Chapter - V

REGIONAL AND LOCAL HISTORIES—IDEAS AND IDEOLOGIES
Regional and Local Histories—Ideas and Ideologies

5. The hundred years which saw the rise and evolution of regional and local histories was a crucial time in the history of modern Bengal. Indeed its intellectual and political climate was largely created and influenced by the social and religious reform movements and multidirectional creative works in the cultural areas often called Renaisssance or Reawakening and the multifaceted political activities broadly referred to as Nationalism. Basically both Renaissance or Rewakening and Nationalism were Bengali responses to western modernism: the first was concerned with social and religious reforms within colonial framework and the second with reconstruction of the nation free from colonial rule. In Bengal it was the educated middle class which took initiative in both. Unlike Europe where in the 18th and 19th centuries the emergent middle classes broke forth shackles of tradition and moved forward with the evolving industrial societies, the middle class in Bengal—deeply entrenched in post Permanent Settlement land arrangements—strove hard to combine indigenous traditions with western modernism in their perceptions of their present and future. All these were reflected in the regional and local histories in Bengal during 1850-1950 and constituted, what we chose to call, their ideologies.

5.1. The regional and local histories were generally written by educated persons belonging to the upper castes. Often they were professionals or engaged in white-collar jobs. Such professionals practiced law and medicine. However majority of such authors were engaged in teaching in schools and colleges; many were service holders. From what we have gathered about the careers of such authors we see the following:—

Teachers — 17
Services holders — 12
Professionals — 10

In addition to these were men of letters, editors of journals and magazines, entrepreneurs etc. Sometimes these authors combined a number of jobs in their professional lives. In few cases the Zamindars also wrote the descriptive accounts of
their regions: Hara Chandra Chaudhuri wrote on Sherpur pargana in Moimonsingh, Rohini Sen wrote on Bakla, Mahima Niranjan Chakarborty wrote on Birbhum. All the authors excepting five were Hindus. These five authors were Muslims. They were Syid Abdul Agfar, Ebene Sabar, Mukhtar Ahmed Siddiqui, Amanatullath Ahmed and Rafiuddin Sarkar.

Writing or compiling histories was quite a substantial project involving huge effort and large expenditure. Such projects required extensive travelling for collecting necessary data—sometimes taking photographs—sufficient leisure to prepare manuscripts, enough money to buy papers and pay printers and binders. These were evident from the statements of a number of authors of such histories. The author of the history of Chattagram did find it very difficult to publish books and had to print his books in different qualities of paper because of scarcity and high prices, which was the result of European wars. Within two years of publishing the first volume of the history of Faridpur in 1909 Ananda Nath Roy started printing his second volume but was forced to discontinue it because of paucity of funds. Eventually it was published twelve years later in 1921 in a reduced form and with a simple appearance—devoid of coloured pictures, good quality papers and attractive covers. The author of the history of Bikrampur, Jogendranath Gupta, stated the need for huge amount of money for publishing such books: the shortage of funds often disrupted the printing of his book. Satish Chandra Ghosh planned a three volume history of his district Chattagram, incurred personal loans, could print only the first volume of his work and never follow it up with subsequent volumes. The authors of the history of Jasohar-Khulna and Pabna similarly wrote about the stringent financial conditions in which they wrote their books and personal hardships they endured to tide over such stringencies. However mention of financial stringencies as above were not there in the books written and published by Zamindars.

Only a few of the regional and local histories written or compiled during our period were apparently individual undertakings. Their authors did not mention any name as their patrons and or associates. Most of the works were collective undertakings in the sense that though written or compiled and published in the name of single individual authors, they received support, patronization, collaboration and assistance from certain organisations, resourceful persons, interested and inquisitive associates. Among such organizations were the Rarh and Barendra Anusandhan
Samities, Birbhum Anushandhan Samiti and the Barisal branch of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad. There were relatively well knit and sometimes supra-regional organizations. However, there were also smaller organizations of associations founded locally by a few interested persons—these included Chattagram Bibarani Karjyalaya established at Rahmatganj in Chattagram, Bikrampur Prativa Karjyalay established at Narayanganj in Dhaka. Often resourceful persons of regions and localities patronized such works—in most cases such persons were the Zamindars. However people belonging to other walks of life also gave financial assistance to such works. Sometimes the District Boards also gave such assistance. In some cases appeals was made to regional and local people for pre-publication subscribing to such books and subscribers were also considered as patrons. Jogendranath Gupta had to move from door to door to secure such subscribers—sometimes his efforts bore fruit, at other times, not. Ananda Nath Roy committed to give the two volumes of his book at Rs. 2 to certain persons who gave him some advance. Indeed such subscriptions ensured return of at least a part of the money spent for such histories and helped the author to tide over the financial problems they incurred during their publication and to enable them to prepare the subsequent volumes for publication. Himangshu Mohan Chattopadhyay even took bank loan for publishing his book on Bikrampur. As these books were written with only the regional and local educated and interested readers in mind, their markets were very limited. Satish Chandra Mitra in his introduction to the history of Jasohar – Khulna made this clear and moreover he also rued that people were more interested in reading novels than history. Perhaps more books could be sold if they were printed in attractive packages. So very few of such histories were reprinted during our period.

