CHAPTER – II

ORIGINS, AUTHORS, SOURCES AND TERRITORIES

2.1 INTRODUCTION: In this chapter we would discuss some issues, highly relevant to a thesis on Bengali local histories. They would include discussions on works of local histories about Bengal districts, written in English by Englishmen and Bengalis and works dealing with closely related issues like the zamindari system. We would also look at the elements of local history found in pre-colonial indigenous texts, written in Sanskrit and pre-modern Bengali. We would then examine the professional careers of the local historians and study their historical methodologies. Their handling of the source materials would be of great importance here. Then we would scan the evolution of the sub-regional geo-political units of Bengal. Topics such as the coming of the printing press, rise of a standard Bengali prose and influence of Western historiography over the Indian mind, that paved the way for such publications, have been dealt with in the introduction.

2.2 THE ENGLISH LOCAL HISTORIES: The tradition of collecting and assessing local annals according to the standards of Western historiography was started by the Englishmen themselves, way back in late eighteenth century. We can zero in on the following instruction of Harry Verelst, the Governor of Bengal, given to the district Supervisors in 1769, as the catalyst for compilation of Bengali local history by the foreign rulers: ‘Each supervisor was to collect a “summary history of the province” assigned to his charge, in which the form of the ancient constitution was to be compared with the present; an historical account given of the leading families ….and the Supervisors were admonished in dealing with verbal information, to distinguish between, “the private bias of individuals and the real state of facts.”’ This instruction was not lost upon the English officials and their strivings led to efforts such as J.Z. Halwell’s Interesting Historical Events (1764) containing information on Kolkata, Patna and Murshidabad, James Rennell’s monumental Memoirs of a Map of Hindusthan (1793)

Henry Creighton’s *Ruins of Gaur* (1801), which contains written descriptions and maps of Bengal’s ancient metropolis, Walter Hamilton’s *East – India Gazetteers* (1828), Martin Montgomery’s *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India* (1838), William Adam’s *Report on the State of Education in Bengal* (1838), James Long’s *On the Banks of the Bhagirathi* (1846) and E. T. Dalton’s *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872). Among them Hamilton’s book contains depictions of many localities, Martin’s work covers similar ground, Adam’s report portrays the state of indigenous education system and Long’s essay narrates the life of various places on the banks of Bhagirathi, from Saptagram to Kolkata.  

Soon volumes concerned more specifically with descriptive histories of districts and similar areas were also produced. Capt. A. S. Sherwill’s *Statistical and Geographical Report of the District of Birbhum* (1855), J. E. Gastrel’s studies on Barddhaman and Bankura, W. W. Hunter’s *Annals of Rural Bengal* (1868), Henry Beveridge’s *District of Bakergunj* (1876), J. Westland’s *Report on the District of Jessore and Its Antiquities* (1871), Hunter’s *Statistical Account of Bengal* (1876), *Imperial Gazetteer, Bengal Provincial Series* (1908), Major J. A. T. Walsh’s *History of the Murshidabad District* (1902), W. B. Marenò’s *The Paikpara and Kandi Raj* (1920) and H. E. Stapleton’s *Memoirs of Gaur and Pandua* (1930), fall in this category. Efforts in English regarding Barddhaman, Hughly and Howrah would be considered in the appropriate chapter. Hunter’s *Statistical Account*, running into 20 volumes, and the *Imperial Gazetteer* edited especially by L.S.S. O’Malley and J.C. K. Peterson, comprises of invaluable data regarding local histories. A glance at the contents of the part dealing with Hughly and Howrah would highlight the wide spectrum of topics covered by the authors. The contents are (i) Geography and General Aspect (ii) The People (iii) Agriculture (iv) Natural Calamities (v) Means of Communication, Manufactures and Commerce etc. (vi) Administrative (vii) Meteorological and Medical Aspects and (viii) Maps.

But the tome which is a classic example of a local history written by a European is Beveridge’s *Bakergunj*. This also acted as an eye-opener for many indigenous local

---

53 We would not consider these English works in detail in this thesis. So full publication references are not provided here.

54 Henry Beveridge *District of Bakergunj* (Trubner & Co, London, 1876)
historians. This book was significantly dedicated to ‘the inhabitants of the district which
it attempts to describe’\footnote{Ibid preface}. The preface to the book is worth quoting at some length as it
cogently suggested how a local history of any Bengali sub-region should be handled: ‘My
primary object has been to write a book which would be useful and interesting to the
officers of Government and the inhabitants of the district and therefore there is much in it
which can have no attraction for the general reader. … The truth is no one man can write
an exhaustive district – history, and still less can a foreigner adequately depict a district
of Bengal. …. My idea always has been that the proper person to write the history of a
district is one who is native of it, who has lived all his life in it, and who has abundance
of leisure to collect information. It is only a Bengali who can treat satisfactorily of the
productions of his country or of its social condition’. As sources of his study he depended
upon, ‘nearly five years experience in Bakerganj, and subsequent researches in the India
Office and the library of the British Museum…’\footnote{Ibid, preface} along with accounts of foreign
collectors like Ramusio and Edward Barbessa.

His plan of work served as a model for many local histories churned out by the
Bengalis. It included: Part I- An account of the land; physical features, description of the
parganas, Antiquities & Early History etc. Part II- The people and the natural
productions. Part III- A History of the administration and comments on education, police
etc. six appendices contained interesting materials like a letter from Mr. Wintle
describing Bakarganj in 1801, notes on general character of the people, dacoits and early
travelers in Bengal. Some of his observations on the historical geography of the province
are also most important for analyzing later local histories e.g. ‘our Bengali districts are
for the most part artificial divisions of the country, and in many cases are of very recent
origin. I am afraid that officials are apt to forget this …as if it was an entity which had
been separated for as long a time as an English shire or parish. Bengal districts are
subject to continual change, partly from diluviation and alluviation, but still more from
the idiosyncrasies of their rulers’.\footnote{Ibid, part I, p.248} Secondly: ‘It is natural that enthusiastic Bengalis
should regret the days of their native kings …. But in sober truth there seems little reason
to regret the extinction of any of the Hindu dynasties. Pratapaditya seems, from his biography to have been a brutal tyrant who fell into his proper place when his conquerors shut him up in an iron cage …. We may remind our Hindu friends that nine out of twelve above – mentioned luminaries are described as being Mahommedans’. The last portion smacks of typical British imperialism and such statements abound in this publication. Here we would present only one such remark: ‘Granted that we wrongfully got possession of India. Still to abandon her now would be to act like a man-stealer who should kidnap a child and then in a fit of repentance abandon him in a tiger jungle’.

Comments are hardly necessary! Undoubtedly, many of the British authors on Bengal history were markedly prejudiced and their chief motives behind penning these works included obtaining exact information regarding the provincial revenue system and presenting the Indian past in the colonial fashion. Still, we have to acknowledge our debt to the European scholars, starting from William Jones, for bringing into light many important facts regarding Bengali and Indian past and constructing a systematic historical framework.

The Bengalis themselves also attempted local histories in English. More important amongst them were the following: a) Bholanath Chandra’s *The Travels of a Hindoo*, having large amount of details about modern West Bengal. This book was based on actual field study and the available descriptions were of much help to future antiquarians. b) Shambhu Nath De’s *Hooghly Past and Present* c) Manmohan Chakravarti’s *A Summary of the Changes in the Jurisdiction of Districts in Bengal, 1757-1916*. This is a most important work, which helps us to determine the formation of geographical identities of various sub-regions of Bengal. d) A. N. Ghosh’s *Memoirs of*.

---

59 The interested reader might find such statements in the preface and pages 229, 372 and 396.
60 H. Beveridge, *Bakergunj*, op.cit,p.396
62 Bholanath Chandra *Travels of a Hindoo* (Trubner & Co, London 1869)
63 Shambhu Nath De *Hooghly Past and Present* (Kolkata 1906)
Maharaja Nabakissen Bahadur (1901) and Shibnarayan Mukherjee’s *Jaikrishna Mukherji: An Appreciation* (1912), are not mere biographies, but repositories of information regarding their respective zamindaries. However we would not dwell upon this topic any further.

