
The King of Controversy: History and Nation-Making in Late Colonial India

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THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES witnessed the emergence and definition of nation-states across much of Asia and the Middle East. History was widely pressed into the service of this phenomenon in regions such as China, Japan, Turkey, Iran, and Algeria.¹ After all, as Eric J. Hobsbawm remarked, “nations without pasts are contradictions in terms. What makes a nation *is* the past.”² In India, too, history became a public passion during this period. It came to be seen as a major site through which and on which critically important issues of Indian nationhood and tradition were articulated. In most of these regions, public debates about history and nationalism also generated intense discussions about the nature and function of history, the definition and nature of community and culture, and other related issues. A public debate among Indian intellectuals in the early twentieth century underscores the critically important role played by history in the articulation of nationhood, highlighting the sharp debates and contestations about the definition and function of history in colonial civil society. It points to the need to conceptualize history not just as a rational-positivist discipline, but also in terms of how practices that are used to commemorate the past can be located within a broad range of cultures.

The debate took place in Bengal, among the Bengali literati. While most of the issues that arose in the course of this debate were framed in regional Bengali terms, they can be viewed as a subset of a broader concern with Indian nationhood and the perceived urgency to determine the type of history that could serve it. Similar con-

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¹ David C. Gordon, *Self-Determination and History in the Third World* (Princeton, N.J., 1971); Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt, *Historians of the Middle East* (New York, 1962); Margaret Mehl, *History and the State in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (New York, 1998); Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago, 1995); Patricia M. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham, N.C., 2002).

² Eric J. Hobsbawm, “Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe,” in Gopal Balakrishnan, ed., *Mapping the Nation* (London, 1996), 255.

cerns with defining and underscoring the relationship between history and nationalism were apparent among the nationalist intelligentsia in other parts of the Indian subcontinent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The specific forms assumed by such regional conversations and arguments were frequently couched in regional idioms, and the spectrum of views behind such expressions ranged from positions that advocated the region-as-nation (for instance, in certain types of Tamil nationalist ideologies and debates in southern India)³ to those that valorized the region and its identity and culture as essential components in a broader Indian nation.

The controversy took the form of an intense and acrimonious debate about a king named Adisur, who was believed to have reigned several centuries ago.⁴ The resulting dispute divided a segment of Bengal's scholarly world into two mutually antagonistic camps during the 1920s and 1930s. This debate was not a discreet disagreement among scholars, but rather a public airing, conducted primarily through the medium of print, and therefore accessible to a literate middle-class reading public. The controversial King Adisur thus serves as an entry point into a dispute that reveals the connections between history and nation-making in a colonized society, on the one hand, and engages with the relationships among different visions of history, on the other.

In the Indian nationalist culture of the early twentieth century, there was a strong perception that knowledge of the past was indispensable for the building of a modern nation. The Bengali literati acknowledged that their British colonial masters had taken the first step toward presenting India's history in a format and manner suited to modern sensibilities, but they were convinced that a proper telling of the narrative of India's past could be accomplished only through the agency of Indians, since they were the natives of the land. There was a sense of urgency and excitement about the collective endeavor to (re)construct a connected account of Bengal's and India's past. The heated charges and countercharges that were traded among the scholarly protagonists in the debate underscore the point that the controversy can be understood only in the context of the passion, excitement, and collective stakes that were perceived to be associated with this historical project.

In addition to being one of the central figures in this controversy, King Adisur also served as a key to some associated issues, the most important of which revolved around the historicity of a mass of genealogical materials called *kulagranthas*, *kulajis*, or *kulapanjis*. Genealogical literature is one of the most well-known and most ubiquitous forms in which historical documents appear in most of the world. In India, a strong genealogical tradition with specific regional variations and significations had existed since very early times.⁵ Royal dynasties took great care to create and update their own genealogies, as did many socially and politically eminent families. Kulajis

³ Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997), http://www.ces.purdue.edu/henv/care_maintenance.htm.

⁴ Gautam Bhadra, "Itihase Smriti, Smritite Itihasa," *Biswabharati Patrika*, Sraban–Ashwin 1401 B.S., 134–142, contains a brief reference to this debate. *Note*: Dates followed by B.S. denote the year according to the Bengal calendar. The Gregorian equivalent for B.S. 1401 is 1994. Hereafter, any citation of a Bengal year will be followed by its Gregorian equivalent in square brackets.

⁵ Mahamahopadhyaya Haraprasad Shastri, *Preliminary Report on the Operation in Search of Bardic Chronicles* (repr., Calcutta, 1963); Romila Thapar, "Genealogy as a Source of Social History," in Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History* (New Delhi, 1990).

belong to the Bengali tradition of genealogical literature. In its most commonly understood sense, the term *kula* meant “family” or “clan”; the terms *grantha* (book) and *panji/panjika* (chronicle) indicate that these materials recorded the generational descent of a patrilineal Hindu family and clan over many centuries. Kulagranthas also claimed to commemorate the story of developments that were believed to have shaped the social structure and normative structure of Hindu Brahmanical society in Bengal over hundreds of years.

Along with the general sense of a clan or lineage, the term *kula* had an additional, unique meaning in Bengal, in that *kula* status was indicative of an elite position within what is commonly understood as the caste system. A person possessing this elite status was described as a *kulin*—literally, one who belonged to a high-status *kula*. This elevated status was believed to derive from spiritual and ritual purity, as reflected in the practices and inner qualities of those who were deemed to be qualified to be *kulins*. Kulinism needs to be understood in the context of the *varna* and *jati* arrangements and hierarchies that had characterized the caste system in South Asian society for many centuries.⁶

Kulagranthas told how the institution of kulinism came to be created in Bengal and tracked its development over several centuries. King Adisur figured frequently as the hero in these genealogies, because he was represented as the founding father of kulinism. He was believed to have invited five ritually and spiritually purer Brahmans from Kanauj in northern India to migrate to Bengal and settle there. Some of their descendants came to be designated as *kulins*, as did some descendants of the five Kayasthas who, according to many of the genealogies, had accompanied the five original Kanaujiya Brahmans to Bengal. The institution of kulinism was subsequently modified and regulated by kings, and later by potentates with varying degrees of power and authority and sharply varying social and political jurisdictions.⁷

Bengal’s society was believed to have been dominated for many centuries by three *varnas* (castes): the Brahmans, the Kayasthas, and the Baidyas.⁸ Each of these broad

⁶ For an analysis of the caste system, see Murray J. Milner, Jr., *Status and Sacredness: A General Theory of Status Relations and an Analysis of Indian Culture* (New York, 1994); for an analysis of the system of kulinism in Bengal, see Ronald B. Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture: A History of Caste and Clan in Middle Period Bengal* (Berkeley, Calif., 1976). For a fuller discussion of the *kulagranthas*—including their features and their political and ideological functions during the period from approximately the tenth and eleventh until the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—see Kumkum Chatterjee, “Communities, Kings, and Chronicles: The Kulagranthas of Bengal,” forthcoming in *Studies in History*.

⁷ The principal features of this account are mentioned in actual genealogies—for instance, the Sanskrit manuscript of “Rajabali,” housed in the Dhaka University library (Accession no. K577A); or in family chronicles that were edited and published in the modern period—for instance, Kedar Nath Datta, *Datta Vamsavali* (Calcutta, 1282 B.S. [1875]); Jnanendranath Kumar, *Vamsa Parichay* (Calcutta, 1350 B.S. [1943]); Mahimachandra Guha-Thakurta, *Kayastha Kulachandrika* (Barisal, 1915); as well as in secondary literature concerned with debating the historical value of such genealogies, such as Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, *Bangiya Kulashastra* (Calcutta, 1973); Umesh Chandra Gupta, *Jati Tatva Baridhi*, 2 vols., vol. 1: *Baidyakayastha-moha-mudgar* (repr., Calcutta, 1912), vol. 2: *Ballal-moha-mudgar* (Calcutta, 1905); and especially Nagendranath Basu’s multivolume *Banger Jatiya Itihasa* (Calcutta, 1318–1340 B.S. [1911–1933]). For details of individual volumes, see note 17.