5.2 The evolution of Indian nation and formation of regional and local identities in the post 1857 years were features of the same process. These were reflected in a few regional and local histories published in the 19th century. Writing towards the close of the 19th century Khosal Chandra Roy observed: “For all the inhabitants of British India hopes of political development were the same, political limitation were same. The whole was under one political administration. Rules and regulations, arrangements and systems of administration were almost the same everywhere. The inevitable results of foreign rule were of the same nature in every province. For all these reasons strong possibilities of mutual fellow feeling amongst
all Indians could be seen. Such fellow feeling between the different races and tribes of India had been intensifying increasingly … For this it appears that under the influence of British rule in this country such a day would come when the world – enchanting string of unity would stand together determined in the declaration of exalting the venerable motherland.” This was written in the history of Bakarganj, a district. In the history of Chattagram published twentytwo years after that of Bakarganj the author Purna Chandra Deb Barma lamented that the Indian Hindus did not write proper histories, that the chronological accounts of rulers were started by the Muslims, that it were the Europeans who began collecting material for composing history of India and that many Indians following Europeans explored the early literature, archaeological remains, inscriptions and oral traditions with same objectives. Such compilation was indeed difficult. So the author believed that sharing the job would make it easier: “If separate histories were written on each district then, in time compiling the history of whole of India would become undoubtedly quite easy.” The evolution of both the Indian nation as well as its region and localities at the same time required their respective histories.

In course of time however following Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s articles on history of Bengal regional and local histories came to be seen as integral constituents of the evolution of an exalted and triumphant Bengali people. Bankim Chandra summarily rejected the histories of Bengal written by Stewart, Marshman etc. as these books did not have anything on the history of Bengali people. He highly praised Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay’s Pratham Siksha Bangalar Itihas : “Perhaps there is no other all encompassing history of Bengal like this.” Perhaps Bankim Chandra’s call, “History of Bengal is an imperative need. Otherwise the Bengalis would never be dignified human beings … Who would write them? You would write, I would write, everybody would write. Whoever is a Bengali, he would have to write … come let all of us collectively explore the history of Bengal …” was interpreted as a clarion call to write regional and local histories as building blocks for proper history of Bengal. Indeed a large number of regional and local histories were evidently published in response to the call— Jogendra Nath Gupta’s history of Bikrampur, Satish Chanda Mitra’s history of Jasohar-Khulna, Jogesh Chandra Basu’s history of Medinipur, Rajkumar Chakraborty and Ananga Mohan Das’s history of
Sandwip to name a few. As a result of this the traditional glories and attainments were extolled in the regional and local histories.

Respect for tradition, concern over its decay and wish to preserve it as much as possible in times of change were very important ideological features of the regional and local histories. The reasons are not difficult to understand. People who wrote and compiled histories of their regions and localities enjoyed diverse privileges in traditional societies—a feature which separated them from the lower classes—and often lamented their decline and decay during pre-British and British rule. To harp on the superiority of traditional societies over and above the ones belonging to the authors’ time was perhaps a reflection of their craving for their past positions of superiority. It was a regular complaint that inhabitants of a place, particularly the younger generations, knew much more about the world outside but very little about their own forefathers and places of birth. Such a feature stunted and deformed their proper mental and intellectual growth, alleged our authors.

The meaning and significance of tradition was very wide. It covered such areas as history of particular place, its material life and evolution of cultural aspects. Almost all the books believed or tried to establish that the regions or localities they dealt with were, at some point of time or other, highly important centres in Bengal. We may call this region- and locality-centric emotions and ideas regionalism and localism respectively for want of better terms. We have already seen that regional and local histories were products of such emotions and ideas, the histories were printed and published by and for the regional and local people. The explanations for such importance of regions and localities might have been varied. Most often such histories assumed or tried to establish that the regions or localities they dealt with were highly important political centers of Bengal. The book considered the earliest amongst regional and local histories, the history and descriptive account of Bogura, had in its notification the following: “In very ancient times Biratnagar of Matsya country and Mahasthan of Poundrakshetra were highly famous places. For that matter people wanted to know the ancient accounts of those two places realizing which I decided many days since to inform everybody the ancient and modern histories of those two urban centers and Bogura district through a book.” Such statements could be seen in books published throughout our period. In the history of Subarnagram it was stated that “Faridpur, Barisal, Dhaka, Moimonsingh, Tripura, Chattagram and Srihatta were
ruled from the capital Subarnagram.” 19 The author wrote the history of Subarnagram to highlight its ancient glories as well as to encourage and mobilize the people of his contemporary Subarnagram to shed their internal differences and come together and work hard for material and intellectual uplift of their place 20. Even Sandwip, a small island in the Meghna delta in Noakhali received such high epithets from its historians: “Attracted by the wealth of Sandwip the Portuguese of Europe, the Mags of Arakan, the Barabhuinyas of Bengal, the Pathans and Mughals fought amongst themselves turning crimson the blue waters of Bay of Bengal; there was a time when at least two hundred ships loaded with salts were sent outside annually from this island; spellbound by the skills of its artisans the Sultan of Turkey got his ships built at Sandwip cheaply instead of Alexandria; the fertility of its land was superior to all others on this earth.” 21 The author of the history of Bikrampur thought: “The stream of history which from the times of Kharga – Chandra – Barma and Sena rulers made proud the history of independent ancient Bikrampur was indeed matter of pride not only of the people of Bikrampur but of all Benglis. The history of Bikrampur was not the history of a pargana only, it was indeed history of Bengal itself.” 22 Both Trailokya Nath Rakshit and Sebananda Bharati highlighted the ancient glory of Tamralipta Kingdom which was a part of Bengal. The people of Tamralipta had once extended their control and supremacy of the Aryans over Sri Lanka, Java and Sumatra. Naturally the people of this region were eager to learn about their glorious past and hence the authors’ humble attempts to write their histories. 23 Rarh was once a famous area of India and its people were renowned and most advanced in scholarship, wisdom, wealth, valour and bravery. All these inspired Bidhubhushan Bhattacharjee to write the history of Howrah and Hooghly, the two districts of Rarh, and bring all its past glories to the forefront. 24 These factors were not only predominant in cases of works on major areas but also in works on villages and smaller places. The author of the history of Senhati stated: “Senhati is a big ancient place of Khulna. Here are residences of many upper class educated Baidyas, Brahmins, Kayasthas and other categories of Hindus. From very early times these people have earned fame for requisite scholarship, intelligence, knowledge and fair conduct. Particularly the Baidyas have succeeded in gaining supremacy in the village for they held the topmost position in education from long time since…In this old highly cultured village numerous magnanimous souls were born and dead …” 25 Kesiari along with Gaganeshwar was a important place in different times for political, economic and
cultural reasons. So it was natural that Radha Nath Pati, a member of a traditional family of the place, would write its history; his objective was to let people know about the past glories of his motherland.\textsuperscript{26}

