

REVISITING BENGALI LITERARY HISTORIOGRAPHY: GAPS, BIASES, AND THE QUEST FOR INCLUSIVITY

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Abstract:

Literature has often been perceived as a reflective lens through which society can examine itself, particularly within the context of a nation's formative years. It plays a crucial role in shaping and sustaining national awareness. Since the mid-nineteenth century, numerous Bengali scholars have felt compelled to document the intricate evolution of literature from both the pre-colonial and colonial eras, recognizing its significance in fostering collective cultural and racial consciousness. This study critically examines the contributions of four major historians—Sushil Kumar De, Sukumar Sen, Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay, and Bhudeb Chaudhuri—who have played pivotal roles in constructing a structured history of Bengali literature. Their works, interconnected through mutual references, collectively form a fortified archive of literary historiography. However, these historians, influenced by the prevailing ideologies of their times, have inevitably left gaps and omissions in their narratives. This research aims to interrogate these silences, particularly concerning the exclusion of marginalized voices, the role of women, and the selective construction of Bengali identity. By analyzing their historical methodologies and ideological frameworks, this paper seeks to explore the possibility of a more inclusive, organic literary historiography that accommodates a broader spectrum of perspectives.

Keywords : Bengali literary historiography, national consciousness, colonial influence, identity formation, historiographic gaps

Introduction :

Literature has long been recognized as a mirror of the society from which it emerges. This is especially true in the case of nations undergoing cultural and political transformations. Literature provides an essential foundation for the growth of national consciousness, offering an intellectual space for the negotiation of identity, memory, and history. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, Bengali scholars have engaged in the project of literary historiography, seeking to document the trajectory of Bengali literature from its pre-colonial roots to the colonial and post-colonial periods. Their works, driven by both academic inquiry and nationalist impulses, have contributed to shaping a structured understanding of Bengali literary tradition.

Among the prominent historians who contributed to this historiographic endeavor are Sushil Kumar De, Sukumar Sen, Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay, and Bhudeb Chaudhuri. These scholars, spanning different decades of the twentieth century, constructed a literary archive that reflected both the dominant ideologies and

the prevailing cultural currents of their respective periods. However, despite their scholarly rigor, their works exhibit notable limitations, particularly in their treatment of subaltern voices, women's contributions, and the broader socio-cultural complexities of Bengali literature.

This study critically engages with their historiographical methodologies and ideological positions, investigating how their works collectively shape, reinforce, and, at times, restrict the literary canon. Additionally, the study examines the broader historical forces—including colonialism, nationalism, and the Bengal Renaissance—that influenced their narrative strategies. By scrutinizing these historiographical trends, the research seeks to address the omissions and silences embedded within the dominant histories of Bengali literature and explore the potential for a more inclusive literary historiography.

Research Gap :

While existing studies on Bengali literary historiography have extensively examined the contributions of individual historians, there remains a significant gap in assessing how their collective efforts construct an overarching historical framework. Furthermore, most literary histories have been written within dominant ideological structures that selectively include or exclude certain narratives.

- 1. Limited representation of subaltern voices:** The literary histories primarily focus on elite literary traditions, with minimal engagement with folk and marginalized literary expressions.
- 2. Gender bias in literary historiography:** Women writers and their contributions remain largely absent or peripheral in these narratives.
- 3. Selective cultural representation:** While certain scholars acknowledge non-Hindu literary traditions, there is a tendency to frame Bengali literature predominantly within a Hindu cultural paradigm.
- 4. Influence of colonial methodologies:** The historiographical methods employed by these scholars are heavily shaped by Western academic models, leading to an inherent bias in the way literary history is structured.

This study aims to bridge these gaps by critically reassessing the historiographical frameworks employed by these scholars and exploring alternative approaches to constructing a more inclusive literary history.

Methodology:

This research adopts a qualitative analytical approach, combining textual analysis with historiographical critique. The study involves:

- 1. Close reading of primary historiographical texts:** Analyzing the works of Sushil Kumar De, Sukumar Sen, Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay, and Bhudeb Chaudhuri.
- 2. Comparative analysis:** Examining the similarities and differences in their historiographical methods, ideological positions, and treatment of literary traditions.
- 3. Contextual analysis:** Situating their works within the broader socio-political and intellectual contexts of their time.

4. **Critical engagement with secondary sources** : Reviewing contemporary scholarly discussions on Bengali literary historiography and its limitations.

Literature Review :

The historiography of Bengali literature has been shaped by several influential scholars, each contributing unique perspectives to its development. This section reviews the key works of four major literary historians—Sushil Kumar De, Sukumar Sen, Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay, and Bhudeb Chaudhuri—while critically assessing their contributions and limitations.

