Chapter – V

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS: IDEOLOGICAL ISSUES FROM CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

5.1 INTRODUCTION: In this chapter we would attempt an analysis of the various ideological issues that are present, either overtly or covertly, in the Bengali local history texts under consideration. Here the attitude of the local historians towards mainly three issues would occupy our attention, i) British imperialism and the Indian nationalistic response, ii) Religious communalism, iii) The class factor, i.e. relation between the zamindar / petty bourgeois landed intermediaries and the common peasantry. After this, we would try to bring out some of the important shortcomings of these volumes. While criticizing historical texts, we may keep certain theoretical models in mind. Some modern critical approaches might be helpful in appreciating the inner tensions of the concerned texts, the context of their composition and ideological thoughts embedded in them. The followers of the simple ‘biographical-historical’ school would gather information about the author’s life and the historical context of his work. Based on these data, they would assess the concerned work. The mainstream Marxists would try to determine the classist agenda of the author. Their prime concern would be to observe the author’s opinion about imperialism, socio-economic condition of the common people and religion. The ‘structuralists’ would try to locate the arguments of the individual writers within broad super structures, such as the pro-nationalist, pro-colonial or pro-subaltern school of thoughts. Some local historians painted the past events of their areas in a most positive hue overlooking harsh realities. The ‘structuralists’ would place these writers within the romantic idealistic group. There are other critics who avoid large frameworks and stress on more complicated aspects of texts. The ‘new critics’ give no importance to the study of the author’s biography or the historical context of his work. Rather they emphasize an extremely minute study of the text itself, to discover the hidden, unstated intentions of the creator. They also try to find out the single unifying theme of the work. For the ‘new historicists’ a mere faithful reading of the script is not enough, rather a

504 For a discussion on novel approaches towards textual criticism, see Lois Tyson, Critical Theory Today (Routledge, New York, 2008)
detailed interpretation of it is to be stressed. They argue that a book is a product of a complex exchange of conflicting ideas. Those ideas again are results of multi angular human experiences. So, human history is not the story of uniform progress. It is complicated and should be interpreted as much. This school of thought is specially influenced by the French thinker, Michel Foucoult.\footnote{For an assessment of Foucoult, Quentin Skinner ed. \textit{The Return of the Grand Theory in Human Sciences} (Canto series, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997) p. 65}

The promoters of the ‘Deconstruction’ theory want to study the conflict between the various interpretations of a text and thereby establish the impossibility of any fixed meaning of any production. The gap between the author’s intentions and the understanding of various readers produces a variety of interpretations. So, all literary creations are essentially ambiguous and limitations of the author’s mind would make any attempt of his to project an ideology throughout the work futile. This view was shaped to a large extent by Jacques Derrida.\footnote{For an assessment of Derrida, \textit{Ibid.}, p. 41} For our purpose, ‘post-colonial criticism’ is particularly useful. This thought process analyzes, the literature produced by cultures that developed in response to ‘colonial discourse’. Alongwith, it studies the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized and the complex colonized mind which internalized parts of colonizers’ values and rejected parts of it. We would keep all these approaches in mind, while we dissect the local histories under consideration.

It has to be remembered that most of the prominent authors of the local histories came from the \textit{bhadralok} category. A vast corpus of pedagogy already exists over the origin and definition of the \textit{bhadralok}.\footnote{For discussion on bhadralks see Partha Chatterjee, \textit{Nation and its Fragments} (OUP, New Delhi, 1993), Sumit Sarkar, \textit{Writing Social History} (OUP, New Delhi,) and Shekhar Bandyopadhyay ed. \textit{Bengal Rethinking History} (Manohar, New Delhi, 2001).} So, the problem need not engage us here. It would be enough to say that these pedants were exposed to Western episteme, had some connections with landed property, tried to pen a standardized Bengali, and broadly followed Hinduism/ Brahmoism. From this premise we might proceed to assess their socio-historical outlook.

5.2 LOCAL HISTORY AND NATIONALISM: Books written in the 1860s and 1870s contain little nationalist sentiment. More important for us are texts of the 1880s
and 1890s when patriotic feelings were slowly gaining ground in the country. Nikhilnath Ray’s *Murshidabad Kahini* (1897) and *Murshidabader Itihas* (1902) are especially crucial as their subject matter was the pre-colonial capital of Bengal, whose fall paved the way for British hegemony over the entire subcontinent. In his works Nikhilnath revealed a cautious leaning towards nationalism. In his essay regarding Siraj he complained: ‘Why don’t we get now, what we used to enjoy during the age of Siraj? Then there was absolute communal harmony. But now there is constant strife between the Hindus and the Muslims. Why? The British officials are not taking any step to remove this evil’.\(^{508}\) In his article on Devi Singh, he again wrote: ‘How can we claim that the Indians were happier in the initial stages of the British rule, than in the Muslim era? Of course, all must remember, we are not talking about the present government, but about the administration of the Company’s early years.’\(^{509}\) The reader must have noted how Nikhilnath avoided the criticism of the contemporary British government. This note of caution is further evident in his other writings. In his essay on Siraj he claimed: ‘The present regime is unparalleled in its efficiency. Many foreigners are jealous about us owing to our peace and prosperity’.\(^ {510}\) Such psychological dichotomy continued to be present in the works written in the early twentieth century as well. During the first decade of the century, Bengal was rocked by an event that brought the topic of imperialism vs. nationalism to the fore of the public debate. This was the Partition of Bengal in 1905. It is needless to repeat here how the entire province of Bengal was swept by a flood of patriotism.\(^ {511}\) Here, it would be interesting to study the response of these nano-level intellectuals to the macro-problem.

Among the books written during the Swadeshi period, Kedarnath Majumdar’s *Mymensingher Itihas* (1906) and Prabhas Sen’s *Bagurar Itihas* (1913) virtually contain no mention of the Partition and the resultant Swadeshi movement. Prabhas Sen, however, did mention the cooperation he received from Nawab Syed Abdus Shobhan Chaudhuri of Bagura and other Muslim gentlemen while penning his work, in the preface. But Partition

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\(^{508}\) Translation mine, for original Bengali text, Nikhilnath Ray, *Murshidabad Kahini*, (Dey’s publishing, edition Kolkata, 2008), pp-341-42

\(^{509}\) *Ibid* p. 320

\(^{510}\) *Ibid* p. 341, ‘Ekkhone amra je rajatye bas koritechi tahar tulana nai…..Amadigake shantimoy rajatye bas korite dekhia, prithibir koto lok himsa koria thake.’ Translation mine

\(^{511}\) Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India* (Macmillan India, New Delhi, 1983) p.111
and Swadeshi do get referral in Jatindramohan Ray’s *Dhakar Itihas* (1912). He wrote: ‘In the year 1905 Bengal was divided into two for administrative convenience and Dhaka became the capital of Eastern Bengal. But owing to universal protest in the province, the magnanimous King-Emperor annulled the move during his auspicious visit to India’.\(^{512}\)

The loyalist tone is only too evident in this quote.

However, authors like Kumudnath Mullick, Anandanath Ray and Satishchandra Mitra displayed more complex attitude in their works. Kumudnath’s massive *Nadia Kahini* was published in 1910. But strangely, he remained totally silent about the major Swadeshi convulsions that rocked the province just five years ago. It is impossible to infer from his tome that Bengal had become a prime seat of nationalist activities during the last few decades. Not content with this, the author passed unfavourable comments about other anti-British uprisings, e.g. the peasant uprising of 1830-31 under Titu Mir. He wrote that in the first half of the nineteenth century, an evil star appeared in the firmament of Nadia. This was Titu Mir, an arrogant Muslim fanatic. He rudely disturbed Nadia’s peaceful existence for the time being. With the help of his ignorant followers, he committed atrocities on the zamindars and their innocent subjects.\(^{513}\) In fact, Mullick showered glowing praise on the British for warding off famine and pestilence.\(^{514}\) Mullick wrote: ‘They (the British) try their utmost to secure the well being of their subjects. They make extraordinary efforts to keep the prices under control, provide medical facilities and safe drinking water’.\(^{515}\)

However, not all local antiquarians were that loyal. We have noted earlier, in chapter 3, how Satish Mitra connected local patriotism with devotion to the all-embracing nation. Thus, through his micro-study he wanted to serve his motherland as a whole. His nationalist intentions are clear in the very opening paragraph of the preface to the first edition of *Jessore-Khulnar Itihas* (1914), where he expressed his feelings after reading Bankim Chandra’s essays about the history of Bengal: ‘Exactly 20 years ago I had read


\(^{514}\) Ironically, modern pedants have brought the colonial masters to book for actually facilitating famine conditions!

\(^{515}\) *Ibid.* Footnotes of p. 77
the principal works of Bankimchandra. But I was particularly impressed by his essays on the history of Bengal in Bangadarshan. I vowed there and then to try my best to construct the history of Bengal.’ Anandanath Ray in his Faridpurer Itihas (1909) was even more outspoken. The most striking thing about Ray was his concept of economic nationalism. He wrote that the Bengalis needed industrial might to counter the British properly. So, they needed to get out of their land-dependent mentality. He observed that in Faridpur, the financial situation of the bhadraloks was deteriorating as they were failing to get government jobs, while the indigenous Muslims and the lower-castes were improving their status through business in jute and other agro-products. He also directly mentioned the advent of home-spun Swadeshi cloth and the need for well-formulated industrial policy to preserve it. A few examples of Anandanath’s writing can be provided here.

Actually, this mental dialectic between imperialism and nationalism was part and parcel of the bhadralok psyche till the 1920s. While appreciating the authenticity of the nationalist logic, they often failed to totally cast off the traditional loyalty to the Raj. Sunil Gangopadhyay, an influential Bengali author, in his popular historical novel, Pratham Alo (1996), based on the Swadeshi era, had mentioned a humorous anecdote about how a young Rabindranath and his friends cajoled the veteran moderate nationalist leaders such as Surendranath Banerjee and W. C. Banerjee into wearing dhoti and giving

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public speech in Bengali. Sunil also lucidly portrayed how the senior leaders dithered to support the armed nationalists, even during the height of the Swadeshi movement.\footnote{Sunil Gangypopadhya, \textit{Pratham Alo} (Ananda, Kolkata 1996), pp. 257 & 540. The author has given a detailed list of primary and secondary historical sources consulted for his work in volume II, pp.709-717.}

He also delineated a debate between senior nationalists and their younger counterparts on the significance of Bengali as a language of practical utility and the possibilities of armed nationalism favoured by the youths. The dramatis personae included aged veterans such as Umeshchandra Bannerjee, Surendranath Bannerjee, Lalmohan Ghosh & Janakinath Ghoshal and some ‘young Turks’ opposed to them. The former held that it was not possible to give political speeches in Bengali. The language was simply not equipped for the exercise, it was fit only for commonplace household conversation. The latter replied that it was simply useless to speak in English before illiterate rural folk. The masses would never understand the political message and feel inspired. So they claimed that in this Conference, organized by the Bengal Provincial Congress, the leaders must try to speak in Bengali. The old moderate leaders also strongly disapproved of violent protests against British rule.

