

" Various Perspectives of Construction of History and the Study of Pre-modern Bengali Literature".

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ABSTRACT

In this proposed paper I shall be engaged in a study of medieval history and the process of constructing the history with the help of contemporary literature. Historians attempt to construct the past by combining literary statements with other non-literary 'evidence'. And this valid connection is the main focus of all our discussion. Literature is an important material in history writing. Literature helps the historians to get hold of the contemporary society and manages to reveal the underlying structure of any society and the mindset of the people living in that society. This is why literature is a crucial material for constructing the history of any period. This paper will deal with the medieval history and its inevitable connection with literature. The limitation of this paper should also be mentioned here, that is this paper will only highlight the connection between history and literature of the pre-modern period, but the objective of this paper is not to specify where history lies in literature.

Key words: *History, Literature, Medieval Bengal, Mangalkavya, Vaishnavism, Bengali literature.*

Almost a hundred years after the simultaneous lamentation and historical inspiration from Bankimchandra, regarding Bengal and history of Bengali, when another Bengali, Ahmad Sharif's speech laments on the undiscovered, unwritten, and undiscussed historylessness of this unfortunate self-forgotten nation, our history-consciousness has began to rediscover the history with a new spirit. Acharya Suniti Kumar Chatterjee while giving the definition of history, said "Itihas i.e. 'iti h aas' was like this before; history is about the past. About whose past? About the people of the past."(1). But history is not merely an unveiling of the past, it is also a construction. This method of constructing the past is recognized as an important process of historiography. History is constructed through the historical data and arguments between historians. In other words, 'what' we see and 'how' we see can contain all the elements of history. In addition to this, the inevitability of modifications in history in terms of time is also a matter of our research. Therefore, while discussing the consecutive history of history, there is no way to deny the fact that history is not a static practice. History is like a free flowing river. So, history is not always exactly the same; because selection and interpretation of facts and data from different perspectives can change the significance of history. In this context, we should remember that history is an altercation between the historical materials and the historians, and it is also a conversation between the reader and the historians. Historians provide 'evidence' to support his description and explanation, because his writing should be comprehensible to the reader. In this process, historians attempt to construct the past by combining literary statements with other non-literary 'evidence'. And this valid connection is the main focus of all our discussions.

In this context, our limitations should also need to be mentioned. In this academic article, we will only highlight the connection between history and literature of the pre-modern period. Although we mention the connection between history and literature, our intention is not to specify where history lies in literature. Some points regarding the relationship between history and literary narratives are highly relevant, yet, those are not intended to be described in this article. Rather we will pose a question ----- Does the social and ideological changes that the writer describes in his narrative, which exclusively belong to his personal time, (According to Ashin Dasgupta) help us to find out the historical changes of the 'larger timeframe'? (2) The question should be valid for us, because we know that fiction and history are not the same thing. But there is nothing stopping it from being a material of history, because every narrative refers to some historical moment. Each narrative of pre-modern Bengal has a clear contextual location, and poets also have their own

backgrounds. Therefore, according to us, the pre-modern Bengali narratives are the elements of the conception of history.

German historian Leopold Van Ranke is considered to be the draughtsman of history, rather historiography, as a separate academic discipline. He said that historians are not storyteller. Historians' job is to present an event exactly as it happened in the past. It requires data fidelity, thorough presentation of the basic elements of history. But history is no longer accepted as history by including only few past events. Those who make a list of events are not efficient historians. True history serves as a mirror of society. Its purpose is to expand the reader's vision about human nature and behaviour. Analysis of mindset and temperament is therefore, a major endeavour in recent historiography. Many historians said that if one does not understand the human mind, he cannot be able to understand the events properly. The human mind is reflected with all kinds of intricate complexities, and the secrets of the inner nature of different classes are revealed within the art of literature in different eras. This is why art-literature can be called the mystical document of human history. Without deciphering of these documents the mankind's introspection in the history is bound to be fragmented and incomplete. But the real truth is that in our country, literary material has been used in the writing of history as a source of data and information. Literature certainly does not present a chronological account like history textbooks. But what art literature can provide cannot be obtained from other traditional sources. In fact, the history that is written or explained with material data or statistics is actually the superstructure of history. The history that is written or interpreted without combining the psychological elements of the people creating history with the material facts, can never be the history of living people. It must be remembered that history is not only a reservoir of dull scholarship, but also the most important tool of social evolution. Therefore, mutual exchange between history and literature is not only for the sake of research, but it is also important to keep alive the relevance of this important branch of sociology among the people of all levels of society.

