

History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives- Vol. I and II

Edited by Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti. ISBN 978-94-94-4520-9. Ananda Society of Bangladesh, 2018

REVIEWED BY SONIA NISHAT AMIN

History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives (up to c. 1200 CE)- Vol. I & II, edited by renowned historians of ancient and medieval Bengal, Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti, will evoke keen interest among the academic community and general readers. Many decades had passed since the publication of the first such study in the 1940s under the editorship of R.C. Majumdar and Jadunath Sarkar, viz. the classic *History of Bengal*. As pointed out by A.R. Mallick in the foreword to the three volumes of *History of Bangladesh 1700-1971*, published in 1992:

"Nearly half a century has passed since the celebrated *History of Bengal* was published by the University of Dhaka. In the meantime a great mass of new information has come to light, new knowledge has accumulated, techniques of writing history have further advanced and new researches and interpretations of historical events have put many of our established theories and views to doubt. Hence there was a strong feeling among the scholars and general readers that the history of Bengal ought to be re-written in the light of the latest historiographical developments..."

The volumes being reviewed here is a part of the series on a comprehensive history of the region. The first part of the ambitious project- three volumes- edited by Strajal Islam under the title *History of Bangladesh 1700-1971* was published in 1992, and twenty six years elapsed before the prequel could be published.

In the introduction to the *History of Early Bengal*, the editors have clarified certain terms which are crucial to any conceptualization of the region's historiography. For instance, the term "early Bengal" has been defined at some length because it has been deemed appropriate in resolving the problem of nomenclature due to blurred boundaries. The volumes deal with the nation state of Bangladesh and states of West Bengal and Tripura in India, and parts of Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha, as the case may be. The editors point out in the introduction, by using the term Early

Bengal: "we go beyond the boundaries of the nation-state." (Introduction, XXVI)

It is not possible to do justice to this work, the collaborative effort of scholars from all over the world, each renowned in his or her field, in a brief review. Suffice it to say that the work is well worth the anticipation engendered.

Divided into 12 chapters in volume I subsumed under the divisions "Archaeology, Political History, Polity"; and 10 in volume II devoted to "Society, Economy, Culture," the anthology covers the entire range of social institutions in their interplay with the land and its geography, from the earliest times to circa 1200. The topics covered in Volume I include historical geography; anthropological history; archaeological sites, and political history. Volume II devoted to society, economy and culture, contains chapters such as: everyday life in early Bengal, life of women, issues of Varma and land, agricultural technology and monetary history; religions, art, architecture, manuscripts and linguistic developments. A cursory glance reveals that new topics (i.e. historical geography; fiscal history; agricultural technology; gender history; linguistic history; maritime and cultural linkages) – are incorporated along with new techniques and interpretations.

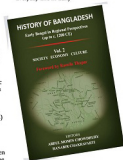
As a history enthusiast teaching history for a long time, I read several chapters of the two volumes with a keen interest. The introduction written by the editors Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti, sets the stage for the ensuing chapters in a thought provoking manner. The first chapter on historical geography by Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Akasad Alam, deals with a relatively new branch of history.

Many archaeological sites have been excavated in the later half of the 20th century and the first quarter of the 21st. The amazing corpus of information gleaned from these new sites, tools and methods of excavation, investigation and analysis, inform the chapters devoted to archaeology: *Bishrupriya*

Basak provides a succinct introduction to the subject.

Ranabir Chakravarti concludes Volume I with an incisive essay, "State Formation and Polity." Through a novel treatment of the subject he enables the reader to view the history of the rise and fall of disparate dynasties through the theoretical perspective of power and state formation. This chapter will be a lasting contribution to the scholarship on early statehood in Bengal.

As a practitioner of socio-cultural and gender history, I turned eagerly to volume II – Society, Economy, Culture. "Everyday Life in Early



Bengal" by Suchandra Chosh and Sapantani Pal is a well organized read covering major aspects of daily life in the period under review. However, photographs would have been relevant here. Runal Chakravarti enriches the volume with his scholarship on Brahmanism in an indigenous context in his chapter Brahmanical Religions.

The history of women has been accorded an important place in the volume. This addresses the tokenism encountered in most works where a cursory acknowledgement is all that half

the human population gets. Chapter 3 and an appendix following this focus exclusively on women's role, status and their relationship to social institutions. "Social Life of Women," written by the pioneering scholar in women's history in Bangladesh, Shahanaara Hussain, brings in a comprehensive women's history in early Bengal. Observations are corroborated by the rich textual and archaeological evidence collected by Professor Hussain. However, one would have liked a more elaborate introduction and a clarification regarding the time indicated by the phrase "contemporary sources" at various points (e.g. - p.8, paragraphs 1, 2, 3). As the period covered here spreads across several centuries, the clarification becomes important. There is, moreover, a preponderant reliance on the *Manu Smriti* as source material in the chapter. Also, subheadings might have aided in organizing the wealth of information presented. At times the presentation becomes too narrative. For instance when the author says, "Practice of seclusion was prevalent in royal families," the reader would like to know when this was prevalent, where exactly and how?

The chapter above is followed by an excellent article titled, "Social History of Women in Ancient Times: Emergent Methodological and Historiographical Issues," by Nupur Dasgupta which should have been included as a chapter rather than an appendix.

Dasgupta's analysis applies to the writing of women's history of any period, ancient, medieval or modern. The author traces developments in this relatively new branch of history- the sources, interpretations/theories, methodologies of writing that the sub-discipline has forged into being. The writer points out that the first breakthrough from stereotypical discussion of women by (male) historians, came in the 1960s when scholars such as Sukumari Bhattacharji emphasized the centrality of women's lives by rescuing their history from the margins. Dynamic historical texts and

interpretations were henceforth undertaken. Dasgupta provides a brief but analytical narration of the notable contributions made by these scholars in reconstructing women's lives. The essay will be of interest to scholars who study women in any time period.

The section on Economy contains three chapters: *Economic Life: Agrarian and Non-Agrarian Pursuits* by Ranabir Chakravarti; *Agriculture and Media of Exchange: Reflections on the Monetary History* by Susmita Basu Majumdar. Perhaps for the first time, these provide the reader, with an overview of the economic conditions of early Bengal, in a single location.

The chapters on sculpture (including frieze art) offer fresh insights not only on new material, but also into interpretations (iconography). Four chapters in Volume II dwell on sculpture – as it was the leading and most prevalent art form of the period in the region.

Any discussion of the origin and development of Bangla literature starts with the *Charyapada* – a collection of mystical songs and poems in the Buddhist Vajrayana tradition during the Pala Empire. Heretofore, only a few of these palm-leaf manuscripts had been unearthed dating back to the efforts of Haraprasad Shastri in 1916. Recently Sayed Mohammad Shahed created a stir in the academic community by unearthing a trove of *Charyapad* manuscripts. His *Charyapad* (chapter 18) is thus a rich contribution to the volume and the cultural history of early medieval Bengal.

In concluding, I would like to say these two volumes present the findings of the latest research on the given topic gathered with the most refined tools available to the historian today. The anthology will become a classic in its own right.

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