Some scholars have recently argued that in the late nineteenth century Bengali literature, evidences of this psychological hesitation can be found.\footnote{Swapan Basu, \textit{Banglai Nabachetanar Itihas} (Pustak Bipani, Kolkata, 2014) pp.203 & 373.} They say that Bengali sub-nationalism had been developing since the late nineteenth century. But the Bengali bhadraloks did not yet dream of securing political independence from the British. The drawbacks of the colonial rule were becoming apparent to them, (e.g. writings of R. C. Dutt), but they largely still failed to shed their loyalty. First of all, they were aware that the British were extremely powerful vis-à-vis the unarmed Indians. Secondly, being products of the imperial economic-cultural system the bhadraloks credited the British with a lot of positive achievements like introducing metalled roads & railways and exterminating robbers & thugs. Alongside, the Englishmen introduced modern education and values. Most importantly, they freed Bengal and India as a whole, from the Muslim yoke. By then, the caste Hindu Bengalis had started looking upon the Muslims as their hereditary foes. The era of Muslim dominance was viewed as an age of persecution for
the Hindus. So, even in patriotic songs like *Padmini Upakhyan* (1858) poets such as Rangalal Bannerjee paid warm tributes to the British. The English educated intellectuals, to satisfy their nationalist aspirations, constructed a Hindu golden age, which was situated thousands of years ago. For Anuradha Ray, this emotional milieu of the bhadraloks found expression in the poem *Aryagatha* (1882) by Dwijendralal Ray.\(^{520}\)

But from the beginning of the twentieth century, we witness a novel optimism and self-confidence in the writings of the new generation of Bengali authors, especially Tagore. A series of victories achieved by the Asian and African nations over European countries such as Ethiopia’s triumph against Italy in 1896 and Japan’s success versus Russia in 1905 increased the educated Bengalis’ self-confidence. Recognition won abroad by Bengalis such as Swami Vivekananda, Sir J.C. Bose and the wrestler Gobor Goho in the last decade of nineteenth century also boosted the morale of their countrymen. Now economic and social fall-outs of the colonial rule were openly criticized and concrete proposals for improvements were mooted. Poems written by Muslims like Syed Abu Mohd. Ismail Hussain Siraji and women like Sarala Devi reflect the new spirit. Characters from the history of Bengal like Pratapaditya and Siraj-ud-daulah were now celebrated as patriotic heroes and the young generation was supposed to follow them. Kshirod Prasad Vidyabinod composed the play, *Pratapaditya* in 1903 and Jibendrakumar Dutta wrote the poem *Siraj-ud-daulah* in 1904.\(^{521}\) Thus, by the onset of the Swadeshi movement in 1905 the image of the British as supreme benefactors of India was being challenged vigorously among the bhadraloks.

The Swadeshi era (1903-1911) was a transition period where both the loyalist and progressive trends were present. The former was represented by leaders like Surendranath Bannerjee who organized extensive petition and demonstration based campaigns. The latter trend was much more varied and included the foundation of the ‘Dawn’ society by

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\(^{521}\) Desire to construct patriotic identity based on Bengali language and literature was evident much earlier among Bengal literati. Ramnidhi Gupta (1741-1834) ‘aka Nidhu Babu’, a major cultural figure of early nineteenth century Kolkata, pined for a standard Bengali language. Poets Ramprasad Sen, and Iswar Gupta too voiced similar sentiments.
Satishchandra Mukherjee, development of indigenous industry by Prafulla Chandra Ray e.g. the Bengal Chemical and the Swadeshi Mela, and most importantly the scientific researches of Upendrakishore Ray Chaudhuri, H. Bose of the ‘Kuntalin’ hair oil fame and certainly, Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose. The contribution of these scientists helped to counter the arrogant imperial claim that the Indians are temperamentally unfit to reach the exact method of modern science. The importance of scientific knowledge in India’s quest for identity is indicated by the fact that Swami Vivekananda and Gopal Krishna Gokhale supported J.C. Bose in his struggle against European discrimination. The rise of the new sentiment and the gradual fading out of the loyalist mentality are evident in this sharp rebuke meted out by the ‘bard’ Mukundodas to the pro-British Bengalis in his Matripuja poem.

Now, we may return to the critical discussion of the local histories produced during this period. Some scholars such as Kanta Chatterjee have recently doubted that the Swadeshi movement inspired the production of micro-annals, qualitatively or quantitatively. The two main planks of their argument are i) most of the local histories written during the said age show little concern about the Swadeshi upheaval ii) none of the books was proscribed by the British government. This indicates their harmless nature. However, important objections can be raised to these arguments. First of all, if we compare the number of local histories published between 1875 and 1900 with those coming up within 1900-1925 it would be clear that the genre of local history really took off in the latter period when the nationalist sentiment was spreading across the province.

Table 5.1: Trends in Publication of Local History

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

(Source: Number of local history titles counted by me during this research work).

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Secondly, that some of the sub regional studies did reflect the authors’ awareness about the rising Swadeshi sentiment has been amply showed in the previous page. Thirdly, if proscription by the British is the only criteria, then the writings of Bankim and Tagore would also not qualify as patriotic!

Here, it may be considered whether the nationalist spirit continued to be present in the works published after the Swadeshi venture was over. It has to be admitted that patriotic concerns did not overtly manifest themselves in the attempts of authors such as Mahimaniranjan Chakravarti, Yogeshchandra Basu and Gaurihar Mitra. Rather, Basu remembered a British officer like John Pierce with respect. Gaurihar Mitra in his *Birbhumer Itihas* refused to blame the British administration for the Santhal rebellion. Rather he said, ‘They [the Santhals] have no complain against the English rule. They blame the Hindu moneylenders and landed elite for their discomfite.’ But, Ramanuja Kar in his *Bankura Jelar Bibaran* was more explicitly nationalistic. He significantly observed that the Bengali bhadraloks’ patriotism was more apparent than real. For him, lethargy is the major cause of the undoing of the Bengalis and this must be removed. The self-conscious elite are the main agents of the ruin of the province. They are the most vociferous spokesmen for Swaraj and at the same time are the chief patrons of foreign goods! The so-called rustic populace does not buy European products like them. Admittedly, the non-elite folk are too poor to purchase exotic articles. But the chief cause of their poverty is again the bhadraloks, who like blood sucking vampires extract resource from them.

The hypocrite British administrators were also fully exposed by the author. In 1924, Lord Lytton, the Governor of Bengal, visited Bankura. He inspected the Bankura Cooperative Society’s activities such as the Aamjod and Rukmini canals. After returning to Calcutta, he sent a letter of appreciation to Mr. Brajadurlabh Hazra, the District Magistrate, stressing the necessity of cooperative society in a poor economic set-up like India’s. The Governor also assured the Bankura residents that he would take up the issue

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524 For views of Mitra on the Santhal rebellion see chapter 9 of his *Birbhumer Itihas* (Ratan Library, Birbhum, 1938)

of their development with the department of self-government and the Central Bank which would provide easy credit. Sadly, but not unexpectedly, all the assurances came to nothing. Kar remarked caustically on this issue. He said: ‘One and a half years have passed since the visit of the Governor. But we have yet to see a concrete beneficial move on his part. It would be a matter of undying shame if he fails to live up to his promise. Anyway, that would be just another episode in his otherwise inglorious career. That is why he did not bother about the expectations of the poor citizens of Bankura.’ Kar went on to criticize Lord Lytton for detaining revered nationalist Anilbaran Ray without trial. He also mentioned an incident which reflected the sense of nationalism present among the citizens of Bankura even in 1920. Many of them walked five to six kilometers to vote for Anilbaran Ray and elected him to the legislative assembly. The narrator remarked significantly: ‘The common people of India are not ungrateful towards those unsung patriots who selflessly serve the nation’

A similarly strong patriotic sentiment is evident in Sashibhusan Ray’s *Santhal Pargana – Atit o Bartaman* (1926). It is true that he blamed the indigenous zamindar – mahajan combination for the Santhal rebellion. But at the same time he blamed the government for failing to check the exploitative nexus. He wrote that only when the Santhals discovered that the government and the zamindars were equally evil for them, they chose to rebel. Thus he highlighted the *sarkar-sahukar-zamindar* combination which exploited the tribals. Ray also painted a touching portrait of the socially destabilized and pauperized Santhals and ‘mountain-dwellers’ under the British rule. The unsympathetic attitude of the imperial officials is also graphically described. He observed that many tribals were leaving this district owing to extreme poverty. However regretfully, Mr. Mcpherson, a senior official, claimed that actually Santhals were in the habit of periodically changing their residence. His patriotic sentiments are evident in

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526 Ibid
527 Ibid
528 Ibid. p. 155. ‘Janhara sARBASYA tyag koria desher sebar atma samarpan koren deshbasio tanhader prati akritagna nahen’. Translation mine.
530 Ibid. p. 85.
the very first line of the preface. Here he said that in those unfortunate days it was dangerous to be a patriot. So their numbers remained paltry.\textsuperscript{531}

