Bengal in the Sixteenth Century, A.D

Gupta Jagundra Nath
Calcutta University
READERSHIP LECTURES

BENGAL
IN THE
SIXTEENTH CENTURY, A. D.
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INAUGURAL

THE STUDY OF HISTORY

MR. VICE-CHANCELLOR, AND FELLOW-STUDENTS:

Comte has told us that the growing passion of modern times for historical studies is a happy symptom of philosophical regeneration. But before dwelling on the importance of these studies and entering on an examination of the subject or rather subjects which I have undertaken to talk over with you, I beg in the first place to express my thankfulness and deep sense of gratitude to you especially, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, and to the Senate and Syndicate of our University for giving me this opportunity of appearing before you as University Reader in History. For I deem it a high privilege to be thus called upon, in however humble a capacity, to indicate new lines of study and methods of research to our younger generation at this critical juncture in the intellectual history of our land. To me this is ample recompense for whatever I may have tried to do during the last few years as one of the band of teachers attached to the constituent colleges of our corporate body, as an unworthy member of that company of devoted workers who have given their best, and who are ever striving even under great discouragements to serve the cause which is your cause as much as theirs, viz., that of diffusion of true knowledge in this ancient and once famous home of learning.

Under the stimulus of the new regulations of our University, there are visible signs of an intellectual awakening throughout Bengal. New ideals have arisen in our academic world, and earnest endeavours are being made for their realisation, as far as one can judge, not without a fair measure of success. This consideration, coupled with the fact that I am addressing my fellow-students in Bengal has largely determined
the choice of the subject of my discourses. For it seemed to me, under the circumstances, not altogether inappropriate to try to study the past of Bengal, and there is a special fittingness in the task if that past can be elucidated with the help of materials derived and evidence gathered from some masterpiece of Bengali literature. If we have had in the past successful examples of the economic interpretation of history, we have no less successful examples of historical interpretation of literature. I have hence ventured to invite you to study the social and economic condition of Bengal in the 16th century of the Christian era with the help of a few Bengali poems whose names are household words with the gentry as well as the peasantry of this province.

Moreover, it has always seemed to me that the old vernacular poetry of our land deserves more respectful consideration at the hands of our scholars and historians than it at present receives. If the reconstruction of the past of our home-land is to be a successful undertaking, part at least of the materials for that reconstruction should be sought in the moth-eaten and perhaps rotting palm-leaf pages of old Puthis, the manuscripts in the possession of the managers and organisers of our indigenous Tols. One of the first steps in this process ought to be the preservation, the deciphering and a correct rendering of these ancient heirlooms of our race. One of the charges which at one time it was the fashion to bring against Indian Literature as a whole is that it is weakest on its historical side,—that there is no true Itihas in its department of Itihas. It used to be said that Indians are lacking in the instinct of historical research, and that unlike Egypt, unlike Crete, the scenes of some of the noblest achievements of the archeologist and the excavator, India offers no monument for the study of the antiquarian and the historian. The work done by the Imperial Archeological Department in India during the last few years, however, has to some extent disabused the public mind of this latter idea, and while it is true that India presents
few monuments above her surface to be read by every super-
official observer as he runs, there is no lack of material under-
ground, relics of her remote past waiting to be unearthed by
the pickaxe and the shovel of the patient explorer. Our
University also in its desire to foster a genuine love of letters
and to encourage a spirit of research as well as a critical
mental attitude amongst its graduates has taken a notable
step in our days by making a knowledge of the vernacular
literatures of the province obligatory in all its Examinations.

The result is seen in a remarkable literary awakening in
the land. A strong stimulus has been given to the publication
of vernacular books. Translations from our old classical
works, translations of the treasures of foreign literatures, new
versions of old and familiar things, are now pouring in upon us
in an uninterrupted stream. All of this, as is only to be
expected, is not likely to be permanent additions to our
national literature, but they afford a striking object-lesson of
the work which it is in the power of Universities to achieve,
and they are evidence of a remarkable indigenous literary
activity in the present generation. Then again quite recently
we have been made familiar with the idea of an Oriental
Institute, a central academy for the study of India's
past, the importance of which study even from a purely
utilitarian point of view it is hardly possible to exaggerate.
A great poet who is also a great satirist, and the
greatness of whose achievements as a poet is sometimes
marred by his satire, has told us that the East and the
West can never meet. India however is a land of dreams
and every true-hearted Indian is a dreamer of dreams. The
dream which some of us, during the last few eventful years,
have been dreaming is that the East and the West have
already met, and that for the welfare of humanity, for the
upward march and development of the race, the civilisation
of the future should be a composite civilisation in which the ideals
of the East and the ideals of the West should stand side by
side, and in which the heart of the East should learn to beat in unison with the heart of the West. And how can this be a reality without a better mutual understanding of our respective past?

The present therefore seems to be a favourable moment for carrying on historical and sociological researches such as I contemplate, and which the schemes of studies drawn up under our new University regulations would seem to favour.

It has been remarked that happy is the land which has no history. When one recalls to his mind the vigorous controversies which from time to time enliven our otherwise somewhat monotonous academic life regarding the scope of particular sciences and the methods of investigation proper to them, one feels inclined to think that happy is the science without a history. Unfortunately for the historian, this can never be the case with the subject of his study, for history has a long history of its own. And this has been one of the unfortunate peculiarities of the Muse of history that she never completely forgets or lays aside her old habits, but goes on acquiring new habits and adding new ambitions to her old tendencies. It seemed at first that Clio was intent on aping and somewhat slavishly imitating the graces of her sister Muses. History as an art seemed almost to pride in being a branch of general literature. But with the advent of the 19th century came a change, and now though the old habits subsist, for picturesque history is still with us, history has proudly stepped forth as an independent science, engaged in the search of abstract truth, true to the kindred points of Heaven and Earth, yet at times somewhat detached from the homely realities of our practical life.

There can be little doubt that history has its beginning in story-telling, that it is Epic in its origin. The European classical scholar has only to think of the Homeric poems, the Indian classicist of the Ramâyana and the Mahâbhârata in this