INTRODUCTION

When I was a student of post-graduate department of History, Burdwan University. I had an opportunity to make special study the history of ancient Bengal. Although, we were offered an option to choose any one of the three periods, ancient, medieval or modern history of Bengal, my choice was ancient period of Bengal. I had developed an interest in the history of ancient India since my undergraduate studentship. However, we were advised by the teacher concerned of the post-graduate department to consult three books, namely, Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay's Bāṅgalā Itiḥāsa, Rameshchandra Majumdar's Bāṅglā Deśer Itiḥāsa, Part I and Niharajjan Roy's Bāṅgalā Itiḥāsa, Adiparva. Those who were interested in English medium might consult History of Bengal, volume I, Hindu Period edited by Rameshchandra Majumdar and History of Ancient Bengal authored by Rameshchandra Majumdar himself. The question naturally struck me as to why I should read more than one book for a particular paper, although I did never raise the question in presence of my teacher in or outside the class. At that young age. I was rather excited and perturbed at the same time to find out difference of approach to the history of ancient Bengal in the books mentioned above. In course of his discussion the teacher often explained the controversies on many historical problems. In that connection we came to know that the controversy was due to the difference of interpretation of the sources of information. Sometimes it so happened that a particular scholar either missed or overlooked a particular source and another one took advantage of it to take an upperhand. This appeared to be highly interesting from academic point of view.

I was offered Research Fellowship at the Department of History, Burdwan University, in the year 1996. When I was asked by my supervisor to think over a topic of research I could hardly make up my mind immediately on account of my interests in different aspects of the history of ancient Bengal. In this connection. I had a free and frank discussion with my supervisor for more than a month or so. At last, out of the discussion emerged the present topic of research and I found out to my great surprise that through an investigation on the topic of research chosen, there was a
probability of getting satisfactory replies to the questions that haunted me in my postgraduate days.

Historiography is a subject which has been recently developed in our country, although it is a prerequisite to the study of the history. It has been observed by a scholar in recent times that what is required at the present moment is the reconstruction of the history of our country by accumulating more and more materials. And as the history of our country has not yet been comprehensively constructed, the question of examining the trends in historiography is superfluous. But, the question remain as to why, in spite of dearth of materials, the historians' perspectives differ from each other even in the light of available materials, meagre in quantity and sometimes poor in quality. Again, it would be reasonable to raise the question as to why the historians of India have adopted the methodology of research imported from the West, although the ideas of history and historical literature were not altogether lacking in India.

We are often reminded of the criticism that the Indians lacked the sense of history and that explains why no Herodotus or Thucydides, Livy or Tacitus was ever born in ancient India. The criticism is of course levelled against India by the Westerners. But, in fact, ancient India or ancient Bengal, whatever the case might be, had a history that might be available in the Vedic Epic and Puranic texts. Of course, that history would be more social or cultural than political. On the other hand, the Westerners were in search of political history of India for which materials were few and far between at least a century ago. However, it is hardly acceptable that Indians were averse to *Itihāśa, Ākhyākā, Purāṇa* or *Itivṛtti*, if one takes into consideration the historical materials, of course political in nature, found in a number of texts like Kalhana's *Rājaratnāgīrinī* and Sandhyākara Nandi's *Rāmācharitam*. If there was no sense of history from the Western point of view as to why and how hundreds of epigraphic records containing relevant materials for history were found out. The edicts, the eulogies and the copper plate grants bear eloquent testimony to the consciousness of history, at least among the upper class of the society. Long ago Alberuni is said to have observed that whenever the Hindus were asked to relate their
histories they used to relate some stories or tales. In the present state of our knowledge, those popular stories, which form the part and parcel of the folk literature are supposed to have provided us with relevant data for understanding and explaining the history and culture of the common people. Perhaps, it was due to the Western impact that the Indians faltered to develop an independent historiography of their own in the colonial period, although the Indians themselves had developed pre-colonial nationalist historiography.