Sudhir Kumar Mitra, the author of \textit{Hughly Jelar Itihas} (1948) was indisputably a nationalist. His dispositions are revealed in works like \textit{Mahabiplabi Rashbehari, Amader Bapuji, Bagha Jatin, Amader Netaji, Yugacharya Vivekananda} etc. In his \textit{Hughly Jelar Itihas}, Mitra has narrated an interesting incident, which showed that under the insightful leadership of Deshbandhu C. R. Das, the Congress had penetrated right up to the district level. Satish Giri, the Mohanto of Tarakeshwar had proved to be licentious and corrupt. The local people decided to stage a Satyagraha against the Mohanto and requested Deshbandhu Das and the Bengal Congress to give the lead. In response the provincial Congress appointed a committee to look into the matter. This was headed by Das and included Subhas Bose amongst others. After a torturous struggle, ultimately the corrupt Mohanta was replaced.\textsuperscript{532} Mitra also portrayed the lives of freedom-fighters like Brahmabandhab Upaddhay with passion. About Upaddhay he wrote: ‘Upaddhay inspired even the common folk like shopkeepers, artisans and labourers with patriotic fervour by composing in a lucid but spirited language …… Today he is almost a forgotten person, but in independent India’s annals, his name should be inscribed in gold. We should publish his collected works also’.\textsuperscript{533} Mitra also paid warm tribute to Girishchandra Ghosh, the father figure of Bengali theatre. He recalled how Lokmanya Tilak and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa were impressed by Girish Ghosh’s performances. He also quoted extensively from C. R. Das’s tribute to Ghosh to bring out the latter’s true significance. Das wrote, ‘One who brings out his national and cultural characteristics in his works, can be called a truly great poet. We can perceive these qualities in Girish babu’s work’.\textsuperscript{534}

\textbf{5.3 LOCAL HISTORY AND COMMUNALISM:} We have seen in the last section how one’s feeling towards the macro- nation was portrayed in the works of local

\textsuperscript{531} Ibid, p.85 ‘Desher ei durdine deshbbakta hoa bhishan birambona. Deshbbhtagancer samkhya sei janya ati alpa’
\textsuperscript{533} Ibid, p. 457-458.
\textsuperscript{534} Ibid, ‘Jnaar kabitay gane, rachanay, dharma ache, jatiyata ache, jatir baishista ache, tahakey bali mahakabi ……… Girish babur kabitay, natake o gane amra jatiyata pai’. Translation mine.
history. Now we would try to gauge how fidelity towards one’s community was expressed in these books. We would also see how the other major sections of the society, were assessed by these pedants. As most of the major local historians came from the Hindu bhadralok category, here Hinduism forms the classic thesis ‘I’ and Islam the anti-thesis ‘other’. There is a common view that a pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim construction of Indian history is a product of the ‘nationalist’ school, which became active with the works of Lokmanyya Tilak and Bankimchandra. But actually such sentiments existed much earlier. Partha Chatterjee in his *The Nation and Its Fragments* has analyzed the early historical texts in Bengali, in some detail.\(^{535}\) There, it can be seen that even in Mrittunjoy Vidyalankar’s *Rajaboli* (1808), which was written with a distinctly pre-colonial conception of history, an unfavourable picture of Aurangzeb was painted. He wrote: ‘He became very active in spreading the Muhammadan faith. And he destroyed many great temples. Many ceremonies of the Hindus such as the worship of the sun ….. had been performed in the fort of the Badshah….. Aurangzeb discontinued these practices and issued new rules ….. he, on being cursed by a Brahmin, died uttering horrible cries of pain’.\(^{536}\) Whatever may be our thoughts about the historical vista of Mrittunjoy, it is clear that even before the British imposed the three-tier Hindu / Muslim/ British time scheme on our historical psyche, orthodox Muslim rulers were not favourably considered by the Hindu intellectual elite. Incidentally, Kaliprasanna Sinha, in his social satire *Hutumpenchar Naksha* (1862), frowned upon the prospect of the restoration of the Mughal rule during the Sepoy Mutiny. Even before the coming of the British, Bharatchandra Ray in his *Annadamangal* (1751) and Gangaram in *Maharashtrapurana* (c.1742) painted the Muslim rulers in highly unfavourable colour. According to Bharatchandra, Jahangir was a zealous Muslim who wanted to suppress Hinduism.\(^{537}\) For Gangaram Alivardi Khan’s oppression of the Hindus prompted the Maratha *Bargis* to invade Bengal.\(^{538}\)

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\(^{536}\) Ibid, p. 83. Translation by Partha Chatterjee.

\(^{537}\) Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay & Sajanikanta Das ed. *Bharatchandra Granthabali* (Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, Kolkata, 1943) p.378

\(^{538}\) Gangaram Dutta *Maharashtra Purana* ( Nabadwip Puratatva Parishad, Nadia, 2002)
By the 1870s, the main structure of the nationalist historiography had been concretized. Two most interesting aspects of this school, for our present purpose, are a) attempt to pen the history of the country i.e. desh or bharatavarsha, not just its kings in the pattern of Rajaboli. b) acceptance of the European time scheme of Hindu, Muslim and British eras. A curious fall-out of the first trend was that the ancient Hindus were identified with the so-called ‘Aryans’. From the 1870s we would see themes appearing in the Bengali history texts that are still familiar to us, namely the glorification of the Hindu-Aryan age, set in some hoary past and lament for the prolonged setting of the Hindu sun, when the Muslim half-moon outshone the former. Chatterjee in his work has given a few apt examples of such psyche:

‘In ancient times, when virtually the whole world was shrouded in the darkness of ignorance, the pure light of learning shone brightly in India. The discoveries in philosophy which emanated from the keen intellect of ancient Hindus are arousing the enthusiasm of European scholars even today’.  

‘The misfortunes and decline of this country began on the day the Yavana flag entered the territory of Bengal. The cruelty of Yavana rule turned this land to waste. ….The country was reduced to such a state that the wealth of the prosperous, the honour of the gentle and the chastity of the virtuous were in grave peril’.

Naturally, in these histories, the Hindus and Muslims were given contrasting characteristics, and Hindu defeats were attributed to sheer bad luck. Much later, in 1930, possibly the best of the Indian historians, Sir Jadunath Sarkar mounted a scathing attack on the Islamic theory of state, while discussing Patshah Aurangzeb’s religious policy. According to him, in an Islamic state, ‘after conquest the entire infidel population becomes theoretically reduced to the status of slaves of the conquering army’. Again: ‘Therefore, the growth and progress of non-Muslims, even their continued existence, is incompatible with the basic principles of a Muslim state’.  

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539 Quoted in ‘Nation & Its Fragments’, op.cit, p. 98.  
541 Ibid, p. 130
Mrittunjoy to Sir Jadunath, most of the eminent Bengali historians did not take a favourable view of Islamic rule.

But it would be wrong to say these pedants were unnecessarily biased against Islam. The positive points about the Muslim rulers were freely praised. Even the pre-modern Mrittunjoy said regarding Aurangzeb: ‘Although he destroyed many great temples, he was favoured by the divine powers at Jvalamukhi and Lachmanbala and made sizeable grants of land for the maintenance of those temples’.542 Sir Jadunath, who has harshly criticized Aurangzeb for his supposedly orthodox religious views, said while assessing the holistic impact of the Mughal Empire: ‘The Mughal Empire, established in 1556, had united much of the Indian continent under one scepter, given it a uniform civilization ….. and on the whole promoted the general happiness of the people in a degree unapproached except in the mythical past ….. and thus took the first step necessary for the modernization of India and the growth of an Indian nationality in some distant future’.543 Thus we see that Bengali bhadralok historiography, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was not unduly anti-Islamic or communal. With this background in mind, we can try to judge the attitude of the local historians about Hindu-Muslim relations in their own locality. Here we would consider examples from works written both on the Western and Eastern halves of Bengal. Kumudnath Mullick, who wrote the history of Nadia, the cultural capital of pre-British Bengal, painted negative pictures of all-India Muslim figures like Sher Shah. For Mullick, the Afghan monarch was a fierce fanatic. He wrote that Sher Shah was a skilled administrator, but was extremely anti-Hindu. He passed regulations that even hampered the daily rituals of the Hindus. He thus succeeded in making many of them outcastes. The fallen Hindus had no option but to accept Islam. For this reason the number of Muslims increased in this locality.544

The last point is rather noteworthy. It indicates that in the memory of the local literati, Sher Shah, who is not normally associated with Nadia, was the main propagator

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542 Quoted in ‘Nation & Its Fragments’, op.cit, p. 83
of Islam in the area. Another premier figure of medieval Bengal, Murshid Quli Khan is painted with mixed colours by the author. Both his tyranny and his eclecticism are recorded. The former is revealed in the forced conversion of the defaulting zamindars, and the latter is proved by his participation in an important Vaishnava religious debate. Coming to the more micro-level events, Mullick records the terrorizing campaign unleashed by the Habsi autocrat of Bengal, Siddi Badr Muzaffar Shah. He wanted to break the morale of the Hindu intellectuals and tried to make them outcastes by forcing them to eat left-over food of the Muslims. According to Mullick, in terms of rapacity there were few parallels to Muzaffar Shah in history. To remove all possible threats to his throne he first killed all Turkish nobles and then destroyed the Hindu chieftains. He was fanatically opposed to Hinduism. Owing to his severity some were forced to embrace Islam but many clung to their ancestral faith. Thus we see that here Kumudnath reiterated the fact that Islam spread in Nadia owing to royal persecution of the Hindus. He cited Vaishnava literature like Chaitanya – mangal as his source-material. But it would be unfair to suppose that Kumudnath always described the Muslims harshly. He bestowed lavish praise on Hussain Shah, the liberal Sultan who ended the Habsi oppression. He wrote that Hussain was famous as a just ruler and a patron of Bengali literature. Under him many Hindus gained high office.

Another leading author of the Western Bengal Sudhir Kumar Mitra also was not impressed with the impact of the Muslim rule. He recorded in his Hughly Jelar Itihas (1948) that from the thirteenth century Gauda came under Muslim influence. From that period owing to Muslim discrimination, Hindu traditions lost much of their original relevance as the Kaulinya system assumed a macabre shape. As days passed by, the country sunk deep into debauchery, owing to Muslim contact. People lost all restraint regarding food and drink and started marrying several time. Only Chaitanya Mahaprabhu later restored Hindu culture to an extent. Thus we see that in Mitra’s narrative, the standard Hindu bhadralok archetype is followed. The majority Hindus steadily decayed.

owing to the malign impact of the foreign Muslims. A great social reformer was necessary to lift them up from their misery.