⁸ The Brahmans, whose occupational specialization was supposed to be the priesthood and scholarship, represented the topmost group in the status hierarchy of the caste system; the Kayasthas (specializing in scribal/literate occupations) and Baidyas (medical practitioners) were supposed to be “mixed” *jatis* or subcastes. For explanations, see Nagendranath Basu, comp., *Bishvakosh* (repr., Delhi, 1988), and Gupta, *Jati Tatva Baridhi*. For British colonial ethnographical explanations, see H. H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (repr., Calcutta, 1981).

categories was broken up into innumerable jati subdivisions. Kulinism created a stratum of elite lineages within these groups, who came to represent the pinnacle of status, prestige, and respect within their respective groups and in the region's society at large. The institution of kulinism, with its associated modifications and shifts, continued to exert a fair amount of influence over politics and the "reality" of status and power in Bengal even into the middle of the nineteenth century—and in some cases beyond it as well.⁹

A view that was generally articulated in the kulaji literature was that the strengthening and formalization of kulinism by the kings Ballal Sen and Lakshman Sen of the Sen dynasty in the twelfth century ushered in the practice of compiling and maintaining genealogies of the kulin lineages associated primarily with the Brahman, Kayastha, and Baidya jatis. These genealogies did not merely track male generational succession within each kulin family; they paid special attention to recording the family's history of social interaction—particularly its marriage practices. A kulin Brahman family, for example, was expected to arrange marriage alliances for its sons only with other kulin Brahman families. Failure to observe this principle could result in the lowering of kula status, or even total expulsion from kulin society, which effectively meant a loss of social rank and prestige.

The Sen monarchs are believed to have appointed learned men to serve as *kulacharyas*. Well versed in the principles of kulinism and the histories of kulin families, these men were charged with the important task of creating and maintaining elaborate genealogical accounts of the various kulin lineages with the intent to build a fund of social and communal memory about their social behavior (especially intermarriage). Thus was born the practice of composing kulajis or kulapanjis, the genealogies that would generate so much heat and acrimony in the twentieth century. Almost always composed in verse (*shloka*), the kulajis were also recited or sung at public occasions, typically at weddings. The kulacharyas, also known as *ghataks*, functioned as the chroniclers and archivists of different kulin communities, and they also occupied positions of leadership. With the demise of a paramount Hindu kingship following the Turkish Muslim conquest of Bengal in the early thirteenth century, smaller Hindu landed potentates and Hindus who held high administrative offices under the Muslim rulers of Bengal assumed the role of presiding over kulin society—often through kulacharyas whom they appointed or supported. Thus, through many centuries of Muslim rule in Bengal, the office of the kulacharya and the practice of writing kulagranthas continued unabated.

Although these genealogies had circulated in Bengal for centuries, there was a renewed interest in them during the late nineteenth century—particularly in recovering "ancient" kulagranthas, preserving them, and interpreting them in order to arrive at conclusions regarding the history of Bengali society. This new interest was in part a consequence of a general enthusiasm for history that was evident among the colonial bourgeoisie in Bengal during this period. When the colonial census was conducted with an aim to create a permanent record of varna, jati, and kula hierarchies, some saw it as a move that would foreclose whatever opportunities for upward social mobility were possible within these classifications. The resulting anxieties

⁹ Pradip Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History* (Calcutta, 1978), 86–94.

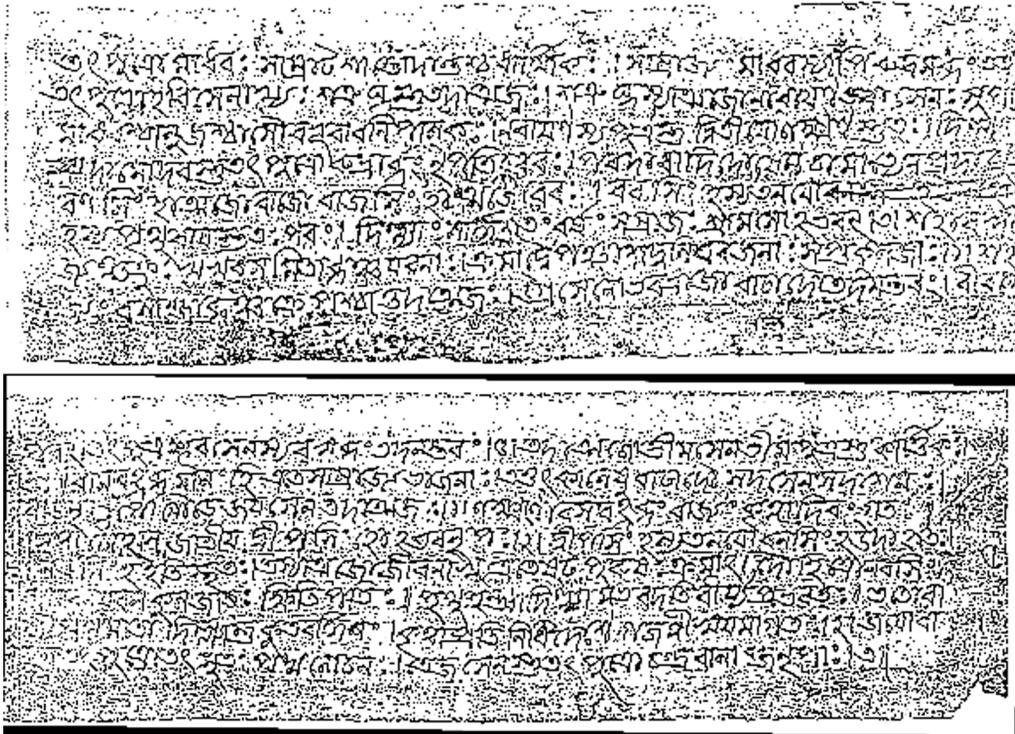


FIGURE 1: Left (top) and right sections of a page from “Rajabali,” a handwritten kulagrantha housed in the Dhaka University Library. Manuscript number: K577A.

were largely instrumental in producing a spate of what are called caste movements in various parts of India, in which certain groups lobbied the census authorities to assign a higher status to their caste or subcaste.¹⁰ The renewed interest in recovering old genealogies and editing and publicizing them thus became an integral aspect of caste politics in Bengal.

This new surge of interest in “caste affairs” among middle-class Bengalis was probably at its strongest from 1850 until about 1930.¹¹ During this period, numerous caste associations were founded for the ostensible purpose of producing contemporary accounts about the past history of specific varnas and jatis.¹² Individual fam-

¹⁰ Sekhar Bandyopadhyaya, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal, 1872–1937* (Calcutta, 1990). For caste movements in other parts of India triggered by census operations, see Eugene Irschik, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism* (Berkeley, Calif., 1969); Gerald N. Barrier, ed., *The Census in British India: New Perspectives* (New Delhi, 1981); Bernard S. Cohn, “The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,” in Cohn, *An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi, 1988), 224–254; Rosalind O’Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (Cambridge, 1985); and Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, N.J., 2001).

¹¹ Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture*, 4.

¹² Examples of caste associations include the Bangiya Tili Samaj and Mahisya Samaj. Publications directly or indirectly commissioned or encouraged by these associations include Harakishore Adhikary, *Rajbansi Kulapradip* (Calcutta, 1314 B.S. [1907]), and Narendranath Laha, *Subarnabanik Katha O Kirti*, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1940–1941).

ilies also took the initiative to publish chronicles detailing their lineage histories.¹³ Many Bengali scholars, professional academics as well as public intellectuals, joined in the quest for kulagranthas, often traveling to remote villages in search of them.¹⁴ The print medium, including popular journals and scholarly publications, was flooded with pieces on Bengal's history generally and the kulagranthas specifically.¹⁵ Kulajis were now being viewed as artifacts from the past that could be pressed into the service of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century agendas. The protagonists in the kulagrantha debate represented a spectrum of opinions. The majority of them, no matter what stand they took, were not attempting to use these chronicles for the primary purpose for which they historically had been composed, since such jati- and kula-based considerations—a subset of broader considerations of caste categories—had largely died out and become irrelevant by this time in the marriage practices of the urban, educated middle class.¹⁶ The participants in this debate, as well as its audience, were all essentially drawn from just such an urban bourgeois milieu. Historically, the kulajis also served as records of pride and honor for particular lineages vis-à-vis others. This dimension of their use surfaced occasionally during the twentieth-century controversy among Bengali intellectuals, thus serving as a reminder that past sensitivities about jati- and kula-related status had not been totally obliterated.

Nevertheless, the debate in the twentieth century was not focused primarily on such questions, but rather on whether the kulagranthas qualified as history. One group of scholars adopted the position that these materials did not meet the necessary qualifications. They elaborated what in their opinion distinguished history from other modes of commemorating the past as well as the appropriate methodologies that were requisite for its construction.