2.3 THE INDIGENOUS TRADITION: It is difficult to trace the beginnings of cultivation of local history in Bengal in indigenous languages. Recently, Yajneshwar Chaudhuri has claimed the twelfth century Sanskrit text, Sandhyakar Nandi’s *Ramcharita* as the first work of local history in Bengal. ⁶⁵ This opinion may be disputed though, but there can be little doubt that the *Mangal Kavyas* composed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries do accommodate many local traditions and anecdotes. ⁶⁶ Benoy Ghose had noted in his famous work *Paschimbanger Samskriti*, that residents of many places in Barddhaman still recall country legends about Chand Saodagar (merchant) and Dhanapati Saodagar, famous characters of the Mangal Kavyas. ⁶⁷ There are numerous essays about them also, composed by district antiquarians, published in lesser-known local magazines. All these show that the incidents told in the Kavyas may have roots in reality. Bharatchandra’s *Annada Mangal* (1751), a somewhat late entrant in the *Mangal Kavya* genre, includes valuable information about Nadia and Barddhaman Raj. Gangaram’s *Maharashtra Purana* (1742) provides a vivid description of the Bargi raids in Western Bengal. *Kshtish Vamsavali Charitam*, produced in the Nadia zamindari court in the 1730s, is a composition that qualifies more properly as a local history, as it supplies a dynastic narrative of the Nadia Raj. Bijoyram Sen’s *Tirtha Mangal* also contains many local incidents. All these works were composed in Sanskrit or old pre-colonial Bengali.

---


⁶⁷ Benoy Ghose *Paschimbanger Samskriti* (Prakash Bhavan, Kolkata 1976), Vol 1, pp.190-203
Still, the pioneering attempt at penning a local history in the language of the soil i.e. Bengali was made only in 1801. This was Ramram Bam’s *Raja Pratapaditya Charitra*. The work was a part of a series of text-books commissioned by the Fort William College. Ram Ram Basu (1757-1813), worked as a *Munshi* (secretary) with European missionaries like John Thomas and William Carey and later as a *Pandit* (scholar-teacher) at the Fort William College. He was a product of an age when the European conception of history had not taken firm roots here and the indigenous sense of the yore was very much there. Still, he presented a reasonably coherent narrative of Pratapaditya’s life. William Carey remarked, ‘They are works of considerable merit and me as deserve remuneration’. However, some interesting features of the pre-colonial sense of history were evident in his volume, like the free intermingling of the natural and supernatural, e.g. the anecdote about Pratapaditya’s meeting his patron-god (*Istadebata*).

Another early effort at composing local history was Rajiblochan Mukherjee’s *Maharaja Krishnachandra Rayasya Charitram*. This again was a part of the Fort William College’s project of producing Bengali text books. Here again mere mortals freely rubbed shoulders with gods. The famous story of Goddess Lakshmi leaving Hari Hore’s abode to reside at Bhabananda Majumdar’s dwelling was related as a part of the normal historical narrative by Rajiblochan. On her way the Goddess blessed Ishwar *Patuni*, an episode portrayed indelibly by Bharatchandra earlier. Rajiblochan, sharing the dominant *bhadralok* sentiment of his times, was overtly pro-British and praised even the controversial dual government (1765-72) He remarked: ‘The Europeans held the actual power, while the Indians performed the day-to-day functions. Under this system, which was like the Ram rajya, the people were contented.’ Even then, he provided a reasonably reliable history of the Nadia Raj, upto the time of Krishnachandra. Some descriptions were genuinely lively, despite the ill-developed Bengali prose of the era, like

---

68 On the title page of *Pratapaditya Charitra* (the Mission Press, Serampore Reprinted by Ranjan Press, Kolkata 2001) the year of Publication is given 1801 in Bengali and 1802 in English. The editor of the volume, Branjendranath Banerjee, decided on the authority of Marshman, that 1801 is correct.

69 *Ibid*, Preface

70 *Rajiblochan Mukherjee Maharaja Krishnachandra Rayassa Charitram* (Serampore Mission, Press, Srirampur 1805)

71 *Ibid*, pp.8-10

72 ‘Saheber lok karta Nababer loke karjya kar eirup rajkarma haite lagilo …. Prajaloker jathestha sukh, kono shanka nei … Ram rajyar nyah manushya sakal sukhni hailo’. Translation mine.
that of Krishnachandra’s marriage. This book, interestingly, was reprinted several times. In 1780 Saka Era or 1858 C.E, an edition was brought out by Gopinath Chakraborty, which had inputs from Reverend Long and had the text modernized to suit the contemporary reader. Another poetic composition, dealing with an important local personage of the period was Dewan Paranchand Kapur’s Hariharmangal. Written by his close relative and adherent, the work centered around Raja Tejchandra of Barddhaman and contained interesting details about royal activities. As it provides the names and revenue details of each of the Parganas under the Raj, Hariharmangal is of some value to the historian. In 1853 and ‘56, Harischandra Tarkalankana produced two more volumes on Pratapaditya. In the introduction to this thesis, we have already stated that biographies of zamindars do not come into our consideration. But we have dealt with these publications in some detail, as they were the initial ventures of the genre of Bengali local history.

2.4 THE INITIAL EFFORTS: The first distinct work of local history in Bengali which tried to provide an account of a district was Kalikamal Sarbabhauma’s Setihas Bagura Brittanta, followed by Shyamdhan Mukherjee’s Murshidabader Itihas. The nomenclature and the contents of the first script are rather significant. The title indicates that the author took narrative history as a part of an encyclopedic description of various aspects of the district life. So, historical incidents are often placed along sundry other topics. Mythical stories like Raja Parashuramer brittanta and Birat rajar britttanta co-exist in the work with pieces like Kalitalar hat; Police thana and Nadir brittanta. Shyamdhan Mukherjee’s work is more specifically historical. It consists of a chronicle of Murshidabad Nawabs in only 45 pages. Bengali versions of the pact between Mir Jafar and the British (1757) and his official treaty with the East India Company are also given. Some general descriptions about the area are there too. Overall these two volumes are rather unsatisfying attempts with dry language and virtually no historical criticism.

73 Ibid, pp. 17-18
74 Paranchand Kapur Hariharmangal (Author, Barddhaman, 1830)
75 Kalikamal Sarbabhauma Setihas Bagura Brittanta (Dhaka Bengal Press, Dhaka, 1861)
76 Shyamdhan Mukherjee Murshidabader Itihas (Dhuna Shindhoo Press, Berhampore1864. The author spelt his name as Shamdhone Mookerjee.)
In 1858, Balaichand Sinha published an essay titled *Koch Beharer Bibaran* in *Bibidartha Samgraha*. In 1862-63 a series called *Hijlir Brittanta* was printed in the *Tattvabodhini Patrika*. But they were not full fledged district histories. Now, why did the authors try to pen these chronicles? Kalikamal Sarbabhauma wrote: ‘After a personal survey of the district, I have tried to pen down its history in standard Bengali, so that the educated Bengalis can know about the place easily. Some of the ancient legends, preserved orally, cannot be proved definitely. So I appeal to the literate society to strive and gather sure evidences and place the history of the area on a firm footing.’

According to Mukherjee:‘One should not start writing the history of Murshidabad from the British times. Then the narrative would be lacking in logical sequence and might mislead the readers. So we should begin from the age of the great personality who gave the name Murshidabad.’

Thus both felt that there was a need for more careful documentation of the annals of Bengal’s micro-regions. A sense of patriotic attachment to Bengal’s indigenous heritage is evident in these quotes. The authors were also urging their fellow countrymen to be conscious of their own culture. Thus we see that glimmerings of modern nationalism could be seen in these pioneering efforts of Bengali local history writing. These sentiments were more clearly expressed in later, more successful volumes of Bengali local history.

If we take into consideration all works worth a mention, regarding districts and other major micro-units, then we come to the following conclusion about the development of this particular school over the years.


78 ‘Murshidabader Ithas’, op. cit, Advertisement section, ‘……Bibechana karilam je kon mahatmar samaye tahar kirti swarup aisthan rajdhani nam baranpurbak janasamaje bikhyata haiyachilo agre tatibibaran kara abashyak, kenona iutra dharia ithas likhite prabritta na haiya kebal ai rajdhani ingrejider adhikrita haoyar samay haite likhite arambha karile kramanway bibaran sakaler samanway abhabe pathakganer apatripti janmite pare’. Translation mine.
Table 2.1: Development of Bengali Local History Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Number of Books</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1850-1875</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1876-1900</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901-1925</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926-1950</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Sources: Tarapada Santra *Banglar Anchalik Itihas charcha* (2001) and Yajneshwar Chaudhuri *Anchalik Itihas charcha and Granthapanji* (2008))

Thus it seems from the table that the flourishing of this branch of historiography had direct connection with the growth of nationalism from the early twentieth century. During the Swadeshi era itself (1905-11) several important works by Kedarnath Majumdar, Anandanath Ray, Jogendranath Gupta, Kumudnath Mullick, Prabhaschandra Sen, Jatindramohan Ray and Satishchandra Mitra were produced. The influence of the Swadeshi movement varied from author to author. But it cannot be denied that the local histories were often products of nationalist indigenous pedant’s attempt to create a well-defined space for his own tract. On the other hand, the local annals served to fuel the patriotic fervour by bringing into light innumerable forgotten data from obscure areas. They served to build a definite identity for the entire Bengali or even Indian people.