Among the authors of Eastern Bengal, Kalinath Chaudhuri, who penned *Rajshahir Itihas* (1901), dwelt on the phenomenon of the Muslim demographic majority in the eastern portion of Bengal.\(^{548}\) He refused to accept that Muslim repression resulted in the large-scale conversion of Bengali Hindus. Rather he hinted at more complex forces at work. He wrote that Muslims were in majority in Rajshahi and they were peasants, while the zamindars, businessmen and literati were Hindus. This showed the number of Muslims did not increase owing to mere application of force. According to Chaudhuri possibly Raj Krishna Mukherjee hit upon the real reason for the spread of Islam. Mukherjee said that non-Aryans fleeing from the Western areas had found a haven in East Bengal. The bulk of the area’s population was made up of them and they were looked down upon by the minority followers of the Vedic religion. So, they willingly converted to Islam later, to belong to the ruler’s faith.\(^{549}\) Then Chaudhuri went on to discuss some curious theories about the origin of the Muslims, current among the Hindus. The latter used the term, *Yavana* to denote the former. Various opinions about the root of the word *Yavana* are also discussed. Interestingly, according to Chaudhuri, the Indian Hindus and Arab Muslims were basically people of the same stock, and thus there was no basic racial animosity between the two. Both were descendants of the Central Asian Aryans. Only much later they adopted different religions and customs.\(^{550}\) Chaudhuri also commented upon the intricate divisions within Hinduism. According to him, most of the upper-caste Hindus in Rajshahi were followers of Tantric Sakta philosophy, while the common mass were adherents of Vaishnavism.

Kedarnath Majumdar, the author of *Dhakar Bibaran* (1910) was concerned about the constant increase of Muslim population and offered his own reasons for it. He said that the number of Musalmans was increasing while the number of Hindus was decreasing, and this is shown in every census report. According to him, many Hindus

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\(^{548}\) Kalinath Chaudhuri, ‘Rajshahir Itihas’, op.cit, p. 50

\(^{549}\) *Ibid*, ‘Rajshahi jelay Muslaman adhik ebong Musalmanera prayey chasi; ebong jamidar, byabsai o bidwan byaktigan pray Hindu. Ihate ei anumita hoi, je kebol bahubole Musalmaner samkhya briddhi hoiache emo to nahe. Rajshahi ebong Purbabange Musalman samkhya briddhir anya karan hoite pare.’

\(^{550}\) *Ibid*, p. 53.
were embracing Islam owing to acute poverty. Some were doing it after being attracted towards Muslim women. Besides, an expansion of the Muslim fold was natural as anybody can accept this faith.\textsuperscript{551} Then, he went on to discuss the various compartments within Bengal Islam. He observed that like their Hindu brethren Dhaka Muslims were divided hierarchically into three parts and the high-class ashrafs did not mix with the lower groups. He also showed that many Muslims claimed fake aristocratic identity. He complained that in this district, there were only a few genuine Mullicks and Mirzas. There were many \textit{zula} (low class weaver) Mullicks. So, in those days it was very difficult to judge the authenticity of the noble titles used by many families. The truly aristocratic Muslims did not enter into marriage alliances with the lower sections of the society.\textsuperscript{552}

Majumdar did not view early Muslim incursions in East Bengal favourably. He adhered to the standard bhadralok historical version of Muslim invasion leading to the decline of Hindu civilization. He wrote that the independence and fortune of Bengal disappeared with the decline of Rampal, near Dhaka. The fierce Muslims succeeded in occupying Eastern Bengal long time after the fall of Nabadwip. With the occupation of Eastern Bengal the slavery and degradation of Bengal started in the real earnest.\textsuperscript{553} Another anonymous author has recorded how the rise of modern nationalism paved the way for the rediscovery of Hinduism: ‘The development of nationalist sentiment has, in fact, been the means of bringing about a reaction in favour of Hinduism. Not long ago, many famous temples showed by their ruinous condition that no one felt sufficient interest in them to undertake their repair, the Dhakeswari shrine near Dacca, for instance. But, according to Mr. Allen the Hindu religion has profited by the growth of national feeling and tendency to reject the teachings and influences of the West. The Dhakeswari temple is no longer buried in jungle.’\textsuperscript{554}

\textsuperscript{551} Kedarnath Majumdar, ‘Dhakar Itihas’, op.cit p. 585. ‘Anek daridra Hindu, abhabe poria Musalman dharmagrahan koriteche, Aneksthale striloker akarshaneo anek Hindu yuva darnantar grahan koria thake. Musalman dharma abalambir samkhya briddhi swabhaktiv keno na sakal dharmabalambyi oj dharmamat grahan korite pare’

\textsuperscript{552} Ibid, p. 590

\textsuperscript{553} Ibid, p. xv

\textsuperscript{554} Ibid. Cited in Kamal Chaudhuri ed. ‘Dhakar Itihas’, op.cit, p. 1006
The narrator of *Pabna Jelar Itihas* (1924) made a remarkable beginning to his work by dedicating it to the ‘Hindus and Muslims’ of the district. He, too, marked that the Muslims were in overwhelming majority in the district concerned. To determine the cause of the phenomenon Saha marshalled opinions of numerous pedants within his text. Some interesting views can be found in these observations. For example, Umeshchandra Batabyal concluded that the poor Hindu peasants, who could not flee their holdings, were forced to intermarry with Afghan soldiers, who had migrated without their wives. Thus, the Bengali Muslim population came into being. Saha, too, listed the names of a number of villages which showed that foreign Muslim soldiers’ colonies were there previously such as Pathanpara, Afnad para and Syedpur. At the same time, *Chholtan* a mouth-piece of the Bengali Muslims pointed out that the Muslims here had been offended to hear that they were descendents of lower-caste Hindu converts. So, they were trying to prove that if their ancestors were Hindus at all, they certainly belonged to the higher castes. Saha himself also supported the view that the Bengali Muslims were descendents of mostly lower-class followers of a debased Buddhism. Their customs like wearing the *lungi* in a particular style proved it. Overall Saha formed a reasonably fair view of the Islamic dominance and praised the Muslim rulers for their commendable deeds like promoting education among Hindus and Muslims. He wrote that manuscripts, four to five hundred years old, could be found in the habitats of many village Brahmans. Careful search would surely bring others to light. In the Muslim era Arabic and Persian languages were also encouraged. The Muslims introduced paper in this country. The mosques and tanks of this district remained as witnesses to the liberality and piety of the Pathan Sultans. Saha again quoted from Bankimchandra to support his view. He also blamed Brahminical oppression for many lower caste Hindus and Buddhists’ conversion to Islam.

The writer of the history of Sirajganj, a sub-division of Pabna, MM Ahmed Siddiqi, was a Muslim and thus he considered the question of communal relations from a different perspective. He held that though in numerical terms, the Muslims were in majority in Sirajganj, the place was actually dominated by the Hindus. This was because

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here all prominent zamindars were Hindus. The subjects, irrespective of their religion, follow the zamindars blindly. Secondly, the Muslims were mostly illiterate and common peasants. On the other hand, though the Hindus were in minority, they were well-educated and occupied high offices. Siddiqi also complained that owing to the cultural domination of the Hindus, the Muslims were increasingly following Hindu/unIslamic practices. He was particularly horrified to see that the Muslims were celebrating Durga Puja, christening their daughters in the Hindu fashion and providing their children with dolls which would surely lead them to idol worship. They also had largely given up observation of Muslim rituals. He praised the Muslims of Shahjadpur for maintaining the proper Islamic way of life. Here in Siddiqi’s narrative, we can clearly discern the voice of Muslim separatism that was becoming increasingly louder throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, the feeling that the minority Hindus were blocking the developmental path of the majority Muslims owing to their cultural hegemony, persisted even during the East Pakistani and independent Bangladeshi regime.

5.4 THE PIRS & FAQIRS IN BENGALI LOCAL HISTORY: According to M.M. Siddiqi, Sirajganj was founded by a pir family, which traced its origin from Abdal Muhammad Shah, a migrant Muslim holy man, influential in the Murshidabad Nawabi court. Siddiqi listed a number of legends current about this pir and others like Shah Maqhum and Shah Kamal. The activities of pirs or faqirs i.e. Muslim preachers, is a major phenomenon in the local history of Bengal. This is because, owing to them, the

557 MM Ahmed Siddiqi, ‘Sirajganjer Itihas’, op.cit, p. 551
558 Ibid p.552
559 Mihir Sengupta, in his award-winning memoir, Bishadbriksha (The Tree of Sadness, Subarnarekha, Kolkata, 2005), p. 253, recollected how a talented Hindu student like him was abused by some Muslim class-mates for doing well in the examination during the Pakistani rule. Here we report the diatribe of the Muslim student Musa and Sengupta’s reaction: ‘Then Musa asked derisively, “As long as you Hindus are here, can we achieve anything substantial? No. The teachers who check the answer scripts are also Hindus. They don’t want that we achieve anything concrete”. His words simply drove me mad with rage. He always tried to prove that Hindu literati were trying to pin them down. Musa and his gang simply did not consider the misdeeds they themselves used to do throughout the year.’

560 MM Ahmed Siddiqi, ‘Sirajganjer Itihas’, op.cit, p.547-48
majority of the rural populace in Bengal turned Muslims, especially in the Eastern side.\textsuperscript{561} Now we may spare a few lines about the analysis of the agenda of these micro-level holy persons by the local historians. This is important as even today there is a mis-conception amongst the urban intellectuals that the influence of ‘pirs’ on Bengali rural society was extremely benign, and their interactions with the Hindus, totally peaceful. The person who dealt with this topic in the most articulate fashion is Satishchandra Mitra.

We have already mentioned his treatment of the adventures of Bara Khan Ghazi and Dakshin Ray in chapter 3. Here we would discuss the ideological standpoint of Mitra about this issue. To recount the incident quickly, Barakhan Ghazi came to coastal Jessore to spread Islam in the late thirteenth century. Then he fell foul with the local potentate, Raja Mukut Ray and his general Dakshin Ray. After a long struggle, Mukut Ray was overcome and converted to Islam. His daughter Champavati was possibly forced to marry Ghazi. This historical incident of the destruction of a local, small Hindu chieftain by Muslim fanatics formed the core of the ballad of \textit{Ghazi-Kalu and Champavati} which of course, contained many fictitious elements. Satish Mitra conducted meticulous research about this event and tried to unearth the truth hidden under a mass of myth. So, his view about the mechanisms of the Ghazi is extremely crucial. He said that among the Muslim preachers who entered this country, there were two main categories, \textit{Aulias} and \textit{Ghazis}. Aulias and faqirs tried to persuade people to join Islam through peaceful debates. But the Ghazis regularly applied force and torture to achieve the same end.

