
Regional Historiography & Jatar Deul: An Archaeological Wonder Of The Sundarbans

Dipankar Naskar

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Bidhan Chandra College, Asansol-713304, West Bengal, India; Email: naskar.dipankar8@gmail.com

Abstract

The early chapter of regional history is like ash shrouded flames in the corners of our rooms. Even with the possibility of its extinction every moment, many searches have unearthed it, but that obviously required a lot of effort and money to pull the pile. Unless the regional history is properly salvaged, the history of Bengal will remain incomplete. Thus, the importance of regional historiography is immense. The general meaning of the word 'area' in this article is locality, whereas its actual meaning is a geographical plot distinctively surrounded by boundaries. As the word regional originates from region, the term means a geographical area defined by definite boundaries or a part of or small unit of a larger township. It must be said as well Archaeology means the study of structures or articles like an edifice, a mound, ancient manuscripts, currencies, art works, sculptures, rock inscriptions, copper inscriptions, earthen ware, clay model, memorabilia etc. which are either visible on the surface of the earth or have been excavated from below, and that have been built or produced by the ancient people. It can be more clearly defined as "the study of the past human culture through materialistic remains". In the discussion article, I will try hard to highlight the regionalism in the practice of history as well as information about the famous monument 'Jatar Deul' of Sundarban.

KEYWORDS: Context, Definitions, Features, Archaeological Importance

INTRODUCTION

History is not a static matter. Even though the targets and goals of national or state historiography are similar to regional historiography but in practice they are not the same. There are two well-known distinct and proven methodologies of historiography. In the language of science, overall historiography is coined as Macro studies, while local historiography is called Micro studies. Now regional studies have been included in Micro studies. While one considers the country or period as a whole, the other looks at it partially. As an analogy one can easily say that while one is the understanding of the totality of the forest, the other is the identification of each tree. With proper following and practice of these two tenets of Historiography one can successfully achieve the goal. Local analysis involves identifying a particular area and the true history of public life can be found in this study. Just as regional history can be written about a particular region, it can also be written about a small town or even a village in particular. Today, the process of cultivation of history is shifting. Regional historiography has expanded rapidly since the last century. The

methodology of writing Regional History is a new topic with infinite scopes and possibilities.¹

Educated Bengalis were fascinated and amazed by the spread and diversity of western civilization. Hence, they tried to discover the past of their motherland to protect their existence against cultural aggression. This interest in exploring the past paved the path for the Bengali historical consciousness to drift towards the practice of ancient genealogies, biographical literature, Puranic literature and regional history. As positive examples of this, mention must be made of the first printed history written in Bengali, 'Pratapaditya Charit' by Ramram Bose published in 1801, 'Vidyakalpadrum' in thirteen volumes by Reverend Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay (1846-51), 'History of Vikrampur' by Ambikacharan Ghosh in 1869, Akshay Kumar published in 1870 Dutt's 'BharatvarshiyaUpasak Sampada' (first part), 'History of Sherpur Pargana' written by Harchandra Chowdhury in 1872, 'TamlukItihasa' by Trailkyanath Rakshit in 1902, Ramtanu Lahiri and the then Bangasamaj by Shivnath Shastri in 1904, Ramaprasad Chander's 'Gau' published in 1912 Rajmala, establishment of 'Barendra Research Society' in 1910 to investigate the history of different parts or regions of Bengal, Kumudnath Mallik's 'Nadia Kahi' in 1911 etc. Besides Rabindranath Tagore, Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, Jadunath Sarkar, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Satish Chandra Mitra, Dinesh Chandra Sen, Haraprasad Shastri, Akshay Kumar Maitreya, Nikhilnath Roy, Mahendranath Karan, Kalidas Dutta, Sudhirkumar Mitra, Paresh Chandra Dasgupta, Narottam Halder and many leading Bengalis have contributed significantly to the history and literature. They were the pioneers of regional history research in Bengal.²

Local folk songs, folk dramas, folk tales, folklore serve as complementary forms to regional history. Akshay Kumar Maitreya, Rajnikanth Chakraborty, Ranjit Guha, Pranabesh Chakraborty, Charuchandra Sanyal, Nikhil Nath Roy and many more have nurtured and are cultivating and exploring regional history for a long time. In the light of the ideas expressed by the theorists of sub-altern studies, Kalidas Dutta, Nakurchandra Mitra, Narottam Haldar can be considered as the first tier of native historians in authoring the history of the district. History of the lower classes, history of sports, history of food habits, history of the environment, history of forests – these new subjects are emerging and these streams of regional historiography are gaining popularity.³