Now, we would mention a few works which, though not concerned with a particular district or a sub-division, include much useful information about the antiquity of various terrains. So they could act as valuable source-books of local culture. Two such scripts are *Zamindar Srenir Abanati* by Jnanendra Kumar Ray Chaudhuri⁷⁹ and *Banglar Zamindar* by Bamacharan Mazumdar⁸⁰. The purpose of both the authors was to make the zamindars (landlord) aware of the declining state of the zamindari system. Both were staunch supporters of the Zamindary system as shown by this quote by Ray Chaudhuri in support of the Permanent Settlement: ‘It can not be proved that during the pre-British days the peasants were the owners of the land, not the zamindars. If that was the case the

---

⁷⁹ Jnanendra Kumar Ray Chaudhuri *Zamindar Srenir Abanati* (M. M. Mazumdar, Kolkata, 1883)
⁸⁰ Bamacharan Mazumdar *Banglar Zamindar* (Author, Kolkata, 1913)
British would have surely made their contract with the actual tillers, not the zamindar.\textsuperscript{81} The authors stressed upon the low pay, corruption and lack of University education amongst the zamindari bureaucracy as the chief causes behind the destruction of the healthy link between the zamindars and the peasantry. They also urged the zamindars to shed their old ways and modernize their estates. Overall the couple of volumes present an interesting picture of the zamindaries, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which stretched over most of the localities under our consideration. \textit{Banglar Krishaker Katha} by Hrishikesh Sen is a history of the Zamindary system and the condition of the Bengal Peasantry under it.\textsuperscript{82}

Another interesting work is \textit{Devaganer Martye Agaman} by Durgacharan Ray\textsuperscript{83}. This tells us about the experiences of some Hindu gods such as Brahma and Indra while travelling incognito in Bihar and Bengal. More importantly it provides detailed socio-historical description of many places, especially in Murshidabad, Hugly, Baroddhaman, Nadia and North Bengal.\textsuperscript{84} The author’s rather conservative social values are found out from the following quote: ‘In the past, people used to take guidance from the elders of the society. But nowadays, they follow the dictates of their wives.’\textsuperscript{85} The reaction of the feminists can easily be imagined! In 1940, the East Bengal Railway brought out a tome called \textit{Banglai Bhraman}.\textsuperscript{86} This contains the historical and archaeological accounts of many local places in Bengal which could be approached by the Railways. This quote on Kalighat would serve as an example:‘It is said that during the early days of the Company Raj, the organization used to offer Puja in the temple. It is written in the “Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward”, that once the Government, while praying for success, had offered Puja worth Rs. 5,000.’\textsuperscript{87}

2.5 THE AUTHORS: Now we may consider the issue of authorship of these micro-level annals. It is remarkable to find out that most of these authors were not formal

\begin{footnotes}
\item[81] ‘Zamindar Srenir Abanati’, op.cit, p.44
\item[82] Hrishikesh Sen \textit{Banglar Krishaker Katha} (Author, Chandan nagar, 1924)
\item[83] Durgacharan Ray, \textit{Debaganer Martye Agaman} (Dey’s Publishers, Kolkata, 1984, originally published in 1911 from Kolkata)
\item[84] \textit{Ibid} pp.320-467
\item[85] \textit{Ibid} p.798
\item[86] Amiya Basu ed. \textit{Banglai Bhraman} (East Bengal Railways, Kolkata 1940)
\item[87] \textit{Ibid} p.23
\end{footnotes}
academicians, but so-called ‘amateurs’. Anandanath Ray was admitted to Japsa high school at the age of seven. But after a few years he was forced to leave school after the untimely death of his mother. He never completed formal education. But he was interested in the history and culture of the land and was an avid reader of history books. As a youth he started contributing historical articles to Dhaka Hinduhitoishoni magazine. Soon he wrote a historical play called Lalit Kusum. After that he studied books on the history of Rajasthan, and this inspired him to write an account of his own locality. This resulted in the composition of Faridpurer Itihas (1909). Kedarnath Majumdar read only upto the class X in school. His health always remained poor. But he succeeded in becoming a self taught scholar. He was the editor and publisher of several magazines of Mymensingh like Arati and Saurav and encouraged many young writers. Throughout his life he tried to unearth the true history of Dhaka and Mymensingh. He collected and read a huge number of manuscripts and books to achieve this end. Owing to his patronage local antiquarians such as Chandrakumar Dey achieved public recognition. Kailashchandra Sinha was forced to leave Kumillah District school and take up service under the Tripura govt. at the tender age of fifteen. But he remained an avid reader of history and literature. He started his historical career by publishing articles in Hinduhitoishini magazine. Later he wrote a number of scholarly articles in famous periodicals such as Bangadarshan, Tattvabodhini Patrika, Bharati and Sahitya. He was held in high esteem by Kolkata intellectuals like Jyotirindranath Tagore. It is impossible to discuss the history of Tripura and south-eastern Bengal without referring to his classic Tripurar Itihas (1897). Nikhilnath Ray was formally a lawyer. But he was interested in history and literature right from his childhood. As a teenager he published a poetry anthology. As a student he visited a number of historical sites in Murshidabad, Bahrampur and Kasimbazaar. These activities laid the foundation of his becoming a historian. He composed the well known historical works on Murshidabad, Murshidabader Kahini (1897) and Murshidabader Itihas (1902) and a historical novel Prithviraj.88

Here we may give short introductions about some of them to prove the point.

Table 2.2: Professional Background of Bengali Local Historians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HISTORIAN</th>
<th>CAREER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shyamdhan Mookerjee</td>
<td>- Government Servant in Murshidabad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jatindramohan Ray</td>
<td>- Antiquarian with no formal training in history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kedarnath Majumdar</td>
<td>Creative writer. Native of Mymensingh or Kishoreganj. Had an able disciple in Chandra Kumar Dey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satishchandra Mitra</td>
<td>Teacher (History, Mathematics, Bengali) and Librarian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radharaman Saha</td>
<td>Lawyer in Patna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muqhtar Ahmed Siddiqi</td>
<td>- Academician. Native of Chattagram.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anandanath Ray</td>
<td>Zamindar. Part of a literary circle along with Nagendranath Basu, Dineshchandra Sen, Rajanikanta Gupta, Kedarnath Majumdar, Nikhilnath Ray etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swarupchandra Ray</td>
<td>Head Pundit of Government School in Dibrugarh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trailokya Nath Rakshit</td>
<td>Holder of various important positions in the locality, (Tamluk).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rohinikumar Sen</td>
<td>Zamindar. Well-educated but lacked formal degrees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khosalchandra</td>
<td>Teacher and manager in Brajamohan school of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

46
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>Bengal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumudnath Mullick</td>
<td>Local landed gentry of Ranaghat. Tried to introduce modern methods of farming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalinath Chaudhuri</td>
<td>Local zamindar and Deputy Inspector of Rajshahi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sourindrakishore Roychawdhuri</td>
<td>Local gentry of Rajshahi. Similar examples are Harachandra Chaudhuri &amp; Vijay Chandra Nag.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhagabaticharan Bannerjee</td>
<td>Sub-Deputy Superintendent of Schools, Koch Bihar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudhir Kumar Mitra</td>
<td>Accountant in government and private service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nalinikanta Majumdar</td>
<td>Homeopath and Member of the Varendra Research Society, Native of Rajshai.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikhilnath Ray</td>
<td>Lawyer. His thoroughly researched works inspired even Rabindranath Tagore.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kailashchandra Sinha</td>
<td>Senior officer in the princely state of Tripura.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramchandra Barua</td>
<td>Doctor in Chattagram.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achyuta Charan Tatvanidhi</td>
<td>Teacher and Government servant for some time. Later full-time scholar and religious thinker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kartikeyachandra Ray</td>
<td>Dewan of the Nadia Raj.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyarimohan Sen</td>
<td>Government school teacher of Begamganj.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalikamal</td>
<td>Teacher at the Bagura Vangiya Vidyalaya.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.6 THE SOURCE MATERIALS: Here a short discussion about the sources used while penning these histories may be attempted. Besides, we would try to analyse the attitude of the historians towards their source materials. Sir Jadunath Sarkar once said, ‘No Document, no History’. So identification and collection of correct source-materials are of vital importance while writing a history. First, we would demarcate the relevant raw staff absolutely necessary for attempting any work of local history. Yajneshwar Chaudhuri has categorized the local history sources, in the context of Bengal, into two major sections.89

i) **Literary Sources**: Early Sanskrit and Pali texts such as Patanjalali’s *Mahabhasya*, Kalidas’s *Raghuvansam*, *Brihat Samhita*, *Anguttara Nikaya* and *Harshacharita* contain references to sub-regional units of ancient Bengal like *Rarha*, *Vanga*, *Suhma*, *Pundra* etc. Vaishnava literature like *Chaitnya Bhagavat* and *Chaitnya-Charitamrita* include information on geography, society, communication and historical legends of various localities of Bengal. Compositions of scholars of medieval Bengal centered in Nabadwip, like Basudeb Sarbabhauma, Raghunath Shiromani, Raymukut Brihaspati Misra are also useful for similar reasons. As said earlier, the *Mangal Kavyas* are also a key factor here, especially in appreciating the upward social mobility of marginal groups, and clashes between diverse peculiar local deities and cults (e.g. *Shiva vs Manasa*). Another group of texts is the *Kula-shastras* or the *Kulajis*. These were family histories maintained by Brahmin match-makers or *Ghataks*. Opinions vary widely regarding their value. R.C. Majumdar had contributed critically on this topic.90 According to him and others, despite all their flaws, the *Kulajis* do supply genuine facts on some

