

Book Review-1

Rupkumar Barman
Paribarta Anusandhan: Rashtra Nagarikatwa, Bastuchyuti O Itihascharcha (In Bengali), (Search for Alternative: State, Citizenship, Displacement and Historical Studies), Kolkata, Gangchil, 2022, Hardback, Rs. 450, Page 170



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Classification and cataloguing of books and journals are not difficult tasks for a librarian. However, the book under review will be a challenging one even for a trained librarian, especially for its exact categorization. It is because the title of the book might generate an impression that it is a complicated academic historical work on state, displacement, statelessness or citizenship. But in reality, the book presents before the reader beautiful co-ordination about the subjective, personal narratives and the objective historical observations regarding some intricate aspects of the historical evolution of a particular geographical region. Professor Rup Kumar Barman one of the doyens of the 'North-Bengal Studies' (*Uttarbanga Charcha*) has beautifully portrayed the history, evolution of statecraft, social milieu, folk-life and geographical specificities of North Bengal covering the period since his very birth to the present decade.

The book titled "*Paribarta Anusandhan*" (*Search for Alternative*) is divided into four specific chapters: *Jatra Holo Suru* (the journey begins), *Uttarbanga Viswavidyalay O Darjeeling Parba* (Years in the North Bengal University and Darjeeling), *Cooch Behar Parba O Muktir Adesh* (Years in Cooch Behar and the Release Order), *Kolkata Parba O Itihaschorcha* (Kolkata episode and the studies in history). The socio-ecological and the 'folk life' of the districts of Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar appear to be the soothing background of the entire narrative. The village is called Chhoto Chowkir Bos in the Alipurduar Block No. II was situated in a geographical plot which was the part of the basin of the rivers like Raidak, Dhaula, Ghoramara and Dharsi. The entire area had a very complicated ethnographic settlement which included the 'sons of the soil' communities like the Meches and Rabhas; the indigenous people comprising the Mundas, Santals, Chik Baraiks, Mal Pahriays, Khariayas and Oraons migrated to this place as the instruments of the economic policies formulated

by the colonial government; the migrants from Nepal; and finally the East Bengali communities like the Malos, Juginaths, Namasudras, and Dhpbas who were forced to migrate here after the partition of Bengal in 1947 as well due to the Liberation War in Bangladesh and the growth of Assam movement in Assam. The first chapter draws a beautiful collage of their daily life, socio-cultural existence, nostalgia and their participation in the larger movements for political rights. The land policies of the Left Front Government in West Bengal (1977-2011) in the areas like Kumargram, Mahakalguri, Samuktala, Kamakshyaguri and Kumargram and their counter-reactions towards it gave birth to consciousness regarding their local and regional rights and demands had been discussed here in detail. The flowing ripples of river Raidak had always been heard as the background of all these descriptions.

In the second chapter, the author has attempted to unfold the impact and influence of the Naxalbari movement in the life and public memory of the tribal population (mainly among the Sadri-speaking people) dwelling in the semi-forested areas on the basin of rivers like Manja, Balasan and Mahananda. The daily life of the working-class people in the delta of Balasan and Mahananda, the government initiatives to eradicate illiteracy among them and the growing interest in the academics about the history of these 'lower-caste' people has been discussed here. The Kamtapur movement and the demand for the 'separation of North Bengal' brought the activities of the political parties like Kamtapur Peoples' Party, Greater Cooch Behar Peoples' Association etc. and the government's responses to their schemes and propagandas are also been touched upon. These political demands and movements were closely linked with the working class and tribal population in the Mahananda basin. It is in the very chapter the author also unfolds that how as a student of history at Alipurduar College and North Bengal University he was gradually getting aware of the historical discussions and arguments regarding the caste relations and caste politics in Bengal. The author also enlightens the readers about the opinions and arguments of the maestros like Rosalind O' Hanlon, Gail Omvedt, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and others regarding the evolution of caste politics and *Dalit* identity in India. From the third chapter objective, historical observations start overshadowing the author's narratives. He takes the history of the 'Duars region' very seriously which was situated in the confluence of four pre-modern states: Koch Hajo, Nepal, Bhutan and Ahom. In this chapter, the author has briefly discussed the evolution of the Koch kingdom from tribalism to statehood and the inseparable yet never accepted contribution of the Mech communities to this process of evolution. Apart from this, the author has discussed the academic evolution of the studies of the lower caste people and the 'tribal' population in Bengal who have been narrated as 'savage' and 'semi-civilized' in the colonial terminologies and how they had been placed in the historical narratives ranging from imperial historiography to Subaltern Studies. The pitiful limitations and incompleteness of these studies had been mentioned time and again. The author had also grudgingly and disappointedly mentioned the limitations and appendage role played by the postcolonial cognitive spheres and the academics before the colonial cultural-anthropology

and the wrongly used, superimposed western ideologies. The chapter ends with the author's resignation from ABN Seal College of Cooch Behar and joining as an Assistant Professor in the Department of History, Jadavpur University. In this regard, the evasive snobbery and intellectual vanity of the Kolkata-centric upper-caste intelligentsia have been mentioned.

The fourth chapter carries the descriptions of the author's doctoral research at North Bengal University and his involvement with different UGC-sponsored projects. In this chapter, different historical issues have been discussed and a specialized readership is required to get into different points mentioned here. The intriguing historical issues include the partition of the subcontinent, displacement of citizens, refugee problems, formation of the Scheduled Caste identity and their representation in the electoral politics, citizenship acts, agony of the religious minorities and the stateless people, existential crisis of the 'enclave dwellers', the evolution of the social and economic situation of the fishermen community and above all the debates regarding the *Dalit* identity in the subcontinent has occupied the lion share of this chapter. The author has vividly discussed the reasons, present conditions, features and characteristics of the *Dalit* writings in India and the impediments in gathering a proper readership for the *Dalit* literature. The research of many contemporary and earlier historians in the field of the history of the Scheduled Castes and the *Dalit* identities and the limitations of the non-*Dalit* scholars in the proper categorization of the *Dalits* as a social entity are been mentioned here as well. The importance of studying the everyday life of the common people and the requirements of the fieldwork to supplement the archival works in making the *Dalit* studies more authentic has been discussed with different examples. The author, however, has provided some personal experiences too by narrating his experiences of teaching in different Departments of Jadavpur University. The chapter ends by expressing high optimism about the unvanquished spirit of the 'common people of this country even in the present traumatized period of the global pandemic. The elaborate endnotes and bibliographies at the end of the book as well as every chapter not only show the typical writing style of a historian but also help the reader to reach the sources of every conclusion in the book

In the end, we should refer to some of the minor limitations of this excellent work which are expected to be removed in the next editions. First of all, there are a few spelling mistakes in the English words which appear as eyesores beside the otherwise perfect printing and illustrations of the book. The Bengali translations of the songs mentioned in Assamese, Sadri and other *Adivasi* languages are often not complete. The book is rather laconic about the clash of the interest of marginal people in the forested areas of North Bengal along with the different wildlife reservation policies opted by the government in recent years. A little elaboration about this burning issue will certainly enrich the readers. Finally, a map of the delta of Raidak and its tributaries should be included at the end. Overall, the book appears to be 'a kaleidoscope projecting the popular and folk life of northern and southern Bengal mirroring through both the personal experiences and objective understanding of a thoughtful author ever conscious of all the happenings around him.