The Hindus traditionally respected spiritual powers. The Hindu saints thus conquered kingdoms by showing miraculous capabilities. Their Muslim successors, \textit{faqirs} and \textit{dervishes} followed the same path.\textsuperscript{562} According to Mitra, the performance of miracles by Sheikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi weakened the morale of Lakshman Sena and paved the way for the conquest of Ikhtiyaryuddin Khalji. Mitra revealed the methods of an

\begin{itemize}
  \item Richard M. Eaton, \textit{The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760} (OUP, New Delhi, 1993), chapters 3, 5, 8 and 9.
\end{itemize}

‘Hindu chirokal adhyatik shaktir nikat dasanudas ……. Muni-rishi ei shaktite Hindurajya jay koriachen. Musalman darbesho ei shaktibole sei Hindur rajye Islamdharmer bijoypataka sangsthapan kariachen’
Islamic preacher in his portrayal of the life of Khan Jahan Ali. He was possibly one of the kings of Jaunpur, who relinquished the throne and took to spiritualism. Throughout the first half of the fifteenth century, he extensively toured south-eastern Bengal on religious missions. In a case of interesting contrast, he had always with him a number of soldiers cowing down opposition and many labourers to dig ponds and construct roads for bringing relief to the rural folk. So, Ali applied both force and charity in the material world to guide the flock to the desired spiritual end. About the effect Mitra wrote: ‘Wars were always not necessary, as people automatically submitted to the Pathan soldiers. The common mass genuinely respected Khan Jahan for his charitable works. This stick-and-carrot method of Khan Jahan is worth emulating.’

Thus Mitra showed how a Muslim holy man penetrated the rural society through his welfare measures and then gradually wooed the rural folk into his religious fold. Ploys of the local level pirs and faqirs are recorded by other local historians such as Achyuta Charan Chaudhuri Tatvanidhi and Sudhir Kumar Mitra. Tatvanidhi was mostly concerned with the tasks of Shah Jalal. He was an Arab mentor who had come to East Bengal to spread Islam. He was active in Tripura, Mymensingh, Dhaka and Rangpur. But his main achievement was the conquest of Srihatta from its Hindu sovereign, Gaur Govinda. According to Tatvanidhi, we should not treat Shah Jalal’s invasion as an isolated incident. The Muslims were trying to capture Srihatta right from the days of Sultan Sikandar. However, Shah Jalal did not commit any atrocities on the Hindu temples and idols. For this reason, the Hindus who did not convert also respected him. Thus the author tried to place Jalal’s exercise in the proper perspective. Instead of looking at the annexation of Srihatta as a sudden burst of fanatical zeal, he saw it as a part of a long drawn political process, which also involved the careful reconciliation of the people to the new regime. Sudhir Kumar Mitra has also cited several examples of local level Muslim leaders destroying Hindu temples and converting them into mosques. These structures later served as nodal points for spreading Islam in the countryside. One of the more important ones was the dargah of Zafar Khan Ghazi, at Tribeni. On the walls of the

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563 Ibid., p. 416.
565 Sudhirkumar Mitra, ‘Hughly Jelar Itihas’ op.cit, p.442-44
dargah we find Hindu, Buddhist and Jain sculptures. This showcases the religious evolution of the place.

Harekrishna Mukherjee in his *Gaur Banga Sanskriti* (The Culture of Gauda and Vanga), has given a touching and vivid description of the destruction of Hindu socio-political order by Ghazis and pirs. He wrote that those who were gullible enough to believe in the myth of the conquest of entire Bengal by only 17 horsemen should visit the countless minor villages of Bengal. There they should find immumerable ruins treasuring the memory of hundreds of Hindu heroes who died fighting against the militant preachers, the Ghazis and the pirs. Tragic tales about some of these martyrs like Swet and Basanta were still current in the rural society. Owing to their heroism, Bengal, even Rarh, was not conquered in a day. The habitats of the pirs are also visible in the hamlets. They first entered the territories of the Hindu chiefs as innocent preachers, then picked up a quarrel, and then raising the cry ‘Islam in danger’ procured armed help from the provincial Muslim authority. With this support, they either captured that principality or died fighting. A dead pir was honoured as a *shahid* or martyr. They frequently took recourse to conspiracy and treachery to achieve their end.

We can close this discussion on the political role of the pirs, with some comments from Akbar Ali Khan, who considered this issue in detail. According to him, altogether 59 pirs of undoubted historicity preached Islam in Bengal, from the ninth to seventeenth centuries. Three of them actually started their activities much before the conquest of Bakhtiyar Khalji. However, the work of the pirs was concentrated mostly between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. Gathering momentum in the thirteenth century, their missionary activities were most intense in the fourteenth century, lost steam in the fifteenth, and regained vitality in the sixteenth. Thus, we see that the Bengalis’ conversion to Islam was a long-drawn and complex process. To gauge the scale of the pirs’ operations, we can analyse the information given below:

567 Akbar Ali Khan, ‘Bangladesher Swattar Anneshwa’ op.cit p. 92
Table 5.2: Activities of Pirs and Faqirs in Bengal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Number of Pirs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chattagram</td>
<td>Ninth – Sixteenth Centuries</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noakhali</td>
<td>Thirteenth century</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Komillah</td>
<td>Fourteenth – Fifteenth Centuries</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Srihatta</td>
<td>Fourteenth Century</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mymensingh</td>
<td>Eleventh – Sixteenth Centuries</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhaka</td>
<td>Thirteenth – Sixteenth Centuries</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakharganj</td>
<td>Fourteenth – Fifteenth Centuries</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khulna</td>
<td>Fifteenth Century</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessore</td>
<td>Sixteenth Century</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajshahi</td>
<td>Fifteenth – Sixteenth Centuries</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pabna</td>
<td>Thirteenth – Sixteenth Centuries</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bagura</td>
<td>Eleventh - ? Centuries</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangpur</td>
<td>? – Fifteenth Centuries</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinajpur</td>
<td>? – Sixteenth Centuries</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldah</td>
<td>Thirteenth – Seventeenth Centuries</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 – Parganas</td>
<td>Fourteenth - ? Centuries</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kolkata</td>
<td>? Century</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hughly</td>
<td>Thirteenth – Fourteenth Centuries</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From this chart it is evident that the pirs were especially active in Dhaka, Maldah and the Barddhaman-Hughly belt. However, Khan excluded from his list those mythical pirs, whose majhars or memorials could not be located exactly. He refused to accept that the briskness of these religious mentors was unique to Bengal. Rather the local-level preachers were equally energetic in other parts of the sub-continent. In Punjab and the N.W.F.P. as many as 113 pirs could be traced including the legendary Baba Farid and Nizam-ud–din Aulia. However, the Muslim saints were much more successful in Bengal, than in many other parts of India. The reason for this, which Asim Roy, Richard Eaton and Khan have tried hard to sort out, should not engage us here. It is only sufficient to say, that the lower sections of the indigenous population were not as strictly bound to mainstream Hinduism as their north Indian counterparts. So, they could easily switch over to Islam from an authocthonous cultural background.

Two legendary themes recur in the rural narratives about the conquest of the Hindu localities by the Muslim pirs. They centre around the existence of Jiyat Kunda or ‘lake of life’ and the role of trained pigeons. The rustic lores follow a familiar pattern regarding these subjects. A Muslim pir, helped by free-lance ghazis and state soldiers attacked a Hindu stronghold. The country raja succeeded in repelling the first few onslaughts as he had a ‘lake of life’ in his fort. The bodies of his dead soldiers were washed in its waters, and immediately they came back to life! The Muslim leader after some time came to know of the secret, and then made this tank impure by throwing some filthy object into it, such as cow’s meat or blood. After losing this charm, the Hindu defenders invariably collapsed before the invaders. Secondly, when the Hindu Raja went out for a desperate fight against his Muslim adversary, he carried two pigeons with him,
one white and another dark. If he emerged victorious he would set the former free and it would carry the news to the members of the royal family. If defeat stared at him, he would set the black pigeon free and it would perform the same function. His family members, especially the ladies, would then take their own lives rather than fall in the hands of their alien opponents. But, it so happened, that the king, after winning, set the black pigeon aflight by mistake. Realising his error, he rushed back to the palace, but before he could arrive, his near ones had already destroyed themselves. Like a Samson shorn, he then committed suicide. With the king gone, the Muslims attacked with renewed enthusiasm and occupied the place.

A number of such incidents have been recorded by the local historians under consideration. Here we would mention only a few examples. Kedarnath Majumdar in his Dhakar Bibaran had written that in early fourteenth century Vallal Sena II, one of the last kings of the Sena dynasty, got involved in a dispute with a pir from Mecca, Baba Adam. Ballal won the day, but the black pigeon he had carried with him, flew back to the palace before him. Members of the royal family, thinking Ballal to be dead self-immolated themselves. The aggrieved king also later destroyed himself, and remaining parts of Bengal were finally occupied by the Muslims. Kumudnath Mullick in his Nadia Kahini recorded the legend of Devapala of Devagram. He rose from being an ordinary blacksmith to the chieftain of that place. He like Vallal Sena II, was strict defender of his faith, and opposed Islamic dominance. He soon got into trouble with the Governor of Bengal, and war started between the two. To redress his grievances, Devapala visited the imperial court of Delhi, where his view was upheld. The zamindar, as usual carried two pigeons, with him. His assistant, after accepting huge bribe from the Bengal Governor, released the black bird, instead of the white. The relatives of Devapala, who were besieged by the Muslims, drowned themselves after watching the carrier of evil tidings. Devapala, who upon his arrival was stunned beyond belief, perished, fighting the intruders.

569 Kumudnath Mullick, ‘Nadia Kahini’, op.cit, p. 15
Sudhir Kumar Mitra, in his *Hughly Jelar Itihas* has recorded a tale regarding the ‘lake of life’. In Mahanad near Pandua, there was such a water body. Its magical powers allowed the local raja to stave off successive Muslim invasions led by pirs like Shah Sufi, during the late thirteenth century. At last the Muslim authorities came to know of this secret and they sent a faqir to despoil the tank. He went there on the pretext of taking a bath and dropped a piece of cow’s flesh into it. The raja put the faqir to death but the damage had been done by then. Robbed of the supernatural qualities of the ‘lake of life’, the raja could not withstand the next Islamic onrush. After the victory, the Muslims erected the faqir’s *majhar* there. Satish Mitra had mentioned a similar story about this ‘lake of life’ in his narrative about Barakhan Ghazi. He said that Mukut Ray had such a tank whose waters would revive his dead soldiers and he could continue his fight against Ghazi. Later Ghazi’s men spoil the fen by dropping cow’s blood into it. After this, Mukut Ray and his general Dakshin Ray lost the day. Mitra tried to provide a realistic explanation of these supernatural legends. According to him, these water-bodies provided the much necessary supply of water to the besieged people of the concerned areas. The invaders made them poisonous by throwing filthy objects such as meat and blood in them. Thus, the Hindu garrison was deprived of water and was forced to fight under unfavourable circumstances. Popular romantic memory invested such normal events with a mythical colour owing to their tragic ends. Hero-worship of such micro-chieftains as Dakshin Ray and Beni Ray is not unbecoming of the common people as they did not deliberately provoke the Muslims, but were forced to defend themselves when the politico-spiritual pirs or faqirs picked up a quarrel.

