

Exploring the History of Birbhum District, West Bengal

Pranab Kumar Saha

Research Scholar, Department of A.I.H.C& A.
Vidya- Bhavana, Visva- Bharati, Santiniketan 731235
Email- pransham@gmail.com

Abstract: (*‘Exploring the History of Birbhum District, West Bengal’- is a study deals with the history of local history of the district (second half of the nineteenth century to first half of the twenty one century A.D). Historical writings on Bengal also have a history. When a country's history becomes huge due to long-term practice, it also becomes necessary to know her history or how it evolved. For This requirement it is important to realize the evolution of historical-literature writings of almost all the districts of Bengal. The writing of chronological history of Bengal begun in the middle of the nineteenth century A.D. ,and it ran in two parallel streams, on the one hand there was an attempt to fabricate complete history of Bengal, and on the other hand was an attempts to write history of local area or small area. These two streams can be further sub divided into two groups- one British history writer mostly English civilians and the other is Bangalees or local scholars and some cases they were not professionals but their contribution is still to be accepted. In this study I have tried to focus, how they write, their intention and methodological aspects of the writers. I think it will help us to compare and differ with the neighbor district's history writers.)*

Keywords: Local History, Features, Bengal, Birbhum, Local Scholars, Subject Matters and Contribution.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Birbhum is the Northern most districts of Bengal. Several theories have been put forward regarding the derivation of the name Birbhum. According to W.W Hunter, it means the land of Heroes(*vir-bhumi*), and another suggestion is that it signifies forest land, *Bir* in Santali meaning *Jungle*. According to the Census District Handbook, 1951 ‘probably the local explanation is the correct one, i.e., that Birbhum means simply territory of the *Bir Rajas*, *Bir* being the title borne by the early Hindu rulers just as *Man*, *Singh* and *Dhal* were the title of the chiefs of *Manbhum*, *Singhbhum* and *Dhalbhum*’. During the time of British East India Company, the administrative unit by the name Birbhum was formed in 1787. Before that, it was administratively a part of Murshidabad district. In 1787, when the official "District *Beerbhoom*" was established, the district was much bigger than it is now. Till 1793, it included "Bishenpore" or Bishnupur, which is now part of the Bankura district. Till the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, the Santhal Pargana was part of Birbhum; the district thus sprawled up to Deoghar in the west.

2. HISTORY WRITINGS OF BENGAL:

In case of history writing of Bengal, non-Indian intellectuals or British officers were took the leading role. But their writings did not have any purpose to waken the past glory of Bengal. Instead they tried to outreach the generosity of British nation in Bengal. Local history writers have written local history from their own zeal. Although they did not have proper understanding about the methods of writings history. Yet they have included the findings from the local primary sources like information obtained on temples, images descriptions, deeds, local genealogy, coins, inscriptions, manuscripts etc. Most of the regional history writers were lawyers or Moktar of the court, school teacher or local patriotic person in one word they were Non Academic or Non Professional. It should be remembered that, during that time there was no such tradition and only few takers who were self-trained scholars and attempted to gather about information of their localities. After clarifying the source materials, they focused on many things related to the society. We all know about Unity in Diversity, but if we want to know its reason then we have to find the history of India: - the history of which is primarily regional history. The collective and common history of each region of India is the national history of India, There are different regions and races in the Indian state, and likewise they have few own features and custom heritages. Therefore, if the factual and complete history of India is to be written, then the research will be based on regional history. Present historians and scholar have been used these writings to fulfill the gap in Indian national history. It is true that many of the regional historians are biased because they love their region very much.

The first British scholar to attempt a history of Bengal was Charles Stewart, professor of oriental languages in the honorable East India's company college. In 1813 he published "The History of Bengal from the First Mohamedan Invasion until the Virtual Conquest of that Country by the English, A.D. 1757" (1). Famous physician, Buchanan Hamilton wrote 'Statistical Description of Hindoosthan' in three volumes, it was published in 1820 and from London.

