

GEO-HISTORICAL PROFILE OF NORTH BENGAL.

1.1 BACKGROUND

Before we enter into the detail study of our problem, we have to determine the area or field over which our investigation is concerned. This chapter will attempt to give a description of that geographical area of North Bengal which had been changed its area and shape in course of times. Even during the period of our study from 1869 to 1969, the geographical boundary of North Bengal had been changed due to the circumstances created by the colonial rulers. The chief aim of this chapter is to analyse the nature of the changes brought about in the area and the history of North Bengal in general. It is admitted by so many scholars in different volumes that history of North Bengal in general are very rich and glorious. From ancient times, it had a tradition, and of course, sometimes it was the central place in the context of the history of whole of Bengal. During ancient period we find mention of the capital city of Bengal was situated in North Bengal. During the later Gupta Period and later on under Sasanka, North Bengal played a remarkable role not only in the history of Bengal, at the same time in the context of the history of North-East India and Northern India also.

In this connection it has to be mentioned that the North Eastern region of India situated in one of the greatest migration routes of mankind¹ from the time immemorial, had been the inhabitant of population which perhaps represent the admixture of all most all the racial strains, like Aryāns, the Alpine-Iranian and the Tibeto-Burman, later being the most numerous and predominant. They had migrated to settle in the region with their own culture, language and religion as groups of Non-Hindu affiliation.² In the context of our present study on North Bengal and its socio-cultural history, it is found that this region is said to have inhabited by the Non-Aryān tribes having Mongoloid traits and features. Accordingly we find some areas of our study like Ccoch Behar (presently a district of North Bengal) which is admitted as the head

quarters of those tribes who were called indiscriminately Koch, Rajbansis and Pali.³ During the medieval period, we find that the region was similarly important in the history of Bengal. From early medieval period to the advent of the colonial rulers, Bengal (particularly North Bengal) were always in the main stream of history. Considering all those things, it may be assumed that the geographical area, which is called North Bengal, had a glorious past. It is quite known that sometimes this North Bengal with its geographical and historical prominence highlighted various aspects on the history and archaeology of Bengal.

Before studying history of North Bengal, it seems desirable to know the geography and geographical boundary of this area. North Bengal, at present a narrow area of land at a short distance from the Chinese border connects to two divisions of India as a vital point in the bottom of the Himalayas. Its geographical proximity with Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan in the North, Assam and Bangladesh in the east, and Bangladesh, West Bengal and Bihar in the South and West has provided her a special place of strategic importance.⁴ Since long past, North Bengal has been serving as the eastern gateway for the passage and communication of people, commodities and ideas between the Indian Sub-continent in the West and Assam, Burma, China and other parts of South-East Asia in the East. This area is situated in the centre of the network connecting different civilization.⁵

1.2 NORTH BENGAL DURING THE VEDIC AND PURANIC AGE

During the Later Vedic age, we find mention of some places the name of which are demarcated with some areas of present North Bengal. At that time North Bengal was probably known as 'PRĀGJYOTISHA-KĀMARŪPA' and a vast adjoining Himalayan regions.⁶ We know that in the ancient divisions of India North Bengal, the area of our study was known in the name of 'PAUNDRA or PUNDRA.'⁷ As regards the geographical boundary of present North Bengal in ancient Bengal, we have further testimony of the

'RAJATARANGINI' that PUNDRAVARDHANA or chief town of PUNDRA was the capital of the king of GAUḌA.⁸

Present North Bengal, a geographical boundary of six districts over which our study is concerned (viz., Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Malda) have so many historical dimensions in respect of its ethnicity, culture, language and in economic and social aspects. When discussing about its past geographical and historical importance we find a series of information about its importance both in ancient and medieval period. Dr. N. N. Acharya in an article, "New Light on North Bengal from the records of Assam History" have mentioned very specifically about the geographical boundary and historical importance of this area.⁹ In the ancient literature we also come across a few other place-names and the names of the people associated with North Bengal such as Kirātas (hill people of North Bengal) the Paliyas (Rajvansis of North Bengal), and Kachchha (CoochBehar).¹⁰ Some other places in this area have also important impact on the history and culture of North Bengal some of the places were Kingdom of Matsya located in the West of the river Koratoya,¹¹ Vijoya Pura, which is situated on the North of the Purnia District and Gorkha King of Nepal conquered it.¹² Madra and Salya Kingdoms are situated on the North-West of Kamarupa and at the bottom of the Bhutan hills.¹³ From the period of Mahabharata we have also some reference of North Bengal. There is mention of twenty-three Princes of the family of Bhagadatta, who continued to govern after his death in the Kurukshetra war. It is also known to us that those princes ruled over Bengal including its northern part.¹⁴ We have further reference about Bhagadatta, the king of PRĀGJYOTISA, sided with the KAURAVAS along with the other eastern countries-ANGA, VANGA and PUNDRA "Practically the whole east supported them".¹⁵ Moreover, in this context we find the mention that the people led by BHAGADATTA were the CINAS and the KIRĀTAS.¹⁶ About the Kiratas, we have so many references in which we will get some relevance with our study on North Bengal. From the 'MAHABHARATA', we came to know that the kiratas are mountain

dwellers.¹⁷ Apart from these, we have so many information about the kiratas, the inhabitants of this region (North Bengal). But all these things are not required to be discussed for our purpose. However, to draw a Geo-Historical profile of present North Bengal we will have to go through so many evidences to get a clear picture on the area of our study.

