Making of Bengali Literary Culture in the 18th Century: The Case of Cachar and Tripura

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This paper intends to unpack the processes that shaped the contours of Bengali literary culture in Cachar and Tripura during the eighteenth century. In the context of shared political fortunes by Cachar and Tripura with Bengal since the ancient times, the socio-religious, cultural and linguistic similarities of these regions with Bengal were a spontaneous historical process. But eventually patronage extended by the rulers of both Cachar and Tripura resulted in the making of prolific Bengali literary cultures. But this corpus of literature produced beyond the 'mainland of Bengal' are often termed as residual and dialectic in nature, therefore do not feature in the 'standard' definition of Bengali language and literarines in the modern parlance. This paper attempts to draw attention to the cultural context of vernacularization in these two regions which essentially happened through the instrument of the Bengali language and the associated cultural elements of premodern Bengal.

Keywords: Cachar, Tripura, Bengali, literary culture, language.

Introduction

Cachar and Tripura presently belong to the conglomeration of eight states called the Northeast in India.[1] Making of the Bengali literary culture in the eighteenth-century Cachar and Tripura will essentially involve tracing the history of two kingdoms, the Heramba kingdom of the Dimasa Kacharis in Cachar and the Tripura kingdom by the Tripuris in Tripura, under whose patronage Bengali cultural efflorescence was witnessed in these regions. Knowledge about the earliest past of the two communities still remain in obscurity for the absence of both literary and archaeological evidences. It is all the more a daunting task to construct the past from the royal chronicles and genealogies written at a much later date and which are nothing but myth laden narratives, essentially resorting to concoction of an ancestry in the ancient Indian sacred texts to establish divine pasts of the ruling elites. Nevertheless, their history from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century had been preserved in many forms, for

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example literature, archaeology, numismatics etc.(Ray, 2006: 74).[2] Cachar is presently one of the districts of Assam which got annexed to the British Territory in India in 1832 CE (Sengupta, 2011: 4).[3] Cachar plains or South Cachar is geographically an extension of the Gangetic plain (ibid). It is one of the three districts that make the Barak valley, named after the principle river of the valley, Barak.[4] The valley also includes Kailashahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura. The Tiperas, who ruled over Tripura also ruled parts of the Barak Valley and included in the thirteenth century. They made one of the capitals of their kingdom in Khalangsa in Cachar (Choudhury, 1317: 96). Tripuri control over Cachar ended in sixteenth century after it was captured by the Koch king Chilarai (Guha, 1971: 30). The west and southwest Tripura were linked with Samatata (Dhaka) and Radha (West Bengal) of ancient Bengal (Debbarman, 1998: 35). Bengal Delta's political destiny oscillated between Cachar and Tripuri occupations. By the dint of sharing geographical proximity these communities exhibited similarities in scripts, language and other cultural traits with Bengal. Literary specimens, official documents, royal edicts, inscriptions, numismatics, diplomatic letters etc. from the sixteenth century till the nineteenth century gave birth to prolific Bengali literary communities. Though these communities have been claimed to be part of the larger cultural Bengal but there have been meagre attempts to preserve this corpus of literature. It has often been labelled as inferior and secondary to standard Bengali literature. While Bengali linguistic and cultural superiority over these literary specimens had been an established narrative in trying to understand the significance of the corpus, in Cachar both the Assamese and the Bengali litterateurs had been constant claimants over the corpus in stating that it was the pre-modern version of their respective languages. But unfortunately, in both Assam and Bengal, the college and university did little to include the corpus in the curricula. Preservation of the literature was largely the result of personal pursuits and intermittent state support.

The broad theme which the paper engages itself with is the making of a regional Bengali culture essentially through the instrument of the language of Bangla outside the 'mainland' of Bengal, the socio-political context in which these Bengali literary communities had come into being. also discuss how comprehension of these communities affected the contours of making the narrative of the history of Bengali language and literature, ensconced in the nineteenth century political and social consciousness of being a Bengali.

The Context of the Text Production

Today the district of Cachar has been reduced to the sole region of Silchar, which serves as the district headquarter. The Jayantia kingdom and the Heramba kingdoms took turns to establish their hegemony in this region. Since the thirteenth Century, Dimasa as a political entity tried to curve a niche for themselves, which faced constant impediments from Ahom aggression. The Dimasas, being fiercely independent in nature and reasonably equipped in military tactics tested their political ambition against the Ahoms which resulted in direct confrontations between the two entities. For a brief period, status quo could be maintained on mutual agreement of peace. But it did

not last long as political aspirations on both sides led to renewed military contestations (Devi, 1968: 80). Cachar from mid sixteenth century to mid eighteenth century was under the subjugation of Koch kingdom. Chilarai, the Koch king invaded Cachar in 1562 CE and Koch rule continued in Cachar till 1745 CE (Ghoshal, 1942: 172). Sometime during the middle of the sixteenth century, the Dimasas capital at Dimapur (Nagaland) was destroyed by the Ahoms and were forced to migrate to Maibong (North Cachar Hills) and established their second capital (Gait, 1984: 90-92, Allen, 1905: 19-25). After the death of the Koch king Chilarai, the Dimasas recovered the Nowgang area (Gait, 1948: 248).[5] They now proclaimed themselves independent rulers under the ambitious Dimasa raja Yasonarayan. The final transfer of their capital in the Cachar plains took place in 1750 CE (Soppitt, 1885: 4),[6] after living through a long and tedious phase of battles with the Ahoms, the Koches and the Jayantias. Heramba kingdom under the Dimasas now included Hills of the North Cachar, Silchar and Hailakandi of the present times. The last half of the eighteenth century witnessed the making of the Dimasa state where the traditional tribal systems and socio-religious rituals were articulated in Hindu Brahmanical terms, a phenomenon echoing that of the acculturation process of tribal communities in the premodern and modern periods. In case of both Cachar and Tripura, this detribalisation had occurred through the means of appeasement of the class of Brahmins, royal households adopting Brahamanical norms and rituals and translation of old Hindu Puranic texts. In both cases, the language of Bengali played as the medium through which such a process of cultural reorientation took place.