History, Geography-sociology-science-linguistics-anthropology are all interwoven and intertwined with regionalism. It is natural that persons can know the best the place or region where he or she was born and brought up. Again, regions connect to form

districts, states, countries and ultimately the entire globe. Thus, regional civilization, culture, history serve as a miniature version of the world and hence has always been important to regional researchers and explorers. The diversity in the regional peoples, their geographical boundaries, their own social system, customs, rules, festivals, language, pronunciation, worldly worship and fairs, etc., till exist today in this 21st century. This existence of diversity had to face several hazards during this survival. Various temptations have come in the life, civilization, thoughts and writings. Some of it has been accepted and incorporated while many have been gracefully rejected. And in this way, the culture of the regional people still survives, though some cultures are lost in oblivion and became history.

In Bengal, Bankimchandra and Rabindranath laid emphasis on regional historiography. In that context, after remaining shrouded in darkness for eons, regional historiography is now being seriously considered for active research. With no upper class or lower class, here man is the central character and society the subject. The subject matter includes society, politics, economy, religion, hope, desire, fear, belief, festival, language, literature, art, culture, family and environment etc. Without proper knowledge of one's region and the past of the land, it is natural to feel ignorant and uneducated. But fortunately, almost all the small regional newspapers, which are being published since the post-independence period have a special tendency to study and observe local history. This regional historiography has been done by local people on their native location. Many times local amateur researchers lack specific academic discipline in many fields such as devotion, sociology, history, economics, anthropology etc. and their writing is pebbled with inconsistency or fiction, but in almost all cases it is filled with the smell of the local soil. Unconventional materials thus added new dimensions to the lifestyle of this historic region. A deep, intimate relationship is established between life and history, which undoubtedly enriches regional historiography to a great extent.⁴

The seeds of history lie hidden in the details of the human societies of the region. Thus, in the vast amount of information being collected through long-term regional historiography, many elements related to numerous regional issues are saved from extinction and their value is immense from the point of view of history. Collecting data and material is the main task in regional or local composition, but it is not the last. Proper use of collected data and material, appropriate analysis of the same in a logical and scientific manner should be the main objective of regional writing. Regional or local history should complement national history. Otherwise, the errors of regional or local history will not help in the writing of national history. Today

regional or local history is complementary to national history and therefore the study of the scriptures of regional history is of considerable importance.

History is unique. Establishing regional identity is not the purpose of regional history; rather it's complementary to national history. Today, historiography explores the multi-dimensional relationship between the modern generation and its predecessors along with the analysis of the past consciousness of the people. (Dictionary of the History of Ideas, vol. II, p.454, 1973.) Historians, researchers, surveyors, etc., take a small peep into the huge workshop of social people and observe a little activity.⁵ Therefore, the division of regional history into different phases is not a fact, but a necessary project or tool of thought. It is valid only so far as it sheds light on darkness and its validity depends on its interpretation. Hence, it is of utmost importance that a researcher should know his own path in the search for regional history. He should examine various possible and partial projects or elements and be satisfied as close as possible to various provisional truths, leaving the door open to successive revisions. The study of regional history has a beginning, a progressive search towards facts but no end. The end of regional history study can never be proclaimed. Therefore, "There isn't the end to announce the last word?"

JATAR DEUL

The South 24 Parganas is one of the districts in West Bengal which boasts of several archaeological remains that have been lying scattered in different places. One such marvellous example is the Jatar Deul temple.

This particular temple once located in a place infested with ferocious animals, reptiles and insects has always been a place of interest for people studying ancient civilization. It has braved the natural calamities like flood and rain, storms, earthquakes, depression *etc.* and survived the wrecks caused by estuarine weather. Some temples of similar nature (locally called Rekh-Deul) were on Delbari- Island under Kultali police station and Banshyam Nagar Village in Pathar Pratima; they are now almost extinct. However, sincere efforts on the part of the famed researcher Kalidas Dutta and extensive support of the A.S.I have helped in renovating the Jatar Deul soon after the deforestation of its adjacent areas. Though these efforts have helped in conservation of the temple, its artistic structures and constructional patterns have been largely affected. It however should be remembered that during the first decades of the previous century not much could be done for conservation of archaeological relics in a hostile land like the Sundarbans.