It is a detailed account of different regions of Bengal. In 1838, 'Report on the State Education in Bengal' by William Adam was published. This book has been known about the indigenous education system in different regions of Bengal. In Calcutta Review, 'On the Bank of the Bhagirathi' by Reverend James Long was published in 1846. In this article, he wrote in the details of many settlements on both sides of the Bhagirathi River (Saptogram to Suti). Next important attempt after Stewart, to writing history of Bengal, was to made by J.C Marshman, who in 1864 compiled "A Brief and Simple Outline of the History of Bengal". In this book Marshman tried to describe the history of the country from the Mohamedan invasion in end of the twelfth century to the close of the Lord William Bentinck's administration. In 1874 a member of Civil Service, named Barton, published a very readable little compilation entitled "Bengal: an account of the country from the earliest times with full information with regards to the manners, customs, religion, etc, of the inhabitants, and the effects of British Rule there." In 1903 Maulavi Abdus Salam, of the Bengal Provincial Service, published, under the auspices of the Bengal Asiatic Society, a work entitled "The Riyazu-s-salatin : a History of Bengal by Ghulam Hussein Salim, translated from the original Persian," the work which formed the basis of Stewart's history.

'*Banglar Purabirto*' (Vol-1) written by Paresh Chandra Bandhopadhaya, was published in 1907 A.D. Probohdh Chandra Sen acknowledged that it was the first attempt to writing the complete history of Bengal. Another important work on Bengal is '*Banglar Itihas*' by Rakhaldas Bandhopadhya it was published in 1915 A.D. This book is the result of source collection of ten years. Not only the abundance of source materials, but also neutralism and liberalism are one of the characteristics of this book. The scientific method is used in writing the history of Bengal in Gourrajmala(1912) by Ramaprasad Chandra, this scientific method was fulfilled after the writing of '*Banglar Itihas*'. One of the key features of this book is the reference and quotation from the original content in the writings. In fact, the compilation of this book started a new phase of Bengal's history writings. In 1916, a book entitled 'Indo-Aryan Races' was published, which was written by Ramaprasad Chandra. The book is mainly based on anthropology, a lot of elements have been found regarding the anthropological aspects in ancient Bengal. Second volume of *Banglar Itihas* was published in 1917A.D. This book contains the history of Bengal from the time of Turkish conquest to 1575 AD, and each of these contents is authenticated by the original source materials. The book was fully based on the inscriptions, coins and direct evidences, which were published or known at that time.

3. HISTORY WRITING IN THE DISTRICTS OF BENGAL:

Local history writings began in the districts of Bengal. There was a spate of sub-regionals or local histories from the second half of the nineteenth century. Officials and indigenous patronage and the role of local aristocrats contributed significantly to the production of sub-regional histories. Articulations of local histories were given concrete bases by voluntary historical societies founded in specific district of Bengal. The Rarh Anusandhan Samati (Burdwan), Varendra Research Society (Rajsahi, 1910) and Birbhum Anusandhan Samati (Hetampur, 1914) worked through an interconnection of official and local patronage. The agenda of sub-regional histories gathered momentum through collaboration and networks between the *abhijat* (Aristocratic family) and the professional *madhyabitta* (Middle class). The Maharaja Bahadur of Dinajpur and Pandit Dineshchandra Bhattacharya helped Nagendranath Basu while he was writing the history of Northern Rarh. The *Rarh Anusandhan Samati* was patronized by Maharaja Dhiraj Bahadur of Burdwan and Ramaprasad Mullick, Zamindar of Agradeep. The eminent historian Haraprasad Shastri was its chairman. With the help of these local historical societies and the financial support of local rulers and aristocrats, Nagendranath visited Kantowa, Daihat, Agradeep, Ghorakhetra, Bege, Debgram, Bikrampur, Bilvesvar, Ketugram and Attahas. The Burdwan Abhyarthana Samati (1915) was founded by Nagendranath basu as a prelude to his composition of the local history of Burdwan (*Bardhamaner Itikatha- Prachin o Adhunikjug*, 1915). The literati acknowledged the help of local aristocrats by dedicating their tracts to such patrons. Sebananda Bharati dedicated *Tamluker Itihas* (A history of Tamluk, 1913) to Raja Surandranarayan Ray, the land lord of Tamluk . Efforts to reconstruct the local history of Murshidabad were also the join work of local aristocrats and educated professionals connected with the colonial Raj. In August 1887, a local Sabha (assembly) for studies in the history of Murshidabad was established in Berhampur College by some aristocratic and well established person of Murshidabad. This encouraged Kaliprasanna Bandyopadhyay to write a local history of Murshidabad, and he first articulated in the magazine *Satsanga*.

4. LOCAL HISTORY WRITINGS OF BIRBHUM:

The writing of Birbhum's past also began with the English civilians. But they have not attempts to invoke the past glory of Bengal; instead they have tried to justifying their administration, social and economic activities. British civilians communicated with local people and started to gather information from the local informants. It seems that the local history of the districts were compiled by the English civilians, local aristocrats, landlord, professional writers, non- professional writers, highest class family, self- interested men and local patriotic men. They published their valuable writings through books, local magazines and Newspapers. I have given below the sequence of history wrote on Birbhum district in chronological framework.