In narrating the history of Tripura, names of the Dimasas, the Tripuris, the Ahoms, the Jayantias etc. will be repeated as territorial ambitions of these potentates were tied to each other. During the same time when the Dimasas were fighting their political destiny against the neighbouring kingdoms, Tripuri kingdom was also busy in carving a piece of sovereign land in the Brahmaputra-Barak valley region. The earliest history of the Tripura kingdom is hard to trace as is the case with other tribal communities from the northeast. Rajmala, the most read, referred and critiqued among all the sources regarding the obscure past of Tripura narrate fabricated lineages of the kings with the intention to provide them a divine ancestry. Govinda Manikya, probably the most significant of all the kings of the Tripura kingdom ascended the throne at the end of the seventeenth century, i.e. in 1660 CE, succeeding his father Kalyan Manikya (Roychoudhury, 1983: 27). His political career was interrupted by civil wars and he was compelled to flee to Arakan (southern Burma). He went to Arakan for both political asylum and to ask for military assistance to win back his territory, to the Arakan king Sri Chandra Sudhamma in which he was successful (Choudhury 1983: 28). Tripura kingdom's existence throughout the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries rested on negotiations with the Mughals precisely on payment of regular tribute. Eighteenth century was also the time when the Tripura kingdom made efforts to mend their relationship with the Ahoms and exchange of envoys between the two kingdoms was instrumental. By the time we reach the middle of the eighteenth century, Tripura kingdom was facing aggression from Mughals who made stronger arrangements to capture Tripura. During Nawab Shuja-ud-din's reign in Bengal Tripura

was reduced to a zamindari functioning under the Mughals with the Tripura Raja compelled to pay Rs. 5000 as rent. Tripura mostly witnessed internal rivalries where the political fulcrum remained affected by Mughal aggression. From the later part of the eighteenth century till the first half of the nineteenth century, rivalry in the Tripuri royal household, British occupation of the lands under the Diwani rights conferred by the Mughals, Tripura kingdom existed as mere zamindari lands on the British papers.

Making of the Bengali literary Culture

Use of Bangali language and the script was in vogue in these two regions throughout the medieval and early modern period. The language of Bangla had not really reached its mature phase and the script and lettering were still going through alterations. The Bengali compositions therefore exhibited local influence both in terms of the script and vocabulary. Instances are available where we witness Sanskrit was written in Bengali script and the Bengali letters in many cases exhibited resemblance to modern Assamese letters in Cachar. The *magnum opus* of Herambo kingdom of Cachar Sri Naradi Rasamrita (Hence forth NS) was a translation of Brihannaradiya Purana from Sanskrit to Bengali, which was composed in the eighteenth century during the reign of Raja Sudarpanarayan (1708-1720 CE). In Tripura this same text was translated from Sanskrit to Bengali during Govinda Manikya's reign (1660-1673 CE).

Many such Sanskritic texts were translated in Bengali and were circulated in these regions till the nineteenth century, a literary drive conventionally understood to be feeding into the process of Hinduisation of Southern Assam and Tripura (Bhattacharjee, 1991). In Bengal this literary drive to translate puranas into Bengali had its inception in the fifteenth century. This process was termed by Dinesh Chandra Sen as 'Pauranic Renaissance' where in the aftermath of the decline of Buddhism and the rise of the 'spirit' to free Bengali language from the Prakrit influence and bringing back the Sanskritic expression in the language had resulted in translation of many puranas in Bengali (Sen, 1911: 151).

Regarding the use of Bengali language and script, eighteenth century could be termed as the mature phase in both Cachar and Tripura where it has traversed a long journey from using the Bengali script for Sanskrit language, to using Bengali as the official language. Most of the texts which could be procured from the region were composed from the seventeenth to the end of the Eighteenth century. Eighteenth century was a unique period in regard to the development of vernaculars. Bengali language in the eighteenth century had been functioning in the complex liminality where glimpses of the influence of Sanskrit could still be seen and the touch of modernity was gradually making its way where a mixed but a simpler form of Bengali was being used.

The earliest inscriptions of the Dimasa kingdom in Cachar could be found from Raja Meghanarayan's time who ascended the throne in 1566 CE. These were also one of the firsts evidences of the use of Bengali alphabets and language when in 1576 CE a gate has been constructed by the raja in Maibong royal palace. The inscriptions had been on the door lintel of the main gateway of the capital city of Maibong. The Bengali version given below:

শুভনন্ত শ্রীশ্রীযুত নেঘনারায়ন দেবহা হাচেঙসা বংশতজাত রাজা হৈ মাঈবাঙ্গ রাজ্যত পাথরে সিন্দুয়ার বন্ধাইলেন শকাব্দা ১৪৫৮ বীতেরিখ আষাঢ় ২৬ (Nath 2006: 71).

(In the year 1458, in the month of Ashad Raja Meghanarayan who was a descendent of the Hachengsa family constructed a stone gate in Maibang)[7]

In the first part of the eighteenth century, Maharaja Tamradhaj Narayan (1706-1708) commissioned a book of law to be written in Bengali. This book was adopted during the time of raja Krishanchandra (1790-1813 CE) and Maharaja Gobindra Chandra (1813-1830 CE) later commissioned the Rule book during his reign with a few additions which was called *Heramba Rajar Dandabidhi* (Bhattacharya, 2007). King Sudarpanarayan under whose patronage NR was composed was the son of deceased king Tamradhwaj. Sudarpanarayan was a very young to shoulder the duties of a head of the state. Therefore, all royal responsibilities were taken care of by the Queen Chandraprabha. Under the Rajmata or queen's patronage, a brahmin from Sylhet, Bhuvaneswar Bachaspati had been asked to translate Brihannariya Purana, an ancient puranic text eulogising Vishnu, into Bengali. This text was later edited and named as *Sri Naradi Rasamrita*. Apart from this text Brahmapuran was also translated in this period (Ray, 2008: 23). An excerpt from the text compsed in the Dimasa kingdom is given below:

অতিত যাসিলে জেই করায়ে ভুজন
সুদ্য মন হৈয়া করে অতিথি সেবন
অতিথি সেবার পর আর কোন নেই ধর্ম্ম
তুমাতে বোলিল আমি এই সব মর্ম্ম
অতিত আইসয়ে তবে যেই জনের পুরে
ভক্তি যুক্তি হৈয়া তারে পুজিব সাদরে
জদি নরে অতিতরে করায়ে ভুজন
ত্রিন ভুমি জল দিআ মধুর বচন
যেই মতে অতিতে করিব সেবন
অবিঘ্ন যাইব সেই বৈকুণ্ঠ ভবন
অতিত বিমক হএ জাহার মন্দিরে
পুণ্য লইয়া জাএ সেই আপদ দিআ তারে
অর্দ্দান সমফল নাহি পৃথিবীত
অর্দ্দ দিষা তুষিবেক যে আইসে অতিত
অর্দ্দান মহাদান জানিবা যাপনে
মর ভক্ত হইয়া জায়ে বৈকণ্ঠ ভবনে
সহস্রেক হস্তি আর সহস্রেক হয়ে
বেদতে ব্রাহ্মণে দান জে জন করয়ে
পৃথিবীতে ভুমিদান করে জেই জন
রজত পাত্রাতে করি কনক রে দান
সাগরান্ত মেদিনী বিপ্রেত করে দান
তথাপি না হএ অর্দ্দানের সমান (Guha, 1971:88)[8]

The original text of the translated Purana could not be found in full. Its reference could be traced in other secondary works which deals with the history of Cachar. The above lines quoted from the Brahmapurara translated in Dimasa court, it talked about the noble act of offering food to people which would earn the person a place in

heaven. It adds that guests are to be treated with utmost care and it is the primary 'dharma' or duty of the human beings. The excerpt talks about a special offering called "antardan", an offering done with greatest sincerity in the heart of the giver. The tradition of translation of Puranas was a prolific literary pursuit in the northeast region throughout the medieval period. One such kingdom in the northeast was the Koch kingdom which patronised numerous works which were translations of Puranas, like the Bhagwat Purana, Skanda Purana, Bhavishya Purana, Naradiya Purana, Padma Purana etc (Bandopadhyay, 1986: 209-210)[9]

A small excerpt from NR is given below:

ব্যাসরূপি আপনে সাক্ষাতে নারায়ণ
যোগে যোগে ধর্ম লোপ **দেখিয়া** শ্রীহরি
চারি বেদ ভাগ কল্যা ব্যাসরূপ ধরি
পরাসর সুত স্বত্ববতির নন্দন
জিব উদ্ধারিলা করি পুরান বচন
দেবব্যাস নির্ম্মিত অষ্টাদশ পুরান
বহু পুণ্য কথা হেতু নারদি প্রধান
নারদি পুরান **পষ্ট** করিতে পয়ারে
দেবি চন্দ্রপ্রভা আজ্ঞা **দিলা** ত আমারে
যুবা লোকে দৃঢ় দ্রব্য দসনে **চিবায়**
দন্তহিন হইলে যথা চুর্ন্ন করি খায় (Bhattacharya, 2007: 4)

In the above excerpt from the mentioned Purana, the vocabulary reflected a heavy influence of vernacular. Specially while using of the verbs and the pronouns. This influence in the literary composition. The traces of regional language and vocabulary were quite explicit from the beginning of the text, Sri Narada Rasamrita. The above excerpt has been taken from the 'Katharambha' or the very first stanza of the poem. The highlighted parts denote the use of local vocabulary and unformalised Bengali spellings used in the composition. With eventual progress in the text, use of such regional vocabularies and patterns of word compositions increase.

সুত বলে মুনিগন কর অবধান ।
ধজ আরপন ব্রত করিএ বাখান ।।
জেই ব্রত করনেতে সর্ব্ব পাপ হরে ।
জেই ব্রতে অতি তুষ্ট হয় গদাধরে ।।

The above excerpt is taken from eighteenth chapter of Sri Narada Rasamrita where words being used from the local vocabulary could be found in abundance. From the Barak valley region, the Puranas could be found to be written from the sixteenth till the nineteenth century (Bhattacharya and Deb, 1983-84). The list of manuscripts in the Silchar Normal school says that Puranas were continued to be composed till the 1830s. Mention may be made of the Padmapurana which were produced in different periods in the valley.

Raja udarpanarayan himself composed poems in Bengali, dedicating his compositions to the household deity of Dimasa kingdom, Ranachandi. A small excerpt from his composition is below:

দীন দয়াময়ী নাম তোমার ধু
শুনিয়া ভরসা বড় হইয়াছে আমার
পূজা জপতপ কিছু নাহিক আমার
তবে যদি কৃপা কর মহিমা মহিমা তোমার
আমি ত কমতি অতি গতি নাই আর
ভরসা করিয়াছি কেবল শ্রীচরণ তোমার
প্রণতি করিয়া বলে সুরদর্প রায়
আজ্ঞা কর মুণ্ড দিয়া ভজি রাঙা পায় (Bhattacharya, 1993: 25-26)[10]

In the above poem raja Sudarpanarayan asked the deity for blessings as he proclaimed himself as somebody who did not know all the rituals but he was willing to offer a 'bali' or sacrifice to please the deity.

Other Cachari rajas also composed songs in Bengali. For example, raja Ramchandra Dhwaj Narayan (1728-1735 CE). An excerpt from the poem is given below:

ত্রাণ করগো জননী ! বিপদে পড়িয়াছি
ভক্তি নাহি জানি মাগো ! শক্তি নাহি স্মিহর
কেবল হইয়াছি আমি জগতে বাহির
সম্মুখে শমনের ভয় জ্বর জ্বর শরীর হয়
হৃদয়া ধরিয়াছি রাঙ্গাপদ শঙ্করীর
প্রণতি করিয়া বলে রামচন্দ্র নৃপ
আনন্দে কৈলাসে যাব বলে দুর্গা শিব (Nath, 2006 :79-80)

This song above was more of a plea made to the deity in a situation of danger when all he wanted was the deity to save him. He also mentioned Durga and Shiva in this excerpt which implied their religious inclination.