Among those who were strongly skeptical about the historicity of the kulagranthas were Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, Ramaprasad Chanda, Akshay Kumar Maitra, and Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyaya (who is also referred to here as R. D. Banerjee, which is how he sometimes referred to himself). Majumdar warned of the need to be wary of basing conclusions about Bengal's past on information found only in kulagranthas, because these materials contradicted each other so frequently. Many of the issues that figured into the controversy—including whether there ever was a king named Adisur, the exact dates of his reign, the dates and chronology of the kings of the Pal and Sen dynasties, the dates and authenticity of the actual Kulaji texts, and their authorship—were purportedly based solely on evidence from the kulagranthas, and thus it was important to try to disentangle the glaring inconsistencies among the genealogical texts themselves regarding these subjects.

The milieu in which the genealogies had been produced and circulated inevitably contributed to the situation that Majumdar found so problematic. The print medium

¹³ For instance, see Datta, *Datta Vamsavali*, and Kumar, *Vamsa Parichay*.

¹⁴ Basu, *Banger Jatiya Itihasa*, vol. 1, pt. 2: *Barendra Brahman Bibaran* (Calcutta, 1334 B.S. [1927]), 1–4; Gupta, *Jati Tattva Baridhi*, 2: 381–382.

¹⁵ The five articles on kulagranthas by Majumdar published in the journal *Bharatbarsha* in 1346–1347 B.S. [1939–1940] are a good example of this, as are Dinesh Chandra Sarkar, “Adisurer Kahini,” *Bishwabharati Patrika*, Kartik–Paus 1371 B.S. [1964], 131–134, and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, “Alochana: Adisurer Kahini,” *Biswabharati Patrika*, Baishakh–Ashadh 1372 B.S. [1965], 337–340.

¹⁶ Rochona Majumdar, “Looking for Brides and Grooms: Ghataks, Matrimonials and the Marriage Market in Colonial Calcutta,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 4 (2004): 911–935.

did not catch on in Bengal until the very beginning of the nineteenth century. Any textual materials prior to that were necessarily produced under the conditions prevailing in a pre-print, manuscript culture. One of the foremost aspects of the debate was determining precisely when the kulagranthas were composed, but there was unanimous agreement that they had been composed or copied well before the advent of print. Thus, whatever the disagreements regarding the dating of the kulajis, their production and circulation were governed by conditions characteristic of any manuscript economy.

The texts of the genealogies were copied and recopied repeatedly by scribes, so discrepancies in copies made from the “original” manuscripts were common. Composers sometimes claimed to be reproducing a preexisting kulaji but in fact inserted new materials into it or, either unintentionally or deliberately, omitted to incorporate sections from the “original.” They also did not always mention that changes had been made in the work being copied. Of course, also in keeping with the norms of a pre-print culture, it was not the convention for the composer or compiler of a kulapanji to inform readers about such things as the “sources” on which the work was based or why some materials had been incorporated and not others. But it was what I call the “porousness” of manuscript texts—the tendency for segments of particular works to migrate into other texts without explicit acknowledgment that it was being done—that appeared to pose the biggest problem for skeptics such as Majumdar.

The interpenetration of materials from one manuscript into another took place quite unrestrictedly; the notion that authors had the right of exclusive ownership and proprietorship of their compositions, and that no other author or compiler should be able to make use of them without permission or acknowledgment, was practically unknown before the advent of print culture.¹⁷ Most of these features relate to the absence of what Michel Foucault described as the “author-function”:¹⁸ the attribution of a proper name to a work. In the case of the Bengal kulajis and much of the literature produced prior to the introduction of a print culture, there were indeed cases in which a specific author or compiler laid clear claim to the authorship or compilation of a particular text. But it was equally true that in many other cases, no clear author-function could be constructed. These characteristics stemmed from the prevailing culture, in which the individuality of the author was often subordinated to the perceived need to adhere to the conventions and stylistic and other traditions

¹⁷ My statements regarding the nature of manuscript culture are based on the study of actual genealogical chronicles in both manuscript form (for instance, the Dhaka University “Rajabali”) and printed form (for instance, Datta, *Datta Vamsamala*), as well as on genealogies excerpted in Basu, *Banger Jatiya Itihasa*; Gupta, *Jati Tattva Baridhi*; and Lal Mohan Bidyanidhi, *Sambandha Nirnaya*, 4th ed., 5 vols., including appendix volumes (Calcutta, 1355 B.S. [1964]). An excellent discussion is also to be found in Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, “Sanskrita Rajabali Grantha,” *Sahitya Parishat Patrika* 4 (1346 B.S. [1939]): 233–239. For a general description of manuscript culture, see M. T. Clancy, *From Memory to Written Records: England, 1066–1307* (Oxford, 1979).

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” in Donald F. Bouchard, ed., *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977), 113–138. See also Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books* (Stanford, Calif., 1994), 27–33; Martha Woodmansee, “The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the ‘Author,’” *Eighteenth Century Studies* 17, no. 4 (1984): 425–448; Mark Rose, “The Author as Proprietor: Donaldson v. Becket and the Genealogy of Modern Authorship,” *Representations* 23 (1988): 51–85; and Carla Hesse, “Enlightenment Epistemology and the Laws of Authorship in Revolutionary France, 1777–1793,” *Representations* 30 (1990): 109–137.

governing the production of certain types of works.¹⁹ These features frustrated and confounded scholars such as Majumdar, who considered the credibility of any historical material to be in doubt if its author-function and sources could not be clearly established. As a distinguished body of scholarly work associated with Jack Goody, Jan Vansina, Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton, and many others indicates, Majumdar's frustration actually reflects a much wider tension between oral traditions and the written word, on the one hand, and between manuscript culture and print culture, on the other.²⁰

Kulajis were typically owned by individual families and by ghataks and kulacharyas. The decreasing importance and relevance of kulacharyas meant that by the mid-nineteenth century they were functioning purely as matchmakers, and they no longer maintained and updated kulagranthas with as much care as before. Because of the relative decline in the social relevance of kula-based distinctions among Bengali Brahmans, Kayasthas, and Baidyas by the nineteenth century,²¹ families sometimes did not take good care of the kulaji manuscripts in their possession. Thus, the hunt for genealogies around the turn of the century frequently turned up only fragments of kulaji manuscripts, which often showed evidence of damage from insects and water. Professional historians such as Majumdar came to the conclusive view that kulajis were unstable materials and thus did not qualify as rational history, which he and other scholars considered to be the only proper definition of history. "True history," he wrote with devastating bluntness, "has only one version, but imaginary history [which to Majumdar was not history at all] has several."²²

The problems stemming from kulaji texts' having been produced in a pre-print milieu formed an important plank in the critique of the genealogies as works of history in themselves. But the centerpiece of this critique was associated with much more substantive methodological issues. This methodology, which Bonnie Smith characterized as "history professionalized in the nineteenth century west as a science of facts and details,"²³ was transmitted to India via the colonial connection. By the late nineteenth century, the institutions of colonial education had produced a generation of Indian scholars—typified by Majumdar and Banerjee—for whom the practice of history was inexorably associated with rational-positivist history grounded in verifiable facts. For them, not to hold history to these new, modern standards meant

¹⁹ I reiterate that there are numerous examples from premodern Bengal of individual authors who claimed sole authorship of a text—for instance, Mukundaram Chakrabarty in his celebrated work *Chandimangal* (see Sukumar Sen, ed., *Kabikankan Birachita Chandimangal* [repr., Calcutta, 1993]). But there were many other cases in which authors either did not reveal their identities or presented themselves as following earlier writers of the same genre or tradition.

²⁰ Some selective examples include Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, Wis., 1985); Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge, 1987); Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition* (Washington, D.C., 2000); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (London, 1988); Roger Chartier, *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, N.J., 1989); Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors and Libraries in Europe between the 14th and 18th Centuries* (Palo Alto, Calif., 1994); and Robert Darnton, *Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775–1800* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989).

²¹ Majumdar, "Looking for Brides and Grooms."

²² Majumdar, *Bangiya Kulashastra*, 106.