5.5 THE BHADRALOK-PEASANT EQUATION IN LOCAL HISTORY: In this section we would try to analyse the view which the local historians took about the peasant insurgencies and the zamindar-peasant relations. The issue is important as this would aptly bring out the general ‘bhadralok’ opinion about the subaltern activity. Ranajit Guha had aptly remarked, in his classic work on peasant insurgency: ‘Most, though not all, of this evidence is elitist in origin.........Staple of most historical writing on colonial themes, evidence of this type has a way of stamping the interests and outlook

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570 Sudhir Kumar Mitra, ‘Hughly Jelar Itihas’, op.cit, p. 402
of the rebels’ enemies on every account of our peasant rebellions …… One obvious way of combating such bias could perhaps be to summon folk-lore, oral as well as written, to the historian’s aid. Unfortunately, however there is not enough to serve for this purpose either in quantity or quality in spite of populist beliefs to the contrary. For one thing, the actual volume of evidence yielded by songs, rhymes, ballads, anecdotes etc. indeed is very meagre, to the point of being insignificant, compared to the size of documentation available from elitist sources on almost any agrarian movement of our period. This is a measure not only of the monopoly which the peasant’s enemies had of literacy under the Raj, but of their concern to watch and record every hostile gesture among the rural masses. They simply had too much to lose, and fear which haunts all authority based on force, made careful archivists of them’.  

Thus, we see that the bhadraloks had always tried to twist the narrative of the downtroddens’ movement in their own way, justifying the statement ‘one man’s pirate, other man’s patriot’. The great historians like Sir Jadunath and R. C. Majumdar, who could often rise above such common prejudices, were naturally always very few. So the numerous and varied productions of minor sub-regional historians more reliably reflect the common bhadralok psyche. Also, as these books focus on limited space, the voice of the subalterns may accidentally find a place there. Presently, we would try to examine the contents of some of the local histories and see what evidence can be found. Kumudnath Mullick has written perceptively on the situation of the peasantry and the controversial peasant-moneylender (mahajan) equation. He said: firstly, once a peasant fell into the trap of a moneylender there was no easy way out. But it has to be admitted that the latter rendered valuable service during famines by advancing food and ready cash. As a positive development, however, the agriculturists were improving their position by cultivating jute and repaying their debts. Secondly, the farmers did not give full attention to the development of their fields as they had no permanent occupancy rights.

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573 Kumudnath Mullick, ‘Nadia Kahini’, op.cit pp. 305 & 307, ‘Ekbar je krishak mahajaner kache rhine abaddha hoi, tahar aar sahaje niskriti nai’
Mullick also efficiently explained the tragic situation of the most of the bhadraloks during the colonial period. The bhadraloks were distinct from the common folk owing to their education and culture. But, as Sumit Sarkar has pointed out, by the beginning of the twentieth century the majority of them were either jobless or lived on inadequate income derived from a petty job or little landed property. At the same time, they could not take recourse to manual labour to augment their finance. So, the bhadraloks’ lot was truly desperate, within the inexorable logic of colonial economy. This has been portrayed, in a touching fashion, by a host of Bengali writers, ranging from Tagore to Manik Bandyopadhyay. Mullick had thus commented on this issue: ‘The price rise has affected the middle-income group most adversely. This is because their family maintainence cost is much higher than that of the peasants. They are forced to borrow when some social occasion arrives.’ Mullick informed us that a bhadralok needed at least Rs. 8 a month to feed his family, while an agriculturalist could manage with only Rs. 4 and 9 annahs.

Kumudnath’s treatment of the famous rebellion of Titu Mir is also interesting. Here no detailed introduction of Titu Mir is necessary. We have already touched upon the theme earlier in the chapter, in section 5.2. He wrote that Titu’s religious views did not conform to Quranic doctrines. So, no respectable Muslim joined him. Only some lowly placed artisans followed him. Titu needed ready money to sustain his expanding band. But he had no well thought-out economic plan. So he started looting the houses of well-off citizens. Ultimately he defied the authority of the British rule and declared himself to be the Emperor of India. Thus, here we have a classic example of a prosperous landlord bhadralok, analyzing a rural peasant uprising. For him, everything about Titu Mir is negative. But Titu’s movement can be viewed from a more complex angle. Titu preached a simple form of Islamic faith which was intelligible to the common mass. He deliberately tried to loot the upper-class rural elite and distribute the property among his subaltern followers. Probably, he attacked the zamindars not because they were Hindus, but they were oppressors of the masses. In the end, we find the subaltern consciousness

finding full expression in Titu Mir. He sought to overturn the exploitative established social order, by de-recognising its greatest bastion, the British Raj and declaring himself the king. Religion, as Ranajit Guha had shown often acted as a tool of inversion. Titu’s men sometimes desecrated Hindu shrines because they wanted to challenge the authority of their patrons, the landed elite. This dialectical angle was missing in Kumudnath’s narrative.

Now, it would be interesting to see what another affluent zamindar, of east Bengal, had to say on this issue. Kalinath Chaudhuri, who wrote *Rajshahir Itihas*, devoted a separate sub-section on zamindar-peasant relationship. There he made a number of significant observations. He criticized the zamindars for their short comings. He also observed that, despite their outwardly ostentatious living, many of the smaller landowners suffered from acute poverty. He blamed absentee landlordism and the corruption of the zamindari bureaucracy for the deterioration of zamindar-peasantry relationship and occasional peasant unrest. He wrote in detail about the various categories of agriculturists. Here he made the significant observation that most of the actual tillers of the soil were Muslims, while the landed intermediaries were Hindus. It seems that the author had the picture of an ideal agricultural society in mind, and therefore made repeated unfavourable comparisons of the present state with the classic past. Possibly owing to this reason, instead of stressing on the proper economic factors, Chaudhuri blamed moral decadence for the current deterioration of the rural situation. He also repeatedly counted on the role of education for improving the quality of zamindari governance and increasing the consciousness of the common folk. Here we can provide a few examples from his writings:

(i) With the spread of modern education, zamindari corruption is decreasing. If the zamindar is well-educated and just, the subjects can live in peace.

(ii) We must compare the attitude of the agriculturists of the present day with those of yore. The latter spent a simple, satisfied life and tried not to borrow. On the other hand

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the former live in style, and try to ape the bhadraloks. So they borrow freely and after paying the dues of the zamindar and the moneylender are left with no capital.

(iii) Even God is merciful towards a just zamindar. In Mahanirban tantra it is written that a zamindar should not cast covetous eyes on the belongings of the peasant. If the latter is pauperized the farmer also faces ruin. It is the duty of the zamindar to guide the subject towards wisdom and prosperity.’ Thus, we see that the author had a strongly moralistic view of the Bengali rural society and even invoked the ancient texts to inspire the zamindars.

Pyarimohan Sen in his *Noakhalir Itihas* (1900) showed the zamindars in an unfavourable light. He highlighted two aspects: i) The local zamindari lineage did nothing to develop Bhulua. Their only occupation was ceaseless extraction of money.579 ii) The area lost its peace as various zamindars quarreled among themselves. They wreaked terrible vengeance on people they disliked. Some particularly licentious zamindars even cast covetous eyes on chaste women of the locality. Their petty conflicts became a cause for steady concern of the docile peasantry.580

Ramanuja Kar in his *Bankura Jelar Bibaran* also mounted a scathing criticism against the absentee landlord of his area, i.e. the zamindar of Barddhaman. He said that the Raja of Barddhaman was the premier zamindar of Bankura. Their house extracted at least Rs. 2 crore from this district over the last 118 years. But they never cared a whit for the welfare of the place, though they were the premier zamindari house of Bengal. They never donated even Rs. 5000 at one go for any beneficial cause in Bankura.581 In contrast he bestowed high praise on the Brahmin zamindars of Simlapal and Bhalaidhiha, who always resided in their estates. Thus, the subjects had direct access to them. They even took active part in the cultivation of land. Kar showed that the peasants were also sympathetic towards benevolent landlords. The zamindar of Chhatna was immersed deep in debt, but his subjects came forward to help him out.

579 Pyarimohan Sen, ‘Noakhalir Itihas’, op.cit p. 34
580 Ibid p.29
581 Ramanuja kar, ‘Bankura Jelar Itihas’, op.cit p. 33
No discussion regarding the agricultural scenario is complete without a reference to the Pabna uprisings of early 1870s. Radharaman Saha in his *Pabna Jelar Itihas* dealt with the causes and progress of the uprising in detail. He did not take the zamindars’ side unnecessarily and actually blamed the faulty zamindari system for the trouble. For him, there were three major reasons for the agricultural rebellion. First, the zamindari rent rate was higher than that of the other districts. Second, the taxes were being increased arbitrarily and the peasants were unsure about the amount they had to pay. Third, the corruption and avarice of some of the zamindars and their employees contributed to the situation. By the 1870s, Pabna, especially the Yusufshahi tract came under a few absentee landlords, who wanted to increase their rent, even by dubious means. This brought them into conflict with their subjects, who were habituated to the traditional demands of the Natore Raj. Saha himself admitted that this was not a common destructive rebellion, and the peasants had legitimate right to rise against the oppressive zamindar. He wrote: ‘This was not a usual rebellion. The peasants demanded in a body that rent should be reduced. They wanted to bring back the old form of assessment’ 582

Various psychological trends of the rebels have been portrayed by the author. He said that at first truly aggrieved peasants joined hands to resist the zamindars. But soon some anti-socials joined the movement to secure their own evil ends and thus spoilt its character. The case of Ischanchandra Ray is again interesting. 583 He was a country gentleman who was hard pressed by the local zamindar Bannerjee family. Failing to settle his personal score with this powerful rival, he joined the rebels. As he was *bhadralok* he was accepted as the leader by the peasantry. Thus, to secure his personal gains, Ishan Chandra sacrificed his elite class character and joined the subalterns. 584 By the 1870s,


583 Ibid p. 231

584 More recently Prof. Binay Chaudhuri and Kalyankumar Sengupta have debated the nature of the Pabna uprisings. According to B.B. Chaudhuri the prime reason behind this movement was the abrupt and significant rise of rent by the zamindars. This coincided with an agricultural depression and the peasants were really hard pressed. So when the zamindars applied coercion to extract rent the peasants revolted. B.B. Chaudhuri claimed that stratification within the peasantry was not relevant here. All of them, whether solvent or poor, were anti-Zamindar. However, according to Kalyan Sengupta, this was primarily a struggle of the substantial peasantry against the zamindars. Owing to the flourishing of the agricultural sector from the 1850s, they had acquired considerable resources and had become small scale property holders. They
rural disturbances also started taking a disturbingly communal turn. About this the author said: ‘During the last few years communal relations have worsened in the country owing to the activities of some short-sighted self-seekers. Therefore, in this district, some Muslim agricultural labourers refused to cultivate the fields of Hindu land-owners. As a result, members of both the communities are suffering in places like Chatmohar. Thus, we see that a kaleidoscopic picture of the zamindar-peasant interactions emerge from the local histories. The writers came from bhadralok background, but not all of them went overboard in support of the zamindars. Rather, many of them severely criticized the landlord and pointed out the evils of the zamindari system. Sympathy for the peasants was also evident.