With the shift of their capital to Khaspur, the area gradually attracted people to settle in the forested area. The sanads or land grants given to mostly the brahmins used to indicate the geographical boundaries and specifically mentioned that these lands could be enjoyed by the grantees and their progenitors and the rights would be protected under royal supervision. In 1736 AD, Maharaj Kirthi Chandra Narayan (1735 -1745 CE) wrote two sanads to Moni Ram Laskar of Barkhala in the Bengali. One of the sanads is read as follows:

৭৪ আর বড়খোলার চাঁদলস্করর বেটা মণিরামরে আমি জানিয়া নিয়মে উজির পাতিলাম এতে অখন তুমার উজির বেটা ও নাতি ও ধারাসূত্রক্রমে এই উজির হৈয়া জাইব আর মজুন্দারের বেটা মজুন্দার হৈব বড়ভুইয়ার বেটা বড়ভুইয়া হৈব এতধর্তে অভয় দিলা... ইতি শক ১৬৫৮ তারিক ২৯ ভাদ্রষ্য I (Bhattacharya, 1993: 21)

In 1791 CE Maharaja Krishna Chandra directed some of his subjects living in Hailakandi to deforest some jungle and to settle people there. It is read as:

অভয় চতুর-শিমা পত্র হ্যালাকান্দির উজির ও রাজ্যের প্রতি লিখনং কার্যঞ্চ তুমার তথাতে আলগাপুরের পূর্ব্বে জঙ্গলা সাবাজপুর নগরেতে রঙ... ভান্ডারেতে শ্রীথুবাই...বসিতে দিলাম. এই জঙ্গলার চুতর্শিমা পূর্ব্বে ওম্বক নদী...দক্ষিণে বাঙালী নদী খাল- এর মধ্যে বসিতে দিলাম (ibid)

Another example is given below of Dimasa raja Krishanchandra's composition:

নাম তোমার রণচণ্ডি মাও রণের জান ছন্দি
রাখিয়াছ হেরম্বেশ্বর মাও করি নানা সন্ধি
জন্মস্হান এরি আইলাম মাওতোমার নামটি শুনি
স্হান মান দিয়া রাখ তোমার নামের ধ্বনি
মেড়া হংস মহিষ বলি মাও তাহে নাহি গণি
আনন্দে মগন হইয়া দিমু নানা বলি
চৌদিকে অরণ্য মধ্যে মাও তোমার নামটি জাগে
কৃষ্ণচন্দ্র মহারাজে তোমার চরণ মাগে (Nath, 2006: 81)

This was also in the nature of a plea to help him during war when Krishanchandra had to flee in the jungle. He made a promise in the above poem to the deity Ranachandi that he would offer her sacrifices of goat and duck if he was saved from the situation by her.

মাগো আর কতদিনে কমলপদ মাও দেখিমু নয়নে
মনের মরম দুঃখে মাও ঝুড়িয়া ঝুড়িয়া মরি
না দিলাম চরণে জবা মাও অঞ্জলি ভরি ভরি ধু
শিশুকালে মইলা পিতা মাও রাজ্য নিলা পরে
আমরা দুভাই অল্পমতি মাও ভাসাইলায় সায়রে
কৃষ্ণমানিক চান্দ বলে মাও তারা হইলা রাজা
রঘুরামকে দেশে নেও মাও করিব তোমার পূজা (ibid)

The above lines echoed the same sentiments as that of the previous poem where he narrated his plight in leaving his country behind. He also laments over the death of his father and how his kingdom was taken over by his mother. He also mentioned his brother raja Govindachandra and asked to bless of the brothers as he proclaimed them inferior to her power. In the end he promised to hold a ritualistic ceremony if he could go back to his kingdom victorious. In the poem mentioned below he repeated his pleas saying that he considered the times to be unfortunate and did not blame the deity for his misfortune:

মরে বলিয়ে দেও মা কাতস সেবকের কি হইবে উপায়
আমি ডাকি মাও মাও মাও মায়ে বাচ ভিন
মায়ের কি দোষ দিমু আপনার কুদিন
মেড়া হংস মহিষ বলি মাও তাহে নাই দেয়
তবে যদি কর দয়া ভজি রাঙা পায় (ibid)

This terracotta plaque in the above picture has been preserved in the Normal school manuscript section in Silchar was found from the Cachar region. The date being engraved on it is 1694 sakabda or 1772 CE and it is in Bengali. This is another evidence of using Bengali Script and Bengali Calendar in this region in the eighteenth century. Bengali months were also in use on the official letters, in the land deeds and receipts of revenues and papers of sale of zamindari lands.

The language spoken in Cachar has been identified to be akin to Kamrupi or old form of Assamese by Grierson in his linguistic survey (Grierson, 1903: 4). The Cachari variety of either Bengali or Assamese had been defined a dialect of Assamese because according to Grierson, the language was more familiar to Assamese, phonologically and morphologically. The vantage point of Grierson's classification was Bengali of the early nineteenth century as the modern form of Bengali. It has been stated that Bengali language in Cachar did not exist from the beginning and that it had only reached Cachar in recent times (Tunga, 1995: x). Added to this hypothesis was the conviction that the "ingenuity" of the people residing in the region had a dialect with vocabularies of local origin. This language or 'dialect' is akin to both Assamese and Bengali. The script also has resemblance to both these languages. There are claims therefore from literati of both these languages to assign the origin of both languages to the form in Barak Valley.

