



The Varendra Research Society and Excavations in Northern Bengal

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ABSTRACT *The state of early history of Bengal was not pleasing till the middle of 19th century. The reason after that was not scarcity of the rudiments of writing history, but fairly, the lack of investigation. Varendra Research Society was established in 1910, which not only built a depository for the ingredients of writing the ancient history of Bengal, rather, itself became the beacon bearer who showed the path of writing the ancient history of Bengal on the basis of original evidence. To achieve that landmark, the VRS(Varendra Research Society) unearthed and collected antiquities and original documents through -) Exploration & Excavation. In fact, VRS excavated some important sites of Northern Bengal and contributed to laid bare historicity of the same.*

Till the middle of nineteenth century, neither in Bengal nor in India there was an ambiance of historical culture in the truest sense. At that time, since historical research based on the study of original documents was hardly known, the history of Bengal, specifically the ancient history of Bengalees, has not been composed. Moreover at that time the Bengalees were quite unaware of utilizing archaeology as the major ingredient¹ of writing the ancient history. Although a few disjunctive surveys were conducted by the Britishers² but those hardly contributed to the composition of the ancient history of Bengal. They were also indifferent towards Northern Bengal which has been central to ancient history of Bengal. And consequently there was no major explorations made at this region. To fulfill that vacuity or to carry out "sequential investigation of evidences in Varendra region"³ the Varendra Research Society was founded in 1910 at Rajshahi, now in Bangladesh.

Having elected Sarat Kumar Ray, Akshaya Kumar Maitra and Ramaprasad Chanda as president, director and secretary respectively, the Varendra Research Society got formally established on 27th September, 1910. "The history of Greenland has been written; even that of Mawri people is on page; however, the land that was constituted of the places like Gour –Tamralipta -Saptagram etc, that land has no documented history in writing" - quoting this statement of Bankim Chandra , Akshaya Kumar Maitra acknowledged in the Upakramnika(Foreword) of Gaudarajama that 'the reason behind this is not paucity of the elements of writing history, but rather, the lack of any investigation'. Therefore, it would not be wrong to mention that the rediscovery of the evidences of the early history of Bengal as well as the Bengalees was the one and only or eventual vision of the Varendra Research Society. Anyway, in the light of the vision, the Society conducted its mission of the collection of antiquities through - a) Exploration & b)Excavation.⁴

Exhilarating by the sensation of the success of exploration, the Varendra Research Society made an effort to put its exertion in a number of perceptive excavation. In actual fact, there was a prerequisite of excavation in some sites to ascertain the genuine and flourishing history of pre-Islamic Bengal. In this regard, president Sarat Kumar Ray put down in black and white in one of his speech for a session (Calcutta) of Bangiya Shahitya Parishad :

"It needs to kick off excavation on the way to expose the archaeological chattels of these archaeological sites of Bengal. History would be revealed only with the discovery of archeological chattels. On the contrary, it would be unfeasible

to depict the genuine history by means of the evidences collected till date. It would be incapable to bring about the genuine history in any point of time if it remains satisfy with those limited evidences. History of Bengalees should be revealed by the Bengalees themselves and they are supposed to be engaged into digging the earth with shovel ."⁵ Every single student of history is acquainted with that this statement is not merely a catchphrase of aphorism. This is integrated with the scientific method of finding the past evidences.

Kumarpur:

The Varendra Research Society opted first Kumarpur of Godagari police station in Rajshahi district as its site in this direction. In his presidential address Sarat Kumar Ray brought up that the Society dug out a little segments of Kumarpur mound by 1912 and the outcome would be made public in a certain time. But it was not publicized, in all probability, in view of the fact that there was no such significant outcome of this initial endeavor.

The excavation of Kumarpur, yet again, got a fresh start. It is to be pointed out that there were more than a few mound at Kumarpur within the one and the same neighborhood. However, one of them , footing next to the side of the main street from Rajshahi to Godagari was erected a Mausoleum over the grave of Ali Kuli, a Muslim nobleman.⁶ In fact, the sighting of three inscriptions of Mughol period (17th century A.D.) from the zenith of this Mausoleum shoved the Society to point up the notice of the local authorities as well as the Archaeological department in 1923 to take actions under the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act.⁷ Following a succession of communications, Mokarma and Uparbari, the two significant archaeological mounds were brought under the provisions of the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act and affirmed to be looked after by the Government.