5.6 LOCAL HISTORIES FROM CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE: So far we have dealt with various aspects of the works of local history written between 1850 and 1950. The contribution of their authors to the field of historiography of Bengal is undoubted. But at the same time it has to be admitted that these texts suffered from serious shortcomings. In this section we would try to enumerate some of them. The first and foremost flaw of these local pedants was certainly their jingoism, evidence of which has been provided in the earlier chapters as well. They were mostly amateurs who collected information and artifacts about their locality, owing to their patriotism. But, as they lacked proper historical training they often could not keep their emotion under control. Primarily for this, they were given a short shrift by the major professional historians. Even now, local history has largely failed to find a place in mainstream history curriculum. Hiteshranjan Sanyal’s controversial review of Sudhir Mitra’s work drives home this point. In his *Hughly Jelar Deb-Deul*, Mitra went gaga over the temples of his district. He gushingly remarked: ‘The temples of Hughly are unparalleled in all wanted to resist zamindari encroachments on their properties and guard the privilege gained under the Tenancy Act of 1859. The poorer agriculturists also participated in the revolt, but their problems and grievances were never seriously addressed. For this discussion see Sanjukta Dasgupta ‘Peasant and Tribal Movements in Colonial Bengal’ in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay ed. *Bengal Rethinking History: Essays in Histriography* (Manohar, New Delhi, 2001), pp.71-73.

R. Saha, ‘Pabna Jelar Itihas’ op.cit, p. 231

Hitesh Sanyal, *Chaturanga* (Kolkata, Chaitra-Baisakh, 1379, pp. 65-73). All the arguments of Sanyal against Mitra are found within these pages. e.g ‘Jela bhittik alochonar aar ekta bipad ache. Eta abashya byaktigata monobhaber prashna. Bipadta ase attirikta jela priti theke’
Bengal. They display a rich variety of architectural style which is rare in the entire country.  

Sanyal, looking through the glasses of a specialist, launched a scathing satire against Mitra. He opined that there was a great intellectual danger associated with cultivation of local history i.e jingoism. An example of a product of such mentality is *Hughly-JeIar Deb-Deul*. There is simply no reason to believe that art and architecture of Hughly attained any special height. After this Sanyal went on to find several faults with Mitra’s analysis of temple-architecture. This need not engage us here. But Sanyal made certain observations which reflect the standpoint of a formal historian with regard to local history. This is important for our purpose. He noted that there was a recent trend of discussing the architectural history of various districts. However, it is highly doubtful whether the modern districts serve as useful units of appreciating cultural antiquity. This is because they were largely artificial units created by the British administration, not natural cultural zones. So, it remains questionable whether one should detach Hughly from the neighbouring areas while dwelling on the history of temples.

Similar criticisms were mounted against Mitra by other scholars as well. In *Desh* magazine, the anonymous reviewer criticized Mitra for compiling huge data in a haphazard fashion. Often data such as lists of schools and colleges, roads under the municipality and published magazines, were compiled mechanically without any effort to create a logical narrative. More importantly in the zeal of collecting data, Mitra often missed the true historical significance of many events and phenomena. Especially, the aspect of folk-culture remained neglected by Mitra. The reviewer said that Mitra missed the significance of the existing popular cults of *Sini* gods and jungle deities of Arambag. There are catalogues of religious festivals and gatherings, but the rich cultural matrix of Arambag is not sociologically analysed. One quote from this review would illustrate the attitude and shortcomings of a local historian like Mitra: ‘It seems that composition of an analytical history did not fall within the mental scope of the author. His target was to collect as much first-hand information as possible. Owing to this possibly he did not even care to properly organize his data. While describing any place, he has dealt with many
subjects without establishing any logical connection’.\textsuperscript{588} While giving a pen-picture of Chinsurah, he dealt most haphazardly with topics as varied as Ramram Basu, Taraknath Biswas, Kana or ‘blind’ chandi, the district board, Victoria hall and the refrigerator of Chinsurah within just 11 pages.

Other noted local historians like Achyutacharan Chaudhuri and Kantichandra Rarhi were also not free from jingoism. Yajneshwar Chaudhuri has claimed that Chaudhuri failed to interpret Bhaskarvarma’s inscriptions properly and thus provided wrong information. He also laid claim upon almost every noted Bengali as inhabitant of Srihatta. Even Sri Chaitanya Deva could not escape his clutches! Kantichandra Rarhi claimed the most hoary antiquity for Nabadwip on the dubious testimony of \textit{Bhaktiratnakara}.\textsuperscript{589} Reasons for this may be that when the genre of local history started taking off, the norms of objective historiography had not yet been firmly set in Bengal. Archaeology was also in its nascent stage. So, collection of strictly historical evidence and assessment of them in a critical fashion were not practised widely by Bengali scholars. Besides, basic material regarding ancient period was really scarce. So, the historians had to construct their argument on dubious testimony of fables, legends and hearsay. Also, expectedly, in local memory historical events often mixed up with figments of imagination. This hampered the work of local historians.

The point that Mitra failed to grasp the significance of popular culture, brings us to our next major theme. This is the ‘class-identity’ of the local historians. Claiming to write the social history of a locality, they mostly confined themselves to the description of and anecdotes about major zamindari families and aristocratic figures like Pratapaditya and Sitaram. Subalterns like depressed castes and tribals hardly received proper treatment from them. The local pedants mostly failed to trace the complex evolution of a local society. They were rather content to give merely full catalogues and short descriptions of various groups, castes and religion. Books like Jogendranath

\textsuperscript{588} \textit{Desh} Magazine (Kolkata), 5th July, 1964, p. 55. ‘Alochona o byakha-bishleshan-pradhan itihas rachana kora lekhaker uddesho noi ebong granther parikalpana dekhe mone hoi je seta tnar lakshero bhahirbhuto’. Translation mine.

\textsuperscript{589} Yajneshwar Chaudhuri, \textit{Anchalik Itihascharcha O Granthapanji}, (Nabadwip Purattava Parishad, Nadia 2008), chapter 1
Gupta’s *Vikrampurer Itihas* (1909) are full of such stories about zamindars and lists of social groups.\[^{590}\] They were also prone looking at the lives of the downtrodden with an unsympathetic, patronizing angle. Kumud Mullick’s contemptuous dismissal of Titu Mir and the minor Vaishnava sects has already been referred to. Only a few writers such as Anandanath Ray and Sashibhushan Ray had a larger social consciousness. Sashibhushan Ray launched a scathing criticism of the British government and the zamindar-moneylender combination for neglecting and exploiting the simple Santhal tribals. He painted a sympathetic picture of the latters’ woes.\[^{591}\] The subject which did receive some critical attention from the local historians was the sub-divisions within the higher castes (such as Rarhi, Varendra and Vangaja) and related issues like Kulinism. Much interesting information is available from the sub-regional chronicles about the Kulin Brahmins and members of other high-castes.\[^{592}\]

Too much nostalgia and romanticism often led the authors to put emphasis on a particular period or phenomenon of a locality, while neglecting other things. Nikhilnath Ray in his *Murshidabader Itihas* spent bulk of the book on the Nawabs, who actually ruled Bengal for only 51 years (1713-1764). Detailed character-sketches and numerous legends about the Nawabs are collected here. In his other book *Murshidabad Kahini*, (1897) Ray compiled essays which concentrated almost exclusively on the Nawabi era. This gave the impression that other periods of Murshidabad’s history were rather insignificant. Kumudnath Mullick in his *Nadia Kahini* (1910) assembled a large number of supernatural and incredulous anecdotes about the pundits of Nabadwip like Ramrudra Vidyanidhi and Jagannath Tarkapanchanan. They should not have found a place in a proper history-book.\[^{593}\]

The local historians cannot be relied upon in terms of chronology and factual accuracy. As they relied upon doubtful local traditions, their chronological arrangement mostly did not agree with expert macro-historians. For example, a major professional like

\[^{593}\] Kumudnath Mullick, ‘Nadia Kahini’, op.cit, p.150
Sir Jadunath Sarkar, held on unimpeachable evidence, that Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore was finally crushed by Islam Khan during the reign of Jahangir, but tradition current in Jessore-Khulna claimed that Pratap was worsted by Raja Man Singh in the age of Akbar. Bharatchandra had immortalized this story in his *Annadamangal*. His dramatic description has been etched forever in the Bengalis’ memory. But sadly, this poetic version is incorrect. To his credit Satish Mitra agreed with Sarkar, after studying the original sources. In *Barddhaman Rajvamsanucharita*, Rakhaldas Mukherjee had written that Raja Tejchandra had constructed a road from Barddhaman to Kalna. But actually, the road was built much before Tejchand and this could be proved from Reynell’s Atlas of 1779. Also some local antiquarions from Barddhaman claimed that Raja Kirtichand played a major role in repulsing the Bargis. But Kiritichand really died in 1740, while the Bargis started raiding Bengal from 1742. However, only local historians should not be blamed for factual inaccuracies. Even leading intellectuals like Ramaprasad Chanda and Dinesh Chandra Sen were guilty of not only providing misinformation but of deliberately twisting facts to suit their own ends. Prabodhchandra Sen had shown that Dinesh Sen intentionally misread the Gwalior inscription of Pratihara Mihirbhoja to prove the relevance of the title of his book, *Brihat Banga*. Ramaprasad Chanda, too, went at great length to prove that the Sena kings were originally the inhabitants of Varendra. For this he was rightly criticized by D. C. Sircar and Harekrishna Mukherjee.