The first report related to Birbhum district published at the government initiative by ‘*Geographical and Statically Report of the District of Birbhum.*’ Captain W.S Sherwell, revenue surveyor, wrote on the basis of the information obtained through the survey and it was published in 1855 from Kolkata. The subject of this report was geography and socio-economic condition of Birbhum. Although it was not a systematic history of Birbhum, yet this report is very important.

Sir William Wilson Hunter (1840- 1900) was a Scottish historian, administrator, statistician, a compiler and member of Indian Civil Service. In 1862 he was appointed as an assistant magistrate and collector of Birbhum district. Then he started pursuing the local history, and he began collecting local tradition, folklore, belief, customs etc. He got help from his subordinate and loyal employees, which formed the materials for his publication entitled “*The Annals Of Rural Bengal*” (1868); the ethnical frontier of lower Bengal with the ancient principalities of Birbhum and Bishnupur. His book was compiled in English language for nearly five years from 1862 to 1867. From the story of the elite class, land lord or king, the common man in village life has got more space in his book. Although he did not follow actual chronological frame work, but the role of the book is very important in local history of Birbhum, and it deals with three decades (1765- 1794). According to Professor Ranjan Kumar Gupta, “the volumes containing correspondence issued and received by the early Collectors, Magistrates, Judges and other officers are in fact indispensable materials for the construction of the social, economic or administrative history of the region. Hunter’s *annals* focused mainly on Birbhum during the colonial and immediate Pre-colonial period, but Hunter shows a remarkable awareness about the distinct character of the district. He began with a discussion on the materials and function of rural history, and lamented dearth of earlier research on this area. Moving a step forward he commented: ‘silent millions who bear our yoke have found no annalist’. Not surprisingly Hunter devoted not much space to ‘the ethnical elements of the lowland population of Bengal’ (chapter 3), and ‘The aboriginal hill- men of *Beerbhoom*’ (chapter 4), wherein he raised methodological issues by citing evidences of linguistic as well as very important anthropological perspectives.

Another informative book in the field of Birbhum is W.W. Hunter’s (Director General of Statistics to the Government of India) ‘*Stastical Account of Bengal Vol-4*, it was published in 1876 from London. This volume treats of the district of Burdwan, Bankura and Birbhum. In this volume almost every mater of the district has been discussed like- topography and general aspects, the people, agriculture, road, commerce, administrative etc. The principal official sources from which he was compiled this statistical account of Birbhum district are as follow- (1) answer of his five series of question, furnished by the District Officers, (2) Report of the district of Birbhum, captain W.S Sherwill (Revenue Surveyor (1855), (3) *Annals of Rural Bengal*, by W.W. Hunter, (4) Mr Grant’s report on the finances of Bengal, dated 27th April(1786), (5) Bengal Census Report, 1872, (6) Collector’s report on the land tenures of the district(1873) etc.

Gurulal Gupta wrote a book named ‘*Rural Sketches*’, which was published in 1888 from Kolkata. Sketches published earlier in the Bengal Magazine. It deals with the interesting and informative sketches of rural life of Bengal and Bihar in the nineteenth century, with anecdotes and historical references. There was an article entitled *Antiquities of Birbhum*. In this article he narrates the proverbs related to his own village Supur.

In the last decades of nineteenth century E.G.Drakes-Brock Man, District Magistrate and Collector of Birbhum, compiled a monograph entitled ‘Notes on Early Administration of the District Birbhum’. It was published from Gaya (Bihar) in 1898 C.E and on the basis of the local official records. This treatise, very short only thirty three pages and scrappy, describe in bare outline in district administration from 1785-1830.

Gazetteers are an important source of local and regional history. Gazetteers are more valuable in fixing local names and terms and giving details of physical aspects, history, agriculture, land revenue system, administration, education, manufacture and trade, in one word from a Gazetteer we can gather almost all details on a district or region. L S S O, Malley’s (1874-1941) *Bengal District Gazetteers- Birbhum* is the second important book on Birbhum’s past, published in 1910 A.D. O’Malley gives a vivid description on social, economic, religion, beliefs etc, during that time. For writing the book Malley follows published sources as well as field works. He has also helped by local scholars and persons. Although he was an administrator in Birbhum that helped and inspired him to collect information. In his book he used many Bengali terms and local language. O’ Malley viewed the early history of the district in relation to wider geo- cultural categories viz, -*Radha* and *Vajjdhumi*. In so doing the author argued that the Birbhum was a part of the Mauryan Empire and of of the Pala kingdom. He also suggested that poet Joydeva was born in Kenduli on the Ajay River in the district. Similarly he discussed the medieval history of the district, within the well-known frame work of Pre Mughal and Mughal history of North India.

