



## Research Article

# Regional history in literature, narratives and performances in Bengal and Santhal Pargana

Ranjan Kumar

Swami Shraddhanand College, University of Delhi, Delhi

Email: [ranjanmehra81@gmail.com](mailto:ranjanmehra81@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

This is an attempt to study the regional history of Bengal with the help of literature and narratives and unheard past of Santhal Pargana through narrative performances. Since, the history was written for the ruling and aristocracy class which gives an understanding of the past from above and it hardly talks about the history of lower strata. There is a massive need of history writing pertaining to local areas. The knowledge of the local people is acquired through qualitative research because the indigenous knowledge is transferred from one generation to another and because of the west centric knowledge, the indigenous knowledge is marginalised which will even vanish after some time. Similar is the situation of the knowledge of spiritual and religious past. The hagiographical literature of this region is considered as an important source to understand the socio- religious outlook. Beneath these literatures, there were several proto socio- religious outlooks that exercised a profound impact on people at lower level. In process to study these, one has to depend upon the oral history available in its surroundings.

### KEY WORDS

Dharma Thakur, Charyapada, Sunyabad, Parakiya, Chaupahara, Bhagat

### Introduction

Poetic framework and historical details are the two most important aspects which are followed by literature in

any language and society. Similarly, narrative poem is an integral part of literature which tells stories and It is formed out of characters and plots. In its definition it is said that, it does not necessarily need a rhyming pattern, but it follows a syllabic pattern and it has a clear objective of influencing a specific audience. These are basically derived out of oral narrations which include old narratives and ballads. On this basis, when we define Bengali early literature and narrative poems and compare it with other literature, we find that Bengali narrative poems have something to deliver when it justifies and teach worship of one or another deity. In process of understanding history of texts, we need to work on the beginning and transition of textuality.<sup>1</sup> In Bengal this is clearly visible in fragments from the early medieval literature which consisted of aphorisms, handbooks of mystic doctrines, ballads and songs in honour of contemporary rulers, hymns in praise of Dharma Thakur and genealogical accounts of aristocratic families.<sup>2</sup>

The Bengali narrative poetry initially was composed during the period of eleventh century and were meant to recite and performed to produce some good.<sup>3</sup> These poems were used in performances for an audience which has implications for a historian. The manuscripts of these narratives preserve traces of an ancient Bengali oral and folk literature, formed over centuries in an intimate and natural relation between village singers and their audiences. At regional level the languages are still in its colloquial form which is far from outside influence. In regional language there are writings used in narrative

<sup>1</sup> Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and the Power in Premodern India*, Published by: Permanent Black' 2006, p.283

<sup>2</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, Published by the University Calcutta, 1911, [en.wikisource.org](http://en.wikisource.org), p.16

<sup>3</sup> David L. Curley, *Poetry and History: Bengali Mangal- Kabya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal*, Published by: Chronicle Books, New Delhi, 2008, p.6

forms and are sung in performances in traditional fashion. A serious scrutiny can produce facts of their relation with old society, trade, voyages and mystic powers of Siddhas and descriptions of Tantric rites.<sup>4</sup>

Sheldon Pollock in his book has discussed the utilization of vernacular in substantiation and workly task where it seeks authority to reinforce and supersede.<sup>5</sup> To a large extent, these vernacular texts are recognised as imaginative work of literature, not as reports or to represent what ordinary people could have or should have done. They were meant to be recited or performed as a part of ritual designed to produce some good. Similar to Sufi literature, the beneficial purpose of these texts was the bliss, welfare, prosperity or virtue to be restored, presumed the redress of religious problems, but often they also presumed and described social, economic, political and patriarchal problems. In these literary texts, an author always locates themselves in a social and political geography and also through the use of chronograms. Very few studies have attempted to relate these texts to the particular circumstances in which they were composed and performed.

### Bengali Literature and narrative poetry

Most works of vernacular Bangla narrative poetry are religious and didactic narratives. They were recited to musical accompaniment and sometimes even with staging, characters and costumes or at least with puppets or narrative scrolls.<sup>6</sup> These performances were intentionally performed for audience, and were never meant for seclusion. The kind of religious practice that has been commended by these narratives usually have materialistic purposes. As has been mentioned by Kunal Chakrabarti, culture has a material basis and other identifiable characteristics and identity is a social construct. It was as a result of contemporary Brahmanical initiative, supported by the regional political structure during the Pala-Sena period, that the crucial ingredients which went into the making of Bengal's cultural identity came together for the first time.<sup>7</sup>