The upper caste educated Bengalis fondly recollected that they were the descendants of the original upper castes of Bengal along with the Brahmins and the Kayasthas brought to Bengal from the west by Adisur. They loved to speak in laudatory terms about the Sur King’s efforts to consolidate the Vedic religion and the subsequent efforts of Ballal Sena to give proper organization and purity to the Bengali upper castes. Quite a number of our authors mentioned these with approval perhaps because these gave sanctions to the status and privileges they enjoyed in society. In this connection our histories traced the subsequent efforts to maintain properly the caste organization in changing times. The role of Debibar Ghatak in arranging in orders the Kulin Brahmins in accordance with the degrees of the contaminations and corruptions they suffered during post Ballal period was mentioned in our histories. The subsequent caste arrangements and the \textit{samaj} of each were also described as the order of society.\textsuperscript{27}

A crucial element of traditional society was its womenfolk. After agreeing with Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay that women of Bengal were jewels and stating that in ancient times the conduct of women were exemplary, Rohini Sen stated whatever still remained in his time of such were rarely to be seen elsewhere.\textsuperscript{28} Sen continued to state that in Hindu society women were created to enrich the house of the in-laws, to regard their husbands as the sole determinant of their lives, to take full responsibilities of managing household works. Sen could not accept widow remarriage unconditionally, did not object to polygamy and even idealized Sati.\textsuperscript{29} Well ordered households where all the family members properly performed their duties and responsibilities were the ideal as such families held the society together. Punishments were meted out by the heads of the societies to those who violated rules and conventions of society. In the 19\textsuperscript{th} century “social punitive actions though became slackened to some extent than in earlier times did not go away fully from the country.” \textsuperscript{30}

Extolling traditional education and scholarship was a very important feature of regional and local histories. This was particularly notable in the histories published in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Descriptions of Sanskrit scholarship and learning were given in such
books as histories of Gaur, Moimonsingh, Srihatta, Pabna etc. Kanti Chandra Rarhi’s *Nabadwip Mahima* focussed mainly on scholarship and learning of Nadia. In the first edition of the book in 1884, the author made it very clear that Nabadwip owed its glory and fame to its scholarship, learning and Vaishnavism— the first two centered mainly round *Nyay* and *Smriti* philosophies, the third evolved with *Bhakti*.³¹ Rarhi’s position was subsequently followed by Kumud Nath Mallick in his *Nadia Kahini* and the revised and enlarged second edition of Rarhi’s *Nabadwip Mahima* in 1937 published by his grandsons after his death. However Nabadwip’s claim to excellence in scholarship and learning did not go unchallenged. The author of the history of Bakla insisted that of Bikrampur, Nabadwip and Bakla— the three most important centers of scholarship and learning the latter indeed surpassed the others: Of all these three places Bakla was in fact the most ancient and full of scholars.”³² As many students went to Kasi, Mithila, Drabir, Kanyakubja to study *Nyay, Mimansa, Smriti, Vedanta* etc. from Bakla so many students came from other places to Bakla for studies, where Brahmin scholars on grants remained immersed in studies of philosophy and knowledge. He also disputed the tale that Basudev Sarbabhauma made copies of *Nyay* texts out of his memories in Mithila and brought them to Nabadwip. He emphasized that Nabadwip evolved much later then Bakla and nothing was known about it prior to Lakshman Sena’s foundation of capital there. Appropriate titles were bestowed on scholars at Bakla much before the practice was started at Nabadwip. After providing a brief list of scholars of early days the author of Bakla lamented that information on them were scant : “We are swept away by the talents of outsiders but unfortunately do not care to look into our own places even for once.”³³

A major ideological element of regional and local histories was reservation about—if not dislike for—Muslim rule in Bengal. In many such histories was reflected the Muslim Dark-Age syndrome widely prevalent in the 19th and early 20th centuries among the Bengali Hindu educated middle class. Satish Chandra Mitra, the author of history of Jasohar Khulna started his part on the Pathan regime with a chapter entitled “The Dark Age” (tamash yug).³⁴ There he stated “When Bengal lost independence in the hands of Pathans, a hundred disasters engulfed her …. We can call the two hundred years from 1200 A.D. to 1400 A.D. dark age because the history of this period was blinded by darkness.’³⁵ In the next few pages of the chapter the author described the various features of those two hundred years of dark age.³⁶ Indeed
the so called Muslim Dark Age apparently constituted the essential backdrop against which most of the histories of regions and localities were perceived. Thus the pre-Muslim ancient times of Bengal’s politics, society and culture were highly glorified in the histories of Bhowal, Bikrampur, Subarnagram, Nadia etc. The rulers were very much praised for scholarship (for example Ballal Sena and Lakshman Sena), sanskritising the society, introducing and preserving purity of upper castes (especially the Brahmins) and winning battles. In the same vein Company’s rule was seen as a deliverance from Muslim Dark Age, particularly evident in the last years of Nawabi rule, and ushering western modernity which was held in high esteem.