Mahimananjan Chakrabarty’s ‘*Birbhum Rajvansha*’ published in 1910 from Kolkata. The book deals with the history and administration of the district, Hindu and Muslim rulers and their chronological list. Another important book in Bengali language is ‘*Hetampur Kahini*’, which is written by Kisorilal Sarkar and it came out in 1910. It is the history of landlords of Hetampur. Nabinkrishna Bandhapadhya’s ‘*Bhadrapur Itibirto*’, it is a very few pages (1+1+43) published in 1911 from Baharampur, Murshidabad. The book deals with a short history of the village

Vhadrapur, which is the birth place of Maharaja Nandakumar. Pratapnarayan Roy's *Birbhumer Itihas* (vol-1, 1911) is an important book on biography of the glorious persons of the district.

In 1914 '*Birbhumi Anusandhan Samati*' (Birbhumi Research Society) was established at Hetampur for collecting source materials related to the Birbhumi's past, folklore traditions, history, archaeological artifacts and its preservation etc. This society had published *Birbhumi Bibaran* in three volumes in Bengali language and under the editorship of Mahimananjan Chakrabarty. First volume published in 1916 and includes nine chapters. Second volume in 1919 and its contents eighteen chapters and third volume published in 1929, which is mainly literary work based of the district.

The next important book is '*Birbhumer itihās*' compiled by Gaurihar Mitra(1901-1947), published in two volumes from Suri. This is the first authentic or reliable book in Birbhumi in Bengali language after W.W. Hunter's *Annals*. The first volume was published in 1936, and the second one in 1938. The intention on writing complete history of Birbhumi arose in his mind when he was publishing article on Birbhumi past, in *Pravashi*, the reputed Bengali monthly edited by Ramananda Chaetapadhya. He was also an author of monthly magazine viz,- *Bharatvarsha*, *Bangalakshmi*, *Purnima*(1926), *Bangabani*, *Manashi*(1920-25). Then he attempts to compile data, from *Ratan Library*(1901), it was an important repertory of earlier publication, where he worked intentionally. Founded by his father Shibratan Mitra, had an important collection of books, journals and other materials on Birbhumi. Probably he also accepted consultation from Harekrishnam Mukhopadhyaya and others. It is accepted that *Birbhumer Itihas* was the first local history written by a local scholar, which illustrate through chronological frame work. Even Rabindra Nath Tagore expressed satisfaction after reading the book. However in his first volume he represent ancient Birbhumi to establishment of British East India Company, and second volume, author demonstrates how British rule spread out in districts and its influenced, evolution of land revenue system, permanent settlement(1793), Santal Rebellion(1855) etc. He also gives a vivid description about social condition before establishment of British rule in Birbhumi, the narratives of *Bargi* (Maratha looters) raid and its impacts etc.

In Birbhumi, local or regional periodical magazines and local Newspapers are played an important role for compiling the local history of the district. They are rich in local incidents, past glory, social and economic aspects of the people. Some scattered historical information concerned with Birbhumi past was published in monthly magazines viz,- *Dharani* (1890/94), Indranarayan Chattapadhya was its editor and published from the village Maluti of Santal Pargona (Now in Jharkhand). *Satsanga*- it was first appeared in Khagra (Murshidabad) and edited by Satkori Mukhopadhyay but few years later he came to Soureshchandra Sarkar, land lord of Kirnahar then in 1896, it started to republish from Kirnahar. *Birbhumi*, an important monthly magazine of the district, it was started to published from Kirnahar in 1899, and under the editorship of Nilratan Mukhopadhyay. This magazine was to represent the district in the domain of national literature. The main emphasis was on the locale of the periodical, the history of the district and the physical and human geography of the district. The literature of the local people got the first priority here. Article on religion and national issues were also published in this magazine. In 1906 it was closed due to source materials. Mahimananjan Chakrabarty, landlord of Hetampur published an article entitled '*Birbhumer Ajay Tirovarti Oitahasic Sampad*' (Historical artifacts on the bank of the river Ajay) published in *Bharatvarsha* in the year 1916 (11). He mentions the village Deul, and there is Shiva temple, on top of the ruins, which is established by Tilakchandra Basak, Dewan of East India Company of Surul. There is a hearsay that, Lochan Das, a Vaishanava poet wrote his *Chaitanyamangal* on siting a peace of stone. At Deul there were also few images like- Vasudava, ten handed Shiva and Sabitri. Maharajkumar Mahimananjan Chakrabarty also published an article in *Bharatvarsha* in the year 1917, the article entitled *Ekchakra*, the village is under Rampurhat subdivision and twenty kilometers from Rampurhat and the village is famous as the birth place of lord Nityananda. Mahimananjan narrates Nityananda's childhood life, his achievements and proverb related to him. Author also attached few valuable pictures like- *Pandavtala*, Dabukeswar temple, Moureswar temple, ten incarnated Vasudeva image of the village Birchhandrapur, two Basudeva images from Dabuk, couple image of Lakshmi-Narayan of the village Moureswar etc.