In the ancient period, we come to know about *Charyapada*<sup>8</sup> as the only evidence of Bengali literature. Except these spiritual hymns, we hardly find traces of literature in ancient period.<sup>9</sup> The scholars of Bengali literature have defined the medieval period of it from 1200-1800, which is further divided into early, high medieval and late medieval period. In the early medieval period, rhymes and sayings of 'Dak' and 'Khana' were

composed and gradually the writings become more Bangla in character. Bengali vernacular literature before Muslim conquest is available in fragments of literary work. They consist of aphorisms, hand books of mystic's doctrines, songs sung in praise of rulers (ballads), hymns, odes and songs on popular Hindu deity and genealogical accounts of royal families. The earliest literary traces are aphorisms and wise sayings (*Dak* and *Khana*) which has Buddhist influence on it. '*Dak-Tantra*', '*Daker-Vachana*', '*Khanar Vachana*', are equally important and well-accepted among the masses. The common aspect in these early writings is its association with agricultural subjects, which were used to make agricultural communities understand the significance of seasons, soil fertility and crops. For example, *Varamasi* is a description of twelve months and talks about pleasures and sorrows of each and every month in poetic manner. Similarly, '*Daker Vachana*' is in strict accordance with principal of health. Later on, *Varamasi* got devoted to feelings of kind and love of different months experienced by lovers during separation.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century vernacular texts, there are Bengali narrative poems which are dedicated to teaching and justifying worship of different deities. While reading them, scholars have found the connection between their didactic forms and purposes. If we look in detail the literary production of early medieval Bangla literature, we get reference of Dharma-cult. During this phase Buddhism was in decline but in Buddhist temples, images of Buddha were still worshipped as Shiva. The Buddhist religious texts were modified and reframed to use it as religious poems of Hindus.<sup>10</sup> As a popular text we have '*Sunya Purana*', which affirm processes of worshipping Dharma Thakur. It is a work of Bengali narrative poetry by Ramai Pandit, composed, as is known from the texts, during the period of 11<sup>th</sup> century and is meant to recite and performed. These poems were used in performance for an audience which has its importance in history.

Narrative songs performed by village singers, stressed link between epic and puranic stories in Sanskrit literature and the specific Bengali narrative of Hindu poems devoted to *Shiva*, *Mansa*, *Candi* and *Dharma*.<sup>11</sup> It is believed that the manuscripts of these narratives preserve traces of ancient Bengali oral and folk literature, formed over centuries in an intimate and natural relation between village singers and their audiences. We also find reference of Buddhist saints in Mangal Kavya. Similarly, the doctrine '*Sunyabad*'

<sup>4</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History ...*, Op.Ct, p.774

<sup>5</sup> Sheldon Pollock, *The Language ...* Op. Ct, p.283

<sup>6</sup> David L.Curley, *Poetry and History: Bengali Mangal- Kabya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal*, Published by: Chronicle Books, New Delhi, 2008, p.6

<sup>7</sup> Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition*, Published by: Oxford India Paperbacks '2018, pp. 288-289

<sup>8</sup> Charyapada were forty-eight spiritual hymns composed by Buddhist monks.

<sup>9</sup> Purnima Bali, *Evolution of Bengali Literature: An Overview*, International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR); Vol.3, issue 1, 2016(Jan-March)

<sup>10</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History...* Op. Ct, p.26

<sup>11</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History...* Op. Ct, p.28

explains the origin from emptiness, which become popular among late Buddhist school; and it has been explained in detail both in the 'Sunya Purana' and 'Dharma Mangal' writings.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, 'Dharma cult' which developed in Bengal has components of Buddhist traditions, ideas and practices of Hinduism and a large number of indigenous beliefs and ceremonies.<sup>13</sup>

In this we find that there was always Buddhist's efforts to uplift the status of Bengali language. But, during the revival of Hinduism this upliftment was stopped and the Buddhist writings were taken away to Nepal and Burma. Still the vernacular of Bengal found recognition in the court of the kings. The copperplate inscriptions of the Pal and Sen kings of Bengal bear abundant proofs of the learning and poetical powers of some of scholars whose contempt of Bengali was as great as was their scholarship in Sanskrit. Rulers like Krishna Chandra and many of kings and chiefs of Bengal who precede him, are described as having extended their patronage and favour to early Bengali poet.<sup>14</sup>

