

Synopsis

Nalinikanta Bhattasali
A Multi-Faceted Figure –A Study

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Introduction: Nalini Kanta Bhattasali (1888-1947) was one of the pioneers in the construction of regional identity for history of Eastern Bengal. He was a historian, archaeologist, numismatist, epigraphist and antiquarian, whose contributions have gone a long way in clarifying many obscurities in the history and culture of ancient and medieval Bengal. He was a founder of Dacca Museum subsequently known as Bangladesh National Museum.

Bengal or more correctly, East Bengal (*Vanga-Samatata*) was Bhattasali's special field of study. By his valuable contributions, extensive explorations and intensive investigation in different neglected areas of this region, he successfully dispelled much of the obscurity and ignorance that had surrounded its early history and civilization.

Bhattasali was closely associated with the discovery of the hitherto unknown *Khadga, Chandra, Varman* and later *Deva* dynasties of Bengal on the basis of the copper-records. Bhattasali's expert knowledge of early Indian paleography and numismatics was of great help in deciphering and interpreting these records.

But he never limited his studies to the pre-Muslim period. He examined very carefully and diligently the Muslim coins in his Museum collection. In course of time he became a recognized expert and authority on Muslim numismatics. With this evidence supplied by these coins, he wrote the first time scientific account of the pre-Mughal Muslim rulers of Bengal, "*Coins and Chronology of the Early Independent Sultans of Bengal*", which till now remains a standard work on the subject.

Bhattasali's most outstanding contribution, however, was in the field of Hindu and Buddhist iconography. He was a pioneer in this field of study. His efforts in

this field resulted in the publication of his monumental work “*Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum.*”

His interest also extended to old Bangla literature and he is regarded as an authority of Bangla paleography. He received a few prizes and awards for his works and for several years he taught Bangla literature, paleography and history in Dhaka University. He had to his credit to competent edition of the Ramayana (*Adikanda*) of *Krittivasa*.

Bhattacharya was a stout controversialist and his powerful pen could occasionally be painfully incisive. Bhattacharya never yielded from any conclusion he had arrived at, which he thought, was justified. An uncompromising individualism and spirit of independence was a marked trait of his character. He has written extensively both in English and Bengali on history, archaeology, epigraphy and art.

Scope of the study: The scope of the work lies in the fact that he has a great contribution in the field of archaeology, epigraphy, numismatic and art history of India. Like his elder contemporary A.K.Maitreya, Sarat Kr. Roy and Rama Prasad Chanda who made a concert attempt to explore the past of *Varendra* in relation to the border history of Bengal in India; N.K.Bhattacharya turned his attention in eastern Bengal (*Vanga-samatata*) and made a sustained attempt to give a proper shape to the history of this region.

Bhattacharya’s most outstanding contribution, however, was in the field of Hindu and Buddhist iconography which, till then was little known and much less studied. He was a pioneer in this field of study. Through his efforts to collect and interpret sculptures for the museum, he acquired an almost unsurpassable knowledge of the significance and identity of images, greatly reinforced by his in-depth and extensive studies of ancient texts of various religious sects, both Brahmanical and Buddhist ones.

Area and Period of the study: To choose any specific area or period on the subject, it will be very difficult. But Bengal or more correctly east Bengal (*Vanga-Samatata*) was Bhattacharya’s special field of study. Although Bhattacharya’s most outstanding contribution was in the field of Hindu and Buddhist iconography. But

he never limited his studies to the pre-Muslim period. He wrote many articles on the medieval period of the Indian history. His interest also extended to old Bangla literature and he is regarded as an authority of Bangla paleography. So the study covers almost whole Bhattasali's lifetime activities and achievements.

Aims and Objectives of the study: The study aims to analyses the contributions and activities of N.K. Bhattasali, in clarifying many obscurities of the history and culture of ancient and medieval Bengal.

Secondly, aims of the study lies in the fact that how Bhattasali untiringly wandered through the country side, exploring, discovering, photographing and collecting objects and gathering information, and trying to create local interest and consciousness for the preservation of our cultural heritage. It must be stated clearly that till his time, Bengal (specially its eastern part) had received scant attention from historians and archaeologist who had an all-India reputation.

Thirdly, as an art historian his career, life and his works should be known to academic world by working on his works and activities.

Research Problem of the study: Aims at understanding Bhattasali's contributions in looking into the past chronological history through the tools of archaeology, epigraphy and intensive exploration through the country side of Bengal specially *Vanga-Samatata* region.

Bhattasali's identification of many unique images, which he proposed for the first time, had remained substantially unchallenged ever since. But, like every other pioneering enterprise, his study suffered from the lack of any sustainable method or system of classification.

Apart from this, I should know whether anyone else has already done any research on the same topic. This would help me to avoid duplication.