By means of their passion of venture of excavation the VRS unveiled the hidden foundations of brick wall of typical width (more than 9 feet) at Uparbari and a Saivate / Hindu temple at Mokarma. At Mokarma lower ingredient of a pillar from a Hindu temple has been unearthed and this had been afterward made use of as a lamp post by the Mahamedans.⁸ The heap on which the Mausoleum situated, stone relics indicative of Hindu derivation were seen laying on. The location is supposed to have shaped part of Vijaynagar, the first capital of the Sena Kings of Bengal and Deopara or Padmeswar from where the copper inscription of Vijayasena was lifted up is not very far-off from the vicinity.

Mahisantosh:

Yet, not the Kumpurpur, it was Mahisantosh, the earliest thriving excavation of the VRS as well as the Bengalees of their own enterprise. For the reason that it was accomplished in the year 1916 where as successful excavation of Kumpurpur was carried out after 1923.

The site is located three miles faraway from Balurghat in Dinajpur district. The members of the VRS inspected the place in 1911. At that point in time there was an old Darga of the 15th century of the Cristian era encircled by a brick built fence⁹ and a heap exclusively crammed with brick, stone and jungles. And there were two inscriptions affixed with the fence of the Darga. Even, several British writers referred to the ruins of Mahisantosh in their writings. But none of them, talked about the ruins of Mahisantosh. During the occasion of their first visit the members of the Society desired to transport one significant stone of the said heap to Rajshahi. However, owing to the dearth of time and being observant of the verity that the porters could refuse to touch the consecrated stone, they had to return with empty hands. In the succeeding years one of the two inscriptions were omitted and there was every risk of missing the pillars of the heap. Hence, the VRS came to a decision to excavate the site in the year 1916. The digging was initiated in the month of December under the supervision of Debendragoti Ray, the member of the Society from Balurghat. And sponsor Sarat Kumar Ray in company with Akshaya Kumar Maitra, Ramaprasad Chanda, Upendra Nath Ghosal, Bimalcharan Maitra joined with him in the Christmas recess.¹⁰

The VRS was successful to divulge the piece of information that the heap was derived as a consequence of the segregation of the brick-stones of the Mausoleum. But the most expensive outcome of this excavation was the detection of the striking presence of Brahminical and Buddhist art in the stones and pillars of the Mausoleum. Actually, a number of icons of Hindu deities like Mahishamardini, Vishnu, Surya etc and Buddha images were exposed from the debris of stones of the remains of Mausoleum. Since the stones are not fit in to the same era and same school of art, Akshaya Kumar corroborated that the brick and stones of the Mausoleum were brought from various Hindu and Buddhist temples of varied periods which were most likely not far-flung from the Mausoleum.¹¹

Deopara-Padyumeswar:

Another significant attainment in this direction of the Society was the excavation of Padyumeswar tank(pool) in Deopara village. Deopara is a village of Godagari police station in Rajshahi district. It is to be pointed out that the inscription of Vijay Sena, the Sena king was discovered from the eastern part of this pool. The excavation was began in the month of April in 1919. The total expenditure of the work was Rs. 200, half of which was put in by the Rajshahi District Board and the further paid by the Kumar Sarat Kumar Ray. ¹² The operation of the Society turn out to be booming to find out 64 valued sculpture and three terracotta Manasa- ghtatas from the bed of the pool.

The fabulous success of Deopara- Padyumeswar stirred the Society and indisputably multiplied the guts of the members of the Society. Consequently, the Society took up schemes in favour of further operations in the similar line. But, till date the Society had no trained scholar of its own in the technique of excavation. For that reason the VRS had to go through a number of difficulties. And so the Society deputed Ramaprasad Chanda in the Department of Archaeology in the year 1917 with the recommendation and arrangement of Sir John Marshall, the director of the Archaeological Survey of India. Ramaprasad had gained the practical knowledge of the method of excavation as a trainee in the archaeological sites of Taxila, Mathura and Sarnath and returned back to Rajshahi in the year 1919.¹³ But the Society became unsuccessful to get a hold of this knowledge of Ramaprasad. Be-

cause the consort of Chanda breathed her last immediately after the conclusion of the training and the bereaved man left Rajshahi for Calcutta.¹⁴ And there he got the employment of lecturer ship in Calcutta University in the department of History and Culture with the support of Ashutosh Mukherjee.

Paharpur:

The most gallant step in this line was taken by the VRS in the year 1922-1923 when the president Sarat Kumar Ray consigned funds in the hands of Calcutta University intended for the excavation at Paharpur. The Government endorsed some funds in this plan as well. Being pleased about the sense of duty of Kumar Sarat Kumar Ray, the Archaeological Survey of India stated in its annual report of the year 1921-22 that:

“The scheme is to be financed partly by the Government of India and partly by Sarat Kumar Ray of Dighapatiya, who by his magnificent donations and active interest in the cause of Archaeology has set a rare example to his countrymen.”