1.3 NORTH BENGAL DURING THE ANCIENT AND EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD

According to our above discussions, we see that during the early historical period we come across a few geographical names, which signified the territories hardly covered the entire area of the boundary of North Bengal.¹⁸ In other words, the territories beyond the Pundravardhanabhukti appear to have been ignored by the people in general, although the place was not altogether unknown to them as we learn from the references to the temples of Śveta Varāhasvāmin and Kokāmukhasvāmin situated in the Himalayas (Himavachehikhare), in the Damodarpur Inscriptions of the 5th century A.D.¹⁹ When we to know trying to study the socio-cultural, and political history of North Bengal, we have to know its past. It is fact that North Bengal came into limelight of history since the days of the emergence of the city in Pudanagala (Pundranagara) on the bank of the Karatoya in c. 3rd century B.C. We had to wait for a few centuries more dawn to the age of Guptas to have a clearer picture about the socio-economic life of the people of this region.²⁰ For our study, very little is known of Bengal during the period between the fall of the Mauryas and the rise of the Gupta Empire, i.e., approximately between 200 B.C. and 350 A. D. There is, however, no doubt that Bengal now occupied a definite place in the political and economic map of India. This is proved by the accounts of the Greek and Roman writers of the period. Pliny, a great Roman scholar of the first century A.D. refers to the Gangarides through whose country flowed the Ganges, in the final part of its course. The Gangaradai are also mentioned by the great Roman poet Virgil in his 'GEORGICS' (about 30 B.C.)²¹ We also get some information from the 'PERIPLUS OF THE

ERYTHRAEAN SEA' written by a Greek sailor who made a Voyage along the Western and Eastern Coasts of India. His date is not definitely known, but is usually placed in the second half of the first century A.D. Another Greek writer, Ptolemy, who flourished in the first half of the Second century A.D., refers to the five mouths of the Ganges and adds that "All the country about the mouths of the Ganges is occupied by the Gangaridai". And the king lived in the city of Gange.²² Gangaridai, denoting the people of Bengal, were very powerful in the fourth century B.C. and the above references indicate that their name and fame were known even to the remote countries of the west during the next five hundred years.²³

Regarding the prominence of North Bengal during the post Maurya period nothing can be said definitely. Kushāna coins have been discovered in large number both in North and South Bengal. But this does not necessarily indicate the suzerainty of the kushānas over Bengal.²⁴ More definite information is available for the political condition of Bengal at the beginning of the fourth century A.D.

According to R.C. Majumdar, Bengal was then divided into a number of states, one of which was Samatata, comprising the delta of the Ganges to the east of the present Hooghly river. Another was probably DAVĀKA which lay between Samatata and KĀMARŪPA (roughly denoting present Assam, a portion of which is still called by that name). The exact location of Davāka cannot be determined. Fleet looked upon it as the ancient name of Dacca, while V.A. Smith located it in 'NORTH BENGAL'. The existence of a third State, about the same time may be inferred from some records engraved on the Susunia Hills about twelve miles to the North-West of the town of Bankura in West Bengal which mention the name of Maharaja Chandravarman.²⁵

It is an established fact that the foundation of the Gupta Empire was a landmark in the history of ancient Indian history. The rise of the Imperial Guptas put an end to this state of things, and gradually whole of Bengal was conquered by them. There are some controversy regarding the early home land

of the imperial Guptas Dr. D. C. Ganguly, however, propounded the view that the early home of the Imperial Guptas is to be located in Murshidabad, Bengal, and not in Magadha²⁶ (IHQ vol. XIV). What ever it may be, that is not our concern. But when we are to discuss about the Geo-historical position of North Bengal it must be mentioned that during the Guptas, we find the mention of North Bengal which was included within the Gupta Empire. The view is based on the tradition recorded by I-Tsing that Maharājā Sri.Gupta built a temple for the Chines priests and granted twenty four villages as an endowment for its maintenance. This temple was known as the 'Temple of China', was situated close to a Sanctuary called Mi-li-kia-si-kia-po-no²⁷ which was about forty YOJANAS to the east of Nālandā following the course of Ganges. Considering the views of Allan and Fleet Dr. Ganguly concludes that the original home of the Guptas was in Bengal and not in Magadha. Dr. Ganguly located it definitely at Murshidabad as its distance from Nālandā is about forty Yojonas (equivalent to 240 English miles). But Dr. Sudhakar Chattopadhaya has argued that as the Chinese pilgrim first went to the Ganges from Nālandā and then voyaged down the river the distance from Nālandā to the Ganges Should be included in the total and this takes us to 'MALDA' in Varendra.²⁸ Due to some controversy we may not accept the view that the early home of the Imperial Guptas is to be located in Mushidabad, Bengal, and not in Magadha, it is valid presumption that the parts of North Bengal were included in the territory ruled over by the founder of the Gupta family. During the post-Gupta period, the reign of 'Gourādhipa Sasanka' was the most significant incident in the history of Bengal. It is an accepted view that Sasanka occupies a prominent place in the history of Bengal. Unlike the three kings in lower Bengal who preceded him, he is more than a mere name to us. He is also the known king of Bengal who extended his suzerainty over territories far beyond the geographical boundary of that province. What we know definitely about Sasanka is that some time before 606 A.D. Sasanka became the king of Gauḍa with his capital at 'Karnasuvarna'. There is hardly any doubt that both Northern and Western Bengal were included in the domains of Sasanka. We have further reference

about the geographical boundary of Sasanka's domain. Hiuen Tsang who travelled in Bengal about 638 A.D. Shortly after the death of Sasanka, mentions, besides Kajangala (territory round Rajmahal) four kingdoms in Bengal proper viz., Pundravardhana, Karnasuvarna, Samatata and Tamralipti. The first two undoubtedly denote to the two component parts of Sasanka's Kingdom viz. North Bengal and northern parts of Western Bengal.

It is mentioned that the capital city of his Kingdom was Karnasuvarna, presently situated in Murshidabad district. Some historians have described that Sasanka was the first son of the soil who was ruling over both northern and southern parts of Bengal. If this view is accepted, then it is true that during the 7th century A.D. North Bengal had an important impact on the history and culture of Bengal. After Sasanka's death anarchy and confusion was prevailing in Bengal both in Southern and Northern parts. The death of Sasanka proved to be a political disaster of the first magnitude. Not only were the dreams of a far-flung Gauda Empire rudely shattered, but within a few years his kingdom, including the Capital City Karnasuvarna passed into the hands of Bhās-Karavarman the hostile king of Kāmarūpa.

After the foundation of the Pāla dynasty in the middle of the 8th century A.D. this anarchy came to an end. The rule of the Pāla dynasty from about the middle of the eighth century A.D. marks a new epoch in the history of Bengal. It is interesting that this dynasty with so many political and cultural dimensions continued to rule nearly 400 years. During the rule of the Pala rulers, North Bengal the area of our study had a very important cultural background. Immediately after the fall of the Pāla dynasty, another dynasty, the Senas came into prominence to rule this area.