---

89 Yajneshwar Chaudhuri, ‘Anchalik Itihas Charcha’, op.cit, chapter 3, p.68
important persons, families and incidents; their descriptions are often backed by independent sources like Muslim chronicles and inscriptions.

Travelogues of foreign wayfarers are also useful. *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* contains information on geography and economy of lower Bengal. *Travels of Fa-Hsien* is necessary to re-construct the history of Tamralipta. Ibn-Batuta’s *Rehala* come in handy for data on Saptagram, Chattagram and Srihatta, and the communal demographic equation in the province. Later records kept by European globe-trotters and factory officials are also most expedient.

ii) *Archaeological sources:* It is a common belief that these sources are more reliable than literary ones. Archaeological materials consist of: Inscriptions, coins, ruins, monuments and pieces of art, utensils etc. In chapters 3 and 4 we have discussed in some detail the connection between collection and preservation of archaeological materials and the penning of local history. Archaeological expeditions in Purulia, Medinipur, Bankura, Barddhaman and Birbhum have yielded rich fruits recently. Inscriptions of Ishan Varma, Karnadeva, Vijaysena, and Bhatta Bhavadeva and non-Bengali rulers like Yashovarman are crucial for systematizing a local narrative.

iii) *Modern sources:* There are some more modern sources available for writing of local history. These are archival papers and documents, local magazines and journals, and artifacts preserved in country museums. W. G. Hoskins had listed relevant documents necessary for writing a local history. They comprise of local directories, census schedules, census reports, old newspapers, annual borough accounts, parliamentary papers, maps, personal diaries, and letters. But procuring documents in Bengal is much tougher than in England, even today. Facilities in sub-regional archives and collectorate record rooms are far from satisfying. Individual help is also not forthcoming always. One may recall Satish Mitra’s experiences here: ‘Local people are often of little help, owing to their utter ignorance of their local history and archaeology. I had a real tough time in making them understand the significance of local history. Actually, some of them even mistook me for a detective or a surveyor who had come to

---

gather information about land revenue. So they expected an unwelcome hike in the revenue assessment and therefore, non-cooperated with me. I was simply stunned. 92

From the mid nineteenth century a lot of essays were produced on aspects of history and culture of diverse localities, in periodicals published from Kolkata and district centers. It would have been really hard to locate these mostly obscure articles, but Ashok Upadhyay has done a commendable job by publishing informed lists of essays written regarding each district. 93 The Bangiya Sahitya Parishat has also laid before the readers a catalogue of treatises printed in its own journal. Researchers like Kavita Mukherjee have worked on periodicals published from specific districts such as Barddhaman. Their dissertations also throw valuable light on articles on local history found in such magazines. Still a lot of work remains to be done in collecting and preserving these widely scattered articles, which can serve as valuable sources to a modern scholar. The sorry plight of most of the district libraries reminds us of this task.

Here, we should spare some thought about the local journals and periodicals. A local periodical can be defined as one which is concerned primarily with the culture and issues of a particular locality. By 1870s, we have quite a few publications of that nature coming from Bengali local townships, like Rangpur, Murshidabad, Vikrampur etc. In 1873, out of 36 journals and magazines published in Bengal 19 were from the countryside. 94 By then, British socio-cultural influence had spread to every nook and corner of Bengal. So owing to colonial administrative and commercial exigencies, some of the local places became important and bhadralok or ‘middle-class’ groups came up there as in Kolkata. They comprised of junior level government employees, lawyers, petty landlords and small-time businessmen. From this group came the publishers and readers of the local publications. These periodicals often contained valuable materials on local society, history and culture and therefore were of great value for future historians. If we go through the articles published in publications such as Birbhum, Noakhali,

92 Satish Chandra Mitra Jessore Khulnar Itihas, (Dey’s Publishing, Kolkata 2001, originally published, Kolkata, 1914 )
Vikrampur and Pallivani we would find a number of instances where local features are highlighted. There were articles which criticized the colonial impact on rural society. In Chandannagore, some editors relied on French newspapers to get correct and impartial data on English rule! It is pleasing to note that as early as 1849, papers like Rangpur Bartabaha were severely criticizing British regime. Naturally the government often came down with a heavy hand on them. Some truly interesting sub-regional sentiments were reflected in these ventures. Journals and papers which were published from Eastern Bengal strongly stressed their micro identity and their distance from Kolkata centric culture. Journals like Bharatmihir said that owing to its distance from Kolkata, Purbabanga or ‘East Bengal’ had no political life and was subject to official neglect. But colonial government siphoned off considerable agricultural resources and revenue from East Bengal. The Eastern Bengal editors also blamed the Kolkata centric bhadraloks for their insensitivity towards East Bengal. The intellectuals related to Dhaka Prakash refused to accept the superiority of the Kolkata centric Bengali tongue and strongly defended their own dialect. They claimed that the Eastern Bengali way of speaking the language should be held as the ideal one. The editors and writers connected with these publications like Krishnachandra Majumdar and Harish Chandra Mitra had to face acute poverty in their life. But still they did their good work.

Now we may reserve a word or two about a couple of most imperative methods of garnering basic resources on sub-regional past i.e. field-survey and mustering oral evidences. Peter Heylyn aptly commented in Microcosmus in 1621 : ‘Historie without Geographie like a dead carkasse hath neither life nor motion at all’. Francis Celoria carried on further, ‘Try to learn by observation, by looking at geological and contoured maps, and by consulting books, the geological and physical features dictate the placing of railway lines near you.’ But at the same time he cautioned an over-enthusiast, ‘one should beware, however, of putting too much emphasis on the physical aspect ….. The local

---

95 Ibid., pp. 145-146.
96 Ibid op.cit
97 Muntasir Mamun, Unish Satake Purva-Banglar Sambad-Samaikpatra (Dey’s publishing, Kolkata, 1996) p. 120.
historian must weigh the physical and human factors and decide which mattered more'.

W. G. Hoskins added his bit on the issue by saying: ‘The student of local history should also possess as a matter of course the latest edition of the 1-inch geological map for his area …. If he is writing the history of a rural parish he ought to possess the 1-inch sheet covering the whole of the surrounding country, because he cannot understand his own parish history without relating it to a considerable area around’. However, Hoskins made it clear that to derive benefits from ground study, one must be intellectually well-equipped as well. Only zest would not suffice. He said, ‘The study of place-names is highly specialized ….. Even a simple name like Ashton, which the amateur would assume to mean “ash tree farm”, may well have originated as Easton, meaning the “eastern farm” in relation to some other and probably older settlement’.  

Coming to oral testimonies, Michael A. Williams provided a structure following which, one can extract historical evidence from interviews of old, experienced persons of a locality.

---

99 Ibid, pp. 46-47.
100 For both the quotes see Hoskins, ‘Local History in England’, op.cit pp. 10-11.
101 Michael A. Williams, Researching Local History: The Human Journey, (Longman, London, 1996), p. 24. The author is a remarkable representative of the amateur genre, being a Professor of Anatomical Science in the department of Biomedical Science at the University of Sheffield.
Table 2.3: Oral History Methodology

(Source: Michael A. Williams, Researching Local History: The Human Journey (London, 1996, p.24)

Francis Celoria too had commented upon the psychological stratagems to get the maximum out of the old peoples’ reminiscences: ‘Old people are repositories of information which must not be lost. Generally they enjoy telling you things, but they can be quick to resent an inquisition …… The person giving information must be made to forget he or she is being observed. A notebook if used, must be unobtrusive’.\(^{102}\) Then, of course remains the problem of applying correct dates and locations to events recollected by the elders.