Paharpur is a mauza of Badalgachi police station of Rajshahi district. The village has achieved its name on or after a high mound (Pahar). The location had been inspected previously by Buchanan Hamilton, Westmaccot and Alexander Cunningham. Whereas Buchanan and Westmaccot illustrated the site of a Buddhist temple, the supposition of the third person(Cunningham) was that it was of a Brahminical composition.¹⁵ However, Akshaya Kumar in his discourse in Calcutta University decisively propped up the opinion of Buchanan and Westmaccot taking into account the loftiness(80 feet) and the collective characteristics of the mound. And one month later, following the Calcutta University lecture of Akshaya Kumar Maitra, one inscription was uncovered from Paharpur by Sriram Maitra, one of the moffossil members of VRS. The inscription consists of a stanza of four line in Sanskrit which bears witness to the Buddhistic derivation of this remains.¹⁶

It is to be highlighted that a little section of the heap was dug up by one Ghanesyam in 1876, who laid bare a large boulder which merely made certain the fact that the heap was composed of solid bricks. Therefore, taking into consideration the fundamental nature of Paharpur mound the VRS formulated prospective grounding to excavate it. But ahead of implementing the plan there was a requisite of its safeguard from reckless vandalism. In view of that, the Society submitted an application to the District Magistrate of Rajshahi as well as the Superintendent of the Archaeological Survey of India, Eastern Circle in support of the consent of the work and safeguard of the mound. The Archaeological Survey of India took action positively. The corollary was that the Paharpur mound was avowed by the Government of Bengal as protected mound under the Ancient Monuments Act. of 1904. After receiving permission, the VRS set up the excavation in the year 1923 in collaboration with Calcutta University. D.R. Bhandrakar of Calcutta University supervised the project. Unfortunately the Calcutta University put an end to the excavation after some momentous progress of the work.

However, the task of excavation at Paharpur was taken up again by the Archeological Department in the year 1925. It is interesting to note that even on this Government scheme the Government and Kumar equally shared the financial contribution. ¹⁷ For this reason the Society was given a quantity of priceless antiquities(sculptures and terracotta plaques) subsequent to the completion of the excavation in 1934.¹⁸ It is astonishing to note that the systematic excavation of the Archaeological Department unearthed the remains of a Buddhist structure, i.e. the Sompuri Vihara decorated with dados of terra-cotta plaques bearing various eye-catching figures.¹⁹

It was with a view to carry out such big projects i.e. excavations by itself, the Society made a decision to send its curator at the eminent site of Mhenjodaro in Sind for handy training

in excavation. As a result, Nanigopal Majumdar, the curator of the Society's museum took a course of training in excavation at Mahenjodaro under the direct supervision of Sir John Marshall. As regards the work of Nanigopal at Mahenjodaro Sir John Marshall remarked " Mr. Majumdar did good work at Mahenjodaro and that he looks forward to enlisting his help in future excavations in Varendra." 20 It is unfortunate that the Society yet again fell short to make use of the practical knowledge in excavation of Nanigopal Majumdar. In fact, being besieged by the work of Nanigopal Majumdar in the training phase, the Archaeological Department of India came to a decision to employ him in the post of Assistant director. Thus, Nanigopal gave up his job of curatorship in 1927 to join the Archaeological Department. 21 Even though the Society did not remain motionless exasperating with the development. Rather, it decided to send Nirodbandhu Sanyal as the third representative to get appropriate training in excavation. With the permission of the Archaeological Department Sanyal partook in excavation in the site of

Mahasthan under the expert guidance of, no other than, K. N. Dikshit. 22

To execute the long cherished aspiration to excavate a decisive and colossal site of North Bengal by itself, the VRS made each and every preparation in the 3rd decade of 20th century. 23 At this instant they had a curator who had been regularly trained in excavation. Correspondence was also made for the purpose in 1930-31 with the Director of Archaeology in India requesting him to entrust the excavation of a chosen site to the Society. 24 A sympathetic reply was also received by the Society from the Archaeological Survey of India. But the accomplishment of this type of attempt depends absolutely on funds. And as the Society was stricken by economic depression at that juncture, the projected scheme could not be materialized. After the failure of this elongated attempt of the 3rd decade the VRS could not take up ever any scheme in this direction of excavation.

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