It is to be noted that Kankan Dighi and Jata at Raydighi police station in South 24 Parganas had been rich in archaeological remains. In the village of West Jata, Lot No.

– 116 (JL. No. – 128) in (22^o N latitude and 88^o 29' E longitude) there exists the ancient and lofty Jatar Deul temple. Not much is known about this temple situated on the bank of Mani River, because this area is near the Sundarban and the Bay of Bengal. This area had been naturally affected by heavy rainfall, floods, depression of the earth etc.⁶ Various oppressions led by the pirates of Mag, Araakani and Portugese origin after the time of the Moghul Empire and during the reign of Pratapaditya in 1606 also led to the desolation of this region. In course of time the entire area was encroached upon by the forest and was turned into the habitat of wild animals. It gradually became impenetrable and the temple was being forgotten. Only at the beginning of the 19th century it was re-discovered during the acquisition of forests.

At the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th, the English surveyor Renel (1764 – 77) and the resident lease-holders and land-owners located the Jatar Deul temple. Surveyor Renel thought that it was a Buddhist pagoda. W. W. Hunter reiterated this particular view (Statistical Accounts, Vol. – I, Pg. – 381). An article in the Asiatic Society in 1868, December mentioned that a picture of the Temple was first published by Swainho – an Englishman, who also remarked the structure to be of Buddhist origin.⁷

By taking the lease of the land of Lot No.116 another Englishman named Smith first tried to deforest and acquire the area. Anticipating existence of secret valuables he demolished the top portion of the temple in 1274 Bengali era. (Kalidas Dutta – Sundarban Basumati Patrika, Kartick 1334 Bengali era). At present the height of the temple is about 100 feet and it is beautifully shaped as an octagon. The actual height of the temple was never and can never in future be ascertained. The width is around 32 feet on every side. The entrance is around 16 feet high and nine and a half foot wide. A brick staircase leads down to the main worship area. Noted archaeologist Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay remarked on the time of the construction of the temple 'Very few temples belonging to the Pala period have survived in Bengal and the only known examples are the temple Bahulara in the Bankura district and that of Ichai Ghosh in the Burdwan district. The deserted temple in Sundarban called the Jatar Deul, must also belong to the Pala period.'⁸

Kalidas Dutta wrote that Jatar Deul was constructed in the similar manner as that of the urbane model temples of the Pala period which was established in different parts of the eastern India. Many archaeologists believed that it bore the signs of the Pala temple architecture because the design and structure of its bricks were of the same size and shape of the temples belonging to the Pala period. Besides, Durgaprasad Raychoudhury, the Jaminder of this area unearthed in 1875 a copper plate near the

temple. It was deciphered from the copper plate that once the king of Jata, some Jayanta Chandra built the Jatar Deul in 975A.D.⁹ The Bengal Govt. published the book entitled 'The List of Ancient Monuments in Bengal' in 1896 in which it was mentioned about Jater Deul that 'The Deputy Collector of Diamond Harbor reported in 1875 that a copper plate ,discovered in a place a little to the north of Jatar Deul fixes the date of erection of the temple by Raja Jayanta Chandra in the year 897 of the Bengali Saka era corresponding to A.D.975.The copper plate was discovered at the clearing of the jungle by the grantee Durgaprasad Choudhury. The inscription is in Sanskrit and the date as usual was given is an enigma with the name of the founder.'¹⁰

Since long this large temple had been attracting many people. Dr. T. Blake visited the temple in 1908 before the A.S.I took it as a heritage temple, and he granted a sum of Rs. 8966 for the renovation of the site. The Director of A.S.I. Eastern Region, J.R.F. Dockiston visited the site in 1914 and recommended immediate conservation. According to him the temple was not a very ancient one. Finally, the site came under the conservation project of A.S.I. sometimes between third and fourth decades of the 20th century.¹¹

When the temple was discovered there were various designs and small replica on the outer surface of the brick wall. There were many reliefs on the surface carved in the forms of lotus petals, small embodiments, symbols, and niches. But at present the actual shape, height and ornamentation of the ancient temple could not be made out. Though the temple is saved from extinction, its improper conservation is a matter of great misfortune for the archaeologists.¹²