There was shortage of history writing in Bengal throughout the Middle Ages. There was no motivation to write history among the people of that time. Because the sense of individualism, which is necessary behind the creation of historical sense, was completely absent among the people of that time. However, even if there is no separate history text, it cannot be said that history was completely absent. Among the religious literary works, which are known as the main sources of medieval Bengali literature, sometimes again indirectly, various elements of historiography have remained. It is true that history provides 'evidence', but poetry goes beyond 'evidence' in its exploration of life and merges with the deeper pulse of life. However, the core essence of that period is described and identified in the works of the Bengali poets of the Middle Ages, and they have played the role of unbiased historians at that time.(3) In this context, we can see in the recent trend of history practice, in the case of Assam, the written books of Burunji, South India's Karanam, in the case of Rajasthan, the literature and the stories of the Charans, are increasing in importance day by day. Maratha's Bakhar is also in the same category. And in the case of Bengali, it is Mangalkavya. The literature is not just simple poetry. Historians like David Karl have not forgotten to mention its immense importance in the practice of history. Utilizing these stories intellectually, historians need to depict the changing society. Historians like Kumkum Chatterjee have also given importance to Kulagrantha or Kulji as an important element of Bengal's historiography in the pre-colonial period. It should be one of the duties of the students of medieval Bengali literature to determine the historical value of literature by creating a model on how literature takes place through the change of era and the change of literature.

Discovering the past and reconstructing it, was one of the characteristics of Bengal's early historiography. The two persons, who inspired the interest of Bengalis in this study of history, were ----- Bankimchandra and Rabindranath, although its traces could be found in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, mainly in the writings of some officials of the company. Needless to say, the local bureaucrats also participated in the initiative. However, there is no doubt that the spread of Western education and modernity awakened the sense of history among Bengalis. Practice of history and patriotism had become synonymous at that time. However, since nation is a huge concept, the history of homeland became the history of Bengal at that time. It became practically a vow to project our 'glorious past' against the white settlers ----- which Rabindranath identified as 'History-Enthusiasm'. It is pointless to retell that it has patriotism in it. But it is undeniable that there has been a shift in Bengali's historical thinking since early 20th century. Bengali intellectuals like Kaliprasanna Bandyopadhyay, Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, Ramaprasad Chand continued to practice history in their own way, following Western scientific methods. The search was going on in two ways. While historians like Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, Rameshchandra Majumdar, Akshay Kumar Maitreya did not want to accept anything as history without solid evidence, Nagendranath Bose tried to construct history with the help of literary sources, like Kulashastra. Durgachandra Sanyal clearly said that those who believe that only written documents are authentic source and do not believe in oral legends at all, their practice of history is incomplete. Besides, historians like Rampran Gupta mention literature as the best material of history. The researches of both parties were published in contemporary journals. Rameshchandra Majumdar declared this in

the literary conference of Musnshiganj in 1332. Since then, as the days progressed, the definition of history has changed, and its scope has expanded. Therefore, nowadays literature, culture, environment all of these belong to the study of history.