The nationalist historiography had its gradual development in the colonial period as a natural reaction to the historiography followed by a group of Western historians who took little interest in the socio-cultural heritage of this country. It was found out that the foreign writers of the history of India including Bengal distorted, suppressed or ignored the historical facts and also sometimes pleaded non-availability of materials in order to justify their approach to the study of history in this country. It was, therefore, a sacred duty on the part of the native historians to rewrite the genuine history of their country in the light of most dependable sources of information which they could accumulate as far as possible. The historians of Bengal since the middle of the nineteenth century onward made their best efforts to collect and co-ordinate the historical data from the available sources after having scrutinised them time and again. There main objective was to make the history of their country free from distortion and project the socio-cultural image of their country in the background of political developments 'as it actually was'. For this purpose they were no doubt inspired by feeling of patriotism, genuine love for their country and people. But, it would be unjust to assume that the nationalist historians ignored objectivity, which is the religion of a historian, in order to recreate a glorious past of their country. Some of those historians hardly attached an importance to the available literary sources and depended more and more archaeological sources. They believed that they had been following the scientific methodology of writing history borrowed from the West with the purpose of recording the true history and culture of the people. The nationalist historiography was to a great extent the product of the gradual growth of national consciousness. The perspective of the nationalist historians was quite different from that of the colonial historians. This difference of perspective generated the nationalist
However, the topic of our investigation is *Historiography of Ancient Bengal till the middle of the Twentieth Century with special reference to Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay*. It can hardly be said that no work has yet been done on this topic. Those who have worked on Nineteenth century Bengal have shown how the historical researches played a significant role in the process of re-awakening. Mention may be made of *Studies in the Bengal Renaissance: Bepinchandra Pal Centenary Volume* edited by Atulchandra Gupta (1958), *The Indian Awakening and Bengal* by Nemaisadhan Bose, *Sanisktrir Rûpântar* by Gopal Haldar, *Ûniś Satak: Bhûû Bhûûghûû O Samanvay* by Rakhalchandra Nath etc. Of course, the discussion on the role of historical researches in the above mentioned books is meagre. Again, we have Prabodhchandra Sen’s *Bûnglîr Ithiśa Sãdhanã* containing a list of publications on the history of Bengal till recent times. Whenever he has chosen he has provided with some annotations, comments and observations. However, there is least doubt that this work has proved to be provoking to the researchers. But, Prabodhchandra Sen has not included the sub-regional histories, that is, the histories of different areas or districts lying within Bengal. Besides, he has chosen to omit the names of those works, which have direct or indirect bearing upon the history of Bengal, although he has mentioned the histories of Bengali literature. The main objective of the work seems to establish the position of Niharàanjan Roy’s *Bûnglîr Ithiśa. Ádiparva*, as the final stage of the historiography of Bengal. Prabodhchandra Sen has never confined his focus of attention to any particular period of Bengal. In spite of that, *Bûnglîr Ithiśa. Ádiparva* appears to him to be the final shape of the comprehensive history of Bengal. While Prabodhchandra Sen has a wider vision of the scope of the history of Bengal, we have concentrated only on the historiography of ancient Bengal with the purpose of making an in-depth study. In this connection, mention may also be made of *Bûnglî Bhaśay Ithiśa Charchã* containing a bibliography from 1801 to 1990. The book is edited by Sunil Behari Ghosh. The above bibliography is not confined to the publications on the history of Bengal, but covers India and the world. However, it appears to be helpful for the beginners who would begin with a bibliography on the
historiography in the Bengali language. The history of ancient Bengal under our study was written both in Bengali and English. The bibliography, referred to above, contains a dependable list of the histories of sub-regions of Bengal.

historical writings on ancient Bengal in order to show the history of ancient Bengal in its historical development.

