



indology, historiography and the nation:

bengal, 1847-1947

Krishna Bhattacharya Samaddar

A Note from the Publisher's Desk

WE WOULD WISH to record our grateful acknowledgment to Professor Ranabir Samaddar, husband of Late Dr Krishna Bhattacharya Samaddar, for his tireless effort to bring out this work. Ms Rita Banerjee offered us invaluable suggestions while reading the manuscripts. We are also indebted to Professor Partha Chatterjee for the Foreword to the publication.

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Foreword

We knew Krishna Samaddar as a self-effacing person who never sought the limelight or displayed her accomplishments. She came from a family that valued classical learning and counted in its ranks several Sanskrit scholars. Struck by a debilitating and incurable disease, she spent the last years of her life in acute physical pain and mental suffering. She had to quit her job as a teacher of History. By then, she had completed a Ph.D. thesis of the University of Calcutta, working under the supervision of Professor Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, the famous scholar of Jainism, Buddhism and Tantra. She had neither the opportunity nor perhaps the inclination to publish her thesis. It is therefore gratifying that her husband Ranabir has taken the initiative to bring out Krishna's thesis for all of us to read. It shows an aspect of her—thoughtful, intellectually curious and culturally astute—that we did not know.

The first thing that struck me when I began to read this book was the attention that Krishna paid to the question of language. She brings this up at the very beginning of her book. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the academic discussion of India's ancient history had been framed by European Indologists. All subsequent discussion, even by Indians, within the portals of what came to be constituted as professional history writing was to take place in the English language. In nineteenth-century Bengal, historians with a professional reputation, such as Rajendralal Mitra and Haraprasad Sastri, wrote their academic works in English. Certainly, such famous twentieth-century historians as Rakhaldas Banerjee, Jadunath Sarkar and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar wrote largely in English. Yet alongside, there was a steadily growing historical literature in Bengali

that addressed a different public, one that did not read the erudite proceedings of the Asiatic Society. And all of the great historians of Bengal enthusiastically participated in this other, more provincial, domain of history writing. Krishna Samaddar identifies the role of nationalism as crucial in explaining this double life of history. From the second half of the nineteenth century, Bengali intellectuals became aware that while engaging with Western knowledge made available through colonial institutions such as the learned societies, the scientific "survey" institutions and the university, one must also promote the values of modernity and instil a sense of pride in a decrepit and defeated national society. The bilingualism of Bengal's historians did not produce two bodies of historical literature that mirrored each other. On the contrary, while claiming to follow the best practices of professional history, the historical literature in Bengali produced effects that were quite different.

Krishna Samaddar notes that almost all of Bengal's historians, when they wrote in Bengali, became social critics. They took sides in the ongoing debates that were shaking society – from social reform to caste ranking to religious and sectarian conflicts to the rise and consequences of British rule. In other words, there was an immediacy and vibrancy in the Bengali historical literature that was missing in the academic English prose of professional history. Indeed, several major historians of Bengal, such as Romesh Chandra Dutt, Haraprasad Sastri and Rakhaldas Banerjee, took to writing historical novels as a less encumbered and more imaginative medium of communicating with the national public. Krishna also notes the urge, passionately voiced by Bankim but equally strongly felt by many, to write a history in which Bengalis could take pride. Not surprisingly, she notes, neither Macaulay nor Ranke was the most powerful historiographical influence on Bengali writers; rather, it was Thomas Carlyle's worship of the hero that seemed to exert the greatest pull when they selected their periods and subjects.