²³ Bonnie Smith, "Facts, Politics and the Gender of History," in Suzanne Marchand and Elizabeth Lunbeck, eds., *Proof and Persuasion: Essays on Authority, Objectivity and Evidence* (Turnhout, Belgium, 1996), 60. See also Bonnie Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

to relapse into the state of history-writing in precolonial India, which they now regarded not as history at all, but rather as a collection of uncritical myths and stories. Together with this faith in rational analysis, this group of scholars also came to be united by a common faith in the primacy of “hard (material) evidence”—archaeological, numismatic, and epigraphic evidence—over textual evidence for purposes of historical analysis.²⁴ Hard evidence was supposed to be far more reliable than textual or oral evidence, and a resort to it came to characterize the brunt of the attack on the historical value of the genealogies.

Archaeology represented a new knowledge discipline in the late nineteenth century, and it was being pressed into service in emergent nation-states in different parts of the world as a resource that was indispensable to the practice of rational-positivist history. As Ian Hodder points out, in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, nationalism and identity provided a self-evident context for the study of cultural sequence through archaeology. Japan, Hispanic South America, and Indonesia provide good examples of this, as do parts of Europe that were characterized in this period by struggles of nation-states and ethnic groups.²⁵ In Egypt and in the Ottoman territories, archaeology and its “auxiliary sciences,” including numismatics and epigraphy, were being deployed to produce histories that were different from what were now perceived as medieval narratives about the past that had not had the benefit of being based on the probings of science and reason.²⁶ The value of archaeology for the reconstruction of India’s past had recently been validated by many important discoveries, foremost among them probably being the discovery in 1924 of the cities of Mohenjodaro and Harappa.²⁷ Many of the scholars who were skeptical about the historical value of the genealogies, including Banerjee and Chanda, were professional archaeologists. For them, archaeology naturally held pride of place among the multiple tools available (including textual analysis) for the reconstruction of history. During the early twentieth century, Majumdar and other professional historians in India showed a clear preference for evidence furnished by archaeology and by other related “hard evidence” over textual evidence.

The principal argument in favor of privileging “hard evidence” as an accurate reflection of historical conditions at the time when the kulagranthas were produced ultimately came down to the issue of what was described as “authenticity.” These scholars were firm in their conviction that inscriptions and coins did not fabricate or exaggerate facts, whereas genealogical texts associated with sensitive issues such as social rank and status were clearly vulnerable to exaggeration or to gross misrepresentation of the past. Some critics of the kulagranthas were willing to concede the value of certain kinds of historical texts—for instance, Sanskrit biographies of kings such as Bilhana’s *Vikramankadevacharita* or Sandhyakar Nandy’s *Ramcharita*,

²⁴ I use the term “hard (material) evidence” following Tapati Guha-Thakurta in “Archaeology as Evidence: Looking Back from the Ayodhya Debate,” Occasional Paper no. 159, Center for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (Calcutta, 1997).

²⁵ Ian Hodder, “Archaeological Theory,” in Barry Cunliffe, Wendy Davies, and Colin Renfrew, eds., *Archaeology: The Widening Debate* (Oxford, 2002), 81.

²⁶ Lewis and Holt, *Historians of the Middle East*, 417.

²⁷ Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *A History of Indian Archaeology from the Beginning to 1947* (New Delhi, 1988); Chakrabarti, “Indian Archaeology: The First Phase, 1784–1861,” in Glyn Daniel, ed., *Towards a History of Archaeology* (London, 1981), 169–185.

or the well-known Persian histories of India and Bengal²⁸—which were also receiving attention from modern scholars at the time.²⁹ They gave some credence to those materials because there was relatively credible information about the authors, their backgrounds, and the circumstances in which they had composed their works.³⁰ According to this line of thinking, if textual materials were to be used for reconstructing the past, they had to be materials such as these—not disorganized, mutually contradictory genealogies characterized by textual instability and disarray. Thus the kulagranthas clearly did not fall into the category of texts that could be seriously accorded the status of history.

Much of the “hard evidence” on which the history of Bengal and India was reconstructed in accordance with modern sensibilities was being unearthed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Stone inscriptions, copper plate inscriptions, coins, and sculptural pieces were among the many objects that were brought to light. The inscriptional evidence found in Bengal for the period from roughly the eighth and ninth to the tenth and eleventh centuries was used by scholars such as Majumdar, Banerjee, and Chanda to write the chronological political and dynastic history of Bengal during that time.³¹ As practically every one of these scholars pointed out, none of the recently discovered objects included any kind of reference to a king named Adisur. The conspicuous absence of even a single mention of this ruler dealt a blow not only to any value that the kulajis might have possessed as history, but also to the entire narrative that they told about the origins of Bengal’s social structure. Thus every major critic of the historicity of the kulagranthas took the position that because no epigraphic, numismatic, or archaeological data or other textual sources could corroborate the existence of King Adisur or the veracity of certain facts that the genealogical discourse presented as key to the story of Bengal’s social history, there was every reason to reject, or at least be skeptical about, these traditions.³²

Indeed, this emphasis on corroborative evidence formed an important part of the methodological critique of the genealogies. As Chanda wrote in his *Gaudarajamala*, the two most important methodological steps in historical research were a meticulous search for “sources” and the use of the right kind of scrutiny to sift out elements

²⁸ Persian histories refer here to a large body of Indo-Islamic chronicles that were produced in India from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries until about the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These texts were often in Persian, the official courtly language of many of the Muslim dynasties that ruled India, and embodied features reminiscent of classic Islamic historiography produced in the Middle East. These features included careful attention to chronology, identification of authorities on whose testimonies the work was based, and clearer identification of authors. For the nature and character of Indo-Islamic historiography, see, for example, Peter Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India: Studies in Indo-Muslim Historiography* (repr., Delhi, 1997), and Harbans Mukhia, *Historians and Historiography during the Reign of Akbar* (New Delhi, 1976).

²⁹ Akshay Kumar Maitra, *Antiquities of Orissa* (Calcutta, 1879), 1: 1–2, 11; Ramaprasad Chanda, *Gaudarajamala* (Rajshahi, 1319 B.S. [1912]), 1–4, and see also the preface to this work by Akshay Kumar Maitra (n.p.); Majumdar, *Bangiya Kulashastra*, 3, 5–6, 8–9, 92–93.

³⁰ Haraprasad Shastri, ed., *Ramacharita* by Sandhyakar Nandy (repr., Calcutta, 1910; revised, with English trans. and notes by Radhagobinda Basak).

³¹ Representative examples include Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyaya, *Banglar Itihasa*, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1324 B.S. [1924]), and Chanda, *Gaudarajamala*.

³² Majumdar, *Bangiya Kulashastra*, 49, 88–89, 91–97; Chanda, *Gaudarajamala*, 56–59; Bandyopadhyaya, *Banglar Itihasa*, 1: 117–124, 186–187, 188–189.

that could not be verified as true facts.³³ The tendency to take at face value the claims made by a body of discourse such as the kulagranthas and accept them as factual history was not viewed by historians as proper methodology. Akshay Kumar Maitra asserted that historians needed to maintain professional objectivity and detached impartiality from the subjects of their research. He believed that a historian was required to be a disinterested judge of the sources of history at his or her disposal; there could be no room for feelings and emotions in the process of historical analysis.³⁴ Maitra felt that the current public controversies about such things as the origins of Bengal's social structure and King Adisur did not qualify as appropriate scholarly historical discussion because, in his view, they were sometimes emotionally charged and tainted by caste rivalries and chauvinism and came nowhere close to being an impartial, detached quest for the truth.

Finally, the fact that the kulagranthas were written in verse condemned them in the eyes of rationalist scholars, who deemed them unworthy of being considered serious history as they understood it. As Suzanne Marchand and Elizabeth Lunbeck write, "style was a crucial element by which authority was asserted and readers badgered to assert the authors' claims,"³⁵ and in this case the verse style was identified as yet another important element that precluded the kulajis from the realm of proper history. As scholars have shown, written prose narratives were associated with a certain sense of dialogue, and with the problem of gaining readers' assent to the text. The methodological concerns of some objectivist historians about evaluating and critically questioning evidence gave the author the right to claim authority for the text by representing "the process of research"³⁶ on which it rested. A poet or storyteller, by contrast, was believed to give much greater weight (particularly in oral performance) to the effort to "suspend his hearers' disbelief and engage them in his created world."³⁷ The verse form of the kulagranthas deepened the unease with which they were regarded by objectivist historians. As Maitra described it, they were "imperfect annals of civilization."³⁸

In contrast, for a fairly large group of intellectuals of the time, including Lal-mohan Bidyanidhi, Nagendranath Basu, Dinesh Chandra Sen, Kshitindranath Thakur, and Durgacharan Sanyal, not only were the kulagranthas not objects of dubious historicity, they constituted an invaluable trove of indigenous social history of the region.³⁹ This point of view was obviously derived from a concept of history fundamentally different from the one discussed above. To almost all of these scholars, history was understood as far more than a systematic, dry marshaling of verifiable facts related to the past and objective, analytic scrutiny of them. Dinesh Sen and

³³ Chanda, *Gaudarajamala*, 1–4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, preface (n.p.).