During the Pāla period, we have so many references that North Bengal was included within the frame of Pāla Empire. In the first place 'RAMACHARITA' definitely refers to Varendri as the 'JANAKABHUH' or ancestral home of the pālas. We should of course remember that Varendra (also called Varendri) denoted the northern, and the Vaiṅga, the eastern and

southeastern part of Bengal. The evidences of Ramacharita and Gwalior inscription might therefore appear to be contradictory, unless we regard Vaiṅga as denoting the whole Province of Bengal. Such an use of the name Vaiṅgacan can, however, be justified or explained only on the supposition that the pālas were originally the rulers of vanga, and the name came to be applied to the rest of the province. Whatever may have been the limits of the kingdom of Gopala it is reasonable to hold that he consolidated his authority over the whole of Bengal.

The Sena dynasty, that ruled in Bengal after the Pālas, appears from the official records that they had included North Bengal within their Empire. It is evident that Lord of Gauda who according to Deopārā Inscription, fled before Vijayasena, was almost certainly Mahanandapala whose dominions in Bengal were at that time confined to North Bengal. That Inscription records the creation by Vijoyasena of the magnificent temple of Pradyumnesvara whose ruins now lie on the bank of an enormous tank at Deopāra about seven miles to the west of the town of Rajshahi. This proves the effective conquest, by Vijoyasena of at least a part of North Bengal. It was perhaps in connection with this expedition to North Bengal that Vijoyasena came into conflict with Vardhana, king of Kausāmbī and defeated him. It is very probable that Vijoyasena's young grandson, Lakshmanasena, took part in this expedition in North Bengal.²⁹ Hence, from this discussion it appears that during the Sena period North Bengal had some importance in the geographical jurisdiction of the Sena kingdom. As already noted above, Lakshmanasena's campaign against Gauda, Kamaruipa and Kalinga might refer to expeditions which he led or accompanied during the reign of his grandfather.

After the Sena rule Bengal witnessed a new experience due to the sudden attack of the Turks. The only detailed account of the Muslim invasion of Bengal during the reign of Lakshmanasena is 'TABAQĀT-I-NĀSIRĪ',³⁰ a historical work composed by Maulānā Minhaj-ud-din Abū umar-i-usmān. Without any detailed discussion about the muslim invasion in Bengal it may be

mentioned here that when Baktiyar khilji arrived at Lakhnawati, (13th century A.D.) the power of the Sena rulers collapsed and a new chapter was opened in the history of Bengal and North Bengal in particular.

1.4 NORTH BENGAL DURING THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

When Baktiyar Khilji became successful in establishing the power of the Delhi Sultanate in Bengal, the history and culture of this area opened a new chapter. During the subsequent period the Sultans of Bengal established the cities (towns) of Gour and Pandua which had created tremendous impact on the life and Various activities of the people of this region, As we are making a study on Present North Bengal, it may be mentioned here that these cities of Gour and Pandua are presently situated in Malda district which in within the geographical jurisdiction of our area of study. With the advent of Islam in this area and the contact and interaction of an alien culture with the existing system in all respect gave birth of a change and created new ideas which are of far reaching consequences. When we are to sketch in brief the historical outlines of North Bengal which is required to be thoroughly investigated we find that this area had vast geographical boundary which had been changed in course of different times.

1.5 NORTH BENGAL IN THE MODERN AGES.

So long we have described and highlighted the geographical profile and its historical importance from ancient period to early medieval and medieval period. During medieval Period, the history of Bengal as well as North Bengal have been studied elaborately in different Volumes. But in modern times the geo-historical profiles of North Bengal to some extent in rather difficult due to a series of factors. Before the partition of 1947 North Bengal had a vast area some parts of which at present are lying with Bangladesh, now an independent state. At that time the area of North Bengal was confined within the Northern side of the Ganges and the western side of the River Brahmaputra.³¹ The area of North Bengal at that time covered the area of undivided Rajshahi Division, (Dinajpur, Pabna, Bagura, Rangpur, Rajshahi, Jalpaiguri, Maldah, Darjeeling)

Cooch Behar Princely state, some parts of Purnia District in Bihar, some parts of undivided Nadia District. Moreover the Districts of Goalpara and Kamarupa (partly) of Assam were situated within the geographical jurisdiction of North Bengal.³² Akshay Kumar Maitreya have mentioned that the Rajshahi Division is known as North Bengal comprising the Districts of Rajshahi, Maldah, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Bagura and Pabna. It is quite evident that some places of the above mentioned districts are at present lying in Bangladesh. But at the same time, according to Akshay Kumar Maitreya, we have an outline about the geographical area of North Bengal. Of course it was the picture of North Bengal during the pre-partition era, (1947) and in undivided Bengal. At that time, the study of the history of North Bengal, its Socio-Cultural practice gained much importance in the context of the history of Bengal with the sincere effort of some contemporary Scholars. In the pre-partition era, we have a good number of Institutions and Associations which were engaged in the socio-cultural study mainly to study the history and archaeology of this region. For instance, we can mention the name of 'RANGPUR SAHITYA PARISHAD' which was established in Rangpur as a branch of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad in the year 1905.³³ About this institution we find the reference that, "Accordingly on 11th Baishak, 1312 B.S, (1905) Rangpur Sahitya parishad started with 28 members as a branch of Bangiya Sahitya parishad".³⁴ Perhaps it was the first branch of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad which was established in North Behgal (Rangpur). For academic and intellectual exercise, Rangpur Sahitya Parishad had a distinction and it started to publish a PATRIKA (journal) as its mouthpiece. The 'Rangpur Sahitya parishad patrika' with its outstanding academic exercise marked a significant role in the study on North Bengal. It is stated that 'As a Branch of Bangiya Sahitya parishad this institution was inaugurated with the avowed object of (i) making archaeological discoveries in North Bengal and Assam.'³⁵ This Institution, (Rangpur Sahitya Parishad) from its inception was very much interested with literary activities and due to this interest the Parishad arranged a literary conference in the name of "UTTARBANGA SAHITYA SAMMILAN".³⁶ About this literary conference

it is mentioned that, "It was in the 3rd year of Parishad's existence the first literary conference met under the Presidentship of Akshay Kumar Maitreya, Babu Surendea Chandra Roy Chaudhury, the secretary of Rangpur Sahitya Parishad, has appointed as permanent Secretary of North Bengal literary conference.³⁷ The Parishad had a special interest on literature, and due to this interest the Parishad arranged 'Uttarbanga Sahitya Sammilan' the first literary conference in North Bengal. The Rangpur Sahitya Parishad was an important institution, which was devoted on research activities especially on history and archaeology of North Bengal. If we quote some relevant portion from the editorial of the PATRIKA, it will be evident that the prime motive of the Parishad's Patrika was to explore on the history and archaeology of North Bengal.