Apart from the phase of collection of lyrical poems in *Apabhramsa*<sup>15</sup>, the early medieval period of Bengali literature witnessed the development of Vaishnava literature, followed by Mangal literature and translation literature. A very important phase in the Bengali vernacular writing is considered of Chandi Das. This was the phase of literary style, where supreme power of gods and goddesses were described.<sup>16</sup> The peasants were the earliest composers of these Bengali narratives and they brought the recitation and religious process in practice. But the inherent qualities of it were recognised with the poems of Chandi Das, whose writings brought an intrinsic strength and expression of love as an extreme thought of mankind. The genre that emerged in his writings is called *Parakiya* (love for other women) adopted by Vaishnavism in Bengal as a form of divine love of almighty. It is said that love in its most abstract and refined form was the theme of Chandi Das's songs. In Chandi Das's writings the love is described in its pure and metaphysical form. His poems are classified as Vaishnava's poem on love of Radha and Krishna. D.C. Sen has also discussed different forms of this divine love, i.e., *Pura raga*; *Dautya*; *Abhisara*; *Sambhoga-milana*; *Mathur*; *Bhava-sanmilana*, and so forth.<sup>17</sup>

*Mohammadan* conquest had also its influence on the status of Bengali literature. With the Pathan's occupation of Bengal in the early thirteenth century, there were efforts from the victors to learn local language and to live in close proximity with the local

population whom they were called upon to rule. Rulers like Nasira Shah and Paragal Khan appointed scholars to translate works into Bengali which they now spoke and understood. Many of the emperors become great patrons of vernacular. Emperor Husen Saha, a great patron of Bengali, appointed Maladhar Vasu to translate *Bhagavata* into Bengali. Kavindra Parameshwar had translated the *Mahabharata*, Chutti Khan, son of Paragal Khan, employed another poet named Srikarana Nandi for translating the *Ashwamedh Parva*. A mid seventeenth century poet, Ahlol, translated a Hindi work entitled *Padmavat* by Mir Mahammad in the highly Sanskritised Bengali at the command of Magan Thakur, a *mohammadan* minister of the court of the chief of Aracan. Later on, many Bengali poets were employed to the court of hindu rulers, and later on most of the works of the known poets were composed and dedicated to their patronisers.

In a comparison of the Bengali vernacular literature with other contemporary Sufi literatures, one can get a better understanding of these devotional writings. The Bengali writings were mainly concerned with the themes related to Gods and Goddesses and their incarnations. Whereas Sufi devotional writings derived their inspirations and themes from Persian and Arabic sources and their subjects were related to religious matters and moral teachings. Historical and romantic themes were also popular in these writings. But when Vaishnavism emerged, the writings in Bengal borrowed many of the elements of Sufi literature and the similarities between them become clearly visible. We can simply trace parallels in Sufism and Vaishnavism, e.g., for bliss 'hal' and 'dasha', recital 'zikh' and 'krishnanama', musical gathering 'sama' and 'kirtana' etc.<sup>18</sup>

The Bengali vernacular literature in the early medieval time was in phase of transition. While reading the style of writing and genre we need to keep in mind the circumstances in which these were written. David L. Curley in his work "*Poetry and History*", examines different questions about how a historian should read a genre of literature. How it can be read by keeping persona of literature in mind and still find a use for them in writing history<sup>19</sup>. Curley's assumption is that there is something problematic and troubling about looking for 'representations' of any kind of social class in middle age Bengali literature. Historian should fully recognize the characteristics of a literary text as an imaginative work of literature, not as reports or documents. Because sometimes actions of heroic characters of a literary text

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.28

<sup>13</sup> Shashibhushan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cult*, Published by: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962, p.259

<sup>14</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History... Op. Ct*, p.9

<sup>15</sup> Also known as 'Prakatapaingala' in the dialect of medieval period in Bengal, is the part of Bengali literature of medieval period.

<sup>16</sup> Purnima Bali, *Evolution of Bengali Literature: An Overview*, *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR)*; Vol.3, issue 1, 2016(Jan-March), p.327

<sup>17</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History...*, Op.Cit, p.123.

<sup>18</sup> Md. Shah Noorur Rahman, *Religious and Cultural Syncretism in Medieval Bengal*, *The NEHU Journal*, Vol XVI, No.1- January-June 2018, pp. 53-77

<sup>19</sup> David L. Curley, *Poetry..Op. Ct*, pp 19-20

were not meant to represent what ordinary people could have or should have done. There is always exaggeration in presentation of characters which imply questions about different protocols of characterization within a single genre must precede our attempts to use individual works for historical purposes.