In modern West Bengal and Bangladesh the utility of field-study is obvious, as even today, many facets of district life remain undocumented. This was more so during the careers of the pedants under consideration (between 1850 and 1950). Mohammed

Shahidullah once remarked: ‘Materials for constructing historical narrative are strewn all over the country in the shape of religious relics, public works of past ages like water bodies, folk memories and legends.’

In this region the value of oral evidence is also great, as records such as zamindari papers and reports of British officials are often fabricated or unreliable. Besides, local poesy such as ‘amongst the munificent Khelaram, amongst the notorious Sitaram’ and lores about local personalities like ‘Gopal the jester’ preserve interesting bits of observation on the tract’s past, never formally recorded.

After this, we may take up the issue of how the historians under our scanner, dealt with all these sources. Regarding source-materials, scholars like Satish Mitra, Kumudnath Mullick and Anandanath Ray were actually not as adventurous and amateurish as people take them to be. Official reports, census data, zamindari papers etc. did form major part of their raw stuff. They did not depend only on romantic folk-lores and hearsays. A few examples from their own writings would drive the point home.

First, we may note the views of the two pioneers of Bengali local history writing. Shyamdhan Mukherjee wrote: ‘As sources I depended on the first hand information that I have gathered as a government servant. Also I have consulted books like Marshman’s History of Bengal, Persian tarikhs, and the geographical account of the Revenue Surveyor Captain J. E. Gastrel.’

On the other hand Kalikamal Sarbhauma stressed upon fieldwork, walking tours and contacts with local people like the deputy inspector of police. This meticulous sense of purpose was visible in the efforts of their successors too.

Harimohon Sanyal wrote: ‘After passing through many privations Dr. Hooker Dr. Campbell, Major Hodgson and Colonel Menwar ing have published valuable reports on Darjeeling, Sikkim and Tibet. They have gathered a huge amount of historical data which would benefit the reading public. They have also brought the scenic beauty of the hills to

---

103 Quoted in Yajneshwar Chaudhuri Anchalik Itihas charcha op.cit, p. 104. ‘Ithiaser upakaran desher bibhinnasthane dharmastup rupe, prachin mandir masjid rupe ba dighi ityadi prachin kirtirupe kimba lokmukher chhora o kimbadantirupe charana rahaiache’
104 ‘datar madhiee Khelaram, badmayeshe Sitaram’
105 The quotations regarding source-materials are taken from prefaces to the respective works
106 Shyamdhan Mukherjee, ‘Murshidabader Ithias’, op.cit, preface.
107 Kalikamal Sarbhauma, ‘Setihas Bagura Brittanta’, op.cit, preface
public notice. Guided by their findings and inspired by their spirit, I have composed this account of Darjeeling.  

Bhagavaticharan Banerjee in his *Koch Biharer Itihas* provided a list of books consulted for his work. This consisted of Colonel Daltons’ *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Dr. Francis Buchanan’s *History of Kamroop and Rungpur*, the *Cooch Behar Gazette* and Journals of the Royal Asiatic Society and the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Amanatullah Ahmed in his *History of Cooch Bihar* used massive amount of sources. Both indigenous and western type materials were called into service e.g. M. Macanlitte’s translation of Tegh Bahadur’s life and Wade’s *An Account of Assam* and local legends like those concerning man-eating soldiers of Bhutan.

Swarupchandra Ray’s effort was full of references from the *Ain-i-Akbari*, Marshman’s *History* and Asiatic Society Journal. Kalinath Chaudhuri and Kedarnath Majumdar used a wide variety of sources. Materials used by them included minor articles, Kulajis, semi-official publications like Hunter’s Statistical Account and Calcutta Review, published and unpublished government Papers, Zamindari documents, letters and oral testimonies.

Gaurihar Mitra in his *Birbhumere Itihas* gave a vivid narration of the Santhal rebellion, based often on eye-witness accounts. Regarding the source-materials, the author’s approach was formal and he depended on Western style documents, like government reports. He provided regular foot-notes and detailed revenue figures.

Both Sashibhushan Ray and Prabhas Ray used government records and European testimonies to establish their arguments. Sashibhushan Ray in *Santhal Pargana* provided a list of regulations passed by the British for the Santhal parganas. Prabhas Ray in *Parbyata Kahini* quoted extensively from administrator Ward’s report. He however also made use of indigenous sources like the ballads current about the Santhal revolt.

---

108 Harimohon Sanyal, *Darjeelinger Itihas*, (Kumarkhali 1880), op.cit, preface
109 Bhagabaticharan Banerjee *Kochbiharer Itihas* (Koch Bihar 1883) preface
110 Swarupchandra Ray, *Suvarnagramer Itihas*, (Dhaka 1891), preface
111 e.g ‘Pralay Santhal kore nath Mahi/ Bhage raja rajpat chori/ yogi tapaswi hore go brahmaine/ parlay shar byapit/ mar mar uchare nath/ mahi parlay Santhal kare’ ( The Santhals wrought havoc on the society. As a result of their disturbances, the ruler fled from his realm and the Brahmins along with the holy cows were dispersed) Translation mine.
As sources Ambikacharan Gupta in his *Hughly ba Dakshin Rarh* mostly depended on traditional materials like epics and Puranas and legends. But, he was against uncritical reliance on such stuff. Gupta wrote: ‘To support my conclusions, I have not created false testimonies by combining statements from *Mahabharat* and *Kumar-sambhava*.‘\(^{112}\) Thus he significantly criticized his fellow local historians, some of whom were certainly in the habit of cooking up dubious evidences. About the source-materials, Bidhubhushan and Banikumar Bhattacharya were quite particular, and it is shown in the foot-notes of *Hughly Howhrar Itihas*. Among the sources mentioned, there were rare manuscripts of the play *Chandakausik* recovered by Haraprasad Shastri, Sarnath inscription of Pala potentate Mahipala, Khajuraho inscription of Chandella Dhanga and ancient texts like *Chandya Parishista* and Hiuen – Tsang’s memoirs. Thus they adopted a good mix of Indian and Western type raw materials. The critical spirit that was present behind the selection of sources is evident in the following quote: ‘The mention of *Suhmah* or *Rarh* is found in many Puranas. But it must be remembered, that most of the Puranas were composed only during the Muslim age‘.\(^{113}\)

Basantakumar Basu rigorously selected his sources. In the preface to *Srirampur Mahakumar Itihas* he presented a long list of them. They included English books like *A Sketch of the Administration of the Hughly district* and *Rural life in Bengal*, Bengali works of Ambikacharan Gupta, Hariprassana Sarkar, Rajendranath Vidyaratna etc., journals such as *Calcutta Gazette, Calcutta Review, Digdarshan* etc., correspondence between the English and the Danish East India Companies, list of English officials etc.

The main strength of *Ula ba Birnagar* lay in the number of local anecdotes it presents. As sources, Srijannath Mitra Mustafi consulted both written records like Hunter’s Statistical Account and oral testimonies. He lamented that many oral testimonies have been lost. About the latter he made an interesting observation that if any able intellectual had attempted a history of Ula, 50 years ago, he would have had access

\(^{112}\) Ambikacharan Gupta *Hughly ba Dakshin Rarh* (Lalitmohan Pal, Calcutta, 1914) Preface ‘Mahabharater kathar sahit kumar-sambhober dui bibhinna katha judiya sia mat samarthaner janya bagaail bistar kori nai’

\(^{113}\) Bidhubhushan and Banikumar Bhattacharya *Hughly Howhrar Itihas*, (Kumarnath Bhattacharya, Calcutta, 1925) p.48
to more information based on oral testimonies, as the author had seen his grand-parents discussing many old events which they had seen with their own eyes.

In Chandannagarer Itihaser Ek Pristha Charuchandra Ray published a 187 year old slavery bond and commented upon it. According to this Atmaram Bagdi, sold his minor son to the European Gasper Cornel for just 7 Madrasi rupees.\textsuperscript{114} Trailokyanath Pal had a good conception of the subject and refused to accept every existing local tradition as sober history. In his Medinipurer Itihas he wrote ‘It is really difficult to obtain a clear view of the history of Medinipur of those days. We get only some information from a few legends and government papers.’\textsuperscript{115}

Yogeshchandra Basu wrote Medinipurer Itihas. His sincerity is reflected in the range of sources he listed, for writing his history. They included published books and essays like ‘Medinipore – A Study’ by Bijoy Bihari Mukherjee, government & archival papers, inscriptions, coins and legends

As for sources Kumudnath Ray used both government and private papers along with personal testimonies. However, he unfortunately did not receive the expected response in terms of raw – materials from the local intelligentsia. He voiced his disappointment and wrote: ‘I did not get the expected sympathetic response from the general literate public, and therefore could not provide the details of many antique areas\textsuperscript{116}

Nikhilnath Ray was meticulous about using his sources, and this lent authenticity to his effort. He always made a statement after verifying the raw-materials. This is amply

\textsuperscript{114} We may provide a quote from the bond which would also serve as an example of the pre-colonial Bengali prose: ‘Iadi Kirdd sakal mangalalay Sri Gach par Kornar Firingi Suchariteshu likhitang Sri Atmaram Bagdi Kasya chokra bikray patramidang Karjaynchan age amar beta naam Sri Shyama Bagdi chokra byedda aat batar borna kala ihar kimat mandrasi 7 tanka paia aami sweccha purbak tomar sthaane bikray korilam’.

