



Contribution of Dineshchandra Sen (1866-1939) in Bengal Historiography

Srikanta Roy
Chowdhury

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Southfield College, Darjeeling

ABSTRACT

The reconstruction of the history of Bengali language and literature was closely linked with the reconstruction of the history of Bengal, especially of the ancient period. Dineshchandra Sen made a great effort to understand the life of the Bengali people as it was reflected in the Bengali literature through his different works. Although he was not the pioneer in the field, but his credit was systematic presentation of the previously available data as well as collection of the new. The periodization of growth the Bengali language and literature provide a scope to the historians to understand the evolution of Bengali culture. Despite various limitations, Dineshchandra showed a way to could be followed by scholars aspiring to reconstruct a total history of the Bengali people.

KEYWORDS : historiography, periodization, Hindu College, Asiatic Society of Bengal.

In the historiography of ancient Bengal the history of literature of Bengal gradually acquired for itself a position of significance. Because, those who engaged themselves in reconstructing the history of literature attempted to trace as far as possible the history of the people reflected in the literature of Bengal. In fact, behind the vicissitudes of political fortune he wanted to probe into "the inner life, the thoughts, the feelings, the real life of Bengal." An investigation on this line was undertaken by Dineshchandra Sen, when he had decided to publish *Baṅgabhāṣā O Sāhitya* on the basis of a large number of manuscripts collected by him from different parts of Bengal. He took great pains for six years to complete the work and published it in 1896¹.

The effort of Dineshchandra Sen for reconstructing the history of Bengali language and literature was not the first of its kind. In 1774, Nathaniel Brassy Halhed published *A Grammar of the Bengali Language* that contained some illustrations from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Annadāmaṅgal*. Kashiprasad Ghosh, a brilliant student of **Hindu College**, wrote in 1830, in *The Literary Gazette* (January 2) edited by Rev. James Long an article entitled 'On Bengali Works and Writers'. From 1853 to 1855 Isvaragupta published in his *Samvād Prabhākara* 'The Biographic Accounts and Works of Eighteenth Century Kavis and Kavivāḥās'. Harimohan Mukhopadhyay wrote in 1869 the *Kavicharita*, volume I, containing discussions on Kṛttivās, Mukundarām, Kāśīrām Dās, Rāmprasād Sen, Mādhabmohan Tarkālāṅkāra and Išvarachandra Gupta. In 1871, Mahendranath Chattopadhyay wrote *Baṅgabhāṣār Itihāsa*, volume I (A History of Bengali Language). In the same year Bankimchandra wrote in *The Calcutta Review* an article entitled 'Bengali Literature'². Ramgati Nayaratra wrote in 1872 for the first time a systematic history of Bengali language and literature³. He divided the entire history of literature into three periods, namely,

Ancient Period or Pre-Chaitanya Period;

Medieval Period, that is, pre-Bharatchandra period beginning from the time of Chaitanya;

Modern Period extending from Bharatchandra to Bankimchandra.

Rajnarain Vasu wrote in 1878 the history of Bengali language and literature depending on Ramgati Nyayaratra's work and Long's *Descriptive Catalogue*⁴. In 1877 was published Rameshchandra Dutt's famous work *The Literature of Bengal*. In this work we may trace a keen sense of history combined with a sharp insight into the mentality of the Bengali people⁵. Therefore, it may be reasonably held that while Ramgati Nayaratra introduced a periodization in the history of the Bengali literature, Rameshchandra Dutt initiated the process of utilising Bengali literature for exploring the history of culture of the Bengali people. Those two trends seem to have been combined by Dineshchandra Sen in his *Baṅgabhāṣā O Sāhitya* (1896).

Rabindranath Tagore wrote in 1901 a critical appreciation of the second edition of Dineshchandra's work and stated thus:

"We have found in Dineshbaboos's book the shadow of a gigantic tree of history (itihāsa vanaspati) of Bengal with its different branches and sub-branches."⁶

In fact, it was Dineshchandra who synthesised the results obtained previously by fragmentary attempts to reconstruct a comprehensive history of Bengali literature. Dineshchandra Sen's work is characterised by collection of a lot of information and facts, systematic presentation on the basis of periodisation and deep insight into the mind of the Bengali people. In this work he has sought assistance from the **Asiatic Society of Bengal** and Haraprasad Sastri⁷. Most of the contemporary scholars witnessed with great interest the process of making history of Bengali literature mainly through field-survey and collection of manuscripts in the districts like Tippera and Chattagrama⁸.