³⁵ Marchand and Lunbeck, *Proof and Persuasion*, x1.

³⁶ S. C. Humphreys, "From Riddle to Rigor: Satisfactions of Scientific Prose in Ancient Greece," in Lunbeck and Marchand, *Proof and Persuasion*, 5, 9. See also Gabrielle Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993), 53–98.

³⁷ Humphreys, "From Riddle to Rigor," 7.

³⁸ Maitra, *The Antiquities of Orissa*, vol. 1.

³⁹ Durgacharan Sanyal, *Banglar Samajik Itihasa* (Calcutta, 1317 B.S. [1910]); Basu, *Banger Jatiya Itihasa*; Basu, "Bangiya Purabritter Upakaran," *Sahitya Parishat Patrika* 1 (1314 B.S. [1907]): 1–24; Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Brihat Banga*, 2 vols. (repr., Calcutta, 1999); Bidyanidhi, *Sambandha Nirnaya*; Kshitindranath Thakur, *Adisur O Bhattanarayan* (Calcutta, 1933); Umesh Chandra Gupta, *Jati Tattva Baridhi*.

other like-minded scholars tended to understand history in its broadest possible sense to denote what I call impressions of the past. These impressions were manifest in and in turn also drawn from a wide range of things, including myths, legends, ballads, genealogies, architectural relics, sculpture, craft traditions, customs, and material culture (e.g., clothing styles, language, and food). In other words, history was a product of culture—not any culture, but the culture of the “people.” Such culture was perceived to constitute an important seedbed of tradition and heritage, from which ordinary people derived their perceptions regarding their traditions. History was thus synonymous with tradition rather than a circumscribed academic discipline that was preoccupied with the application of a rational-positivist methodology to artifacts and texts from the past. History was to be discovered in impressions or essences of the past, as cherished and valued by a specific people—in this case, the people of Bengal. Sen claimed that his ambitious project embodied by the two volumes of *Brihat Banga* symbolized his effort to capture this concept of history through telling the story of the past experiences of the Bengali people.⁴⁰ According to this view, the genealogical literature that had evoked a firestorm of arguments and name-calling among scholars deserved to be regarded as history precisely because the “people” viewed it as a pool of trustworthy accounts that explained the evolution of the region’s social organization over many centuries.

This concept of history as the story of the traditions and culture of a people was intimately associated with an ethnographic dimension: this was an indigenous Bengali view, rooted in the land and culture of Bengal, and it was therefore distinctively different from other concepts of history. Its validity derived from the fact that it was a native tradition and therefore uncompromisingly authentic. Other historical traditions could not be accepted primarily because they had been formed by what were viewed as “outside influences.” The Persian histories were to be rejected first, because they were perceived to have been composed by Muslims, who as “outsiders” could not understand the indigenous Hindu Bengali view of history.⁴¹ The modern rational-positivist concept of history was to be avoided, too. It was seen unambiguously as a “Western” concept that had been brought to India by a colonial regime. Its acceptance would therefore lead to the alienation of Indians and Bengalis from their own traditions and ways of thinking.⁴²

In a manner not uncharacteristic of colonial intellectuals who had developed the tendency to use Europe and European traditions as a constant reference point, some of the scholars who articulated this folk-oriented tradition of history chose to deliberately position such endeavors in the German Romantic tradition associated with Johann Gottfried von Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. In fact, however, these Bengali intellectuals were also participating in practices of indigenous and in some cases nationalist ethnography that were evident during the same period and later in emergent and modernizing nation-states across Asia and elsewhere. Japan and Vietnam, for example, provide excellent comparative perspectives on the connections between ethnography, nationalism, and history. In Japan, the ethnographic and folk-

⁴⁰ Sen, *Brihat Banga*, 1: preface (n.p.).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Sen, *Brihat Banga*. This idea runs like a recurrent theme through both volumes of this work; representative samples can be found in 1: 26, 460–461.

loric studies of Yanagita Kunio, Origuchi Shinobu, Yanagi Soetsu, and others underline the immense need felt by a segment of Meiji intellectuals to capture and commemorate the customs and beliefs of the “real” Japanese people⁴³ in an effort to rescue what Harry Harootunian describes as a “submerged authenticity”⁴⁴ under pressure from the hectic pace of modernization. To many of these intellectuals, the history of Japan was to be found in the practices and customs of ordinary rural people, because they reflected older cultural practices and were believed to still be capable of communicating “an authentic experience of the people.”⁴⁵ In post-1945, and especially post-1952, Vietnam, ethnographic explorations into the culture of the rural and presumed “real” people were also aimed at resuscitating genuinely Vietnamese cultural traits perceived to still be in circulation among them. This, in turn, would illuminate a truly *national* culture—untouched by Chinese or French cultural influences—which could then serve as the foundation on which a national history of Vietnam could rest.⁴⁶

This nexus between ethnography, nationalism, and history in places such as India, Japan, and Vietnam draws further attention to theories of nationalism,⁴⁷ particularly to Benedict Anderson’s notion that a modular formula of nationalism had been developed and tried in the Western world during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and that it then became available to anticolonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa.⁴⁸ The processes of nation-making and history-writing in colonial and formerly colonial regions such as India and Vietnam underline instead Partha Chatterjee’s rebuttal of the Andersonian model and his refusal to concede that anticolonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa were derivative and based on a conscious emulation of modes and methods that had been tried out in the West. As Chatterjee demonstrates, anticolonial nationalisms in many parts of the world drew strength from articulating their own cultural distinctiveness and authenticity vis-à-vis their colonizers.⁴⁹ The proclivity among groups of intellectuals in Japan (here the tension was not with colonialism per se, but rather with the phenomenon of modernity and its uneasy association with what was perceived to be the “West”), India, or Vietnam to identify value and authenticity with what was supposedly distinctive and unique to a particular language, culture, or history underscores the tendency of these nationalisms to attempt to articulate their indigenous distinctiveness vis-à-vis colonial and Western traditions. The propensity among a certain group of Indian and Bengali

⁴³ Ronald A. Morse, *Yanagita Kunio and the Folklore Movement: The Search for Japan’s National Character and Distinctiveness* (New York, 1990); Alan S. Christy, “The Making of Imperial Subjects,” in Tani E. Barlow, ed., *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia* (Durham, N.C., 1997), 141–169; Mehl, *History and the State in Nineteenth-Century Japan*; Gerald A. Figa, *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan* (Durham, N.C., 1999).

⁴⁴ Harry Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), xxvi.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, 69–112.

⁴⁷ For example, Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism* (New York, 1944); John Plamenatz, “Two Types of Nationalism,” in Eugene Kamenka, ed., *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of an Idea* (London, 1976), 23–26; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990).

⁴⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991).

⁴⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, N.J., 1993), 1–13.

intellectuals to emphasize “colonial difference” produced a strongly nativist theory of history accompanied by an explicit disavowal not of universalist, but rather of “Western” notions of scientific history.

