadunath Sarkar and Professor Rameshchandra Majumdar. Long ago, A.L. Basham stated that research or investigation is an academic adventure. Again, for some, it might seem to be academic entertainment also. But, the investigators, researchers and scholars can hardly afford to forget that the results of their researches are meant for the people of their country whose history and culture is the area of their investigation. Rameshchandra Majumdar wrote Bāṅglādesher Itiḥāsa on the model of Dacca History of Bengal, volume I, for the use of the people in general. Again, Sir Jadunath Sarkar advised Nihar Ranjan to publish abridged versions of Bāṅgālīr Itiḥāsa, both in Bengali and English, so that the people in and outside Bengal might be benefitted.

The history of Bengal thus required more than half a century to take the shape of the history of the Bengali people. From the very beginning the motto of the Bengali historians was the construction of the history of the Bengali people for the Bengali people. The aspiration for constructing such a comprehensive history of the Bengali people with a view to provide them with an understanding of self-identity and inspiring them for gaining self-consciousness, self-confidence and above all, national consciousness among them, was first expressed in the second half of the nineteenth century. From the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, an all-out effort was made for collecting sufficient authentic data and for making their methodical utilisation with the purpose of reconstructing the history of Bengal. In pre-
independence period, the nationalist historiography gradually took its shape. in spite
of its indebtedness to Western methodology, and thus served as one of the factors
behind the growth of nationalist consciousness among the Bengali people that found
its first manifestation in the Bengal Partition Movement in 1905. In post-
independence India the people of Bengal passed to vicissitudes of fortune in political,
social, economic and cultural life and sometimes found themselves on the verge of
ruin. But the undaunted efforts of the historians of Bengal inspired in them an
optimism, the sine qua non of life, by imparting to them the lessons of history that
witnesses not only growth and decay but also regeneration of the society. The
aspiration of the people’s history of Bengal remains, however, yet to be achieved.
References


2. *Asiatic Researches*, volume I, p. xii.


5. Supra. Chapter I, pp. 1 ff.

6. Amalesh Tripathy, ‘*Presidency College Satavārṣik?, Presidency College Patrikā*’ (Centenary Issue), Āṣādh, Year 37, June 1955, p. 58.


Jodhpur, 1996.
   Dacca, 1943, p. xiv.
   Orient Longman, 1994, p. 3.
22. Ibid., p. xii.
   Orient Longman, 1994, p. 3.
29. In a personal communication of Professor Bhaskar Chattopadhyay with Professor
   A.L. Basham in the early seventies at Burdwan. From the reminiscences of
   Professor Chattopadhyay before me.
30. View expressed by Professor Bhaskar Chattopadhyay while discussing the matter
    with me.