Hypothesis: A hypothesis is a tentative conclusion. It is a suggestive explanation. A hypothesis is a suggestion of possible connection between imagined fact and actual fact. So it can be said that N.K. Bhattasali made a valuable contribution in the field of Indian art, archaeology, epigraphy, numismatic and history. He made a

sustained attempt to give a proper shape to the history eastern Bengal (*Vanga-Samatata* region). On the medieval history of Bengal, he prepared for the first time, a dependable sequence of chronology of the Bengal sultans on basis of numismatic evidences. But Bhattasali's most outstanding contribution, however, was in the field of Hindu and Buddhist iconography. He was a pioneer in this field of study. On the conclusion it can be said that N.K. Bhattasali was a multi-faced genius.

Review of Literature: Published works on N.K. Bhattasali give information for the theoretical framework of the study. Saifuddin Chowdhury wrote on the subject a short biography "*Nalini Kanta Bhattasali: 1888-1947*" (in Bengali), 1989, published from *Bangla Academy*, Dhaka. N.K. Bhattasali commemoration volume edited by A.B.M. Habibullah, Dacca Museum, 1966, also throws light on Bhattasali's contribution to the history of Bengal. Though not much known for literary work, Bhattasali has written a few books on Bangla literature. A collection of his short stories, *Hasi o Ashru* (Lough and Tears) was published in 1915 and an edited version of Abdus Sukur Mohammad's *Gopi Chander Sannyas* was published in 1332 BS. His interest extended to old *Bangla* literature also and he is regarded as an authority on Bangla paleography. It was mainly through his efforts that the Dhaka University established a cell for collecting Bengali and Sanskrit manuscripts. Mallar Mitra's *Journal of Bengal Art* also gives us much information about N.K. Bhattasali's activities and research works on the art history of Bengal. Krittivasa's main the Ramayana in Bengali language also throws light on Bhattasali's edited work.

Methodology of the study: A method is a system or procedure of any rational study. A more precise and useful equivalent of method is technique. The science dealing with method is called methodology. Here the method of the study involves purely a historical method.

The first step of historical methodology is search for and collection of sources. Then the relevant data or documents that will be collected from diverse sources specially the works of N.K. Bhattasali.

Then thoroughly analyzed the data which have been collected from different libraries, and

Finally, it will be trying to show that what were the contributions of N.K.Bhattachali's in different field of researches on the history of Bengal.

Sources of the study: The study is based on both primary and secondary sources available in the Bangladesh National Museum in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Primary sources comprise of the written records of N.K. Bhattachali those are preserved in the Dacca Museum collections. N.K. Bhattachali's many research articles published in the *Pratibha* and the *Prabasi patrika* during the first half of the 20th century. Next are the many research works on N.K. Bhattachali which are included as the secondary sources. That sources deals with his activities and contributions to reconstruct the ancient and medieval history of Bengal. *Journal of Bengal Art* also throws light on the works that have been written by N.K. Bhattachali published in different periods.

CHAPTERISATION:

The present thesis is a humble estimate of an assessment of Nalini Kanta Bhattasali's life and works. The thesis entitled '*Nalini Kanta Bhattasali: A Multi-Faceted Figure- a Study*,' is arranged tentatively into nine (9) chapters including Introduction and conclusion. The chapters are following:

1. Introduction

2. Early life and Education

3. Career and works

4. N.K.Bhattasali as an Archaeologist and his contemporaries

5. N.K.Bhattasali as an Epigraphist

6. N.K.Bhattasali as an Iconographer and others

7. N.K.Bhattasali and other Numismatist of his age

8. Study on other areas

9. Conclusion

In the **Introduction**, I am trying to show that, how Bengali historiography passed on to a further stage of development during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. To the call of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a period of inquiry in Bengali historiography has been started. Contemporary historian like Akshoy Kr. Maitreya, Sarat kr. Roy, Rama Prasad Chanda, R.D.Banerji who made a sustained attempt to explore the past of Varendra in relation to the border history of Bengal; N.K.Bhattasali turned his attention in eastern Bengal (Vanga-Samatata) and tried to give a proper shape to the history of this region. He infused a new spirit and a new vigour into historical research and carried historiography a long step forward.

In the chapter entitled "**Early life and Education**" deals with Bhattasali's school life education. He was born on 24th January, 1888 in a Brahmin family of

Vikrampura in Munshiganj district (now in modern Bangladesh). He passed the Entrance Examination of the Calcutta University in 1905 with a scholarship. Passing B.A. Exam in 1909, he obtained his M.A Degree in History from the same University in 1912. After serving as the Headmaster in a high school for some time Bhattasali got an appointment as a lecturer in History at the Victoria College, Comilla (now in modern Bangladesh).

In the chapter entitled, **“His career and Works”** an attempt is made to highlight Bhattasali’s work career and his role as an Institution builder. In 1914 he joined the newly established Dhaka Museum as its curator. He remained in its service till his death, dedicating his entire life to its development. During this period, for some time, he also worked as a lecturer in History in the Dacca University.