In this indigenous Bengali concept of history, the community or *samaj*—the civil institution of society—was upheld as the primary locus of interest and attention, in contrast to both the Islamic or Indo-Persian tradition and the modern Western notion of history as a rational-positivist discipline. The Persian histories were devalued by the proponents of a Bengali indigenist vision of history as “histories of the state (*rashtra*)” rather than a history of the “people.” The modern rational-positivist concept of history associated with the “West” was also characterized as preoccupied mainly with accounts of governmental regimes and their activities rather than commemorating the life and customs of the people. As Kshitindranath Thakur remarked, Europeans had taught some Indians to believe that only books in which past wars and conquests were discussed deserved to be regarded as history. Thakur supported a broader, holistic concept of history that was distinctively different from king- and war-centric histories. He also linked the absence of a tradition of war-centric histories in Bengal to the superior cultural values and attributes possessed by the Bengali people, including an aversion to warfare and violence.⁵⁰ Bengalis instead emphasized the importance of social institutions such as the jati- and kula-based *samaj*. The kulajis, the ostensible subjects of the controversy, were valuable histories, recounting the story not of warmongering governmental regimes, but of the social entity represented by the *samaj*. “I proclaim with pride,” wrote Basu, “that hundreds of Xenophons and hundreds of Thucydideses were born in Bengal”;⁵¹ but these Bengali Xenophons concentrated their geniuses more on writing about the development of the community and its customs than on battles and military exercises. In fact, some of the discomfort that scholars such as Banerjee and Majumdar exhibited toward these views may have derived from the very deliberate turn away from chronological, dynastic history of monarchical governments to narratives about the languages, crafts, and poetic traditions of the people. Inherent in the ethnographic, nativist impulse in Japan was a tendency to valorize the Japanese folk and the rural communities that provided a framework for their culture vis-à-vis the centrality of the emperor and the state as the primary sources of Japanese nationhood.⁵² But the implications of a people- and community-oriented vision of nationhood and history meant different things in different contexts. In Vietnam, the quest for a genuinely indigenous community and culture as embodied by the peasantry also highlighted traditions of political corporatism and opposition to a centralized state that were important components of peasant or folk culture, and these were of course not palatable to a state-supported project of national history.⁵³

In the case of colonial Bengal, the romantic nativist concept of history generated an impulse for what Sumit Sarkar describes as a “precocious” agenda to write the social history of the land, which came to be regularly counterposed to the *rashtra* or

⁵⁰ Thakur, *Adisur O Bhattanarayan*, 113–116.

⁵¹ Nagendranath Basu, “Bangiya Purabritter Upakaran,” *Sahitya Parishat Patrika* 1 (1314 B.S. [1907]): 1–24.

⁵² Christy, “The Making of Imperial Subjects”; Mehl, *History and the State in Nineteenth-Century Japan*; Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity*.

⁵³ Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*.

rajshakti (the state, the political domain).⁵⁴ The primacy of the civil sphere in recounting the past experiences of a people was reiterated in the writings of public figures and intellectuals such as Satish Mukherjee and especially Rabindranath Tagore at the turn of the twentieth century. Both insisted that the privileging of the community over tales of war and conquest as the main subject of history distinguished the quintessentially Bengali world view of history, as opposed to the then-preoccupation of rational-positivist academic history with dynastic narratives of territorial expansion and wars.⁵⁵ These scholars did not acknowledge the possible existence of links between the community and the state (the latter was conceived of here as a military and administrative apparatus). Instead, they sought to idealize the samaj as a sphere of peaceful quotidian activities that they ideologically isolated from the state as a governmental regime preoccupied with wars and conquests.⁵⁶

A powerful idea shared among scholars advocating the nativist concept of history was to be found in their critiques, both explicit and implicit, of Western education in India. They felt that by teaching adherents to believe that the Western style of writing history was the only true history, this education had succeeded in alienating some Bengali intellectuals from their own cultural traditions.⁵⁷ Banerjee, Majumdar, and others were taken to task for allegedly becoming alienated from the indigenous Bengali way of commemorating the past. Dinesh Sen, in particular, hypothesized that the only people in Bengal who had not suffered cultural alienation from their own traditions were the ordinary poor people living in the rural areas.⁵⁸ Thus the strictly professional rational-positivist view of history propagated by Majumdar and others created a gulf between the Bengali upper class and the poor, humble people of the region. The latter, according to this point of view, were the real custodians of Bengal's past. Those hypothesizing an "indigenist" Bengali concept of history thus made a very important claim: that history was not the exclusive academic preserve of professional archaeologists and historians, but rather a sphere to which nonspecialists had an equally strong claim. Much of the methodological criticism leveled by the professionalists at those espousing a more romantic, nativist concept of history was deemed irrelevant by the latter group. Sen, for example, stated clearly in his preface to *Brihat Banga* that he had written the work not for professional historians but for ordinary people, and in so doing he had deliberately chosen not to use detached scientific language or to separate myths and legends from facts.⁵⁹ The need to analyze and scrutinize evidence, to look for corroboration from other sources, and to evaluate the "truth" versus the "mythic" nature of information related to the past—these either were declared to be unnecessary or at best were assigned a fairly low priority by the indigenists. Interestingly enough, the proponents of this concept of history, while eschewing positivist history because they identified it as being non-Western in

⁵⁴ Sumit Sarkar, "The Many Worlds of Indian History," in Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi, 1997), 20–26.

⁵⁵ Satish Mukherjee's advocacy of a communitarian ideology is cited in *ibid.*, 28–29. For Tagore's views, see Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, ed. R. K. Dasgupta et al. (Calcutta, 1990), 12: 37–39, 40–43, 43–60.

⁵⁶ I am grateful to Dipesh Chakrabarty for drawing my attention to this point.

⁵⁷ Sen, *Brihat Banga*, 1: 251–252; Thakur, *Adisur O Bhattacharayan*, 113–116; Gupta, *Jati Tattva Baridhi*, 2: preface (n.p.).

⁵⁸ Sen, *Brihat Banga*, 1: 252, 262–263, 274.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, preface (n.p.).

origin, betrayed a lack of awareness of and interest in classical Indian intellectual traditions, particularly those pertaining to theories of verifying evidence and the criteria for ascertaining the truth of a statement or a story.⁶⁰

In effect, the notion of history extolled by Sen and others rebelled against formal methodology, whether Western (this they made explicit) or indigenous (this they implied with their total silence on the subject). What these scholars valorized was rather an instinctive, nonformalized manner of recovering the past, unfettered by structured methodology or criteria and evaluation. In taking such a stand, these Bengali intellectuals were echoing the distinction between history and memory articulated by Maurice Halbwachs, and more recently by Yosef Hayim Yarushalmi and Pierre Nora.⁶¹ In the context of the kulagrantha debate, Sen and Basu expressed their preference for spontaneous, free-form memory as a mode of retrieving the past over professional history with its preoccupation with “abstract frameworks of chronology and factual detail.”⁶² Memory was to be further reinforced by conjoining it to emotion. Instead of being a deterrent to research about the past, emotion was in fact its underlying bedrock.

Many of the ideas discussed above had in fact been reinforced by the antipartition Swadeshi agitation (1905–1910/1911) in Bengal. The association of emotionalism with patriotism and the celebration of the people’s culture as the true substance of history was in full flower during and after the antipartition turmoil. The kulagrantha controversy antedated the Swadeshi movement, but many of the core ideas and concepts that characterized it—particularly the arguments and ideas articulated by the proponents of an emotional, nativist vision of history—were invigorated and actualized by it. The strongly emotive, romantic conceptualizations of the land as mother and as goddess in popular patriotic poetry, plays, and visual representations, which had been in evidence since the late nineteenth century, peaked during this period. The embodiment of the land as mother also provided a matrix of bonds based on love, affection, and familiarity that bound together the people with the land as well as with each other.⁶³

The Swadeshi years were also instrumental in strengthening the already strong interest in and awareness of history among the Bengali literati. The celebration of the “people’s culture”—an integral feature of the Swadeshi movement and of the

⁶⁰ The literature on classical Indian intellectual traditions is very large. Representative examples of standard surveys of Indian intellectual and philosophical traditions include Surendranath Dasgupta, *History of Indian Philosophy*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, 1922–1925), and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 2 vols. (London, 1923–1927). Gautam Bhadra, *Jaal Rajar Katha: Bardhamaner Pratapchand* (Calcutta, 2002), contains an insightful discussion of Indian theories of verifying evidence. See also Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Truth: A History and a Guide for the Perplexed* (New York, 1997).

⁶¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York, 1980); Yosef Hayim Yarushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish Memory and Jewish History* (Seattle, Wash., 1982); Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–25. The literature on history and memory is a large one. Here I refer to only those works mentioned directly in the text.

⁶² Susan A. Crane, “Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory,” *AHR* 102, no. 5 (December 1997): 1372–1385.

⁶³ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908* (New Delhi, 1973); Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New “Indian” Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920* (Cambridge, 1992); Sugata Bose, “Nation as Mother: Representations and Contestations of ‘India’ in Bengali Literature and Culture,” in Bose and Ayesha Jalal, eds., *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in India* (New Delhi, 1997); Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Delhi, 2001).

kulagrantha controversy—was embodied in the collection and systematization of folk ballads, folktales, and fairytales, a process that was pioneered in Bengal by Sen and Dakshina Ranjan Mitra-Majumdar.⁶⁴ This trend was reminiscent of the efforts of Japanese folklorists such as Yanagita Kunio during the same period. It represented efforts to valorize folk traditions as indigenous and untouched by “outside” or “new” influences—whether colonial, Western, or industrial.