Basically the local historians always struggled to achieve a chronological connection between so called macro and *nano* history. They adopted mainly the chronological framework used for national history by prominent historians e.g. the tripartite time-scale of Hindu, Muslim and British era. But the problem is that crucial events of national / provincial history might not have any impact on the distant localities. In the local memory, natural calamities and poltical events confined to the area could be more important. As Professor Bhaskar Chakraborty has said, ‘a locality is not always the nation writ small’. In the sub-regional context, a ‘crafty rural boss’ like Pratapaditya or

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594 Rakhaldas Mukherjee *Barddhaman Rajvamsanucharita* (Indu Publications, Barddhaman2003, originally published in 1915) p. 97
596 Prabodhchandra Sen, ‘Banglar Itihas Sadhana’ (Kolkata, 1952), p.52
597 Review article, *Bharatvarsha* magazine, Kartik 1341 BE, pp.698-703
Sitaram and ‘the rebellious peasant opponent’ like Titu Mir or the Pabna rebels might be more significant than leading supra-regional figures such as Dharmapala, Islam Khan Chisti or Shah Shuja. It is interesting to note that professional historians like R.C. Majumdar projected Dharmapala and Devapala as standard bearers of Bengali nationalism, but in Bengali folk-memory, among the Pala kings, only the name of Mahipala has been preserved. The local historians, as has been shown earlier, depended largely on country traditions, hearsay and oral testimonies as their sources. These were certainly different from the archival materials used by the formal scholars. So, the mindset behind the two types of works and the time scheme employed in them had to be different. But it seems that most of the local historians were caught between the two conceptions of history. When they composed their work, especially from the late nineteenth century, their models remained supra-regional narratives composed by Europeans and Western-educated Indians. So, a History of Faridpur was often sub-consciously modelled upon a ‘History of India’ or a ‘History of Bengal’. But as their sources such as Ghazir Geet (the ballad of Ghazi) or Chitra champu (short ballad about Chitrasen) were of more indigenous origin and conformed to the native itihas-purana tradition, the local historians should have constructed their work more innovatively. The flair for local memory should have been more evident there. Only one or two glorious exceptions like Satish Mitra could achieve a healthy balance between the two historiographies.

Recently subalternists and post-modernists have shown that Unitarian nationalism may not be the only organizing element in Indian historiography. Sub-nationalism, local factionalism and autonomous peasant movements can be studied for their own sake. Historians belonging to different schools such as Ranajit Guha and C. A. Bayly have claimed that distinct regions and human groups in India possess possibilities of autonomous action and are different from each other to some extent. According to Ranajit Guha, peasant movements are limited to a restricted space. So, when they should

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598 Bhaskar Chakraborty, ‘Writing Local History : Some Problems’ (Sonarpur College journal, Sonarpur, 2004)
be studied, the local factor should be kept in mind. It would have been good to see prevalence of this view among our local historians.

One particular example of the intellectual confusion of the local historians was the case of Adisura. The legendary king, credited with the introduction of Brahmanical culture in Bengal, once occupied a prominent place in Bengali histories. Some old regional historians and some local historians made much of Adisura. Historians like Kedarnath Majumdar (in *Mymensingher Itihas*) made Adisura the great-grand father of Vijaysena, and thereby the founder of the Sena lineage. According to Majumdar, he was the king of Samatata in the tenth century and his power-centre was Vikrampur. On the other hand, Pareshchandra Banerjee, in his *Bangalar Purabritta*, made Adisura a figure of the eighth century, who ruled over Gauda. In fact, he refused to accept the early Pala rulers as the kings of Bengal. For him, they were the kings of Magadha or Bihar who sometimes invaded Gauda. The latter was ruled by an equally powerful lineage, the Suras, established by Adisura. Banerjee definitely contradicted Majumdar’s conclusion that Adisura ruled in Vikrampur, or had any connection with the Senas. Bannerjee held that the Palas entered Bengal only after the decline of the Suras. The two historians were again at loggerheads with regard to the actual name of Adisura. For Majumdar he was Virasena, while for Banerjee, he was none other than Jayanta, the father-in-law of Jayapida, the potentate of Kashmir. Thus, we see that even these scholars had no clear idea about the historicity of Adisura. Dineshchandra Sen, who extensively used traditional sources for his *Brihat Banga*, again denied the physical existence of Adisura. He said: ‘The Brahmins had forgotten which Sura king had brought them to Bengal. They just remembered that he was one of the early or adi kings of the dynasty. So they called him Adisura. Thus it seems that Adisura was not the name of any historical person.’ Veteran nationalist historian R.C. Majumdar also doubted the historicity of the legendary monarch.

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600 Ranajit Guha op.cit, p.278
More recently, Dilip Kumar Biswas and Amitabha Bhattacharya, while editing *Banglar Itihas* by Rakhaldas Banerjee, commented in some detail on this issue. In the medieval Kulajis there are a number of stories about Adisura. But they cannot be proved by definite historical evidences. Even different Kulashastra texts do not support each other. They provide varying descriptions of Adisura’s lineage and kingdom. The tale of the arrival of the five Brahmins is also narrated variously. At least nine different dates of the event are given in different kulajis. The names of the Brahmins also vary. For these reasons modern historians do not accept the lore of Adisura as authentic.\(^{604}\) Thus, we see that the local historians like Kedarnath Majumdar and Jatindramohan Ray were trying to fit in a legendary person within their strictly Westernized historical framework. The story of Adisura, despite its fictional contents, remains significant in the field of social history. But, for accommodating it within an academic historical text, the local pedants should have created a structure which was more flexible than the one found in professional history text-books.

However, the local historians should not be unduly criticized for following the Gazetteer model. The district gazetteers were carefully compiled by able and educated officials. So, they were quite reliable. The nano-historians did the common Bengali readers a service by borrowing a large amount of information from the gazetteers and presenting them in Bengali in their own works. Also there were no proper indigenous local accounts when the historians under consideration started writing. So, in the absence of a native ideal, the sub-regional pedants had no other alternative than to follow the readily available English gazetteer model. Following the gazetteer structure, authors like Achyutacharan Tattvanidhi included a huge amount of socio-cultural data in their work. These are of invaluable help to even mainstream macro historians. However, as Chaudhuri was writing the narrative history of the region, he might have easily reduced the number of pages devoted to natural and geographical aspects. Again, the more

successful among the local historians did not blindly copy the gazetteers. Jatindramohan Ray modelled the first volume of his *Dhakar Itihas* on the British accounts but included much longer amount of data than found in the efforts of Hunter & Taylor.

Now we can spare a few lines for comparing the style of writing followed in Western and Eastern halves of Bengal. We have to only remember the superb descriptions of Satish Mitra and Achyuta Chaudhuri, quoted in chapter 3 to realize to what remarkable height they lifted the genre of nano-history. Achyutacharan and Jatindramohan Ray wrote in crisp and straightforward style. There is a popular feeling that their Western Bengali counterparts often failed to live up to such standards. But such opinions are belied by examples of portraying capacity of authors such as Sudhir Kumar Mitra and Mahimaniranjan Chakravarti. We can present this quote of Mitra from an episode about the *Tantriks* as a specimen: ‘After the sunset, the sky was infested with dark rain clouds. Wind started blowing with great speed. Soon it started raining. Thunderclaps reverberated round the atmosphere. The world was covered with darkness….. During their journey the sky lit up with flashes of blue lightning.  

However not all writers of Western Bengal were that gifted. Some such as Gaurihar Mitra in *Birbhum Itihas* presented a rather dry narrative, which stressed only on recording information like revenue figures. Still, it appears that, in terms of literary skills, a larger number of successful works were produced in Eastern Bengal than in the Western half. Actually, in terms of literary style, most of the local historians, Eastern or Western Bengali, failed to excel. Their narratives are largely dry passages full of statistics or artificially high-sounding elegies composed in favour of their tracts. Examples of such books are *Tripurar Itibritta* by Kailashchandra Sinha, *Hughly Kahini* by Munindradeb Ray, *Bagurar Itihas* by Prabhaschandra Sen and *Birbhum Itihas* by Gaurihar Mitra. Here we have an example of deliberate Sanskritization and exaggerated self-appraisal: ‘Chattagram is the old centre of naval activities in India. It is the unique meeting point of numerous cultures. It has throughout maintained its autonomous identity. Chattagram has become a part of Bengal only 200-250 years ago. Earlier historians have largely neglected this geographically marginal region. So, surely the publication of my work

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605 SudhirKumar Mitra ‘Hughly Jelar Itihas’, op.cit, p.343
would create a furore in literary and historical circles.\textsuperscript{606} One has only to open books like Munindradeb Ray’s work on Hughly or Kedarnath Majumdar’s on Dhaka to see chapters which are full of statistical information, having little literary value.

5.7 CONCLUDING NOTE: In this chapter, we have tried to study the attitude of the local historians regarding some of the very relevant socio-political issues of the day. These issues include nationalism, religion and peasantry. We have noted that many local historians were in mental dilemma regarding the British. They could not shed their traditional loyalty towards the British completely but at the same time could not ignore the misrule of the colonial govt. Some authors like Ramanuja Kar were outspoken critics of the exploitative British rule. Regarding the religious question, authors like Kumudnath Mulick and Sudhir Mitra were quite critical of the Muslim rule. However men like Kalinath Chaudhuri were more discerning and tried to understand the causes behind the Muslim dominance in Bengal demography. About the peasants the bhadralok writers entertained complex feelings. They could not accept peasant rebellions easily but observers like Pyarimohan Sen squarely blamed the zamindars for the plight of the peasantry. We have noted that their response about various issues was largely decided by their bhadralok mindset. However, a handful of Muslim historians, who did not share the ‘Hindu bhadralok’ psyche, had a slightly different approach. Here we have also tried to point out some major shortcomings of the local pedants. Inclination towards jingoism and indecision about the historical model to be followed, Western or indigenous, made the historians concerned commit some errors. On the whole, these volumes reflect the complex and multi-faceted psyche of these authors.