The original sources of the present work are the contributions on the history of ancient Bengal made so far by the historians from the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. Those contributions were published in the *Asiatic Researches, Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Bangadarshan, Tattva Bodhini Patrika, Bhāratī, Śādhanā, Sāhitya, Prachār, Aitihāsik Chitra, Vaṅgīya Sāhitya Parisat Patrika, Prabāsī, Bhāratvarṣa*, etc. Secondly, the *Monographs and Memoirs* published from time to time have been taken into consideration. Thirdly, since the introduction of History as a subject in the school-curriculum since 1835 the books on ancient and medieval history of Bengal began to be written and published. This process continued till the end of the nineteenth century. We have consulted the specimens of those books in the libraries, although all of them are not easily available. Fourthly, we have laid emphasis on the prominent works of the historians from the time of Mrityunjay Vidyalankar to that of Niharranjan Roy in order to understand the trends in the historiography of ancient Bengal. Fifthly, we have devoted a special chapter for assessing the contributions of Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay who is supposed to be the pioneer in the historiography of ancient Bengal. In fact, the historiography of ancient Bengal is divided into three phases, namely, pre-Rakhaldas phase, Rakhaldas phase and post-Rakhaldas phase. Naturally, Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay has been brought in the centre of the stage.

In our study, we have adopted a chronological framework in which Period I begins from the foundation of the *Asiatic Society* and ends with the passing away of Bankimchandra; Period II begins with the foundation of the *Vaṅgīya Sāhitya Parisat* and ends with the publication of Ramaprasad Chanda’s *Gautamāyamāla*, the first visible fruits of researches at the *Varendra Research Society*: Period III roughly begins with the publication of Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay’s *Bāṅgalīr Itihāsa*, part I. and ends with the publication of *Dacca History of Bengal*, volume I; Period IV begins with the publication of *Dacca History of Bengal*, volume I. and ends with the publication of Niharranjan Roy’s *Bāṅgalīr Itihāsa, Ādiparva*. Rameshchandra
Majumdar's *History of Ancient Bengal* is virtually a revised version of *Dacca History of Bengal*, volume I, published later than Niharranjan's *magnum opus*.

Period I is characterised by the import of Western methodology through the *Asiatic Society* and the pledge for nationalist historiography. Period II witnessed experiments in reconstructing the social and political history of Bengal on scientific lines, criticism of the authenticity of the indigenous texts, especially the *Kulāśāstras* and more and more dependence on the epigraphic data. Period III witnessed the reconstruction of the political history of Bengal side by side with exploration of new sources of history including both epigraphs and indigenous texts like Sandhyākara Nandi's *Rāmācharitam*, researches in the field of anthropology, linguistics, art and iconography having bearing on the ancient history of Bengal and also a modest attempt to combine the political history with the socio-cultural history. Period IV was the period of joint enterprise or collaborative effort for constructing a comprehensive history of Bengal combining both political and socio-cultural history side by side with individual efforts towards the same target and dawning of a new perspective of the history of ancient Bengal by the adoption of the sociological method.

The historiography of ancient Bengal may also be viewed in three stages. Firstly, a group of historians made sincerest efforts to provide for the school-curriculum suitable books on the history of Bengal. Some of those books dealt with the medieval period and a part of the modern period. Some of them included the history of ancient and medieval Bengal. Some dealt exclusively with the ancient history of Bengal. For the English medium schools the books were written in English, while those for Bengali medium schools were naturally written or translated from English original works into Bengali. The purpose of the books was a clear understanding of the history and to make the history educative. The second stage of the historiography is known by the exposition and interpretation of the sources and the history written on the basis of the data furnished by those sources. In such works, there is always a scope of controversy or difference of opinion among the scholars. In the third stage, we may include the popular writings on the history of Bengal in general and that of ancient Bengal in particular. Such popular writings aimed at
developing historical consciousness among the people of Bengal. Such writings were published in periodicals from the beginning of the twentieth century to the latter half of the same century. Attempts were made also by a group of historians to publish books on history free from complications and controversies and also without a detailed discussion on the explanation of the sources. Of these three stages, we have focussed our attention on the second one that includes the research-oriented works on the history of ancient Bengal. Because, our purpose has been two-fold. First, we have attempted to examine how discoveries of new sources and evidences gradually changed the standards and methods of understanding history. Second, an attempt has been made to trace an evolution of the historiography from the limited view of history as political history to the wider vision of the socio-cultural history. In spite of the fact that the historians of India, consciously or unconsciously, adopted the Western methodology, an attempt has been made to find out whether there was any trend towards the growth of a nationalist history.