Another important manifestation of the urge to preserve the people’s culture was the huge number of local histories written during this period by the Bengali gentry.⁶⁵ Studies of local places, however defined, were often far more typical of the romantic, nonprofessional historical impulse than the larger transcendental entity of the nation. Yet, as Celia Applegate points out, the tendency to place exclusive emphasis on the modern nation-state as the subject of history has resulted in the neglect of conceptualizations of the region or the locality both in terms of their relationship to the nation and as subjects of history.⁶⁶ Prasenjit Duara’s work demonstrates that historical discourses emphasizing a primary identification with the province or region existed in the interstices of nationalist historiography in early-twentieth-century China.⁶⁷ Perhaps an awareness that historical discourse can also articulate itself via a locality can serve to open up discussions about the region and the nation, their mutual relationships and their histories.

This growing interest in the redemption, recovery, and preservation of the people’s culture as an indispensable plank in the history-writing project found a more permanent and institutional form in the activities of many organizations that had emerged in Bengal before, during, and after the Swadeshi movement, including the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, founded in 1900, as well as a host of local organizations.⁶⁸ The term *sahitya* was most commonly used in reference to literature, but the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, like many other organizations of this type, tended to understand it in the broadest possible sense. Maitra once described it as “the wellspring of all possible types of intellectual and developmental powers” that could benefit human society.⁶⁹ Thus defined, *sahitya* could well accommodate within it the category of “history” as understood by its members. In the pursuit of this kind of history, the language, customs, and past achievements of the people were seen as essentially related objects of study. Dedicated gentleman enthusiasts associated with many of these organizations undertook walking tours devoted to photographing extant historical buildings and monuments, made notes about local traditions, and looked for

⁶⁴ Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Folk Literature of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1920); Sen, *Maimansimha Gitika*, vol. 1, pt. 1 (Calcutta, 1923); Dakshina Ranjan Mitra-Majumdar, *Thakumaar Jhuli* (Calcutta, 1908). See also Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (New York, 1988).

⁶⁵ Typical examples include Rasiklal Gupta, *Maharaj Rajballabh Sen* (Calcutta, n.d.); Nabinkrishna Bandyopadhyaya, *Bhadrapurer Itibritta* (Murshidabad, 1910–1911); and Saradacharan Dhara, *Nabab Harekrishna* (Calcutta, 1910).

⁶⁶ Celia Applegate, “A Europe of Regions: Reflections on the Historiography of Sub-National Places in Modern Times,” *AHR* 104, no. 4 (October 1999): 1157–1182. See also Kären Wigen, “Culture, Power, and Place: The New Landscapes of East Asian Regionalism,” *ibid.*, 1183–1201.

⁶⁷ Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, chap. 6.

⁶⁸ Amarnath Karan, *Sahitya Sammilaner Itibritta, 1900–1903* (Calcutta, 1994); *Sahitya Parishat Panjika O Bangiya Sahitya Parishader Unabingsha Sambatsarik Karya Bibarani, 1913–14* (Sahitya, 1320 B.S. [1913]); Gautam Bhadra and Dipa De, “Chintar Chalchitra: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad,” *Sahitya Parishad Patrika*, Centenary Volume, 1401–1402 B.S. [1994–1995], 39–68.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Karan, *Sahitya Sammilaner Itibritta*, 186.

hoards of old manuscripts stored in rural homes. Descriptions of these “history” tours are imbued with an infectious energy and enthusiasm that demonstrates the long reach and power of history as understood by nonspecialist amateurs.⁷⁰

The limitations inherent in the romantic celebration of the “people’s” history need to be kept in mind. The masses were eulogized as the custodians of the region’s history and customs, but it required urban, upper-class, often upper-caste, educated scholars to speak up for and represent village traditions in a bourgeois public sphere shaped by print. It was perhaps inevitable, too, that the perception of what was considered to be the people’s culture would be colored by class, caste, and other cultural considerations unique to the urban Bengali literati.⁷¹ These types of writings also tended to idealize and view the culture, beliefs, and practices of the “people” as fully formed, enduring, and in a sense almost timeless prior to the onset of the present with its problems of colonialism and nationalism, the dilemmas of negotiating modernity, and the predicaments of producing appropriate histories in such situations. They were in fact involved in the invention of a tradition⁷² regarding what they considered to be the people’s culture against the encroachments of an alienating colonial modernity. The significance here of this strand of romantic, nativist popular history lies in its potential to offer us a view of history that was significantly different from the academic history practiced by professional historians.

The debate among the two groups of scholars suggests that—discursively, at least—the battle lines between them were pretty clearly drawn. Despite the significant disagreements, however, almost all of the scholars involved in the kulagrantha controversy shared certain important concerns and objectives. For the most part, they did not adopt rigidly absolutist positions. The most important point uniting the two groups of scholars was the conviction that a (re)discovery of the past via Indian and Bengali agency was in fact an essential prerequisite to nation-building. But here, too, as the preceding discussion has demonstrated, significant distinctions separated the protagonists of the two groups discussed above.

Interestingly enough, the two opposing concepts of history discussed here came closest to an uneasy consensus on the question of oral tradition, which they described as *janashruti* (literally, “what the people heard”).⁷³ Umesh Chandra Gupta, an advocate of the historicity of the kulajis, insisted that oral traditions were not to be taken lightly as a typology of knowledge. He believed that there was always at least a kernel of truth in hearsay, and that without this grounding in truth, the hearsay could not originate, expand, and spread.⁷⁴

Predictably, the scholars on the opposite side in this debate were deeply troubled at the prospect that haphazardly written and compiled genealogies could be con-

⁷⁰ Nagendranath Basu, *Bardhamaner Itikatha* (Bardhaman, 1915); Kumudbandhu Basu, “Amader Aitihasik Bhandar,” *Bharati*, Kartik 1311 B.S. [1904], 700–718.

⁷¹ Sarkar, “The Many Worlds of Indian History,” 22–24.

⁷² Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1993).

⁷³ A large secondary literature exists on the subject of oral traditions in India. Examples include Stuart Blackburn, *Singing of Birth and Death: Texts in Performance* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1988); Blackburn, *Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales from Oral Tradition* (Helsinki, 2001); Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991); Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1989); and Gautam Bhadra, “Kathakathar Nana Katha,” *Jogasutra*, October–December 1993, 169–278.

⁷⁴ Thakur, *Adisur O Bhattanarayan*, 1–2; Gupta, *Jati Tattva Baridhi*, 2: 6.

sidered history. Yet despite such weighty objections, the proponents of “objectivist” history ultimately and somewhat paradoxically agreed with the romanticists—although not without reservations—that these materials might be accorded some historical value. Majumdar and Chanda conceded that the kulagranthas, although of suspicious historicity, could not be totally dismissed as fabrications. Majumdar, and later Inden, rejected the contention of scholars such as Basu that the kulagranthas were datable to a time between the eighth and ninth and the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Both believed that paleographic and other evidence suggested that most extant kulajis had been composed or recopied from earlier chronicles during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁷⁵ Majumdar and Banerjee categorized the kulagranthas as janashruti from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁷⁶ The texts thus embodied memories and impressions of particular segments of Bengali society regarding the origin and development of the jati and kula rankings of the region. But the primary reason why they merited some consideration by historians was the persistence and power of certain types of janashruti and their overall uniformity. Banerjee and Majumdar both felt that a few specific stories included in the larger mass of oral tradition embodied in the kulagranthas merited cautious and limited acceptance—including the possible existence of a king called Adisur. Majumdar explained that he found this particular story somewhat plausible because it was repeated in most of the kulagranthas and in practically identical terms. These attributes were sufficient for a professional historian to accord grudging acceptance to the historical value of the kulagranthas.⁷⁷ But neither Banerjee nor Majumdar granted the genealogies the status of history; at best they could be cautiously considered to be “sources” of history. The materials had to be subjected to scrutiny and analysis by modern scholars, who alone possessed the intellectual training to write proper history. Other objectivist historians refused outright to acknowledge their possible historical value.

At one level, the disagreements among the participants in the debate can be attributed to differences in academic specialization and professional standing. Most of those who spoke for the need to deploy rational, objective modes of analysis, an attitude of detachment, and highly specialized expertise of the kind needed in fields such as archaeology and epigraphy were professional historians affiliated with institutions of higher education, with museums or the Archeological Survey of India, or with semiprofessional organizations such as the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Those articulating the nature of history as essentially meant to inspire the “people” of the country and insisting on trying to prize it out of the exclusive control of specialist scholars were not, despite their generally acknowledged scholarship and erudition, professional historians or archaeologists. Both Basu and Sen saw history as a public concern rather than the concern of a few specialists.