Sushil Kumar De: Early Thematic and Textual Analysis:

Sushil Kumar De was one of the earliest scholars to attempt a systematic study of Bengali literary traditions. His works, such as ‘Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Bengal’ (1942) and ‘Studies in the History of Bengali Literature’ (1954), focused on the devotional and spiritual aspects of Bengali literature. His primary contribution lies in the detailed textual analysis of medieval Vaishnava poetry and its sociocultural implications. However, his approach largely privileged elite literary traditions, often marginalizing the contributions of folk and oral traditions.

Sukumar Sen: Canon Formation and Historical Continuity:

Sukumar Sen’s ‘Bangla Sahityer Itihas’ (1965) remains one of the most comprehensive accounts of Bengali literary history. His work is characterized by a strong emphasis on continuity and progression, tracing Bengali literature from its Sanskritic roots to the modern era. While his approach provides a broad overview, it also reinforces certain canonical hierarchies, often overlooking literary expressions outside the dominant Hindu-Brahminical framework.

Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay: Nationalist Narratives and Colonial Critique :

Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay’s contributions to literary historiography were deeply influenced by the nationalist movements of his time. His works often engaged with the colonial impact on Bengali literature, offering a critical perspective on how literature functioned as a tool of resistance. However, his historiography tended to emphasize the role of Hindu intellectuals while underrepresenting Muslim and Dalit literary figures, thereby creating a selective historical narrative.

Bhudeb Chaudhuri: Structuralist and Modernist Approaches:

Bhudeb Chaudhuri adopted a structuralist approach, focusing on literary forms, genres, and their transformations over time. His works incorporated modernist frameworks to analyze Bengali literature, yet they largely remained within the established canon. His historiographical methods, influenced by Western academic models, often lacked engagement with the indigenous historiographic traditions of Bengal.

Examining the Gaps and Biases in Bengali Literary Historiography :

1. The Absence of Subaltern and Folk Narratives:

One of the major limitations of mainstream Bengali literary historiography is the marginalization of subaltern voices. While folk traditions, including Baul, Bhatiyali, and Murshidi songs, have significantly influenced Bengali literary culture, they receive minimal attention in canonical literary histories. The works

of Sushil Kumar De and Sukumar Sen, for instance, focus predominantly on Sanskritic and high-literary traditions, relegating folk expressions to the periphery.

2. Gender Bias in Literary Histories :

Women writers have been historically underrepresented in Bengali literary historiography. Although authors like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Sarojini Naidu made significant contributions to Bengali literature, their works are often given secondary status in historical accounts. The methodologies employed by these historians largely reflect the gender biases of their time, failing to adequately incorporate women's voices into the mainstream literary narrative.

3. Selective Representation of Bengali Identity :

The historiography of Bengali literature has often been shaped by Hindu nationalist discourses, which frame Bengali literary identity predominantly within a Hindu cultural context. This selective representation overlooks the significant contributions of Muslim and other minority writers, thereby limiting the scope of a truly inclusive literary history. Scholars like Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay and Bhudeb Chaudhuri, despite their progressive methodologies, often reinforced this cultural exclusivity by focusing primarily on Hindu literary traditions.

4. Colonial Influence on Literary Historiography :

The methodological frameworks employed by these historians have been significantly influenced by colonial academic models. Western historiographical traditions, emphasizing linear progress and textual analysis, shaped the way Bengali literature was documented. While these approaches provided a structured historical account, they also introduced biases that excluded indigenous historiographic traditions, oral literature, and alternative epistemologies.

Outcome: Towards an Inclusive Literary Historiography :

This study reveals that the historiography of Bengali literature, while rich in scholarly analysis, has been shaped by certain ideological and methodological limitations. The primary outcomes of this research include:

1. The need for an alternative historiographical approach that integrates subaltern, folk, and minority literary traditions.
2. The importance of gender-inclusive historiography, ensuring the recognition of women writers in Bengali literary history.
3. A call for decolonizing Bengali literary historiography by incorporating indigenous methodologies and oral traditions.
4. The necessity of revising the canonical structure to accommodate a more pluralistic representation of Bengali literary traditions.

Conclusion :

Bengali literary historiography, as constructed by scholars like Sushil Kumar De, Sukumar Sen, Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay, and Bhudeb Chaudhuri, has played a foundational role in shaping the understanding

of Bengali literature. However, these histories have also reinforced selective narratives, often marginalizing subaltern voices, women writers, and non-Hindu contributions. This research underscores the importance of re-examining these historiographical models to develop a more inclusive and holistic history of Bengali literature. By incorporating diverse literary traditions, oral histories, and alternative perspectives, future historiographical efforts can better reflect the complex and pluralistic nature of Bengali literary heritage.

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