Following Bankim Chandra a number of authors found it difficult to accept that a handful of Muslims under Ikhtiyar-bin-Bakhtiyar Khilji could thwart Lakshman Sena, famous for his strength and valour. They questioned the veracity of Minhaj’s *Tabkat-i-Nasiri* as a dependable source for the above information. They tried to establish that it was not Lakshman Sena but one of his weaker descendants who ruled at Gaur and not at Nadia who was defeated by Ikhtiyar-bin-Bakhtiyar Khilji. Even if Lakshman Sena himself had to suffer defeat and leave Nadia for Eastern Bengal it did not signify the defeat of Bengal itself; that Sena rulers continued to rule parts of Bengal even after the so called conquest of Bengal by Muslims.37

Quite a number of our histories highly glorified the role of the so called *Barabhuinyas* in fighting the Mughal rulers of Bengal and preserving their independence. It is true that there were some debates as to which particular landlords were included amongst the *Barabhuinyas*. Ananda Nath Roy, the author of the history of Faridpur, furnished with a list of eight landlords about whose inclusion amongst *Barabhuinyas* he had no doubt. They were Pratapaditya of Jasohar Kandarpa Roy of Chandrawip, Kedar Roy of Bikrampur, Lakshman Manikya of Bhulua, Mukunda Roy of Bhushana, Fazl Gazi of Bhowal, Isa Khan Masnad-i-Ali of Khizr, Chand Gazi of Chandrapratap.38 All these landlords were described as strong, upright, freedom-loving men committed to their ideals and prepared to fight for them. Divided between themselves the *Barabhuinyas* were united on one point only: to resist the Mughals. However pressed between the Mags and Portuguese plunderers on the one hand and the Mughal invaders on the other headed by Todar Mall and more particularly Mansingh, the *Barabhuinyas* did not last long. Satish Chandra Mitra stated that though their times and opportunities were little, the military and diplomatic skills
shown by the Barabhuinyas were such that if they had not the talented Mansingh or Todar Mall to face “they could have created a new history for Bengal.” About Pratapaditya of Jasohar Khulna, Mitra continued “the valorousness, commitment to his own ideals and beliefs and efforts to establish freedom has made him immortal. The new hymn which Pratapaditya recited three hundred years back and its valourous commitments which he inspired his fallen land and people to fulfill rendered his deeds permanent.”

The Bengali Hindu resistance to Muslim rule was not limited to political and military efforts, it took religious and cultural forms as well. In the regional and local histories the main form of this religious and cultural resistance was Vaishnavism. The prolonged Muslim rule resulted in conversion of the Hindus to Islam and penetration of Islamic customs and practices in Hindu families. At such times when the scholars of Nabadwip were involved in passionate scholastic argument with God nowhere in sight, the Vaishnavas as Chandrasekhar in Srihatta, Pundarik Vidyanidhi in Chattagram, Nityananda in Rarhland, Adwaitacharya in Santipur and Jagannath Misra in Nabadwip rose to prominence. But the man who transformed Vaishnavism to all encompassing movement involving diverse elements of Bengali society, religion and culture was Chaitanya. At a time when the rigidity of Hinduism, enormous influence of the Brahmans and cruel caste oppressions separated the great multitude of the lower people from sastric Hinduism and they were attracted towards Islam, it was the Vaishnava movement of Chaitanya which kept them within the ambit of Hinduism. “Chaitanya saved the country, the people and religion.” It is true that by the late 19th and early 20th centuries Vaishnavism as a force countering Islam had lost much of its use and value and had indeed so degenerated as to invite severe criticisms and apathy from the elite classes, yet it remained one of most important cults of the common people.

What followed from the general belief in Muslim Dark Age was acceptance of western modernism and English rule. This had two broad aspects: first, effects to modernize religion, society and culture and second, attempts to adjust the developments of Bengali society with the arrangements and institutions of English rule. It is highly interesting to see that the elements of the first aspect were only selectively mentioned in regional and local histories. For example efforts to spread Brahmoism and the diverse activities of the Brahmos received scant mention. Perhaps
this could be seen as a reflection of a conservative mindset of our authors. The almost total absence of any mention of the ideas of Ramkrishna and Vivekananda was however, striking—Ramkrishna was mentioned only in two histories of Hooghly, Vivekananda never. Perhaps this indicated that beyond Calcutta the Vedantaism of Ramkrishna and Vivekananda did not make much headway. Social reforms related to stopping the practice of polygamy and initiating window remarriage similarly did not find much place in our histories. The authors of the histories of Bakla and Nadia described in an approving manner conducts of the Brahmins of Nadia in relation to the issue of widow remarriage first in case of Rajballabh Sen and next Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. The Nadia Brahmins greeted Rajballabh to a feast of beef and served food to Vidyasagar in unwashed utensils. Himangshu Mohan Chattopadhyay was one of the very few authors who supported such reforms; he printed fully a piece advocating stoppage of polygamy in his book on Bikrampur. Attempts to expand education in general and female education in particular however received more attention. Most of the regional and local histories contained considerable information on school and college education in the concerned places, literary works, journals and magazines of a wide variety published from there as well as educationists and men of letters.