Krishna Samaddar covers the usual ground with extended discussion of the works of Rajendralal Mitra and Haraprasad Sastri. She also discusses at length the important amateur historian Rajanikanta Gupta. Not surprisingly, she notes the important interventions by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore who, though not historians, were extremely influential by virtue of their programmatic statements

on how the history of the nation should be written – Bankim calling for a history of the military and political prowess of heroes from Bengal's past and Tagore, abjuring the biography of the state, calling for a history of the social and cultural practices among Bengal's rural communities that have long endured through all the vicissitudes of war and dynastic succession. This is ground that needed to be traversed by Krishna, even though it is largely familiar. The surprising chapter is her treatment of Akshay Kumar Datta and Kshiti Mohan Sen. These were two historians, she says, who took popular religiosity seriously and sought, in their own ways, to provide a rational historical account of the variety of sects and denominations in Bengal and northern India and their apparently strange beliefs and practices. These works would normally not have been included in a survey of Bengal historiography. That Krishna chose to discuss them could have been at the suggestion of Professor N. N. Bhattacharyya, her supervisor, a famous scholar of the Sakta and Tantric sects: I have no way of knowing. But her chapter does connect with a much more recent interest among historians of studying popular sectarian practices as a key to the understanding of popular culture and politics.

The later chapters of Krishna Samaddar's book tell the story of the gradual professionalization of history writing in the twentieth century. It begins, somewhat oddly, in the district town of Rajshahi where two intrepid amateurs, Akshaykumar Maitra and Ramaprasad Chanda, set up the Varendra Research Society and launched a remarkable venture of creating a new tradition of scientific historiography, following the most advanced European practices, in the Bengali language. Once again, this is not a story that is entirely unknown, at least not in Bengal. But Krishna's narrative brings home the fact that it is there that the groundwork is laid for the achievements of Bengal's famous twentieth-century historians—Rakhaldas Banerjee, Jadunath Sarkar, Ramesh Chandra Majumdar and Nihar Ranjan Ray.

Her treatment of the controversy concerning the usefulness of the kulaji or family genealogies as a source of history is also astute. She recounts the arguments made by the new historians influenced by positivist methods that the genealogies contained fabricated and often fantastic stories and were therefore useless as reliable historical sources. But she also stresses the point that even when shrouded in

legend, the kulaji could reveal features of a powerful cultural memory that was often still alive. They were not, in other words, useless at all for a skilful cultural historian.

The relation between history writing and nationalism is the main theme of this book. Within it, the two subthemes are, one, the relation between national history and Orientalism or Indological scholarship, and two, the tussle between a liberal-rational interpretation of history and the valorisation of community and collective memory. There is also a third theme that makes its explicit appearance at the end of the book: the relation between a provincial, in this case Bengali, imagination of the nation and an Indian one. It is remarkable that until almost the middle of the twentieth century, the two were simply assumed to be concurrent; virtually no one seriously considered the implications of a mismatch between the two views. Only in the 1940s, possibly because of the rise of communal politics and the possibility that the end of British rule might be followed by the birth of not one but two independent nation-states, did this discussion enter the domain of history writing. It is worth pointing out that nowhere in this book is there any mention of a Muslim historian of Bengal, or indeed of anyone writing about the history of the greater part of the Bengali people who are Muslim, except for the popular syncretic practices described by Kshiti Mohan Sen and the celebration by Akshay Maitra of Siraj and Mir Kasim as patriotic rulers. It is pointless to blame Krishna for this omission, because that is indeed the state of the field in which she worked in West Bengal. To her credit, she does discuss at some length Nihar Ranjan Ray's bold thesis that the view of the nation that emerged from each of the major linguistic regions of India was not identical with the others and that Indian nationalism, even as an idea, must itself be seen as irreducibly federal. That is a thesis that is finding increasing support from the splurge of recent research on the print literatures in the Indian languages in the nineteenth and twentieth century. But that is a body of history writing that, sadly, Krishna did not have a chance to read.

PARTHA CHATTERJEE

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Acknowledgements

WHEN THE SUGGESTION for covering an entire century for the purpose of my historiographical research was first mooted to me by my supervisor, Professor N.N. Bhattacharya, I felt a little daunted. However, in the end, I feel, had I not considered the entire century as the span of development of Indological historiography in Bengal, my attempt to treat the latter as the mirror of the nationalist feelings of the Bengali people would have remained incomplete. As my reading list grew and the vast subject of Indology seemed to weigh me down, Professor Bhattacharya kept on encouraging me. I express my gratitude to him for suggesting the topic of research as well as seeing it through to completion.