(‘In this letter I state that I Atmaram Bagdi voluntarily sell my son, Shyama Bagdi as a boy-salve to Gasper Cornel for seven madrasi ruppees. He is 8 years old and dark hued’. Translation mine)

\textsuperscript{115} Trailokyanath Pal Medinipurer Itihas (G.C. Bose & Co. Calcutta, 1888-'97 C.E), Preface

57
proved by the extensive foot-notes he prepared while discussing the exact date of birth of Siraj-ud-daulah and criticizing those who willfully vilified the Nawab.\textsuperscript{117} Reputedly, in the pre-British era important persons often committed suicide by consuming diamond dust. Ray showed his critical spirit by commenting upon the phenomenon: ‘According to Chemists, diamond itself is not poisonous, but some stones may contain poison.’\textsuperscript{118} He combined different types of materials like European Holwell’s \textit{Historical Narrative}, Persian \textit{Syer-ul-Mutaqherin} and indigenous ballads like those concerning Zalim Singh and Plassey.

As source materials for his histories of Dhaka and Mymensingh, Kedarnath Majumdar used official documents such as the \textit{Collector’s First Settlement Report}, dated 12.02.1788 and H. J. Reynold’s \textit{Report on the History and Statistics of the District of Mymensingh}. But he also consulted more old-school stuff like Harachandra Chaudhuri’s \textit{Vamsanucharita} and the \textit{Kalikapurana}. Kedarnath also made use of Hindu traditional texts like \textit{Yogini Tantra}, \textit{Brihad Gabaksha Tantra}, \textit{Tripurarna Pawa} among Tantric works, \textit{Amarkosha}, and \textit{Puranas} such as \textit{Kurma}, \textit{Kalika}, \textit{Matsya}, \textit{Brahmavaivarta}, \textit{Garura} etc., alongside conventional materials like archival papers and gazetteers.

Anandanath Ray was quite serious about his sources. He, in his \textit{Faridpurer Itihas} provided translations of and commentary on inscriptions of Bahadur Khan of Gerda and Raja Shyamal Varma. He was critical of the inefficiency of the traditional Kulajji writers: ‘The Kulajjis often fail to mention the details of important families and personages. We can write about them only when they are referred to in Persian annals or local legends. This is a serious hindrance to compiling of national history’.\textsuperscript{119} Anandanath provided a cogent description of Renell’s Atlas, because it was not easy for other local researchers to get hold of the original text.\textsuperscript{120} Regarding source-materials, Jatindramohan Ray in his \textit{Dhakar Itihas} stressed on archaeological proofs like copper-plate inscriptions including those of Lakshman Sena found in the Sunderbans, Dinajpur, Anulia (Ranaghat) and

\textsuperscript{117} Nikhilnath Ray, \textit{Murshidabader Itihas} (Metcalfe Press, Kasim bazaar 1902) pp. 630 & 648.
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Ibid} p.650
\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 196.
Madhai Nagar, of Ashoka – Challadeva found in Gaya, and of Viswarupa Sena discovered in Idilpur and Madayana

As source material Achyutacharan Chaudhuri used diverse stuff ranging from papers from Srihatta collectory, texts and oral testimonies from bhadraloks of the place like Harakinkar Das, Ishanchandra Majumdar, Radhacharan Pal, and Maulavi Shah Syed Imdad-ul-Haq, letters of some eighteenth century Ahom commanders, local legends about major figures like Bhagadatta and Shah Jalal.121 Regarding source-materials Upendrachandra Guha, the author of *Kacharer Itibritta* depended on indigenous stuff like *Kamakhya tantra, Rajmala* and *Buranjis*. Even hearsay found its place.

As sources Radharaman Saha, for his *Pabna Jelar Itihas* depended both on Western documents and indigenous memory. He used traditional Kulapanjikas like *Bipra kulatilaka* and official papers like Pabna collectory records in the same work.

However non-conventional sources like legends and indigenous scripts (*punthis*) also did find their places in the works of these scholars. They indeed had much harrowing experience while doing field survey and gathering oral evidences. About Kalinath Chaudhuri, the *Hindu Panjika* magazine commented: ‘For performing assigned duties he had to travel to all corners of Rajshahi and meet many gentlemen there. Everybody cooperated with him and his health permitted him to visit every obscure place. So he could obtain all sorts of rare source materials. He must be considered fortunate in this matter.122

Satish Mitra himself strongly recommended such direct methods of gathering information. He wrote: ‘In our country, almost everybody writes history without performing much field-work. Various publications about the popular hero, Raja Pratapaditya are glaring examples of this disappointing trend. None of the so-called authorities on Pratapaditya cared to visit Jessore, the native place of Pratap. They preferred to remain confined in their comfortable three storey houses in Kolkata and write fictitious accounts. But direct visual evidence is most effective. So though I have consulted major written works on Jessore and Khulna, I have also visited all the crucial

places. Even while describing Sunderbans, I have not relied merely on dry scientific texts, but have used my practical experience, which I have gained after undergoing considerable hardships.¹²³ After this, Mitra told us of the hazards faced during his area study. The harassments faced by a historian documenting unpalatable facts were recorded by Brajamohan Das: ‘Many turned against me as they felt their petty personal interests threatened …… No stone was left unturned to force me out of Nabadwip’.¹²⁴

Sudhir Mitra also held similar opinion about the travails of practical field study. He said: ‘I started the work, expecting large scale assistance from my well-established, educated countrymen. But I was sorely disappointed with their non-cooperative and arrogant attitude. Often, the half-literate common people did their best for me, after learning that I was trying to write the history of their locality.’¹²⁵ Appreciating his dedication to field studies ‘The Statesman’ newspaper commented: ‘Mitra had to travel to nearly 1800 villages to write this 1100 page tome’.¹²⁶ He visited many settlements of Hughly over a period of five years and collected many legends, personal papers and documents. He also consulted published works like Toynbee’s *Administration of the Hooghly District* Crawford’s *Hughli Medical Gazetteer* and Hunter’s *Statistical Account of Bengal (Hooghly District)*. Previous accounts of the district like those of Sambhu Chandra Dey, Ambikacharan Gupta and Bidhubhusan Bhattacharya also were used. He deployed other rare stuff like the final statement of the armed nationalist Gopinath Saha, the poem written by Sir John Shore on the occasion of the famine of 1770 etc. At the same time he did not neglect local anecdotes and oral testimonies like those about Jagannath the savant and origins of Chinsurah. A host of Bengali historians, including Nihar Ranjan Ray, Annadasankar Ray and Amales Tripathi, lauded his efforts at various times. One quote would amply reflect their appreciation: ‘You have put together this effort, following 35 years of field study. This highlights your attachment to the local society, social history and learning in general.’¹²⁷

---

¹²³ Satish Chandra Mitra, ‘Jessore Khulnar Itihas’, op.cit, preface
¹²⁴ Brajamohan Das *Sri sri Nabadwip darpan* (Sri Radha Press Nadia, 1920) preface
¹²⁵ Sudhir Kumar Mitra, *Hughly Jelar Itihas*, (Sisir publications, Kolkata 1948), preface
¹²⁶ The Statesman, Kolkata, 22.10.2007
¹²⁷ Sudhir Mitra, ‘Hughly Jelar Itihas’, op.cit ‘Dirgha panchatringshati batsar jabat Hooghi jeler gram theke gramantare parivraman kare, gram o gramer manushke tatha lokayata janamasajke bhalobese ….. je
Two histories of Chattagram by Ramchandra Barua and Purnachandra Debbarma were partly based on indigenous Burmese ballads such as ‘Beenabati Aredo pung, Brahmar oengi, magbaoni, Hachi nichy abvut tahiram jamar dut etc.