Introduction of elements of modern administration even at the district and locality levels were hailed by regional and local histories and the different arrangements were described. This can be traced back to the first book on regional history of our period—the history and account of Bogura. The book argued that even in the early 19th century Bogura was mostly filled with anti-social elements engaged in evil activities and there was no semblance of proper administration—the Zamindars often colluded with such people and activities. All these underwent change during British rule when police stations, courts, prisons excise offices, post-offices, schools, dispensaries etc. were introduced. Descriptions of English rule in different regions were particularly given in their respective accounts of Sherpur pargana, Darjeeling, Moimonsingh, Dhaka etc. Most of the subsequent books during our period followed this trend. The authors of these histories were particularly pleased with censure reports published once in very ten years from 1872 onwards as these gave a lot of useful information in a concise methodical format. Such information included population distribution according to sex, religion, caste, profession, education etc. and
showed particularly the educated classes, their social positions and professional and job-related opportunities. The relevant census data were profusely used in regional and local histories.

The initial urge to evolve with an evolving Indian nation or inspiring Bengal to reach the position of exaltation, triumph and glory as imagined by Bankim Chandra notwithstanding, most of the regional and local histories remained silent about the political developments in Bengal especially in the years following 1900. This silence was significant as it was precisely during this period that the Congress in Bengal split into the Moderates and Extremists, Extremism grew and evolved both intensively and extensively, Swadeshi and Boycott movement shook large parts of Bengal and eventually culminated in armed revolutionary movements. None of these left any deep mark whatsoever in our regional and local histories. Certain scholars believed that the Swadeshi and Boycott movements in Bengal spurred writing and publication of regional and local histories in Bengal. Indeed in terms of the numbers book published in the twenty years between 1905-06 and 1925 were more than in any twenty years during our entire period. It was more than the numbers of books published in the last fifty years of the 19th century and the last twenty five years of our study, i.e. 1926–1950 : the latter is particularly significant because it saw the armed revolutionary movements at its peak, the rise of peasant and working class movements, the evolution of left politics, the beginning of the second world war, activities of Subhas Chandra Bose, the movements of 1942, the intensification of communalism and finally the transfer of power and partition in 1947. Yet histories published between 1905-06 and 1925 hardly said anything about the partition of Bengal or the anti partition movement which followed. Brief references to certain political movements of the 20th century were made in the histories of Moimonsingh, Pabna, Bankura and Sandwip. After the proposal of partition of Bengal in 1903 the discussion of politics by people in Moimonsingh became widespread, a meeting was held in the town where fifty thousand people gathered and after the implementation of partition in 1905 political meetings and associations in the towns, villages and localities were held to promote use of Swadeshi products. In Pabna the declaration of the Partition was received with arandhan, rakhibandhan, boycott of foreign products and associations and meetings. The book then went on to report the imprisonment of Ismail Siraji for leading the Swadesi movement and publishing a
revolutionary text named *Analprabaha*. The book then mentioned the punishment of Bankim Chandra Roy and few others for involvement in Dhaka conspiracy and Nadia Prayagpur dacoity cases, the internment of a student of Pabna college and a teacher of Radhanagar School for suspected connection with conspirators, the imprisoned under Defence of India Act of 1915 of two youths of Telijana Ghurka under Raiganj thana. The book further reported the spread of Non-Co-operation movement in Pabna along with khaddars, charka, use of Swadeshi products and boycott of foreign products, prevention of sale and use of intoxicants. The book finally reported deaths due to police firing at Salangahat under Ullapara thana on 27th January 1922.\(^50\) A very brief account of Bankura during the Swadeshi and Non-Co-operation movement and the condition of Congress was given in the descriptive account of Bankura. During the Swadeshi movement Surendra Nath Bandopadhyay, Krishna Kumar Mitra, Raj Kumar Goswami, Hem Chandra Sen and Maulavi Dedar Baksh delivered speeches in the district. Amongst the local leaders were Abinash Chandra Roy, barrister Chandrasekhar Sen, lawyer Upendra Nath Das etc. Ramdas Chakraborty, Surendra Nath Mukhopadhyay and Raicharan Dhabal (Raja of Ambikanagar) were arrested in connection with Aurobindo Ghosh’s case and were later released. District Congress committees and Khilafat committees were founded in 1920 through the efforts of a local person named Anil babu. It was Gopinath Datta, a mahajan of Bankura, who made arrangements to set up the national school and office of the Congress in his house.\(^51\) The author of Sandwip mentioned that the armed revolutionaries in Bengal planned insurrections with German help and selected Sandwip as a spot for unloading arms and the British Indian Government foiled the plan. The pattern of reporting hinted that the author considered the planned insurrection as creating disorder and the Government’s alertness to foil it as preserving peace and order.\(^52\) These were all which we get about the nationalist movements in Bengal in our regional and local histories. This relative silence might have been due to certain factors which we are giving below but are not elaborating as these are our conjectures and not statements based on hard facts. It might have been that our regional and local histories feared state repression; did not have all relevant data to form a balanced view of British rule; thought that an appropriate distance in time was necessary for a proper assessment of post 1900 Bengal—this distance was all the more necessary for regional histories as these were more in the nature of complete histories; accepted British rule as Bengal’s usher to her way to triumph and
glory. Whatever the reasons, this silence perhaps raised questions about our histories' commitments to carry Bengal to her grand historical destiny.