"Half Portion of the Patrika will contain the folk literature, archaeology, different historical facts and events and the details of the different rare books. Another half portion will publish the rare and unpublished books, description about the authors of the books of North Bengal and book review".³⁸

This organization was no doubt a research institute which may be entitled to the distinction of having regular publication on Socio-cultural history of undivided North Bengal. It may be mentioned in this connection that the study of history and socio-cultural aspects of this area have started lately. Some scholars, like Akshay Kumar Maitreya took a special care on research and publication through this organization. In this connection mention may be made that some of the issues of this Patrika published so many important articles on linguistics, ethnology, history and cultural identity of the people of North Bengal. Akshay Kumar Maitreya wrote an article, entitled "Uttarbanger Puratatanusandhyane" which was a pioneer work on the archaeology of North Bengal.³⁹ So long, any article or book had not been published particularly on North Bengal. From this work of Akshay Kumar Maitreya it became evident that historically the area of North Bengal can attract the attention of the scholars. At the same time so many unknown information came into being and

enriched the history and culture of North Bengal. Similarly, during the same year, another article was published by Hamed Ali, entitled, "Uttarbanger Musalman Sahitya".⁴⁰ It was a study of new taste and identity which is evident from the title of the article. From medieval period particularly from the time of the invasion of Baktiyar Khilji this area of North Bengal went under the Muslim rulers and that rule had been continued up to the coming of the British. During this long period under Muslim rule some literary activities of the Muslims of this area were developed. Hamed Ali, in his article have highlighted on this new dimension of Muslim literature. The writers in this Patrika did concentrate their writings not only on socio-cultural field but on other sides also. For instance we can mention that Keshablal Basu wrote an article, titled "Uttarbanger Swastha Tatyanusandhan". It was published in three parts in the Sahitya Parishad Patrika.⁴¹

Apart from Rangpur Sahitya Parisad, another institution was established in Rajshahi for the cause of North Bengal study. It was 'VARENDRA ANUSANDHAN SAMITI' which was established in 1910 in Rajshahi. Kumar Sarat Kumar Ray and Akshay Kumar Maitreya were the most interested scholars who with their intimate and sincere efforts founded this organization to cultivate the socio-cultural and historical study of this region.⁴² Another interesting thing is that the selection of the name of the institution is also significant. Probably, the very word 'Varendra' signifies the glory of the past of this region (see chapter 6.4). Whatever it may be we can mention one thing that before the establishment of the 'Rangpur Sahitya Parishad' in 1905, and the 'Varndra Anusandhan Samiti' in 1910, no institution or organization had any interest or activity on the study of this area. In fact though the Bangio Sahitya Parishad was working in broad sense about literature, language, history, archaeology, culture, and so many things, but it was in wide perspective. In this connection this two institutions had a special character to emphasis on the study of North Bengal. As the head of these two institutions Akshay Kumar Maitreya proved his scholarship though he was a lawyer by profession at the Rajshahi court.⁴³ His activities and fame was by far the greater

for his historical research since he was a pioneer researcher on the history of Bengal on scientific way. Before the establishment of this institute, Akshay Kumar, due to his personal interest on history and culture of Bengal started to publish a quarterly journal under the title 'Aitihāsik Citra' in 1899.⁴⁴ As a distinguish scholar, Akshaya Kumar was full of glory throughout his life. He had a series of publications and his main aim was the collection and preservation of antiquities as well as encouraging the study of the history and culture of Bengal in general, but North Bengal in particular. In his writings, the study of North Bengal have mostly highlighted. Such as we can mention here that a lecture was delivered by Akshay Kumar in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, in 1927, under the title, 'The ancient Monuments of Varendra'. It was edited by K. C. Sarkar and published in 1949.⁴⁵

1.6 CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF NORTH BENGAL.

From the above discussions it is clear that the territory 'North Bengal' in undivided Bengal had a glorious past/ history. Now let us have some idea about the cultural background of this region. From the archaeological evidences discovered in different places of the Brahmaputra Valley prove that most of the sculptures, temples, coins, inscriptions etc. were the works of the Hindu people and patronized by the Hindu royal authorities.⁴⁶ Apart from this the icons of the Buddhist deities preserved in the Assam state Museum shows that in the medieval period Tāntrik Buddhism could have some hold in the Brahmmaputra Valley. In the Brahmma Putra Valley two rock-cut Jaina Sculpture have been found and it prove that the Jaina faith existed here. These Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina people who settled in Brahmmaputra Valley⁴⁷ and spread their culture in this region must have come from the west i.e. region located to the immediate west of prāgjyotisha, Kāmarūpa or Assam. We know that the immediate west of the present state of Assam stands 'North Bengal' and a part of Bangladesh. So, it is not unlikely that these Bhuddhist, Jaina and Hindu faith were predominantly prevailing in this region of North Bengal. Dr. D. C. Sircar in his study on Mahasthan inscription pointed out that both North Bengal and North

Bangladesh were included in the Mauryan Empire.⁴⁸ After the decline of the Mauryas so many dynasties ruled India among which the Kusanas were the most famous (before the emergence of the Gupta rule). On the basis of the evidences, specially the discovered coins belonging to the Kushāna Empire also included this region.⁴⁹ It is evident and accepted by the scholars that the Mauryas and Kushānas were perhaps best known for their Buddhist religious faith and cultural activities. So it can be said that Buddhism or Buddhist religious faith could have some hold among the people who settled in this region.