In Cachar the Bengali spoken and used is often termed as "Cachari Bengali" (Tunga, 1995: ix). which was defined as a dialect of standard Bengali and it has also been mentioned that this "dialect" of Bengali has no resemblance with that of the "standard Bengali" (Tunga, 1995: xiii). The Bengali script and language being used in the eighteenth century was claimed by two Linguistic groups as the proto form of their language i.e. Bengali and Assamese. Historians and litterateurs of both Bengal and Assam had credited the poets and their compositions with early modern pursuits of literary activities in their respective languages. The script which was used in both Cachar and Tripura had resemblance with both Bengali and Assamese, for example the letter 'b' or 'ð'in Assamese and '¬'in Bengali. Whereas in Assamese the two letters are still written in the same way with a minor difference, modern Bengali script has done away with slashing of the letter in between.

The nature of language being used in the sanads or land grants, the inscriptions and the poetic composition by the rajas differs. The sanads and inscriptions were heavily influenced by the local version of the Bengali being used. In NR the language

was more formalised than the land grants but it still could not escape the influence of the regional parlance. It is true that the language could not be distinguished as either pure Bengali or pure Assamese and therefore the debate to consider these texts as the medieval and early modern specimens of their languages are still rife in the linguistic debate. As has been mentioned in the previous section in this paper, the formalisation of the Bengali alphabets and language which were taking place in Bengal during the last phase of the eighteenth century did not have any impact upon the region of Cachar. The evolution of the language had been taking place at its own pace and in the very particular socio-cultural milieu which ran parallel to the developments of Bengali language in Bengal.

A precedence of the eighteenth century Bengali literary culture in Tripura could be found in the seventeenth century (1651 CE) during the time of raja Kalyan Manikya. It was a royal edict which enumerated the gifting of a piece of land to a Brahmin:

রাজধানী হস্তিনাপুর সরকার উদয়পুর পরগণা নুরনগর মৌজে বাউরখার আজ্ঞলাতে শতদ্রোন ভূমিপ্রীতে শ্রীমুকুন্দ বিদ্যাবাগীশ ভট্টাচার্যকে দিলান ইহা আবাদ করিয়া পুত্র প্রৌত্রাদিক্রমে ভোগ করিয়া আশীর্বাদ করিতে রহুক এহি ভূমির মাল খাজানা গয়রহ সমস্ত নিষেধ। (Ray, 2008: 21)

Govinda Manikya (1660-1673 CE) commissioned the transition of Brihannaradiya Rasamrita, as has been mentioned before but the author's identity could not be determined. In one of the parts of the composition were the poets usually identify themselves as the author read as follows:

শ্রী শ্রী যুত গোবিন্দ মানিক্য নরেশ্বরে
নারদীয় অর্থ সব লোকে বুঝিবারে
পাঁচালী করাইল রাজা অনুমতি দিয়া
পন্ডিত সকলে কৈল পুরাণ দেখিয়া (Ray, 2008: 43)

It can be surmised from the above lines that the translation was done by a group of brahmins. A few more lines from the text as follows:

পরাজিত হইয়া রাজা ছাড়ি নিজ দেশ
পত্নির সঙ্গে ঘোর বনে করিল প্রবেশ
রাজা মহিষীর গর্ভ দেখিয়া লক্ষণ
অতিশয় ভীত হইয়া যত শক্রগণ
মন্ত্রণা করিয়া গর্ভনাশের কারণ
অলক্ষিতে করাইল গরল ভোজন
গুর্ব্বিনী পত্নির সঙ্গে রহে নরত্তোম
বলেত ভ্রমিতে গোলা ঔর্ব্বের আশ্রম
নিদাঘে তাপিত অতি মহিষী সহিত
পদগতি করি দুঃখ পাইলা বিপরীত
ক্ষুধা তৃষ্ণা শ্রম পাইয়া অতিশয় তাপ
আপনার নিজ কর্ম করিলা বিলাপ
এতিমত দুঃখ হইল রাজার
সরোবর দেখি তুষ্ট হইল অপার। (Ray, 2008: 44)

Since the reign of Raja Dhanamanikya (1463-1515 CE) Bengali received pre-eminence over Sanskrit. Dhanamanikya commissioned a poet called Ram and composed a poem in the *panchali* meter a text of *Pret Chaturdashi* (Bhattacharya, 2003: 32). This is a text which is usually used during the worship of Kali puja. Before his reign Sanskrit was the medium of literary composition. Dhanamanikya brought changes in the literary landscape of Tripura by replacing Sanskrit with Bengali as the latter was more intelligible to the common subjects who were not versed in Sanskrit. This brought about a substantial change in the literary cultural scene of Tripura. *Krishnamala* which threw light on the reign of raja Krishanmanikya (1760-1763 CE) also mentioned specifically in the text that the poet, a brahmin called Ramganga was asked by Rajadhar Manikya (1785-1803 CE) to compose the legends of his uncle in Prakrit so that the common masses of Tripura. A few lines from *Krishnamala* are mentioned below:

জয়ন্ত চন্তাই মুখে বৃত্তান্ত শুনিয়া

রামগঙ্গা নামে দ্বিজ আনে আদেশিয়া

আনি রামগঙ্গা স্থানে কহিল রাজন

কর দ্বিজবর এক পুস্তক রচন

রাজা কৃষ্ণমানিক্যের যতেক বৃত্তান্ত

আমা ঠাঁই করিয়াছে চন্তাই জয়ন্ত

সে সব সংবাদ তুমি করিয়া শ্রবণ

প্রাকৃত ভাষায় কর পুস্তক রচন

দৈববাণী বুঝিবারে নারে সর্বলোকে

পয়ার প্রবন্ধে সব বুঝিবেক সুখে I (Ray, 2008: 51)

During the reign of Dharma Manikya II a usurper named Jagatram, who was also a descendant of Chhatra Manikya, instigated the Mughals to attack Udaipur, the capital of the Tripura kingdom (Ray, 2008: 46). Jagat Ram made promises to the Mughals to send them regular tribute in exchange of the throne in Tripura kingdom. He commissioned translations of many ancient sanskrit texts during his reign (1726/27 CE). One of such texts was *Kriyayogsar* from *Padmapurana* in 1727 CE. The author had just identified himself as Mukunda. An excerpt from the text is given below:

পালিনু সকল পৃথ্বী সপ্তদীপ সমে

সংহারিনু বৈরীপক্ষ আপন বিক্রমে

আপনার গোত্র যত করিনু পালন

বহু দান করি তুষ্ট করিনু ব্রাহ্মণ

তুষিলাম সব দেব করি যজ্ঞ দান

সর্ব লোক তুষ্ট হৈয়া করিল বাখান

এখনে আমাতে হৈল জরা পরবেশ

না হই রাজ্যে যোগ্য দুর্বল বিশেষ (Ray, 2008: 46-47)

The rajas in Tripura kingdom instructed to make copies of the texts which were being translated and that it should be preserved in every household of the kingdom (Ray, 2008: 47). The intention lied in dissemination of the literary culture in the entire stretch of the kingdom and to establish the culture of the king as the culture of the kingdom. But Bengali literary specimens procured from Tripura the region portrayed a different kind of cultural pursuit where royal patronage was not the incentive to compose. One of the such texts was Champak Bijoy whose author Sheikh Mahaddi wrote under the patronage of Mir Khan who was one of the commanders in the Tripura military. Sheikh Mahaddi narrated the tumultuous time of Raja Ratnamanikya's reign (1682-1712 CE). This text is one of the few Bengali texts written in Tripura by a Muslim poet. The text starts with eulogising the Hindu Gods and Goddesses and in the entire text there were many references to Hindu Puranas and ancient texts. But the language was different from the more formalised structure of the former poems being mentioned earlier in this chapter.

The language of Champak bijoy had more influence of the local vocabulary and specially resembled the language of Eastern Bengali variety of Bengali. This was essentially written to profess the glory of Mir Khan, the patron of the author and how his courage and prowess helped the raja in his military campaigns. The language was more colloquial, the intention to write in the particular vocabulary and expression was to increase its readership among the common masses. This was a significant example of the literary culture beyond the court circle. A few lines from the text are given below:

শ্রী শ্রীদুর্গা

নমো গণেশায়

প্রথমে প্রণাম করি প্রণাম করি প্রভু নিরঞ্জন

বর্ণাবর্ণ যেই প্রভু করিল সৃজন

নানা বর্ণ বিবর্ণ যে করিল বর্ণিত

তান বর্ণ কহে হেন কে আছে পণ্ডিত... (Ganachoudhury, 1995: 1)

তবে যত ত্রিপুর বংশ হইল একত্তর

যুক্তি করিতে বৈসে সোনাদ্বার ঘর

জগন্নাথের বংশ সব প্রবল অপার

রাজকার্য্য করিতে রাজায় দিল ভার

সূর্য্য প্রতাপ নারায়ণকে করিল উজির

পরম ধার্মিক বুদ্ধি গুণবন্ত ধীর

দেওয়ান মুনসি হৈল চাম্পারায় ঠাকুর

সুবা হইল জয়মর্দ্দন বলবন্ত সুর

হংস্বধ্বজ ময়ূরধ্বজ দুই মহাসত্ত

রাজকার্য্যে আগু হইল যেন গজমত্ত (Ganachoudhury, 1995: 26)

Another example which will contribute to our understanding of the literary pursuits beyond the court was Gajinama, a poem written by Sheikh Manuhar written during the last half of the eighteenth century (Bhattacharya, 2003: 101). This was a poem which was written out of a personal volition by Manuhar who heard this story from his grandfather. Shamsher Gaji who was usually known as a dacoit in Tripuri folk culture revolted against the raja of Tripura during the reign of Indramanikya. This was known as the Shamsher Gaji's revolt (1767-68 CE). The language used in the poem also had explicit influence of local version of the language of Bengali. Since Manuhar did not write under any official patronage, his desire in commemorating the deeds of an erstwhile usurper of the throne of Tripura monarchy and narrate the last days of Tripura kingdom did not necessitate him to use any formalized version of the language. This text was an evidence of the nature of Bengali language in use during the eighteenth century. A few lines from the text are mentioned below:

সমসের গাজি এক আছিল তস্কর
পরগণে দক্ষিণ শিক ছিল তার ঘর
দস্যুবৃত্তি করি ধন করিয়া সঞ্চয়
হইবারে জমিদার তার মনে লয়... (Ray, 2008: 52)

বিবাহ করিতে গাজি ইচ্ছা হইল মনে
জুক্তি করয়ে তবে বছিরের সনে
পুত্র হোতোধিক দয়া করিব আমারে
স্রাপ্রাস করিআ দিল জমিদারি পরে
জেহেন ভরম দিল সভার উপর
তেহেন করাউক মোরে বিবাহ সোন্দর
বছিরে বলিলা তোমা শ্রদ্ধা কথা মনে
গাজিযে বলিলা হুজুর জাতাহ আপনে
জমিদার সুত দৈয়া বিবি রূপবতী
মোহোতে দিবারে বিআ বোল হ সমপ্রতি (Barman, 1998: 7)

This Bengali literary activity in Tripura which had its inception in the fifteenth / sixteenth century in Tripura, continued up to the nineteenth century and beyond. A text composed during the reign of Kashichandra Manikya (1826-1830 CE) called Srenimala was an example in this regard. A few lines from the text:

ত্রীলোচন দ্বিতীয পুত্র দক্ষিণ ভূপতি
তার পুত্র হইল তৈ-দক্ষিণ যে নৃপতি
সেখল রাজার কন্যা বিবাহ করিল
তার পুত্র সুদক্ষিন নৃপতি হইল
তস্য পুত্র তরদাক্ষিন অতি গুনবাণ
তার পুত্র ধর্ম্মতার নৃপতি আখ্যান
তস্য পুত্র ধর্ম্পাল হৈল নরপতি
জীবহিংসা না করিল পালিলেক ক্ষিতি (Bhattacharya, 2003: 89)