5.3. Extolling the different landed elements and Zamindars was a significant ideological feature of the regional and local histories. This was no wonder as lives in districts mainly centred around them and they were often the chiefs or influential members of samaj. Satish Chandra Mitra wrote: The history of a country is incomplete without the history of its samaj… The main pride of Jasohar – Khulna centre round its samaj; that way this region encapsulates Bengal.” For Mitra samaj implied caste organization rather than the society in general. “Samaj evolved with the setting of a Raja or influential person… The Jasohar samaj evolved with the foundation of political centre by Bikramaditya and his son Pratapaditya… The two most important periods of evolution of such samaj in Jasohar were, according to Mitra, 1575-1625 and 1700–1750. Jasohar–Khulna had the samaj of Brahmin, Baidya, Kayastha followed by Nabasakh, Baishya—Barujibi, Subarnabanik, Jugi and other lower castes. Each samaj had their own divisions and sub-divisions. For example the Brahmins were divided in Rarhi, Baidic, and Barendra; the former was again divided in Kulin, Srotriya, Bhangakulin and Bansajas. Then there were Gayins Gotras etc.” The Muslims had their own samaj, but information about them were very brief and sketchy.53 Though the majority of the population of Bengal were Muslims, most of the landed elements were Hindus, often upper caste Hindus, and they upheld and preserved caste regulations and traditional customs and practices. References to such activities were available in the works of Satish Chandra Mitra, Rohini Sen, Achyut Charan Chaudhuri, Mahima Niranjan Chakraborty, Himangshu Mohan Chattopadhyay etc.54

Zamindars were regarded as pillars of tradition and respected as Rajas in their respective territories. Often it was believed that particular persons or families obtained Zamindaris through supernatural, indeed divine, wishes and interventions. Ramnath Danujmardan Dey, the founder of Chandradwip estate in Bakarganj, was according to a legend destined to rule lands arising out of river Sugandha according to the desires of Goddess Kalika.55 Srinath Roy, the founder of the ruling family of Selimabad, had according to legends an eventful childhood; one such event was that while asleep in a field at midday his head and face was protected from scorching sunlight by an expanded hood of a snake—56 we have heard this story about many characters and at
many different times. The legend about Durgasharan, the founder of Ujirpur Zamindari, is that one day when the Zamindar of Madhabpasha hesitated to receive initiations from the renowned devotee Digbijay Bhattacharjee the latter got out, incidentally met the young Durgasharan, bestowed initiations on him and professed that his descendants would soon acquire great wealth and found their own Zamindari.\textsuperscript{57} Zamindars settled people in their areas. The founder of the Chaudhuri Zamindar family of Naupara, Ragunandan, improved the conditions of his Zamindari and brought respectable people from different places to settle there—particular among them were the Baidyas from Jasohar-Khulna.\textsuperscript{58} Paramananda the founder of the Zamindari of the Rays of Itna brought to settle there many \textit{Bansaja Kulim Kayastha} with a view to protect the \textit{samaj}.\textsuperscript{59} Protection of the subject was an indispensable duty and responsibility of Zamindars. Jaynarayan, Zamindar of pargana Richi in Srihatta suppressed dacoities which was quite rampant in the area and protected the subject people.\textsuperscript{60} The Singhas of Satrajitpur maintained armed forces for protection of their land and people even after the invasion of the bargis right up to the battle of Palasi.\textsuperscript{61} An important function of the Zamindars was to promote education and scholarship by making land grants and allowances to the scholars-pandits, maintain and found institutions for studying Sanskrit, philosophy and religion. Particularly important in this respect were Raghab (early 17\textsuperscript{th} century), Rudra (late 17\textsuperscript{th} Century), Ramkrishna (late 17\textsuperscript{th} Century) and Krishna Chandra (early 18\textsuperscript{th} century onwards).\textsuperscript{62} Such promotion of education and scholarship cut across religious divisions: Munshi Chaudhuris, the Muslim Zamindars of Kartickpur in Faridpur made grants of lands and allowances for scholars in Sanskrit and philosophy.\textsuperscript{63}

Providing for maintenance of religions, religious practices and rituals was another important traditional function of the Zamindars. Examples galore— Zamindars of Satrajitpur, Itna, Rayerkathi, Karapara\textsuperscript{64} and important families mentioned in the five volumes of the third part of the history of Srihatta and in the second volume of Himangshu Mohan Chattopadyay’s \textit{Bikrampur} as well as the accounts of Zamindar families furnished in other books provide innumerable examples of this. All these traditional functions gave the Zamindars and respectable families such dignity which they were never ready to compromise. In early 19\textsuperscript{th} century in Sreerampur the Raja used to give the Brahmins necessary permission to take the idol of Jagannath to bath. When another landlord of Tele caste bribed the
Brahmin priest to take from him the permission to take Jagannath for bath, the Raja rode to Mahesh with his men, captured the Brahmin priests, imprisoned and tortured them and extracted from them assurance that they would never repeat such acts in future.\textsuperscript{65} Krishna Chandra, the Zamindar of Hetampur, performed the sradh ceremony of his father Bipracharan and spent rupees three lakhs for that. After the Kangalibhojan was over and Krishna Chandra’s munificence lauded by those present, the Zamidar declared that his function was not over as yet; he called two Brahmins who had taken loans of Rs.60,000 and Rs.27,000 from him and were in no position to repay them, tore their loan-papers and thus wrote their loans off. This earned Krishna Chandra much name.\textsuperscript{66} Sometime the zeal to protect respect and dignity went to extreme lengths. It was said that the Dutta Chaudhuris of Moubhog once became involved in a bidding rivalry with the neighbouring Baruipara Zamindars over the purchase of a mere Kula (a winnowing platter or tray) and finally bought it at Rs.2000—as a token of this loss to Moubhog, Baruipara came to be called Do Hazari.\textsuperscript{67}