However, even at the end of it I feel dissatisfied at the inadequacy of my handling of such a sensitive theme as the relation between Indology, historiography and nationalism. All these three elements demand much greater attention to details and analysis. This is especially so considering the vast time span. Yet, it is also true that unless the entire colonial period is kept in perspective, the relation between Indology and nationalism cannot be discussed in a satisfactory way. I hope I shall be able to revise this work and further continue working of this theme at a later date.

This work would not have been possible without the wonderful library of Bangiya Sahitya Parisad, Kolkata—that great depository of old vernacular tracts in Bengali language. My thanks are due to the staff of the Parisad for continuously helping me in my requests for the torn and half torn tracts, periodicals, etc. I am also thankful to the staff of the American Research Centre Library at Hyderabad for granting me one month stay there and allowing me access to the vast

theoretical literature on historiography there. I extend my gratitude to the staff of the Library of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, the Jaikrishna Library of Uttarpara and the Seminar Library of the Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture, University of Calcutta.

I have presented my views on this theme at various seminars organised by Visva Bharati, Kashi Sampurnanand Visva Vidyalyaya, Institute of Historical Studies, Kolkata, Itihas Sansad, Kolkata and the Gorakhpur Session of the Indian History Congress. I would like to thank all the organisers and participants of the seminars. Comments by Professor Subodh Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Professor Tarasankar Banerjee and Professor Nishith Ranjan Ray have enriched me. I also thank the editors of *The Quarterly Review of Historical Studies*, *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, *Itihas-Anusandhan*, vol. 4, and *Historiography in Modern Indian Languages* for publishing earlier drafts of some of the sections covered here.

I could not have completed this work without the cooperation of my colleagues and the librarian of my college. My sincere thanks are to them. Finally, my thanks are to my husband, Ranabir, for helping me in thousand and one ways throughout my research.

As a student of modern history, Indology had always remained something distant and ancient to me. I have tried to approach and learn it in my own 'modernist' ways. I am not sure whether there has been any advantage in that, but disadvantages there have certainly been many. Apart from the other difficulties in pursuing Indological tracts, I have felt discomfort at the necessary diacritical marks for writing vernacular and Sanskrit words. I have tried to standardise them, but inconsistencies have still remained.

Preface

THIS IS A work on Indological Historiography in Bengali language, tracing the rise and growth of historical consciousness of a nationality, within a span of 100 years, between 1847 and 1947. The purpose of this study is to delineate the growth and development of Bengali historiography on Indology during the century preceding Independence. I have tried to trace here the factors that led to the growth of modern Bengali historiography, this being an example of the growth of regional historiographies in India. Indology here means studies not only pertaining to the ancient period of India, but the trends and orientations of our historical thinking of the past of the entire country. My efforts have been to see how the Bengalis as an emerging nation in the modern era were led to think of their own past and the past of their own country, what factors provoked and influenced the continuing historical enquiry and finally to examine the interrelationships, if any, between the growth of a regional historiography and the awakening consciousness of that region in modern era.

In deciding upon my plan of work I had to decide on an effective and representative way of covering the century long narrative of Indological historiography in Bengal as reflection of the rise and growth of national consciousness. Roughly speaking, there were two approaches before me—biographic and thematic. Either I could cover this period of hundred years by taking historians one by one or breaking up this story into sub-themes like economic historiography, political, cultural, etc. I opted for the former. A thematic break-up of the corpus of Indological historiography in Bengal could have brought out the various sub-themes in it specifically, but would not serve my

purpose of treating Indological historiography as one single unified theme mirroring our national historical consciousness. Moreover, Indian historians were not always conscious of the sub-themes in writing history; only later were they constructed by researchers on historiography.