Bhattasali was won Griffith prize of the Calcutta University for his thesis on “The Coins and Chronology of the Early Independent Sultans of Bengal” which was published by the Cambridge University in 1922. In 1934, he received Ph. D Degree of the Dacca University. His efforts in collecting coins, inscription, sculptures of ancient Bengal for the Dacca Museum and his rich source material, till then unavailable.

Bhattasali besides publishing his studies in English used to contribute to various Bengali periodicals. He was also adept in writing dramas, poems and short stories.

“N.K.Bhattasali as an Archaeologist and his Contemporaries” is the fourth chapter. Even as a student N.K.Bhattasali had made his mark as a historian and archaeologist by publishing articles on history and antiquities of ancient Bengal which drew the attention of many distinguished scholars including Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, the then Vice-chancellor of Calcutta University. He untiringly wandered through the country side, exploring, discovering, photographing and collecting objects and gathering information, and trying to create local interest and consciousness for the preservation of our cultural heritage. It must be stated clearly that till his time, Bengal (specially its eastern part) had received scant attention from historians and archaeologist who had an all-India reputation.

“N.K.Bhattachasali as an Epigraphist” is the fifth chapter. It highlights the works of Bhattachasali as an epigraphist and it significant to reconstruct the past history of Bengal. Contemporary historian like Rama Prasad Chanda in ‘Gaudarajamala’, Akshoy Kr. Maitreya in ‘Gaudalekhamala’ throws light on the history of the Pala rulers of ancient Bengal on the basis of copper plate grants. But the other ruling dynasties who were ruling after the decline of the Gupta dynasty and during the Pala, Sena period in different parts of Bengal, were ignored by these historians. At this point, hitherto unknown Khadgo, Chandra, Varman and later Deva dynasties of Bengal came into light through the efforts of N.K.Bhattachasali. His expert knowledge of early Indian paleography and epigraphy was of great help in deciphering and interpreting the copper plate records.

“N.K.Bhattachasali as an Iconographer and others” constitutes the sixth chapter. It deals with the iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptures in Bengal has been studied by a number of scholars in various context and varying degrees of details, from simple notices of the discovery of individual sculptures or studies of single cult to surveys covering a particular region or epoch or the whole of Bengal. The most important work devoted to the subject was by N.K.Bhattachasali, **“Iconography of the Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptures of the Dacca Museum”** and his efforts resulted in the iconographic survey of the of the sculptures of East Bengal which became one of the principal north Indian sources on the subject of Iconography.

T.A.Gopinath Rao’s **“Elements of Hindu Iconography”** (Vol. I & II) has so long been and still is the standard work on the subject. Some other works on it, such as H.Krishna Shastri’s **“South Indian Gods and Goddesses”**, B.C.Bhattacharya’s **“Indian Images”** (part I), J.Dubreuil’s **“South Indian Iconography”** have been published since then. But most of the works deal with the South Indian images only, while Bhattacharya’s book treats of several North Indian Hindu images of the Gupta and Post-Gupta period. But N.K.Bhattachasali’s **“Iconography of the Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptures of the Dacca Museum”**, discuss the special features of the Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures found mostly in Eastern Bengal.

Bhattachali's identifications of many unique images, which he proposed for the first time, have remained substantially unchallenged ever since. At almost the same time as Bhattachali's study was published, attempts were made for the stylistic assessment of Bengal sculpture by Stella Kramrisch and J.C. French, shortly followed by R.D. Banerji, S.K. Saraswati, J.N. Banerjea, later period, also focused on the stylistic as well as iconographic evolution. They were indebted to Bhattachali for made their monumental works.

In the seventh chapter of this thesis, entitled "**N.K. Bhattachali and other Numismatist of his age**" contain elaborate discussions about N.K. Bhattachali's expert knowledge on numismatic study. He wrote the first scientific account of Bengal Sultan's, "The Coins and Chronology of the Early Independent Sultans of Bengal" on the basis of numismatic evidences. In them I have tried to appraise critically the views of previous scholars on the above problem. Through his efforts we came to know about the two Hindu kings of medieval Bengal, Danujmarddana deva and Mahendra deva, "who broke the domination of the Muhammadan line of kings for however short a period", would have otherwise remained unknown to us.

In the eighth chapter based on Bhattachali's "**Study on Other areas**", I have shown his interest also extended to old Bangla literature and he is regarded as an authority of Bangla paleography. Bhattachali has written a few books on Bangla literature. His research articles were published in leading contemporary journals and periodicals, both at home and abroad.

The last chapter of the study is '**Conclusion**'. In the conclusion it can be say that Bengali historiography at least in relation to works of N.K. Bhattachali on the province of Bengal, has reached the stage of maturity.

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