If we argue that the rulers of Tripura and Cachar were trying to imbibe a culture which was prevalent in Bengal at this point in time, we would not be attentive to the ways political and cultural language being unfolded in Bengal and in areas surrounding it. In the eighteenth century the vernacular languages, like Bengali, Urdu, Hindavi etc. were used to carve out regional cultural niches beyond the erstwhile formidable presence of languages like Sanskrit and Persian. Their articulation of regional cultural expression was conveyed through using of the locally accepted languages. But during the same time in regions like the Heramba and Tripuri kingdom, Bengali was used to assert the identity of the ruling class. Tripura's demography from the ancient times had been fed by migration from its neighbouring regions, especially Bengal. Regions of Sylhet, Chittagong, Noakhali or eastern part of Bengal which fall into the country of Bangladesh presently, had decisive influence on the language, culture and religion of Tripura. On many occasions throughout the state formation process in Tripura, the rajas encouraged settlement of people from the Bengal, which included the class of Brahmins, artisans, artists etc. Raja Dhanamnikya for example invited artists or sculptors to build Hindu temples and Ratna Manikya settled many Hindu Bengali families in the tribal areas of Tripura. Though in other aspects such as religion, architecture etc. the influence of Bengal's culture remained palpable, pronouncement of their ideological and political stand was quite contrary to what was transpiring in Bengal's socio-political milieu. These literary communities in the Northeast was in the process of establishing a literary culture which went back to the literary traditions of older times, by translating Hindu religious texts for buttressing their identities. It is a unique moment in the history of the eighteenth-century social history where the same language is used for contrasting purposes, for varying motives.

If we examine the literary corpus which were produced beyond the court, their use of the Bengali language differed both in themes and vocabulary. The corpus of literature which existed beyond the courts, in both Cachar and Tripura, weaved local folktales, ritualistic songs, eulogies of local heroes and old tales of the regions. The use of language in these corpuses tend to incline more towards the kind of Bengali which is spoken by the local people and therefore free of any influence from either Sanskrit or the kind of standardised Bengali usually associated with the heartland of Bengali language. We do know that the texts which were produced under the aegis of the kings or at times composed by the kings themselves, at court were instructed to be both copied and transmitted.

Sheldon Pollock stated that the selection of a language through which courtly cultural language would be articulated, must be predicated on a well thought out political strategy on the part of the polity (Pollock, 1998: 46). The choice would determine their identity in the sphere of negotiation with rival powers, legitimacy in their polity and the image that they want to create for the posterity. The Dimasa Cacharis and the Tripuri kings were originally of tribal ancestry. Their selection of the language of the predominant community in the sphere of their reign was both an inevitable and deliberate strategy.

In case of Cachar and Tripura, the linguistic landscape was quite diverse. Apart from Bengali, which is regionally called Sylheti, the other languages which existed parallel were Ahomiya, Meitei etc. In Cachar and Kokborok, Kuki etc. In Tripura.

Among them Bengali, or the regionally developed version of the language with influences from other parts of the Barak Valley and especially eastern Bengal or present-day Bangladesh had been receiving preeminence over other languages since the sixteenth century. We have already given an overview of the political developments under the Cachari Dimasas in Cachar and the Tripuri dynasty and their patronage and being extended to the language of Bengali. It has to be understood in the very political contexts of the two kingdoms, the Heramba and the Tripura kingdoms in Cachar and Tripura respectively that the Bengali was adopted both as the official language of the state and for diplomatic exchanges. Other than these, numismatic and epigraphic evidences also prove the point that in both Cachar and Tripura Bengali as a language had gained some eminence. During the eighteenth century, as has been mentioned before, both the language and the literature of Bengali were going through major shifts. Apart from translation of major Sanskrit texts into Bengali under the aegis of the European Missionaries and later by the British Utilitarians, the effects of such a transformation in the linguistic landscape of Bengal did not quite reach the so-called frontier regions of Cachar and Tripura. These cultures remained in a cultural and linguistic perpetuity where printing only reached in the middle of the nineteenth century. The themes of literature in eighteenth century in both Cachar and Tripura remained closely associated with various religious trends where texts were being translated from Sanskrit though majority were Vaisnava religious poetry, mostly handwritten on *tulot* paper or soft clothes made of cotton. In Cachar however we also get texts related to Natha tradition throughout the Barak valley.

My research has landed me at the behest of oldest reservoir of texts in the Barak Valley, The Normal School, which was established in 1906 CE with the intention of collecting and collating Bengali and Sanskrit literary texts of this region. Eminent scholars of the region, namely Agharnath Adhikari (the first superintendent of the school), Jagannath Deb, Tarinicharan Das, Maulabi Abdul Bari, Kulinbehari Bhattacharya and others joined hands since then in taking the much-needed initiative to gather texts of all religious colours, Saivaite, Vaisnavite and Brahmanical, which the valley boasts of playing host to. These texts are mostly transmitted in nature, meaning that most of the manuscripts found from this region and kept in the bosom of Normal School, had been copied from the original texts. Moreover, since in most of the manuscripts, colophons are missing, the actual date and time of the composition of the texts could not be determined. But it could be surmised that since these texts had been copied from texts which must have been older, such narratives must have been part of the literary tradition in the region. Few texts like Manasamangal, Vaisnav Bandana, Nemai Sanyas have been found whose language resemble that of eighteenth-century Bengali script as concluded by Professor Amalendu Bhattacharya. The Vaisnav songs still feature in regular ritualistic performances in Cachar on religion occasions. It can be understood as a continuous literary and cultural process which had its inception in the medieval period, around the middle of seventeenth century when Gouriyo Vaisnavism made its appearance in the Bengal. And being historically related and geographically connected to the Bengal Delta, Cachar could not stay untouched by its effects. The texts as has been mentioned above, had been composed from the middle of the seventeenth till the early nineteenth century exhibit evidence of early

Bengali script practiced and preserved in the region.

Manipur and Tripura, neighbouring regions of Assam where Vaisnavism struck deeper roots, Cachar was the main passage through which the tenets travelled. The last ruler of Heramba rajya in Cachar, Raja Govindachandra composed songs and poems dedicating to Krishna in the middle of the nineteenth century, a tradition which he kept alive from his ancestors. This bore testimony to the fact that in Cachar the literary pursuits, from the court circle to the local level, endeavoured to practice and preserve the literary activities with much vigour, presenting the scholar a significant window to observe their cultural making of the region.