My next problem was how do we pick up representative historians? Admittedly, there has to be some arbitrariness in it. Though I have tried to discuss the major Bengali historians in the century long historiography, it could not be exhaustive, having certainly missed quite a few. My added problem was how to define Indological historiography in Bengal? Many of our major historians wrote in English, though they were Bengalis. Thus, while keeping my focus on Indological historiography in Bengali language, I have at times included some works written in English also in my study.

Another point in reconstructing Indological historiography in Bengal for over hundred years has been the problem of taking into account the various narrative methods used by historians in writing history. The nationalist historians had to often use the narrative mode to reconstruct the past history of our land as something different from what the colonial power thought that history to be. This narrative mode may be called in some sense the pre-modern mode which of late has seen a revival. From Ram Ram Basu this narrative mode has been used with telling effect and a great Indologist like Rajendralal Mitra too had to fall back on it in his popular writings in *Vividārtha-Saṅgraha*. Even the great Dacca history volumes form a narrative on the full history of Bengal though these volumes are edited and compiled.

The issue of the narrative mode brings up the question of textual analysis. Historiographical analysis in one sense is an analysis of historical texts. Though historiographical discussions may include discussion of the milieu, time and condition in which a certain historiography originates, thrives and flourishes, in textual analysis these are generally considered as externalities. Textual analysis concentrates on texts. Thus, in observing the dynamics of the reflection of national consciousness in our Indological historiography, I have rarely made references to contemporary political events. Instead, I have taken certain historiographical texts as a form of

discourse on the assumption that a textual reading might bring out the reflection of the rise and growth of the consciousness of a nationality in our historiography in an interesting way. Text, consciousness, history—these then form the elements and arguments of my story.

The *first chapter* presents an introductory discussion on the general factors that helped the emergence of a specifically Bengali historiography under the shadow of Indological history writing pioneered by western Orientalists in India. The introductory section also aims to examine the particular factors behind the emergence of modern historical thinking in Bengal. In this connection I have discussed the relevance or otherwise of various theoretical views on historiography in the context of an Indian agenda for Indological thinking.

The *second chapter* deals with the early years of Bengali historiography. Here, I have sought to cover two things: (a) the historical literary biographies written by our earliest historians, who kindled the spirit of historical enquiry in Bengal; (b) the special contribution of Rajendralal Mitra in initiating Indological enquiry in Bengal on a serious note.

The *third chapter* shows how quickly Indological historiography developed into a beginning of the nationalist historiography in Bengal. For this purpose I have cited the works of Rajani Kanta Gupta, a contemporary of Rajendralal and Bankimchandra and the author of the first major nationalist account of the Mutiny.

The *fourth chapter* traces the way in which Indological historiography became for the first time genuinely Indian by acquiring keen sociological insights into the composition of the Bengali society and language. I have discussed the writings of Mahamahopadhyay Haraprasad Shastri in this context.

However, any account of nineteenth century Bengali historiography would remain incomplete without the deep philosophical and political reflections of the novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay on the historiographical agenda of an emerging nation. Thus, the *fifth chapter* evaluates the contribution of Bankimchandra to the growth of Indological historiography in Bengal. The perspective here is the interrelationships between Indology, rationalism and nationalism.

The *sixth chapter* attempts to connect the various threads of nineteenth century Bengali historiography in order to present the various sociological and ideological dimensions. Thus, the subsections deal with the relation between nation and religious historiography, the reflections of the Bengali intellectuals of a historiographical nature on the colonial urbanisation process, their thoughts on the peasant question and finally the various elements of the ideological structure of nineteenth century historiography like orientalism, utilitarianism and positivism.