The inclusion of sub-regional history might have given the present investigation a wider dimension. But we have found that most of the histories of the districts of Bengal cover the entire period since earliest times to the present age. In some cases, those sub-regional histories are based upon Census Reports and District Gazetteers, and in other cases, the area study is based upon in disciplined field-survey. Of course, there are exceptions like Satishchandra Mitra’s Jashor-Kulna: Itihāsa and Sudhir Kumar Mitra’s Hugli Jelār Itihāsa or even Yajneswar Choudhury’s Bardhamān: Itihāsa O Sāristipti. In fact, without understanding properly the sub-regional histories it is rather difficult to have an understanding of the comprehensive history of Bengal. Although we felt tempted to lay our hands upon the sub-regional histories, our attempt has been restrained on consideration of the fact that our attention might be diverted from the mainstream of the historiography of ancient Bengal. Dineshchandra Sen in his Bhārat Vaṅga has given an exhaustive list of studies in sub-regional histories, but he himself has made a little use of them in his voluminous work. Besides, one has to confine one’s investigation within a scheduled framework. Otherwise, it would have been impossible to finish a particular project undertaken within time limit.
The central theme of our investigation is the growth of historical consciousness among the Bengali people. Because, it has been alleged that the Bengalees had no sense of history and therefore, did not possess any recorded history. Our objective is to identify the time frame in which the people of Bengal were awakened to the sense of history. It is but natural that the intelligentsia took the lead in the beginning, but later the people in general began to feel an excitement with the gradual unveiling of the past. The intelligentsia was divided into two sections, one being pro-Western culture and education and the other taking a balanced view between the East and the West. While a section of the intelligentsia was pro-British rule assuming that the British had come to civilise the Indians, the other section was critical of the British policy towards India. In this background, the common people who had confidence upon the intelligentsia could hardly decide whether mere learning of history of Greece, Rome and England would be enough for their education or they would have also to learn and understand the history of India and the history of Bengal. Therefore, the historians who engaged themselves in the task of recovering the past and the cultural heritage of our country had to face insurmountable difficulties. The historiography of ancient Bengal from the end of the eighteenth to the middle of the twentieth century in fact reflects the growth of the historical consciousness among the people. The Bengalees, for example, remained indifferent to their own history for a long time. But the series of the publications on the history of Bengal, especially in Bengali language gradually prepared the Bengali mind to appreciate the necessity of historical awareness, which is another name of social awareness. The researches on high level simultaneously with their popularisation in the forms of Monographs on the history and culture of Bengal served their purpose in both pre-independence and post-independence India. However, the discovery of Bengal, like the ‘Discovery of India’, created an opportunity for the Bengali people to have a taste of their self-identity, self-confidence and self-consciousness. The Bengali nation, as it is sometimes called, emerged with the drawing of a sense of history, history that had its beginning in the ‘Adiparva’. It may, therefore, be modestly claimed that our investigation has social relevance even in the modern period.
However, we have collected materials for our study from different libraries like Central Library of Burdwan University, the Library attached with the Museum & Art Gallery, Burdwan University, the Seminar Library of the Department of History, Burdwan University, Visva-Bharati (Shantiniketan), Vaṅgīya Sāhitya Parisat, Asiatic Society of Bengal, Indian Museum, National Library. I also worked for sometime at the Library of Benaras Hindu University and was highly benefited by collecting some invaluable materials on the life and works of Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay in an unpublished thesis that had been awarded the Ph.D. degree by Benaras Hindu University.¹

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