2.7 THE GEOGRAPHICAL ENTITIES: In this section we would try to provide a concise introduction to the formation of the districts, whose history the concerned pedants attempted to document. The details of the ancient administrative sub-divisions of Bengal (modern West Bengal and Bangladesh only) are not known to us satisfactorily. It is from the time of Akbar that we come to know about the minor administrative units in considerable plentitude. The Ain-i-Akbari partitioned Bengal into 19 sarkars (districts) comprising of 688 parganas or mahals. This settlement of 1582 was modified by Shah Shuja in 1658 as lands were added to Bengal from Orissa and in the North-East. He increased the number of sarkars to 34. When Murshid Quli Khan started his own administrative reforms, he felt that larger and more efficient units of administration were necessary. So in 1722, he divided Bengal into 13 chaklas or 1660 parganas. After the British obtained the Diwani in 1765, they continued to adjust the boundaries of these divisions (then called zillas or districts) till they numbered 28 in the early twentieth century. At the time of the permanent settlement, the districts numbered 16. Now we may proceed to provide their names along with the year they came under the British or were created by them. First we would list the districts of modern West Bengal.

Table 2.4: Short Accounts of West Bengal Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>YEAR OF CREATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barddhaman</td>
<td>Ceded to the British in 1760. Then comprised of current day Barddhaman, Hughly, most of Howrah, Medinipur, Bankura and Birbhum. Hughly, Howrah and Medinipur were detached within 1795-1807.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birbhum</td>
<td>Acquired under the Diwani grant of 1765, included most of Santhalt Parganas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

bipulayatan grantha apni rachana karchen, ta apnar adhyayan …. Abong samajik itihas chetanar sugavir parichay bahan kare’.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bankura</td>
<td>Created a district in 1837. Judgeship formally named Bankura in 1881.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medinipur</td>
<td>Ceded to the British in 1760. Later Hijli, Mahisadal, Tamluk parts of Jungal Mahals and North Orissa were added.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hughly</td>
<td>Created in 1795, largely out of Barddhaman. Chinsurah acquired from the Dutch in 1824 and Srirampur from the Danes in 1845.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howrah</td>
<td>Created in 1844, out of Hughly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 24-Parganas</td>
<td>Ceded to the British in 1757. Later Barasat, Basirhat, portion of the Sunderbans added. Some areas like Chitpur, Maniktala and Uluberia transferred to Calcutta and Hughly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>Acquired by the British in c. 1698. Major additions in 1757 and 1788.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>Acquired 1765. Then included parts of modern 24-Parganas, Jessore, and Khulna.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murshidabad</td>
<td>Acquired 1765. Boundary adjustments with Birbhum.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

128 At one stage it was believed that Calcutta, or currently Kolkata was founded by Job Charnock on 24th August, 1690. But on 31st January, 2003, the Calcutta High Court ruled that the three villages of Sutanati, Govindapur and Dihi Kalikata were leased out to the East India Company only on 10th November, 1698. Much before that, there were already thriving settlements in the area. So it cannot be held that Calcutta was born, owing to a single person’s effort in 1690.
Dinajpur | Acquired, 1765. Included parts of Maldah (reported in 1815). District boundaries notified in 1874.
---|---
Jalpaiguri | Acquired, 1765. Augmented with areas conquered from Bhutan, especially in 1866 and ‘95.
---|---
Darjeeling | District boundaries defined in 1862. Formed out of areas ceded by Nepal and Sikkim in 1815, ’35 and ’50. Kalimpong added in 1867.
---|---
Maldah | Created in 1815, out of Purnea, Dinajpur and Rajshahi.
---|---
Koch Bihar | During colonial times an autonomous princely state. Became a district of West Bengal in 1950
---|---
Purulia | Transferred from Bihar to West Bengal in 1956. Part of united Bengal till 1905. Became a part of Bihar from 1912.
---|---

(Sources: Information gathered from various works on local history)

The last two entities were not included in the 28 districts of British Bengal, but we would consider them for the sake of convenience and affinity with Bengali culture. The same condition applies to the princely state of Tripura, which became a part of India in 1949. Now we would catalogue the districts situated in contemporary Bangladesh.

Table 2.5: Short Account of Eastern Bengal Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>YEAR OF CREATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jessore</td>
<td>Created in 1765. Sub-divisions established in 1860-61. Khulna separated in 1882. Partitioned into 4 districts in 1984, as part of administrative reorganization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakharganj</td>
<td>Created in 1817 from the Dhaka Collectory. Later Patuakhali was separated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajshahi</td>
<td>Acquired by the British in 1765. At that time it stretched from Bhagalpur to Dhaka. Area reduced in 1793 and again in 1813-29.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pabna</td>
<td>Created in 1828, with 5 thanas from Rajshahi and 3 from Jessore. In 1855 Sirajganj was included in it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khulna</td>
<td>Created in 1882, with 3 sub-divisions of Jessore.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chattagram</td>
<td>Acquired by the British in 1760.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bagura</td>
<td>Created in 1821, with 4 thanas from Rajshahi, 3 from Dinajpur and 2 from Rangpur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhaka</td>
<td>Acquired in 1765. At that stage virtually all districts of East Bengal came under the collectory of Dhaka. In 1874, Srihatta and Cachar were transferred to Assam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tracts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangpur</td>
<td>Acquired by the British in 1765.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mymensingh</td>
<td>Created in 1787, reputedly included 32 Parganas. Famous for its folk culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tipperah</td>
<td>Acquired by the British in 1765 and made a district in 1789. Actually part of the independent state of Tripura, conquered by the Nawabs. Later renamed Kumillah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faridpur</td>
<td>Created in 1811, with areas taken from Dhaka, Jessore and Bakharganj. Now divided into 5 districts (1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noakhali</td>
<td>Created in 1821, with lands taken from Chattagram and Tripura. Named Noakhali in 1868. In 1984 partitioned into 3 districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Srihatta and Cachar</td>
<td>Srihatta and Cachar were originally part of Bengal, but were transferred to Assam in 1874. Srihatta went back to East Bengal (now Bangladesh) in 1947. We would include them in our study. Srihatta (Sylhet) was acquired in 1765, while Cachar was conquered by the British in 1831.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Information gathered from various works on local history)
The 28 districts of British Bengal were administered under five divisions: Presidency, Barddhaman, Rajshahi, Dhaka and Chattagram. For our study, we would accept the geographical boundaries of the British times and not consider the later day fragmentations e.g. partition of Medinipur into West and East Medinipur and Jessore into four districts.

Way back in 1897, F. E. Pargiter sub-divided ancient Eastern India into the following parts 1) Magadha, Videha and Vaishali, 2) Anga, Vanga, Kalinga, Pundra and Suhma, with Odra and Tamra-lipta 3) Prag-jyotisa and the Kiratas 4) Utkala. His chief concern was the racial difference between the people of these groups. Later pedants were more discerning and stressed on five major natural zones i) The alluvium plains of Western Bengal its nucleus comprising of Murshidabad, Birbhum, Barddhaman, Bankura Hughly, Howrah and Medinipur districts. ii) The new alluvium plains of Eastern Bengal.Comparatively older portions include the districts of Dhaka, Mymensingh, Faridpur, Srihatta and the state of Tripura. Khulna, Bakharganj, Noakhali and Chattagram were of more recent origin iii) New alluvium plains of South Bengal whose boundaries often overlap with that of East Bengal. It mainly consists of Jessore, the 24-Parganas and parts of Nadia, Tripura and Khulna. iv) The sandy red-soil old lands of North Bengal stretching into the Assam hills. It comprises of the districts of Maldah, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bagura, Cachar and hilly parts of Tripura. v) Even north are the Himalayan foothills embracing Darjeeling, Koch Bihar and Jalpaiguri. The borders of the plains of Western and North Bengal often merge into eastern fringes of Bihar and Jharkhand. The district of Purulia along with rocky western most parts of Bankura, Barddhaman and Medinipur form ‘a short of halfway house on the way to the Chhotanagpur plateau’. This is infertile in terms of cultivation. All these sectors developed their distinct histories and were called by different names in various epochs. Niharranjan Ray gave a brilliant

---

depiction of the evolution of these habitations in his *Bangalir Itihas*.131 The first among the four major geographical sections we have demarcated was variously known as *Gauda, Rarh, Suhma* and *Vajrabhumi*. The physical boundaries of these entities were not always the same, but they broadly stood for the land mass west of the river Bhagirathi. According to Niharranjan Ray, Vajrabhumi was synonymous with Northern Rarh i.e. upper Barddhaman, North-West Murshidabad and Birbhum, while Suhma meant Southern Rarh i.e. lower Barddhaman, Hugly and Howrah. Later from the sixth century C.E., within this area, Barddhaman *bhukti* (district) achieved a special distinction. From Puranic and epic evidences it seems that Tamralipti or the part-city of Tamluk was a settlement separate from Suhma or Rarh.