During the Gupta rule Pundravardhana or North Bengal was included in the Gupta Empire from the 4th century to 6th century A.D. So many scholars have admitted it and now it is a well-known fact. It is said that, during the days of Kumara Gupta I North Bengal formed an important administrative division.⁵⁰ At that time, if we look into the religion and cultural activities of this North Bengal region, it will be evident, that a change in the cultural field of North Bengal came into being. At that time one very important thing has been mentioned by Dr .D. C. Sircar that, the *prāggyotisha* or *Kām rūpa* Kingdom was separated from the Pundravardhana territory in the west only by the river 'KARATOYA'. About the origin of the Guptas, some scholars have made an attempt to locate the original home of the Imperial Guptas some where in North Bengal.⁵¹ Reference may be made that I-tsing, the Chinese pilgrim has stated that 'Mahārāja Sri-Gupta built a temple for the Chinese priests and granted twenty-four villages as an endowment for maintenance. Quite naturally the question may raise that where this temple was located. By measuring the distance, on the basis of the Survey of India Maps, it has been suggested that Sri. Gupta, the first known member of the Gupta dynasty, who made an endowment of twenty-four villages for the maintenance of the 'temple of China' situated near Mrigasthavana (Mi-li-Kia-Si-Kia-Po-no) stūpa in Malda.⁵² Though, in the later centuries, particularly during the 13th century, we find in the *Taboqiāt-I-Nasiri*, that it might have been situated in Rajmahal, just opposite to Malda. What ever may be the location of the Chinese temple, either

in North Bengal or else where, the fact is that the Gupta Emperor (Maharaja Sri-Gupta), no doubt, had some soft corner and respect to Buddhism.⁵³ Probably for this reason he personally patronized the cause of Buddhist religion by granting twenty-four villages to a Buddhist temple (Temple of China), constructed for the cause of the Chinese priests.⁵⁴

After the Guptas, the break up of the Gupta Empire followed by inevitable results. The provinces and feudatory states declared their independence and the whole of North India were divided into a number of independent states. In the home provinces of the Gupta we find a long line of rulers and the family is known in history as the 'later Guptas of Magadha'.⁵⁵ It was after the reign of Skandagupta that decline of the Gupta Empire became extinct. Inevitably the Gupta Empire broke up and on ramified parts different rulers related to Guptas were ruling. Although the Gupta Empire broke up small families related to the Guptas were found to rule in some parts as local rulers up to the eight century A.D. Remover of strong rule at the centre, the distinctly after Budhagupta brought the centrifugal forces in action and Kathirowar, Bundelkhand, North Bengal became virtually independent.⁵⁶ With the growing weakness of the central authority due to struggle for succession among the princes of royal blood and personal inefficiency of the rulers, the feudatories of the Gupta Empire began to raise the standard of rebellion and eventually tore off their local areas from the Gupta Empire.⁵⁷ During the rule of the later Guptas, about 525 A.D. an independent kingdom was established in Vaiñga i.e., East and South-Bengal, but North Bengal still remained under Guptas, when the Gupta Empire fell, Gouda comprising west and probably also North Bengal asserted independence, but were defeated by the Maukharis. Subsequently, half of a century later the throne of Gouda was occupied by Śasāñka. Bana and Hiuen T-Sang have described Śasāñka as the king of Gauda and he settled his capital at Karnasubarna (near Murshidabad) and probably soon made himself master of the whole of Bengal. So during this period, we also find that there were some political and cultural identity of North Bengal under the independent rule of Śasāñka. What ever may be the geographical boundary of present North

Bengal, or the historical background of this region, it is simply to have an idea about the area of our study. Our major objectives are something different. In this course of study there are so many ups and downs as a result of which we find an area, northern part of present West Bengal which is popularly known as 'North Bengal'.

1.7 NORTH BENGAL DURING THE POST PARTITION ERA

In the initial stage, immediately after the great partition of 1947, the term 'North Bengal' was a vague one. From that time this term 'North Bengal' took the shape of a verbal geographical area which had no official recognition. But its socio-political and cultural character remained something different which did not come to be highlighted. Though North Bengal is a particular geographical area in the northern part of West Bengal comprising five districts (presently six districts) of the northern part of West Bengal, still its remarkable Socio-cultural feature, and identity cannot be denied. During recent times so many Scholars of different fields are trying their best to explore and highlight the issues of North Bengal. Even some measures have already been taken from the part of administration (Government) considering its importance. But the root of this issues and problems are yet to be investigated and emphasis should be given properly on the particular points which are related with socio-cultural practices and identity question.⁵⁸

So far we have discussed about the geo-historical profile of North Bengal right from ancient period to the colonial rule. From this discussion it is understood that some etymological and socio-cultural identity during the period of our study (1869-1969) are inherent. It is evident that North Bengal is the meeting place of different group of peoples with different cultural identities. The Aryans, the Non Aryans, Dravidians, and the Mongoloid peoples all have settled here. Moreover, North Bengal may be called to be a part of 'KIRĀTA-BHŪMI'.⁵⁹ The Kirātas or the Mongoloids are the early settlers of North Bengal. In the ethnological framework of North Bengal we see that, the Koches, the Bodo-Kacharis, the Meches, the Garos, the Totas, the Jaldas, the