However, the Vaishnava tradition of medieval Bengali literature was considered to be an important factor in the reconstruction of Bengali consciousness in the nineteenth and twentieth century. To determine the shape and form of Bengali's hunt for reason, we have to go back repeatedly to the Vaishnava Mahajans' vision and conception. Chaitanya, the heart and soul of the Vaishnava tradition, is also not out of history. It is not easy to measure how much he is a god and how much a human being for Bengali self-consciousness, because at the same time when Bimanbihari, Asitkumar, Girija Shankar are trying to make Chaitanya Dev a human being, Banshibadan Babaji, professor Khagendranath Mitra, Mahapandit Rasikmohan Bidyabhushan, Nabadwipchandra Brajabasi and many others are portraying him as a god. Jadunath Sarkar and Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyay in their 'History of Bengal' and 'History of Odisha' respectively propagated the view that Vaishnavism had weakened Bengalis and Oriyans. Surendranath Dasgupta in his 'A History of Indian Philosophy' expressed his objections to the winged ideology. S.K. De in 'Chaitanyacharitamrita', found only self-contradictions, errors, ahistorical judgements and often hypocrisy. As a result of all these evaluations the reaction of the Vaishnavas became negative against history practice. The Vaishnava Bhakta Bhakti Pradiptirtha of Madras commented in his book, 'Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu', that 'Supreme Lord Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is not a historical person.' Therefore, we think that Vaishnava historiography should be now viewed in a new light.

Chaitanya Dev cannot be understood without history. His history is mainly cultural and social history, whose roots can be found in religion. Brindaban Das's 'Chaitanya Bhagavata' and Krishna Das's 'Chaitanyacharitamrita' ----- both commentaries on Vaishnavism are the outcome of the the the historical consciousness of the authors. Modern historians have highlighted the trend of constructing the economic history of Bengal by using these literary materials in their research works. Because according to them in many cases, economic status is connected with religious events or religion reform movements. But, we have to also judge whether the presentism of modern historians has any influence on construction of the history of the Vaishnava community.

Medieval Bengali literature can be our main resource not only for the construction of economic history, but also for the construction of the history of medieval communalism. However, a preliminary list of books to be read in order to develop a non-communal perspective in the study of Indian history, was published on 7th April 1983 at Calcutta University, by West Bengal History Council, on the occasion of the discussion on 'Communalism in the study of Indian History'. They felt that it was the task of modern scientific-minded historians to elucidate the obstacles and limitations that communal interpretations create in the practice of Indian history; otherwise the study of history is bound to be distorted. In understanding the problem of communalism if we avoid history and focus on the present, we will definitely make a mistake in that case. It is a problem whose roots are spread throughout the past history. So there is no way to avoid history. The theorists of communalism will drag us there by saying that the bitter relationship between two communities is not created by a third party, but the source of this conflict and hatred can be found in the pages of our own history.

The history of communalism basically belongs to social history. Although there was no contemporary consecutive documented history of Bengal in the Middle Ages, there was literature, which was the main materials of political and social history. Needless to say, that this literature was religious literature. Apart from various religious literature, such as Brahminism, Islam, Sufism, Nathpanth, Vaishnavism, Mangalkavya is also an essential element of social history. In pre-historic times, especially during the period of Turko-Mughal rule, the common people (almost all Hindus) recorded the treatment they received from the rulers in their literature. Therefore, through the analysis of the administrative system based on the sources of literature, we will try to recover the nature of caste-discrimination and the nature of communalism in the Middle Ages. In fact, we can raise a question whether the history of communalism that has been created in history is supported by the facts presented in Bengali literature, both Hindu-Bengali and Muslim-Bengali.

Reviewing the history of history shows that from the 19th century, the history of Bengal began to develop side by side with two parallel pursuits. The two streams are ----- general and regional streams of history. The general style is the overall form of Bengali history, and the practice of history in a limited area is called regional history. Basically, the regional history is the history of the people of a particular area, in which state history is mentioned but not dominant, and their main recourse in this regard is literature. Since most of the regional historians are more biased towards the past glory of a particular region, and since pre-modern Bengali literature has always had a region-consciousness, most of the narratives are the main source for them. If medieval history, according to Ahmad Sharif, is to be regional, the basis for constructing medieval history

should also be pre-modern Bengali literature. (4) But by retrieving traces of regional historical consciousness in various narrative poems of the Middle Ages, the attempt to turn Bengali's historical consciousness to some extent towards the past has not been successful yet.