Next important attempt on Birbhumi's past is '*West Bengal District Records, (New Series) Birbhumi 1786-1797 & 1855*', edited by Ashok Mitra, of the Indian Civil Service and it was published in 1954. The records were published in 1954 and from Kolkata. In publishing this selection of records preserved in the Birbhumi Collectorate for 1786-97 and for 1855 editor has tried to include every legible letter which seemed to carry some news for instruction. He has not confirmed the selection for 1786-97 only to political events. On the country the emphasis in this selection is on the state of the country immediately preceding and following the permanent, to early administration, commercial, trade and political tangles, the speedy, cynical and ruthless overthrow of the old landlords, the merciless exaction of revenue in the name of restoration of peace. He has merely arranged the correspondence chronologically into two parts (1) letters issued by the collector and (2) letters received by him.

In the year 1959 the Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi published about forty five images with part of Mukul Dey's text in '*Birbhumi Terracotta*'. It is very important work from artistic point of view because it bears many valuable pictures of terracotta image of the temples of Birbhumi.

Deb Kumar Chakrabarty, superintendent, Directorate of Archaeology, Government of West Bengal, compiled a book entitled '*Birbhumi Jelar Purakirti*' it was published in 1972 from Public Work Department, West Bengal,

Kolkata. It is second publication after 'Bankura Jelar Purakirti' (1971), which the State Government had planned to publish a book about the archaeology of every district of West Bengal. This book is written alphabetical according to the many important places or archaeological sites of Birbhum like- temples, mosques, places, excavated sites etc. Otherwise Debashis Bandhopadhyaya wrote 'Birbhumer Yamapat o Patua' in Bengali.

In 1975, Durgadas Majumdar, retired IAS and former state editor, published 'West Bengal District Gazetteer: Birbhum', from Kolkata. It is the sixth series of west Bengal District Gazetteers, which is written according to a scheme jointly sponsored by the Government of India and West Bengal Government. The former Gazetteer for Birbhum was published by L.S.S.O' Malley in 1910. The plan followed in this volume was laid down by the Government of India, keeping in view the progress and achievements of the people since independence as well as numerous socio- economic changes that had taken place since 1910. Sukhamay Bandyopadhyay's 'Temples of Birbhum' is another important book on Birbhum district. It deals with the temple architecture, religion and religious sites of the district and it was published in 1984.

'The Economic Life of a Bengal District, Birbhum -1770-1857' is written by Prof Ranjan Kumar Gupta, Suri Vidyasagar College under Burdwan University. It was published in 1984 from Burdwan University. The book deals with how did the Zamindari, old and new of Birbhum react to the new revenue settlement? what was its impact on the peasant community etc. In short it is both a narrative and an analysis of the socio-economic life of the district as it moved round administrative and revenue reforms, agriculture, industry and trade between 1770 and 1857.

Manas Kumar Santra, has written a book entitled 'The Largest Musalman Zamindari in Bengal : Birbhum under the Pathan royal Family (1600-1765)', which was published in 2013. The author has attempted to present how did the Zamindari of Birbhum emerge with its geo-political limits by the early wears of the seventeenth century and prospers up till it passed under the British rule.

5. CONCLUSION:

History of Birbhum moved in two directions, first initiated by the British Scholar- administrator and second by the local enthusiastic with deep-seated passion about the glorious past of their areas. One each drew on other official history writing was not unaware of which happening in vernacular writing. The most significant work of the history of Birbhum viz, *Birbhum Bibaran* is a product of intense field work and proper use of published information. Even in the post-independence period these two trends- institutional and public narratives continued to thrive.

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