Limbus, the Kirantis, the Lepchas are all of Mongoloid origin and the early settlers of North Bengal.⁶⁰ But one thing we observe that the Rajbansis are the dominant among the early settlers of North Bengal. Among the different group of people, it is evident that the Rajbansi people were majority in this region. They are found in good number in all the five (presently six) districts (Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, North and South Dinajpur, Darjeeling plain and Malda). We have sufficient documents and evidences in favour of the above statement. But at the same time one interesting fact which has to be studied, that from early period, people of different ethnical groups and cultures have settled in North Bengal. Their social habits, social structure cultural practices, always maintained a general unity and harmony. In our study from ancient times to pre-colonial period we don't have any major social and cultural troubles in respect of their language and culture like present days. But later on due to several factors like financial exploitation, and poverty of the common people, we get some incidents of troubles of agrarian and peasant discontent. We find a series of agrarian and peasant revolt in Bengal during the colonial period.⁶¹ Immediately before the partition of 1947 we observe peasant revolt like 'TEBHAGA MOVEMENT' specially in present North Bengal region.⁶² After independence, in North Bengal Changes happened to come on different aspects. With the passage of time, tremendous changes have taken place in this region (North Bengal) in respect of Socio-economic, political and cultural fields. During the period of our study North Bengal came into limelight in respect of socio-cultural and political tensions. In the last three decades, the entire region and its people have attracted and held the attention of the rest of the country. No doubt, it must have definite reasons which are going to draw due importance. While studying about the Geo-historical profile of North Bengal we have simply observed its traditional-history and geographical boundary in course of different periods. This is just to have the traditional dimensions of history and culture of present North Bengal. But he period of our study is 1869 to 1969 of which the major part was within the framework of British India and the rest in Independent India. During the period of the one

hundred years North Bengal have witnessed series of incidents in respect of political and social movements. It is fact that both in pre-partition and Post-partition period so many unrest had taken place in course of times. Those unrests which took place in North Bengal were sometimes time-specific, geo-specific as well as ethno-specific and they had an important impact on our socio-cultural and political history. More specifically it may be mentioned that a series of Socio-political movements with certain aims and objectives have brought some change in our socio-cultural atmosphere. It is really a matter of great surprise that most of the post-colonial problems in West Bengal were originated in present North Bengal. For example, we can refer some cases like Cooch Behar Merger question with West Bengal, the Berubari question of Jalpaiguri Enclave or Chitmahals, the Naxalite Movement in Darjeeling District and the movement of some hill community in Darjeeling. The nature and importance of these movements were so grave that for all these incidents the name and fame of North Bengal has taken place in the national and international atlas. In this situation what we tend to ignore is the enormous potential of such incidents for bringing about desired change in the order.

So long we have discussed on various aspects related to North Bengal, the area of our study. Now we would like to turn our eyes on a very important issue which is the main theme of our study i.e., publication of press and formation of Association. It is evident that like greater Bengal or undivided Bengal there emerged a good number of press publications and Associations in North Bengal. In Socio-political and cultural activities, these publications and Associations had a great role to play In fact these publications and formation of Associations were practically the reflection of society, polity, economy and cultural practices of North Bengal. In fact these were the mirrors which constantly highlighted most of the major socio-political problems.

In this perspective, we have a series of theoretical framework. 'Russick' in his 'Social and political philosophy' pointed out about the issue of man's relations with the society. According to him, it is the society, that shapes man

as a social being: in social life man attains complete development of his personalities. There is no such thing as 'merely an individual experience': there is no idea of man divorced from his social circumstances. Man minus his social surroundings is a misnomer, he attains some meaning only as a member of the society.⁶³

Theoretically it can be said that social problem come out due to many reasons. Individual problem is one which affects one individual or a small group. On the other hand a public social issue is one which affects the society as a whole, or the larger part of society. At the same time social problem may change with the passage of time. What was not considered a social problem a few decades back might become a crucial social problem after two decades. For example, the population explosion in our country was not viewed as a social problem up to the late 1940's of the twentieth century but from the early 1950's it has come to be perceived as a very crucial problem. Social change as well as the political change creates new conditions in which an issue comes to be identified as a social problem. Similarly, youth unrest in India was not a problem up to 1940s but in the 1950s and the 1960s it became a problem and in the 1970s and the 1980s it became a very serious one and continues to be so in the 1990s.⁶⁴ These are not quite fit to study the social and political problems of present North Bengal. Some problems of distinct character emerged in North Bengal of which some were in the colonial period and the other after independence. However, it is a very persistent question, that why these crisis came out. There is no doubt that after 1950 a new political dimension emerged in North Bengal the root of which required to be studied. The demographic character, social structure, political environment, cultural identity question, the racial stratification, backwardness of the area (North Bengal) in respect of communication, education, treatment and other essential services, all these things will contribute sufficiently for the socio-cultural and political movements in North Bengal.

We have studied elaborately on the diversity of the Geo-historical profile of North Bengal of which six districts will comprise the field of our present study. In these six districts the most important district of North Bengal is Jalpaiguri district which has a distinction in the field of Social, cultural and political movements from the Colonial period to the recent times. Specially, in the field of political activities the Associations/organizations and Vernacular press of Jalpaiguri made a significant contribution in the growth of national political regeneration. It is surprising that, within one year of the establishment of Indian National Congress, Jalpaiguri got contact with this all India political organization.⁶⁵ For example, it may be noted that at the second annual session of the India National Congress in the year 1886, Jalpaiguri district was represented there by participating the congress session.⁶⁶ Without any communication with the all India political organization and without any organized political force of the district this participation in the session of the Congress could not have been possible. In this context the elites played an important role. In the colonial context of the British Indian Nationalist politics this has often been viewed at least basically as a reflection of western educated people.⁶⁷ This western educated people or the elites were always active for constitutional reforms and competition and conflict among what have been considered as elites groups for having an increasing share in the formal political institution under the British Raj.⁶⁸ But politics is viewed here as an endeavour on the part of the people to bring about a transformation in their social economic and political situation. We have a series of examples of socio-political movements not only in the district of Jalpaiguri, but more or less in all the six districts of North Bengal (see chapter 5). Here, I just mentioned an example of the emergence of political activity only in the district of Jalpaiguri in the early stage. During the colonial period the picture of CoochBehar district (at that time, Princely state) in respect of Social and political movements, was to some extent different from the other districts of North Bengal. As it was a native state, and there was a friendly relation between the Cooch Behar state and the British government political activities against the Raj were restricted