The failure of the Zamindars and other ruling people to maintain the traditional terms and conditions of their status and rule, failure to protect peasants and instead oppressing them sometimes resulted in violent popular outbursts. This was realized by Hari Mohan Sanyal as early as 1880: after describing the sorry state of the common people in Darjeeling and their exploitation and oppression by the strong and powerful elements Sanyal wrote, “…the oppression by the Zamindars and moneylenders of the Santhals indeed was the reason of their rebellion of the last few years” and the same could happen in Darjeeling also.\textsuperscript{68} Sanyal’s view was supported by Gaurihar Mitra fifty seven years later. The rights which the paharias (the hill tribes), the original inhabitants of the Santhal Parganas of subsequent times, enjoyed were not shared by the Santhals; this was utilized by the cunning moneylenders and other powerful persons to oppress them severely. Thus passed two decades of intense hardships and privations, but no more after that. Oppressions bore their result: the Santhal rebellion of 1855.\textsuperscript{69} Intensification of exploitation and oppression by Zamindars led to the outbreak of Pagalpanthi movement of Tipu in Sherpur in Moimonsingh. “After the division of the Sherpur Zamindari was complete in 1820 the Zamindars of the pargana fixed rent at a higher rate to realize the costs of division from the subject peasantry. The Zamindars imposed abwabs, kharch, mathot etc. and
started oppressing the peasants. Many subject peasants not being able to tolerate such oppression stood against the Zamindars. They declared that they would not be able to pay taxes more than 4 annas per Kur. At such a time Tipu the preacher assumed leadership of the rebel people and aroused a dangerous rebellion at Sherpur by preaching his own unique idea of equality. The main theory of Tipu’s religious idea was “All human beings are creation of God, so nobody is inferior to any one.” Thousands and thousands of oppressed peasants took to this idea of equality and stopped paying the Zamindar’s taxes.\textsuperscript{70}

At a time when the antagonism between Zamindar and his subjects on collections over and above standard taxes payable were quite widespread, the Yusufshahi pargana of the Natore Raj family were purchased by the Thakurs of Kolkata and Bandopadhyays of Dhaka, the Sanyals of Salap, the Bhaduris of Porjana and the Pakrasees of Sthal. The new Zamindars insisted that the peasants possessed more lands than actually shown and imposed increased taxes on them but did not give them necessary pattas. In addition to increased tax demands the other reasons of peasant outbursts in Pabna were the arrogant and unrestrained behaviours of the Zamindars and their amlas and their determination to exact amounts at will despite the rulings of the courts declaring extra claims as illegal. The peasants had no way out but to revolt.\textsuperscript{71}

Indeed in course of the late 18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries most of the traditional Zamindars of a district gave way to new ones who came from a different social milieu.\textsuperscript{72} One of the most important factors of this change which affected the subject peasantry with greatest adversity was that most of these Zamindars were not regional or local men—they came from outside the district or village and stayed outside.\textsuperscript{73} In earlier times “The Zamindar was like father to the subjects and according to propriety and justice was responsible to God to always protect the subject…”\textsuperscript{74} Rani Bhabani, the Zamindar of Natore was called “Ma Bap” (“mother father”) by her subjects. "Why” asked the Zamindar of Bakla “then are we committing such suicides? ” The answer lay in absenteeism of post Permanent Settlement Zamindars. Often the new Zamindars— the so called absentee landlords— left management of their estates with their amlas or gomostahs. While taxes continued to be collected often at higher rates, the subject people were deprived of the protection and welfare arrangements given to them by the Zamindars of earlier times. Most of the disputes centering round land and
its rent took place between the outsider Zamindars and subject people of the region and locality concerned.\textsuperscript{76} When the history of Sandwip admitted that Zamindars like Rani Bhabani were not yet completely extinct it meant that a large part of them had already disappeared. The results of such absenteeism were extreme exploitation and oppression of the peasants. The three fourths of the peasants in Sandwip did not have sufficient food to eat and could never repay the Zamindars’ debts in all their lives. Rarely did the Zamindars found schools and dispensaries, construct roads, dig ponds and canals or help peasants to tide over privations and famines.\textsuperscript{77}

Actually times were changing. The history of Bakla rued passing away of traditions with traditional Zamindars. Such landlords were almost independent. They themselves meted out criminal justice to their subject people. The armed forces with which they exacted taxes from the subject people also protected the latter from external threats. The landholders ruled their lands according to the writings of Manu and other law givers. Their settlements were surrounded by the Brahmins, barbers, washermen—performers of essential functions—and all were looked after by the landlords. In those times, unlike the times of the author, the Brahmins, Baidyas, Kayasthas and other castes stuck to their traditional professions and functions—none took to other works unless heavily compelled. Religion and rituals were regularly performed and conventions were respected. Education and scholarship reached highest levels and ideals held the society firmly. Each family performed its duties and responsibilities diligently. All these changed with the Muslim conquest of Bengal. Many elements of Islamic culture penetrated social lives in Bengal. The downward journey of Bengali society continued even after the establishment of English rule. “In present times the unfortunate sons of India are gradually forgetting the great strength of their godly predecessors, their unusual intellectual powers, widely respected religions and commitment to justice.”\textsuperscript{78} Kumud Nath Mallik in his history of Nadia, likewise extolled ancient lives as traditional and proper. The change for bad were initiated by the Muslims: from 1198 to the time of the arrival to Chaitanya in the 15\textsuperscript{th} century, the Hindu social bonds were broken by the Muslims and all their ago old customs and practices were destroyed. Lives were restored to earlier standards as much as possible during Maharaja Krishna Chandra. During the British times conditions remained the same—changes, if any, were marginal.\textsuperscript{79}
5.4 The passing away of the traditional social arrangements considerably changed the lives of people excepting the conservative few and the uneducated families. The people having new education often did not pay much need to traditional social norms, propriety and rituals. The once prevailing social checks and punitive actions almost totally disappeared. There were times when two Brahmins were compelled to leave their settlements for the offence of drinking liquors and reciting hymns at a ritual regarding dedication of a pond by a Namasudra. “All these are indications of the strict social rule of the earlier times.” The time–honoured social arrangements were uprooted due to the new trends of performing Sradhs on the banks of Ganga, holding marriage ceremonies in Calcutta, accepting services outside often far away from original settlements and residing there etc. Intimate addressings faded away. The earlier social sanctions and restraints received terrible jolts from the introduction of modern medicines and soda – lemonades. The traditional social practice of separate sitting arrangements for the different castes of the Hindus and for Hindus and Muslims were not observed in modern day schools and colleges. The earlier zeal among both Hindus and Muslims for local improvement evident in digging large ponds, constructing temples and mosques etc. were scarcely seen. Hospitality was widespread and the learned persons gave free lessons to needy students in earlier times. In the modern times all these changed: people became far more concerned with making their own houses beautiful, grabbing others’ properties even by dubious means etc. Attempts to social reform such as stopping the practices of dowries notwithstanding, the number of fathers of unmarried girls were on the rise.80