Despite the opposing positions adopted by these groups of scholars with respect to the genealogical materials, the lines separating the two camps did blur at times. Notwithstanding the conviction that historical research had to be free of emotion and

⁷⁵ Chanda, *Gaudarajamala*, 56–59; Majumdar, *Bangiya Kulashastra*, 23–26; Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture*, 4.

⁷⁶ Bandyopadhyaya, *Banglar Itihasa*, 1: 124; Majumdar, *Bangiya Kulashastra*, 26.

⁷⁷ Bandyopadhyaya, *Banglar Itihasa*, 1: appendix, “Shur Rajbangsha,” 209–214; Majumdar, *Bangiya Kulashastra*, 88–91.

of any desire to bolster national, sectarian pride, professional historians are charged with having succumbed to the very same emotions and feelings that they decried. Majumdar's view that the existence of strong Indian cultural influences in Southeast Asia from the seventh and eighth to the eleventh and twelfth centuries was proof of the operation of an Indian imperialism there has been interpreted by later scholars as an effort to glorify Indian achievements in the historical past.⁷⁸ Even the work of H. C. Raychaudhuri, the author of one of the early classic works on ancient Indian history, was not free from the impetus to find in ancient Indian history the lineages of a nation-state that nationalists in the early twentieth century dreamed of reestablishing.⁷⁹ The claim that "hard evidence" was truthful and impartial because it was impervious to cultural, national, or sectarian politics has also, of course, been punctured. Tapati Guha-Thakurta has shown that in disputes over architectural monuments, myth and memory could infiltrate the fields of history and archaeology, disrupting the properties of their methods and procedures, challenging their evidentiary logic, and refusing to keep "proven fact" apart from "imagined truths."⁸⁰

Some of the professional historians and archaeologists associated with the kulagrantha controversy were also practitioners of what is regarded as popular or romantic history. As the rich literature on the topic of romantic history reminds us, historical narratives constructed in accordance with the principles of rational positivism were but one important mode of representing the past. There could be, and indeed there were, other modes of representing the past as well, for example, through spectacles (such as waxworks), historical novels, and plays. Hayden White's postulate of the incestuous relationship between history and fiction is well-known.⁸¹ The work of scholars such as Stephen Bann, Ann Rigney, and Maurice Samuels on the close connections between academic history and romantic or popular history in nineteenth-century Britain and France demonstrates convincingly that a broader environment of historical awareness or interest had been created by and was at the same time manifest in cultural productions such as those mentioned above.⁸² The novels of Sir Walter Scott and of Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, and other French romantics enjoyed phenomenal popularity, which underscored their ability to entertain and provide pleasure to a much larger audience than just highly educated, trained professional historians or archaeologists. Thus, the historical cultures of a

⁷⁸ R. C. Majumdar, *Ancient Indian Colonization in South-East Asia* (Baroda, 1955), 6–7; Dietmar Rothermund and Herman Kulke, *A History of India* (1986; repr., New York, 1990), 152–153.

⁷⁹ H. C. Raychaudhuri, *The Political History of Ancient India: From the Accession of Parikhit to the Extinction of the Gupta Dynasty, with a Commentary by B. N. Mukherjee* (1923; repr., New York, 1996), xi–xii.

⁸⁰ Guha-Thakurta, "Archaeology as Evidence," 15; Guha-Thakurta, "Archaeology and the Monument: On Two Contentious Sites of Faith and History" (unpublished ms.).

⁸¹ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, Md., 1978); White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, Md., 1990). See also Carlo Ginzburg, "Fiction as Historical Evidence," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 5, no. 2 (1992): 165–178.

⁸² The literature on this subject is large. The works I found the most useful were Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clío: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge, 1984); Bann, *The Inventions of History: Essays on the Representation of the Past* (Manchester, 1990); Lionel Grossman, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2001); and Maurice Samuels, *The Spectacular Past: Popular History and the Novel in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2004).

given society encapsulated academic history or “historiography proper,”⁸³ as many of them described it, and extended to include phenomena such as visual arts, historical novels, historical spectacles, and museums. In fact, romantic, popular history, with its ability to reach larger numbers of people, may well have been of critical importance in creating an overall environment of interest in the past. Professional history could have come into being and functioned only against this backdrop.

Yet much of the scholarship on the emergence of history in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century India overlooks the potency and significance of romantic history.⁸⁴ The historical novels of Scott allow us to establish a link to the intelligentsia of colonial India and Bengal. This period saw the production of large numbers of historical novels and plays in Bengal, and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, indisputably the most celebrated historical novelist of late-nineteenth-century Bengal, acknowledged his direct debt and inspiration to Scott’s novels. This sphere of imaginary romantic or popular history shared with the nativist conception of history the character of being a nonspecialist field in which emotion, imagination, and romance took center stage. Several proponents of scientific history—including Banerjee and Maitra, who were actively engaged in denouncing the historicity of the *kulagrathas*—were also authors of historical romances, both plays and novels.⁸⁵ This genre of imaginary history can be seen as a sphere in which “real” historical personalities could be endowed with the nobility and virtues that rational, credible sources of history made difficult or impossible in academic history. Similarly, real historical events could be made to have imaginary but more desirable outcomes.⁸⁶

Yet we must be careful not to completely blur the boundaries between professional history and archaeology, on the one hand, and popular, nonspecialist, romantic history, on the other. Despite the existence of this “intermediary zone—a space not quite history nor entirely fiction,”⁸⁷ professional historians and archaeologists, when writing for specialist scholarly audiences, worked within the methodologies prescribed by their academic disciplines—they evaluated evidence, sought corroboration for discovered facts, and attempted to explain why one kind of evidence was more reliable than another. Even when some among them wrote “imaginary” history, it was kept separate from their scholarly work.

The birth of the modern nation-state and the emergence of history as a rational-positivist discipline occurred in tandem in Europe after the French Revolution, and this is believed to have endowed history from the inception of its professionalization with the tendency to become a narrative of the state. This feature has been em-

⁸³ For instance, Bann, *The Clothing of Clio*, 3.

⁸⁴ Such omissions are noticeable in, e.g., Guha, *An Indian Historiography of India*; Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*; and Gyanendra Pandey, “The Prose of Otherness,” in David Arnold and David Hardiman, eds., *Subaltern Studies VIII: Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha* (New Delhi, 1994). The exceptions to these are Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi, 1995), and Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New York, 2004).

⁸⁵ A. K. Bandyopadhyaya and B. N. Mukhopadhyaya, eds., *Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyaya Rachanabali*, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1988, 1990); Akshay Kumar Maitra, *Mir Kasim* (Calcutta, 1906); Maitra, *Phiringi Banik* (Calcutta, 1922).

⁸⁶ Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness*, 107–157; Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 132–139.

⁸⁷ Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 133.

phasized for India by several influential scholars.⁸⁸ Prasenjit Duara agrees that this was undoubtedly a predominant tendency in China, but he also makes a persuasive case for other visions of history that existed there in the twentieth century. In these visions, it was not the state but other forms of community, such as civil society or local affiliations, that took primacy.⁸⁹ The kulagrantha controversy compels us to conceive of history and its cultures in broader and more complex terms and to acknowledge that professional history did not exhaust other, sometimes competing modes and genres of representing the past. This analysis of a romantic, indigenist concept of history belies the claim that nationalist historiography was essentially state-centric. This vision of history emphasized the community as its subject rather than the state and authorized the use of emotion and its constituent elements—including love, pride, and nostalgia—as legitimate tools for the articulation of this concept of history. These tendencies emphasizing the expression of such non-state-centric visions of history are also found in Japan, China, and elsewhere during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus the multiple intersecting and contradicting strands within national historiographies of India and other regions need to be acknowledged more fully. To characterize them simply as “statist” is to denude them of some of their richness, variety, and complexity.

In the case of the kulagrantha controversy, the battle between professional history and romantic history remained unresolved. In the long run, rational-positivist history probably captured what it perceived to be the academic high ground, but the resonance and appeal of romantic or imaginary popular history beyond the academy continued to be equally significant.

⁸⁸ For instance, Kaviraj, “The Imaginary Institution of India,” in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, eds., *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi, 1992); Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*; Pandey, “The Prose of Otherness.”

⁸⁹ Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*.

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