there. ⁶⁹ Moreover, deportation law was existing there for which any kind of seditious activities were strictly prohibited.⁷⁰ In spite of that situation, Cooch Behar had witnessed some political movements rather incidents. Other than political movements, in the field of Socio-cultural activities Cooch Behar had a glorious past like 'Brahmo-Movement'. Before Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, the Cooch Behar Royal family was very much influenced by the religious faith of Vaishnavism and Saivism. At the end of 16th century, the great Vaishnava religious leader 'Sankaradeva' came to Kamata-Koch kingdom.⁷¹ His appearance in Cooch Behar stirred the religious life of the Royal family and the common people at large. It is said that Mahārāja Naranārāyana in the later part of his life was influenced by this Vaisnava faith.⁷² Moreover prince Sukladhyaja (Chila Roy) married Kamalapriya the daughter of Ram Roy, who was a near relative of Sankaradeva. But in spite of all this the religious faith of Vaishnavism could not stay for long in Cooch Behar.⁷³ The common people of Cooch Behar state had a special softness and belief on Saivism. According to their religious belief the Saiva cult was the symbol of fertility (EPW. April, 1991). As a result they again started to worship the Saiva cult and Vaishnava religious movement was getting a failure.⁷⁴ Like 'EKSARAN' religious faith, which was introduced by Sankaradeva, 'BRAHMO-RELIGION' (Brahma movement) also got so much importance in the religious life of the Cooch Behar Royal family. This happened definitely by the influence of Keshob Chandra Sen, (a- Nababidhan Brahma preacher) the great Brahma leader of Calcutta and the historical marriage of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan with Suniti Devi, daughter of Keshob Chandra Sen.⁷⁵ During the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, who after receiving English education tried to inculcate the spirit of the twentieth century ideals on his own people, Brahma religion flourished in Cooch Behar. This is a long story in the history of Cooch Behar. We have just mentioned it as a reference for good understanding of the discussion. Likewise, so many instances may be mention as a reference of Socio-political and cultural activities of North Bengal in other districts also. Specially during the colonial period Malda played a very significant role in the

context of Press publication. All of these will be discussed in the appropriate place during the course of our study.

When we will be discussing about the 'Role of the press and Associations in the Socio-cultural and political Movements', we will have to look into the respective areas for a few decades which were under the colonial administration.

1.8 SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT AMONG THE RAJBANSI COMMUNITY.

In dealing with the socio-political stirrings of the period it is important to take account of the 'RAJBANSI KSHATRIYA MOVEMENT' that emerged and spread among the Rajbansis of North Bengal including Rangpur and Dinajpur and Goalpara district in Assam. The movement came to be called the Rajbansi Kshatriya Movement. In our later discussion (Chapter 6) we will make an elaborate study on different aspects of this movement. Here, in this profile of North Bengal we are just to mention a few words about this.

It is evident that the background of the movement was provided by the social, political and economic change that took place under the British rule.⁷⁶ The fact was something like that for over several centuries social mobility involving various autochthonous groups of North Bengal, particularly the Rajbansis had been taking place. At the same time, new opportunities for social mobility were opened up through commercialisation of agriculture, improvement of communications and spread of education, though to a limited extent. These developments generated new social tensions and strivings which partly found expression through the Rajbansi Kshatriya Movement. In our later discussion we will try to explain the background of this movement in details. Here we are to mention that this movement was at first started as a social reform movement, and the scope was provided by the colonial government, particularly the census operations which since 1891⁷⁷ tried to classify each Hindu Social group or caste on the basis of social hierarchy recognized by Hindu public opinion directly contributed to the growth of the movement. In

course of so many dimensions, ultimately the movement started by some Rajbansi zamindars, joteders and some intellectuals with the claim that the Rajbansi Hindus were Kshatriyas of Aryan origin who lost their kshatriya status due to non-observance of Vedic rituals since long time. Ultimately this Rajbansi kshatriya movement have mobilized most of the people of this Rajbansi community which initiated in voicing protest against this and led to the formation of 'RAJBANSI KSHATRIYA SAMITI' in 1910. This social movement of the Rajbansi community will be an important part of our socio-political history of North Bengal.

Under the colonial administration, we see a major transformation have taken place in the social and political situation of North Bengal. It is from this standpoint that the emergence and growth of Socio-political Movements including nationalist politics in most of the districts of North Bengal had started. Regarding nationalist politics, and movements in Jalpaiguri and Malda districts, stirred the total atmosphere in the first quarter of the twentieth century. At that time the administrative policy of 'Divide and Rule' as expressed by Curzon's initiative to downgrade Bengali predominance in the sphere of higher education, government services and nationalist politics, and the 1905 partitions of Bengal presidency led to a political and cultural ferment among Bengalis throughout the former imperial presidency.⁷⁸ People of this Bengal presidency considered this action of Lord Curzon as illegal and unjustified. As a result Bengalis, both Hindus and Muslims in western Bengal and mainly Hindus in East Bengal came out against this unjustified imperial policy and developed the ideology of Swadeshi Nationalism⁷⁹

In the nationalist perspective, Jalpaiguri was still then torpid. At that stage political consciousness remained at a low level both in the local issues and in the context of the main stream of the nationalist movement.⁸⁰ However, the swadeshi and anti-partition movement had its reverberation in the district of Jalpaiguri town in particular, with the emergence of an urban middle class in the Jalpaiguri town political movement started and it got leadership and

inspiration from legal practitioners, teachers and Bengali Tea-planters. Students and young men from these families were active participants in this movement. The day on which the partition of Bengal was officially introduced, (16 October, 1905) 'RAKHI BANDHAN' was observed by all Bengalis as a symbol of brotherhood and unity of the people of Bengal. In Jalpaiguri town too the day was observed. A large crowd led by Jogesh Chandra Ghose a leading tea planter, walked barefoot (the traditional Hindu sign of mourning) through the town. At the same time a campaign was launched to boycott foreign goods. More interesting, at Dinbazar, the market place of the town, propaganda for the boycott led to the arrest of three young men. Two of them were sentenced to imprisonment for two weeks.⁸¹ Apart from Jalpaiguri district, there are mention of so many incidents of nationalist politics in some other districts of North Bengal (Malda, Darjeeling and West Dinajpur). Some of these will be mentioned in appropriate place in course of our study. Not only political activities, in the field of Socio-cultural activities, the North Bengal districts were also aware about different type of Social issues. Sometimes it was found that North Bengal has seized the eyes of whole Bengal as well as India. Regarding those issues the regional vernacular press and Associations of North Bengal played a significant role which have become an interesting field of study. Even the all India dailies sometimes covered some issues of North Bengal. For example, we can refer the name of Amrita Bazar patrika. During 1930s a Provincial conference of the Congress party was held at Jalpaiguri. All the proceedings of the conference were reflected on the pages of Amrita Bazar Patrika. Amrita Bazar Patrika (ABP) covered the proceedings like this:-

“Jalpaiguri, February 4-the session of the Bengal provincial conference opened at 4.p.m. when S.j. Saratchandra Bose, the president of the conference, accompanied by S.j.Subhaschandra Bose, S.j.Bepin Behari Ganguly and others entered the pandal. The assemblage, numbering more than 15000 rose to a man to extend an ovation to the Bose brothers who passed through the crowd exchanging greetings on either side.”