A large number of histories compared their own times with earlier times the latter were arbitrarily chosen by each book according to its objectives, orientation and views. Such books as the histories of Bogura (1861), Medinipur (1888-96), Bakarganj (1898), Rajshahi (1901) etc. rated their own times better than earlier times : administration during their own times were more organised and efficient than in earlier times and as a results, the law and order situation improved a great deal. Histories of Rajshahi (1901) Sandwip (1923) etc had another feature in common. Both described certain aspects of their earlier histories in glorious terms both held that the English rule was beneficial for their people but both criticized their people for not utilizing such benefits and move upwards. Indeed the history of Rajshahi
acknowledged that the British had shown Indians ways to development and prosperity, but the Bengalis lost all their qualities since Rani Bhabani. By imitating undesirable features of the British the Bengalis degenerated. The authors of the history of Sandwip (1923) acknowledged that the history of the pargana was not as rich a Saptagram or Tamralipta, that reduced in size it lost its association with Bikrampur and Bakla and was linked with Noakhali, that it came to be denigrated as the second Andamans. However it was the English enlightenment which brightened up the island and enabled its inhabitants to know themselves. The English rule was enlightened but the Bengalis did not reap its benefits properly.

The histories of Nadia (1910), Bakla (1915), Pabna (1923-26) etc. dealt with the passing away of the traditional society and the gradual setting of the new one. For the first two books such passing away began with the Muslim rule in Bengal but their assessment of British rule differed: while the history of Nadia credited the British rule with carrying Bengal towards progress, history of Bakla passed a few praising remarks about the English rule in a perfunctory manner and balanced them with critical observations. The histories of Pabna (1923-26) and Moimonsingh (1906) as well as the descriptive accounts of Moimonsingh (1904) and Dhaka (1910) were balanced in their assessments of their earlier and contemporary times. While traditional social arrangements, scholarship and ideals of rulers were extolled, the benefits of modern administration introduced by the British were also acknowledged and praised. Actually the authors of these books represented the rural middle class of Bengal. With stakes in the traditional social arrangements still there, they—men belonging to upper or affluent castes and learned in modern education—look forward to carve out careers in white collar jobs. Their positions however were not always happy—comparative price index of necessary commodities and items in earlier with contemporary times in the account of Moimonsingh (1904) show its concern with rising prices; similarly its list of educational institutions show its concern for availability of proper education.

5.5. We shall now deal with regional and local histories written by Muslim authors. Three out of four books consulted had the issues of the Muslims under their focus. The ideologies of the history of Taraf (1887) and Sirajganj (1915) were more or less the same: to point out the defects and demerits of the Muslims and urge them to come to terms with the necessities of modern times. Basically they believed that the
despite all limitations the British rule was an established fact which could not be wished away in any way; in order to regain importance it was necessary for the Muslims to avail of and utilize whatever opportunities it offered—clearly their thoughts were in line with the Aligarh School. The history of Syidpur (1921) focussed on how the place got its name and highlighted the exemplary activities of a few educated and influential Muslims of the locality. The book implicitly urged upon the Muslims to try to follow such examples to gain prominence in society. The fourth book, the history of Coch Behar by Khan Chaudhuri Amanatullah Ahmed sponsored by the Coch Behar State was its official history and gave a chronological account of the rulers of Coch Behar and glorified them— it had nothing which could be called Muslim specific ideology.

In this chapter we have focussed our attention on some of the major features of the ideologies of regional and local histories during 1850-1950, the hundred years which formed the most important phase in Bengal’s efforts to come to terms with western modernization. The process was of course complicated and involved many more issues than those covered by us. Indeed we had to simplify the matter, to select only a few of the features and to discuss them as briefly as possible. However in our view the features selected for this summary discussion largely reflected the main ideas and thoughts of the significant sections of the Bengali society in course of its historical experiences during 1850–1950.

End Notes


2. Purna Chandra Deb Barma, Chattagramer Itihas, Chattagram 1920, Author’s Introduction.


44. *Ibid*, p 163.


73. Saha, *Pabna Jelar Itihas* 2004, p 268. The author furnished a brief list of some of the important Zamindars who came from outside and stayed outside.