The second one was known as *Vanga, Vangala, Samatata* or *Harikela*. Vanga more or less corresponded with the territory between the Bhagirathi and the Brahmaputra rivers. Vangala was the name for the *Bhati* region or the districts of lower Bengal, protruding into the sea. This again was divided into two belts in early thirteenth century, Vikrampur and *Navya*. Vanga or Vangala were root words for the later day appellation, Bengal. Parts of lower Bengal were also denoted as *Samatata* i.e. Tripura and adjoining areas according to Niharranjan Ray and *Harikela* or Bakharganj and the adjacent terrain. In early medieval times, two other names also became prominent, *Chandradwip* (parts of Bakharganj) and *Pattikera* (portions of Tripura and Chattagram). However in popular terminology, entire Eastern Bengal was called Vangadesh. Much of our third physical division was also covered within the early medieval compounds of Samatata and Harikela, The fourth segment was known as *Pundravardhana* and then *Varendrabhumi*. A non-Vedic people called the Pundras are mentioned in the Vedic and Puranic sources. They were supposed to be ethnologically and geographically akin to the inhabitants of *Anga, Vanga* and *Suhma*. Their flourishing settlement came to be known as *Pundravardhana* (expanding). Its center was possibly Mahasthan, around 11 km away from Bagura town. In the Gupta age this unit stretched from Ganges near Rajmahal to the Karatoya river i.e. covering all North Bengal. In Pala and Sena times the boundaries of

---

Pundravardhana were pushed right up to 24-Parganas and Bakharganj. However, from the tenth century C.E., a fresh nomenclature for North Bengal came into increasing use. This was *Varendra* or *Varendri*. But the geographical sweep of this division never reached the proportion of Pundra and was mostly limited to Bagura, Dinajpur, Rajshahi and possibly Pabna. In fact, even in late Pala years, Varendra was taken to be just a part of Pundra, probably its central portion. Still, owing to its reputation as the homeland of the Palas and other factors, Varendri carved out a niche in Bengali psyche, this being reflected in Kulajis and medieval literature. Even Minhaj-us-Siraj mentioned the name *Varind* obviously meaning this area. Incidentally, Minhaj partitioned Bengal into *Ral* (Rarh), *Varind* (Varendra) and *Vang* (Vanga).

He was not much off the target though, as by the eighth century all other sub-regional identities paled into insignificance before three major formations *Gauda*, *Varendra* and *Vanga*. Soon even the political individuality of Varendra became absorbed within Gauda. From the days of Sasanka potentates who ruled over most of Bengal, often called themselves *Gaudesvara* or lord of Gauda. Rulers like the Senas who had their initial base in Eastern Bengal, preferred to style themselves as ‘lord of Gauda’ instead of Vangapati, after they had captured the occidental areas. Outside Bengal, customs of this province were commonly known as *Gaudiyariti* or *Gaudiya achar*. Dineshchandra Sen in his *Brihat Banga* has noted that once almost whole of India, north of the Vindhyas was celebrated as *Pancha Gauda* (Saraswata, Kanyakubja, Gauda, Mithila and Utkala). Sen himself, significantly used the term *Gauda* frequently for Bengal. Sen in his own emotional way went on to include Bihar, Orissa, Assam and Manipur within the cultural sphere of greater Bengal. He wrote, ‘the boundaries of our Gauda, the predominant state of Aryavarta, once stretched from Gandhara or Afghanistan to the Ocean’. Ultimately though, Gauda failed to achieve the glory of being the by-name of the entire region. From the emergence of the independent Muslim Sultanate of Bengal, the designation, *Bangala*)

---

132 Sandhyakar Nandi in his *Ramacharita* had mentioned Varendri as the *janakabhu* or the homeland of the Palas. This is still the popular view. Recently, however, some scholars like Ranabir Chakravarti have claimed Eastern Bengal to be the patrimony of the Palas.

133 Nihar Ranjan Ray ‘Bangalir Itihas’ op.cit, p. 116


67
gained currency. This was a direct derivative of the name, Vanga, which stood for a less advanced and more obscure locality even in Sena times. The first sovereign Sultan of Bengal, Haji Iliyas styled himself Shah-i-Bangaliyan. Finally, from the reign of Akbar this province came to be known as Subah Bangala. Gauda survived only in local usage.  

2.8 THE ECOLOGICAL FACTOR: Now, we may spare a few words about the most fundamental element in the creation of the Bengali landscape i.e. the rivers and streams of Bengal. The silt deposited by the waterways had virtually created contemporary Southern Bengal within the last 500 years. At the same time, their changing courses have wiped off flourishing settlements in a twinkling, forced migrations and unsettled the rhythm of history. For this, the Bengalis have endured an intense love-hate relationship with their streams. Jawhar Sircar in his insightful essay, ‘Situating Local History’, observed how ‘frequent shifts of unpredictable rivers in this deltaic region’ had compelled rural communities to shift their residences, thereby disturbing the continuity of their historical / cultural memory. Owing to paucity of records, it is not conceivable for us to gauge the influence of the rivers over the geopolitics of Bengal before the sixteenth century. After this, Mughal revenue documents, indigenous literary compositions and European testimonies became freely available. According to Prof. Radhakamal Mukherjee, until the twelfth century Bhairab was the chief river of Western Bengal. Later its place was taken by Saraswati which continued to flourish till the sixteenth century and then by Bhagirathi. On the northern banks of Bhagirathi were situated many of the metropolises of early medieval Bengal like Lakshmanavati – Gauda, Pandua, Tanda, Rajmahal etc. They were built to dominate the narrow defile of Teliagarhi and Sikrigali, 

---

136 Interestingly, the inhabitants of these sub-divisions of Bengal spoke distinct dialects. People of central Bengal spoke Rarhi, those of south-western Bengal spoke Jharkhandi, those of north Bengal Barendra, those of Eastern Bengal Bangali and those of north-eastern Bengal Kamrupi. People of Chattogram had a different dialect. Later Rarhi became the standard spoken form of the language in all Bengal. (Yajneshwar Chaudhuri, ‘Anchalik Itihas Charcha’, op.cit, p.53)

137 Niharranjan Ray had truly said: ‘Eisob Nad Nadir Itihasi Banglar Itihas’ (Translation mine : The history of Bengal is actually the history of its rivers). Niharranjan Ray, ‘Bangalir Itihas’ op.cit, p.72

138 Jawhar Sircar, ‘Situating Local History’ op.cit (Kolkata 2004)

139 For Bengali geo-politics, Radha Kamal Mukherjee, Changing Face of Bengal- A Study in Riverine Economy (University of Calcutta, Kolkata, 2008, Revised edition, originally published from Kolkata in 1938). The introduction by Prof. Arun Bandopadhayay to the revised edition is especially helpful. Also Sugata Bose, ‘Rural Bengal’ op cit.

68
just north-west of Rajmahal, the gateway to Bengal. Later, European trading settlements dotted its southern banks. One can even argue that for controlling the remarkably surplus agricultural resources of the Rarh region, and the commerce along the Bhagirathi, the English started intervening in Bengal’s politics resulting in ultimate conquest of the entire country.  

But in the mid seventeenth century the Ganges took a more eastward turn, and the old channel of Bhagirathi started declining. Later Kosi combined with Ganges and the united waters rushed along the new channel of Padma. In the meanwhile, after the fifteenth century, the Brahmaputra started playing a more prominent role in the economic life of Bengal. It started taking a westward route, first along the channel of Dhaleswari and then along Jamuna after 1789. Brahmaputra’s entry brought an agricultural flourish in the north Bengal districts. By the end of the eighteenth century the riverine geography and economy of Bengal had changed considerably owing to the earthquake of 1762, the massive floods of 1769-70 and changes in river routes. After 1787, the united waters of Kosi and Ganges had a junction with Brahmaputra near Dhaka and later combined with Meghna. The eastward shift of the Ganges led to the deposition of large amount of silt in eastern Bengal. This vastly increased the fertility of the area and ultimately led to a steady increase in population. Meanwhile, the delta of central and western Bengal became moribund owing to loss of silt, and agriculture and population growth declined resultanty. These areas also became malaria infested while east Bengal remained comparatively free. The said changes became manifest especially after mid nineteenth century.

2.9 CONCLUDING NOTE: In this chapter we have seen that the genre of local history writing in Bengali did not come out of the blue. Much before 1850, works were composed in Bengal which contained elements of local history. From the mid eighteenth century The English officials wrote accounts of various districts which were store-houses of information on local history. We have also studied how the local historians dealt with their sources. We have also given short accounts about the historians as well. We have also

noted the evolution of the sub regional units within Bengal. Now we would proceed towards a detailed discussion of the major volumes of local history in Bengali.