These statements about the genre, describing a common language and form, a period of composition, a didactic purpose, and communicative fulfilment in performance as part of beneficial ritual, have the consent of most scholars. The worship of regional deities that has been advocated in these Bengali literary texts usually have their worldly purposes. The beneficial purposes of the text, the bliss, welfare, prosperity or virtue to be restored, presumed the redress of religious problems, but often they also presumed and described social, economic, political and patriarchal problems. The plot of these texts is very simple, and they can be related directly to the purpose of religious proselytizing. In order to establish worship of a deity on earth, one or more characters are cursed to born to moral life. There they learn to overcome a series of increasingly difficult and dangerous situations through proper worship of the deity in question. When the deity's claim to worship have been acknowledged, these human characters are taken back to heaven. Their worship establishes the pattern for later human to emulate. One method of analysis has been that, for each deity an attempt is made to deduce the circumstances of the origin of the cult and the manner of its dissemination, by supposing that human characters in literary texts represent social groups who historically had joined in worship or who had resisted worship.

David L. Curley talks about another approach of France Bhattacharya and Client Seely . According to them, the religious didactic literary texts have two distinct plot functions. In the primary plot function deity sets in motion actions which establish his or her worship on earth. While in the secondary plot function the status and the honour of the deity's protagonists are degraded and must be re-established.<sup>20</sup> The proper worship of the deity resolves these conflicts for the protagonists which helps in building its faith and acceptance among believers.<sup>21</sup>

Early literature and other means like oral narratives are valuable voice of the past which can be used in reconstruction of regional history of Bengal. There are many such regions where we really need to depend on these sources. If critically used, these sources can give a better understanding of past because sometimes these are the only available source of information.

## History in performance

In the West, oral traditions are gradually withering away. Whereas in the India, there is larger influence of local and regional cultures and both the popular and local traditions are in cultural continuity and are found in diverse regions.<sup>22</sup> Indian civilization is a unique example of continuity and change where the whole process of historical development with all the colours of all the periods and ages of history are still alive. Thus, the Indian historians have different type of oral sources to complement and supplement or to contrast and juxtapose the written sources and if utilized in a critical manner, may embellish the concept, methodology and scope of history.

The region of Santhal Pargana, derived its name from two words, 'Santhal', a major tribe of India and 'Pargana', a Persian word, meaning district. It is one of the division or commissionaires of Jharkhand. In 1855, during British India, it was created as a district, and was a part of Bengal presidency.<sup>23</sup> Apart from Hindi there are many other languages spoken in Santhal Pargana. Bengali, Santhali, Bhojpuri, Nagpuri, Angika are mostly spoken in this region and *Santhali* is one of the most spoken language by local tribes. To study the unheard past of this region we need to rely on spiritual and religious past. The hagiographical literature of this region is considered as an important source to understand the socio-religious outlook. Beneath these literatures there were several proto socio-religious outlooks that exercised a profound impact on people at lower level. In process to study these proto socio-religious outlook or the covered aspiration, one has to depend one has to depend upon the oral history available in its surroundings. By oral history we mean the reconstruction of the past mainly on the basis of oral sources, which included oral traditions, folklores and interviews. In Santhal Pargana there are many communities which are still unheard, but they carry their history with them. To get the idea and knowledge of their past we have to rely mainly on the oral tradition that they have followed. The indigenous knowledge is transferred from one generation to other. This knowledge is gradually being suppressed and eliminated because of West centric knowledge. Because of it the indigenous knowledge is marginalised which will even vanish after some time.

On this basis I would like to present a case study of Chamu Karmkar, who was a Vaishnavite saint and a *Jhumar*<sup>24</sup> performer from Madhupur, Santhal pargana. Among the *Charmakar* community in Deoghar and other districts of Santhal pargana. Chamu is considered as a religious figure whose ideas had a larger impact on the

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, pp.10-11

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 20

<sup>22</sup> Kunal Chakrabarti, Anthropological Models of Cultural Interactions and the study of Religious process, Studies in History, SAGE journals, Vol. 8, Issue 1, Feb 1' 1992, p. 123-149

<sup>23</sup> Jha, Amarnath; Locating the Ancient History of Santhal parganas; Proceeding of the Indan History Congress, vol.70 (2009-2010) pp. 185

<sup>24</sup> Song and dance performed by the vashnavite saints called '*Bhagat*' in Santhal pargana

lower caste communities. His ideas and beliefs are propagated in form of songs and poetry by bhagats who perform *jhumar* in *Chaupahra* which are arranged during marriage ceremonies or death ceremonies of lower castes in this region. The bhagats in their songs, praise Chamu for his contribution to the society, they criticise Brahminic order and the exploitation of the lower caste by higher. Chamu was a well-known personality in this region with his contemporaries like Bhawaprita Ojha and Pucho Pande who were equally famous. In the songs of the bhagats there is reference of serious poetic conversation among Chamu and his contemporaries regarding social evils and religious practices. For examples in a stanza while criticising Brahmans, Chamu and Titu Lal<sup>25</sup> says:

*Narir ninda na koro kokhon he pandit gon  
nari hanthe sansarer jivan*

*he pondit gon narir ninda na koro kokhon*<sup>26</sup>

(Oh, respected pandits don't disrespect women, the world exists in their arms so do not disrespect them)

A number of times Chamu talks about Bhagat Namdeo in his songs who was influenced by Vaishnavism, and become widely known in India for his devotional songs. Chamu talks about miracle-filled hagiographies on him and his philosophy which contained both *nirguna* and *shaguna* themes. Talking about a miracle of Namdeo, Chamu says

*'Pathala ke murti piye muh baye*

*upar se namdeo dudh dharkaye.*<sup>27</sup>

(sculpture of lord opens mouth as Namdeo pours milk on it)

Another story on Namdeo is about the discrimination that he faced when he wanted to attend a bhajan which was organised by a higher caste family. After being recognised he was thrown out of the house by saying that his presence has polluted the environment. After which Namdeo sits in the backside of the building and begins singing. The people get mesmerised by his devotion and they come out to see who is singing and realises that the door of the house has turned toward Namdeo. Later he is asked to turn it back which he rejects by saying that it is his true worship which has made Thakur to turn toward him, if they are true worshipers, they should turn it back with their devotion.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Titu Lal was a social reformer of lower community. He was a resident of Pathore village, Madhupur, District -Deoghar, Jharkhand.

<sup>26</sup> Personal interview of narrative performer group of Tarani bhagat, Kamdeo Das, Amir bhagat of Pathore, Lakkhi bazar, Madhupur, Jharkhand

<sup>27</sup> Personal interview of Tarani Bhagat

The biggest challenge for a historian is to read these performances and to incorporate it in history. This formulation is too simple for historical documents because of their imaginative dimension and sometimes because of its complete fictitious nature. It is hardly acknowledged that these performances offer a detailed and reliable picture of lower-class social world and aesthetic world which include lower caste characters. It is possible that they must have been presented in an exaggerated manner to gain audience believe on them. Most of the scholars have found connection between the didactic forms and purposes of these performances. They are meant to recite and performed to produce positive gain. In the study of the performance two aspects are really important, one is to understand how the performance shape the work of performers and another is related to the receptivity of the audience. Sometimes these performances are on the basis of contemporary vernacular text and sometimes they are on the basis of oral narratives. These vernacular texts and oral narratives have common purpose and as a genre are equally beneficial for authors, performers and audiences, because these were intended to act upon and to bring about some good for all three.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

In these literary texts and performances an author and performer always locate themselves in a social and political geography. Authors also locate themselves through the use of memories. In such writings one need to look at the compositions keeping parallel the signatures (*banita*) and to confirm the time one needs to keep an eye on the description of individuals who are known to historical records. Very few studies have attempted to relate texts to the particular circumstances in which they were composed and performed. On the other hand, too many studies present a summary of a conventional plot. It is important to look for subtle variation in individual versions, variations which correspond to the circumstances of their composition and performance in a way that the convention plot cannot.<sup>30</sup> Information about patronage is much rarer than information about authorship, but it provides us with another way to place these texts in their social, political and artistic contexts. We should assume that performances were based on manuscripts', but we also should assume that performances could be different from the written texts upon which they were based.<sup>31</sup>

It is also a fact that older and more popular texts were altered in the process of transmission and contain much

<sup>28</sup> Translation of Bengali lines sung by narrative performer group in praise of Namdeo and religious miracles related with his devotion.

<sup>29</sup> David L. Curley, Poetry... Op. Ct, p.12

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p.13

<sup>31</sup> Stuart H. Blackburn and Joyce B. Flueckiger, Introduction, in Oral Epics in India, edited by Stuart H. Blackburn, Peter J. Claus, Joyce B. Flueckiger, and Susan S. Wadley, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, pp. 1-11

interpolated material, and many simplifying revisions of problematic verses. The printed editions upon which all of us must rely most of the time are the product of entirely modern and continuing scholarly labours, based upon changing style of translation between what always was a various tradition of manuscripts and the more uniform one of print culture. No doubt many manuscripts have been lost; many more are slowly disappearing through natural processes of decay but in such regions these literature and narratives act like a complementary and supplementary historiographical instrument. These focuses on people in history and history in people. As has been mentioned by John Tosh, it offers a “unique insight into the formation of popular historical consciousness.”<sup>32</sup>So, the history of cultural aspects can be ornamented through these sources since these are sometimes the only dependable primary sources of certain categories of people, particularly, natives, indigenous and lower communities.

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<sup>32</sup> John Tosh, *Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Direction in the Study of Modern History*, London 1984