“The president took his seat on the dais which was decorated with flowers and foliage, pictures of Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal and S.J. Subhaschandra Bose were hung up prominently as also some quotations from the poetical works of Rabindranath Tagore.”

Dr. Charuchandra Sanyal, Chairman of the Reception committee welcomed the delegates. His welcome to S.J. Subas Chandra Bose, the president elect of the Indian National congress was loudly cheered by the entire assembly.⁸² It is also evident that the communist party of India was also active to some extent with their organizational activities at Jalpaiguri.⁸³

From ancient period to early medieval period, North Bengal as a Geographical area gained much importance. In our discussion it is found that during that time North Bengal was a meeting place of different ethno-cultural identities. Later on during the medieval period some cities were grown up in North Bengal which got much importance in our Socio-cultural history. Even during the colonial period. North Bengal witnessed so many Socio-cultural movements. In our national movement North Bengal also played a significant role though it had certain limitations. Hence, as a whole it is found that for our present study North Bengal got a unique geo-historical profile which have attracted so many scholars for a comprehensive study on different fields.

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- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Raghuvamsa, anto V.pp. 81-84; Sirkar, D.C.; studies in the geography of Ancient and Medieval India, Varanasi, 1960.p.7.
- ⁷ Mahabharata, I, 102,53.
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In early historical period we come across a few geographical names which signified the territories of the northern part of the undivided Bengal. These territories hardly covered the entire area of the present day North Bengal.
- ⁸ Rajatarangini, IV, 420-21.
- ⁹ Mukherjee, B.N. and Bhattacharya, P.K. (Eds) op.cit p.p. 72-78.
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²⁷ Ibid.p.532.

Dr. Ganguly inadvertently takes this (Mrigasikhāvana?) as the temple founded by Maharaja Gupta.

²⁸ Chattopadhyaya, Sudhakar, *Early History of North India*, pp. 137-38.

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²⁹ It is said in the *Mādhāinagar* (c.13) and *Bhowal cp.*(c.12) that Lakshmanasena suddenly seized the goddess of fortune of the king of Gouda while he was a *kumāra* and sported with the women of *kalinga* while he was young. It would thus appear that Lakshmanasena undertook an expedition against Gauda even before he attained his full youth.

³⁰ The text was printed in Calcutta in 1864 and translated into English by Major H.G. Raverty in 1881. The following account is based on this English translation, and references to its pages are given with in brackets. A critical translation of the passage relating to the raid on *Nadiyā* has been published in *Indian historical Quarterly*, XVII. 92.

³¹ Majumdar, R.C., *History of Bengal*, part I, Dacca University, P.2.

³² Mahmud Abdul Oahab (Ed) *Itihash Anusandhan*, 7, p.532.

³³ *Proceedings of the Rangpur Sahitya Parishad and its Eight years work*, 1913, p. 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

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³⁸ *Rangpur Sahitya Panishad patrika*. Ashwin, 1313 B.S.

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⁴⁴ Ibid. P.11

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⁴⁶ Chaudhury, R. D., North Bengal: The Gateway of spread of Aryan culture in Assam as known from Archaeological evidence, Mukherjee B. N. and Bhattacharyya, P. K. (eds.) Op. cit. p.44

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 45.

⁴⁸ Sirkar, D. C., "Money in pre-Ahom Assam and its neighbourhood," coinage and economy in the North-East states of India, Numismatic Society of India, Varanasi, First edition, p2.

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Kusāna coins have been discovered in large number both in North and South Bengal. But this does not necessarily indicate the suzerainty of the kushānas over Bengal. For coins are carried by way of trade far beyond the territory of the rulers who used them, and kushāna coins have been found even in the Ganjam District in Orissa.

⁵⁰ Chaudhury, R. D., North Bengal : The Gateway of spread of Aryan culture in Assam as known from Archaeological evidence in Mukherjee, B.N. and Bhattacharyya, P. K. (eds.) Op. cit. p.45.

⁵¹ Majumdar, R. C. History of Ancient Bengal. Op. cit. P. 37.

Dr. Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya has argued that as the Chinese Pilgrim first went to the Ganges from Nālandaā and then voyaged down the river the

distance from Nālandā to Ganges should be included in the total and this takes us to Malda in Varendra.

⁵² Chatterjee, Bhaskar., place of KAJAMGALA in the Early Historical perspective of North Bengal, in Mukherjee B. N. and Bhattacharyya, P.K. (Ed)OP. cit. 54.

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⁵⁵ Majumdar, R.C., Ancient India, (Reprint) 1994, p.248.

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⁵⁸ Dakua, Dinesh, Kāmatapuri Andolonon Asol uddyeshya (in Bengali) Calcutta, 2001.P.15

According to Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy, the phrase ‘identity politics’ has become to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social group. The most important and revolutionary element of identity politics is the demand that oppressed groups be recognized not in spite of their differences but specifically because of their differences.

⁵⁹ Gupta, Pabitra, Ethnic affinities of the Early settlers of North Bengal: A study with reference to the Rājbanis. In Mukherje B. N. and Bhattacharya, P. K. (eds.), Op. cit. P.157.

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⁷⁶ Dasgupta, Ranjit-op, cit p.87.

⁷⁷ Barman, upendranath, Rajbansi Kshatrya Jatir Itihash, Jalpaiguri, (3rd edition) 1388 B.S. p.56.

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⁸² Amrita Bazar Patrika, February 5, 1939.

⁸³ Amrita Bazar Patrika, January 19, 1947.