Satis Chandra wrote that the Jatar Deul on Mani River was originally a monument of victory. He thought that the temple is perhaps 4 to 5 hundreds years old built during the reign of Pratapaditya. It was made of thin bricks. Since those bricks were to a great extent broken, the art forms on its external surface were abolished (Jessore - Khulnar Itihas 2nd part page no-206). Sri Nalinikanta Bhattasali and Kashinath Dikshit remarked that it was constructed in the Mughal period. Later on Kashinath Dikshit changed his opinion and said that its style was similar to that of Bhubaneswary Temple.¹³ On the other hand, eminent historians like Kalidas Dutta and Ashim Mukhopadhyaya said that its architectural design is almost similar to was the Pala Bhubaneswary Temple. It is further known from the List of Ancient monument page no-221 published by West Bengal Govt. in 1886 that the king Jayanta Chandra Sen built the temple in 975.¹⁴ But till today the exact time of its inception is not clear.

There are differences of opinions on the origin of the name of Jatar Deul. The local people think that it was built in the Pala period as an abode of Lord Shiva. Jatadhar is another name of Shiva from where the name of the temple came into existence.

Ashim Kumar Mukhopadhyay opined that inside the temple once lived a ferocious man-eating tiger having some mane or jata after which it is named. However he had little doubt that the temple was built in the Hindu period. Though W. W. Hunter and Renal said that it was a Buddhist pagoda, it is almost confirmed that the Pala kings revered the Buddhist and Jain religions while being great supporters of Hinduism. But Nihar Ranjan Roy was of the opinion that in the South Samatata Bengal the Chandra Bansa rulers were devoted to Buddhist and Jain religions. Hence the temple built by Jayanta Chandra could be an instance of Jain Temple. The real identity of the temple is shrouded in mystery. At present it is being adored as a Shiva temple.

It is already proved that this region had been a very ancient and prosperous place. A large number of ruined houses discovered in the neighboring lot no-26 of Kankan dighi exhibit the bricks; the dilapidated sun temple, other metal images etc. which confirm the origin of the temple in the Pala period. Similarly, the earthen wears, gold coins, the embodiments of the Jain Tirthankars, the various gold coins and copper coins of the periods of Kaniska and Skanda Gupta tell that here were some ancient janapada. Other archaeological remains of the surrounding areas namely Khari, Chatravog, Krishnachandrapur, Nalua, Maiphit, etc help to know so much about the village Jata.¹⁵

It is not the best time to say final words on the identity of Jatar Deul situated on the basin of the Mani River. There is every possibility for fresh historical discussions based on new data to be made available in the days to come which may alter the historical perspective of South Bengal.

REFERENCES

- 1.Naskar, Dipankar- Dakshin Chobbish Parganar Itihas Charcha, vol.I, Amar Bharati, Kolkata, First edition year 2021, p.34.
- 2.Ibid, p.34.
- 3.Ibid, p.35.
- 4.Ibid, p.36.
- 5.Dictionary of the History of Ideas, vol. II, 1973, p.454.
- 6.Poschimbonga Potrika, Jela Dakshin Chobbish Porgana, Tothya O Sanskriti Bivag, W.B., March, 2000, p.167.
- 7.Hunter, W.W. - A Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol-1, 1973, p.381.
- 8.Dutta, Kalidas- Dakshin Chobbish Porganar Atit, vol.I, Varendra Research Society, monogram no.3, p. 43.
- 9.Mitra, Satishchandra- Joshor Khulnar Itihas, vol.-I, Deys Publishining, Kol. Jan. 2001, p.69.
- 10.Mitra, Satishchandra- Joshor Khulnar Itihas, vol.-II, Deys Publishining, Kol. Jan. 2001, p.201.
- 11.Haldar, Bimalendu(edt.)- Nimna Ganeya Sundarban Sanaskriti Patra, March 2005, p.57.

-
12. Dutta, Kalidas- Dakshin Chobbish Porganar Atit, vol.I, Sundarban Ancholik Sangrahasala, March 1989, p. 46.
 13. Blackiston, J.F. - Asst. Superintendent of Archaeological Survey of India, Eastern Circle,- Inspection note on the Temple of Jatar Deul, 24-parganas, Bengal, 24th Dec. 1914.
 14. Govt. Of Bengal, - List of Ancient Monuments in the Presidency Division, 1896, p.3.
 15. Naskar, Dipankar- Dakshin Chobbish Parganar Itihas Charcha, vol.I, Amar Bharati, Kolkata, First edition year 2021, p.148.