As an indicator of the political, economic, social, cultural life of a particular country in a particular period, literature helps to establish historical information through strong arguments; because life-consciousness of people blossoms through literature. Therefore, the true history of literature is the evolution of consciousness. The evolution of literature is based on what people think, feel, and see, the internal and external aspects of life in a particular era. Rabindranath was impressed after reading Dinesh Chandra Sen's 'Bangabhasha O Sahitya'. At the root of a nation's social history is its motivation for self-expression, and literature contains the pursuit of self-expression. This is why literature cannot be separated from the life of the community. In other words, the history of literature is actually a part of the history of the nation.

The history of writing the history of Bengali literature is an ongoing project of more than 150 years. We have no such claim that there is no well-written history of this literary history practice. Therefore, in search of continuity, the aim of the students of Bengali literature is to judge the social, economic, political, and geographical context of Bengali literature and history. Moreover, it is also important to analyze whether the close relationship between literature and context has been reflected in the practice of history or how much it has been reflected.

The famous novelist, Mark Twain, once jokingly defined history as 'lies, damn lies and statistics'. History philosopher of present day also admitted this indirectly. Maybe that is why there are different opinions about the interpretation, analysis, and evaluation of historical data. Moreover, with the passage of time, our ideas about history are gradually changing. From age to age, new perspectives of history writings are being created. In modern scholarly practice, the history of the upper class is replaced by the broader history of the people of the lower class. But one doubt still remains, whether this wide mass of people can be counted within the limits of the documents of the government treasury. Modern French historian, Weber, has also emphasized on the importance of folk music, proverbs, and anecdotes in writing the history of lower class. So, this modern attempt to find contemporaneity in art-literature beyond the information-dependency of the government treasury certainly demands our curiosity.

We all know that the order of events is not history, instead of that the pursuit and depiction of consciousness is what can be called history. History of Bengalis, national history of Bengal, culture of Bengal, Kulji-Kulpanji etc., have given much importance to the foreign rulers and foreigners's literature and society, but there is not even a fraction of the efforts to discover the authentic Bengali way of life. Basically, Bengali history is another name for Bengali folk religion, folk literature, folk art, folk music and folklore, because there are reflections of our mindset, hope and despair in our own Nath Sahitya, Dharmamangal, Shivayana, etc. Therefore, it is needless to say that Mangalkavya will reveal a myriad of mnemonic associations of our lost social history. Moreover, it is an important task of the eminent scholars of medieval Bengali literature to explore the possibility of constructing the economic history of Bengal as well as political history based on these narratives. Ahmad Sharif once said that the history of Middle Ages should be regional. If we trace the history of different regions of Bengal on the basis of this formula of regionalism, we will be able to see how the places and characters of these fictional narratives of Bengali are actually taking place in the real historical land. In fact, these will later appear as sources of various possibilities in the field of research.

CONCLUSIONS:

"It is true that we cannot live without our past; but that does not mean that we have to live in the past." (5) -----
- these are the final words of Amartya Sen in his book 'Bharater Oit-Byakhya Prosonge'. The past for him is the key to self-realization and self-identity. According to him, our past-reading and past-structure, and our understanding of the present are dependent on each other. History deals with the past but the historian's present affects his interpretation of the past. Without understanding the present, the past cannot be understood because the journey of knowledge is from well-known to the less-known. And it is also true that literature, like life, has also a past; and this past informs our existence. Therefore, modern Bengali literary review and literary observation help us to some extent in constructing the past left behind.

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