I next examine how Bengali Indologists in the twentieth century conceptualised Bengal as Gauda. The *seventh chapter* presents the case of the Varendra Research Society duo, Akshay Kumar Maitra and Ramaprasad Chanda. I have tried to show how Indology was put to use by these historians for constructing the history of pre-Muslim and pre-Mughal Bengal in order to show that Bengal had its own identity in the ancient days. Further, the Varendra historians developed the ethnological dimensions of Indology in order to have a fuller understanding of the ethnic and cultural composition of popular society in the country.

The *eighth chapter* takes up one of the prominent themes with which modern historiography grappled in the first quarter of the twentieth century. A discussion in this chapter on the controversies over the Bengali genealogies will show how modernism and rationalism in Indological thought had a stormy encounter with the popular and indigenous involvement in the genealogical literature in Bengal.

We now come to the real era of the modern historians who transformed Indology into history of India and were responsible for creating the tradition of constructing a comprehensive history of Bengal. Bengali historians must write histories of Bengal, even if they are involved with other Indological enterprises. I have in mind here the historians such as Rakhai Das Bandopadhyay, Jadunath Sarkar, Ramesh Chandra Majumdar and Nihar Ranjan Ray. Each of this quartet had his own history of Bengal. Thus, I have examined Bānglār Itihās, the two Dacca University volumes on History of Bengal and Bānglār Itihās here, though for a larger understanding of the state of

Indological historiography at that time, I have taken into account their other works also.

The concluding section, i.e. the *tenth chapter* discusses how the mainstream of Indological historiography in Bengal encouraged local history writing and brought the history of sub-regions in Bengal into open. This section also shows how modern Indological historiography would have been impossible in Bengal without a suitable modern institutional base. References are thus made to various institutions and journals that were the backbone of Indological researches here. We conclude this work by showing how Indological historiography in Bengali language during the one century of colonial rule became modernist through constant interactions with the evolving national consciousness of the Bengali society. The journey from Ram Ram Basu to Nihar Ranjan Ray is indeed a long one, yet this journey that connects the beginning and the destination at the time of Independence would be inconceivable without taking into account the linkages between the fundamental elements of our story—history, historiography, nation and national consciousness.

Indology, Historiography and the Nation: Bengal, 1847-1947

Series: Critical Debates in History & Politics

A book on Indology seems something distant and ancient. This book by late Dr Krishna Bhattacharya Samaddar on Indological Historiography in Bengal, however, brings Indology to our own time and history. As the late author left the manuscript with this cryptic remark, I have tried to approach and learn the theme in my own 'modernist' ways. This work traces the rise and growth of historical consciousness of a nationality between 1847 and 1947 through an examination of the Indological historiography in Bengali language. It shows, most of the Indological tracts in the Bengali language during the colonial time needed the mediation of culture for ushering in modernity in Bengal's own sense of history. Indology served such a purpose of cultural mediation. The author notes that almost all of Bengal's historians, when they wrote in Bengali, became social critics. They took sides in the on-going debates in society – from social reform to caste ranking to religious and sectarian conflicts to the rise and consequences of British rule. There was an immediacy and vibrancy in the Bengali historical literature that was missing in the academic English prose of professional history. She also noted the urge to write a history in which Bengalis could take pride. Not surprisingly, neither Macaulay nor Ranke was the most powerful

historiographical influence on Bengali writers; rather, it was Thomas Carlyle's worship of the hero that seemed to exert the greatest pull when they selected their periods and subjects. The book presents an absorbing discussion on Indology, history writing, and nationalist consciousness in Bengal in the hundred years following 1847, ten years before the great Mutiny of 1857 was to break out.

About the Author



Krishna Bhattacharya Samaddar was a Reader of history and a specialist in girl child education. She had researched in the field of

Indological historiography under the guidance of the famous scholar in Ancient Indian History and Culture, N N Bhattacharya. She died after suffering for more than a decade from an incurable disease leaving her unpublished thesis behind. This acclaimed thesis is now published with minimum of editorial intervention. She died on 6 September 2013.

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