The periodisation in the history of Bengali literature as followed by Dineshchandra Sen indicated, firstly, the Hindu-Buddhist age, secondly, the age of Chaitanya, thirdly, the age of Reforms, fourthly, the age of Krishnachandra and lastly, the age of the British. Rameshchandra Dutt's periodisation was thus: the age of Lyric and Poems, the age of Sanskrit influence and the age of Western influence. In comparison with the previous scholars' periodisation Dineshchandra Sen's planning of the period appears to be more meaningful and comprehensive, although the shortcomings in it was pointed out by later historians like Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay and Sukumar Sen⁹.

Prabodhchandra Bagchi¹⁰ in an appendix to the eighth edition to the *Baṅgabhāṣā O Sāhitya* pointed out the following:

Whatever has been said about the interrelation between the *Prākṛt* language and Bengali requires revision. Because, Bengali language originated from the *Prācyā* or the eastern *Apabhraṃśā* which was again derived from *Prācyā* or *Māgadhī Prākṛt*.

No mention has been made of the Buddhist *Charyāpadas* representing the earliest form of the Bengali language. When the first edition of *Baṅgabhāṣā O Sāhitya* was published, the *Charyāpadas* were not yet discovered. But in later editions, a discussion on the *Charyāpadas* might have been incorporated.

Whatever has been said about *Śūnyapurāṇa* appears to be based on facts furnished by Nagendranath Vasu and Haraprasad Sastri. After the discovery of many manuscripts it has been found out that there was actually no work entitled *Śūnyapurāṇa*. The work was actually *Dharmaṅgāpaddhati* written in the fifteenth-sixteenth century by the priests of Dharmaṅgāhākura and not by the person named Ramāṅgāḍīta.

In order to determine the exact date of the Nāth literature, the discovery of more manuscripts is required. It is difficult to determine whether *Goraṅgāvijaya* or *Maināmatir Gān* formed a part and parcel of the Nāth literature.

As we are concerned mainly with the early history of Bengal we may

concentrate on the Hindu-Buddhist period of Dineshchandra extended from AD 800 to AD 1200. Dineshchandra has opined that to this period should be assigned the *Śūnyapurāṇa*, the *Nāthagitikā* including *Gorakṣavijaya* and *Maināmatir Gān*, *Kathā Sāhitya*, that is, *Vratakathā* and *Rūpakathā* (folk-tales) and the sayings of Dāk and Khanā. Dineshchandra has made a brilliant sociological study of the texts referred to above with the purpose of reconstructing the social history of ancient Bengal. But for obvious reasons, it would be unreasonable to assign the said literature in the period between AD 800 and AD 1200. As pointed out by Niharranjan Roy that the above-mentioned texts were put into writing when the oral traditions transmitted from generation to generation in *Prākṛt* language was rendered into the literary language¹¹. In fact, most of the texts referred to by Dineshchandra Sen were compiled in the medieval period and it would be, therefore, reasonable to assume that some social ingredients entered into those texts at the time of compilation. It does not necessarily mean that those texts are not useful for reconstructing the social history of ancient Bengal. But the historian has to be very cautious in making use of the data furnished by those texts. To quote Niharranjan Roy:

"There is some historical basis in the adages of Dak and Khana; scattered here and there in these sayings there is enough to give a fragmented impression of society, undoubtedly that of the tenth or eleventh century. However, the form and language in which they have come into our hands are not as old, and the same kind of room for doubt is applicable to the *Śūnyapurāṇa*, *Gopī Chander Gitā*, *Se-khśubhodayā*, *Ādyer Gambhirā*, *Murśidyāgān* and the ancient folk-tales. The real story of the life and language of the common people, their daily joys and woes, their problems great and small, did not begin in written form but rather was contained in songs, stories, proverbs, ballads and folk-tales and circulated amongst the people in oral tradition; only a long time later, perhaps, it achieved a literary form, and thus the language of the common people was elevated to the status of a written language.¹²"

REFERENCES

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