The Dimasa rajas built their last capital at Khaspur, an Archaeological Survey of India marked area, 25kms away from the main city has the remains of Dimasa fort built in the middle of the eighteenth century. The Raja's palace, bath hall, temple of Ranachandi give inroads into both religious and cultural inclinations of the kingdom. The Architectural patterns used in making of the fort complex resemble that of the huts in the villages of Bengal. Influence from the Bengali style of architecture is a significant addendum to the cultural making of this region.

The temple structure above is the Ek-bangla temple with single entrance. Sether Bangla (1779 CE) from Pabna, Bangladesh (McCutchion, 1983)[11]. Below is Keshta Ray Temple, Vishnupur (Ghosh, 2005: 28).
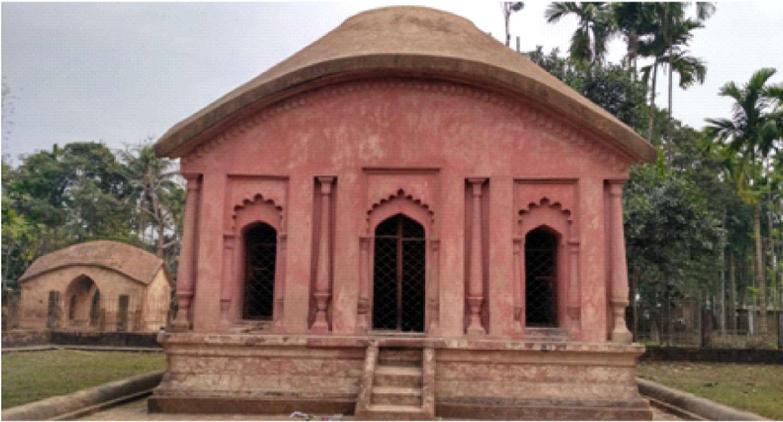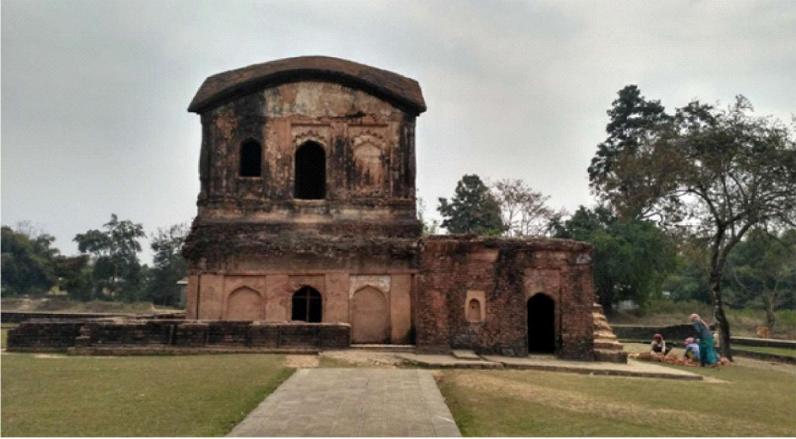
The picture above is of the ruined palace structure of the Dimasa kingdom. And below is the Ranachandi temple in the palace premises. Observe the similarity in the architectural pattern of the two buildings, specially the roof of the palace resembles that of the ek-chala or one-roof pattern borrowed from the temples of Bengal.

In case of Tripura the Vaisnava texts only few of which could be procured are scattered throughout the city of Agartala, in different libraries, museums and archives. Most of these texts remained unedited till date and the indifference regarding the significance of the corpus was palpable when one endeavours to search for them. Though in comparison to Cachar, preservation of the Bengali culture and celebrating its associated cultural tapestry had been better in Tripura. Royal patronage and initiative throughout the medieval and early modern period in this pursuit had been instrumental. In later years state initiative had been significant in this regard for archiving the literary as well as other cultural remnants associated with the Bengali language and the history of the community.

The Bengali literary cultures in Cachar and Tripura had often been analysed as part of the Brahmanisation of the Brahmaputra valley which spilled over the Barak valley and Tripura. If we examine the courtly culture and its associated cultural manifestations, it will surely lead one to conclude that the Bengali literary culture

which flourished in these two regions were representative of the typically Hindu upper caste culture where supremacy of the class of Brahmins in matters of administration and beyond was established since the beginning of the Dimasa state formation process in Khaspur, the last capital of the Heramba kingdom. Brahmins played significant roles in matters of coronation, presiding over any religious rituals in the royal house or translating Sanskrit texts. This was a continuation of a tradition from the fifteenth century where two Brahmins, named Sukreshwar and Baneshwar were commissioned to translate Rajmala from Sanskrit to Bengali in Tripura. Before the Dimasa kingdom of Heramba was established in Khaspur, the Koches used to rule the region. And under the Koches Brahmins from Kamrup were invited to the region and asked to settle down. This tradition was later continued by the Dimasas when Brahmins were invited to settle in the area and were given lands to settle in. In matters of commencing the cult of any deity, constructing temples, use of the typical trope of seeing the deity in dreams and thereby legitimizing the rule by a 'divine sanction' were very common features in the making of the socio-cultural and religious fabric in both Cachar and Tripura.

Conclusion

The idea of a community is closely related with its shared historical experience. In the process of acquiring characteristics which would define a community being different from the others, sometimes deliberate and in most of the times, circumstantial events play a significant role. Definitions of a community also undergo alterations which often require a community to adhere to certain features, in different historical contexts, conveniently justifiable in order to cater to immediate socio-cultural needs. Bengal as a political entity and Bengal as a cultural entity definitely share intertwined historical timeline. In case of the Bengali community, like many other, the language has always played a significant incentive to encompass them into a distinct entity. But the language itself had gone through many stages and in the process of its evolution socio-cultural and religious elements it carried within the fold had been curiously varied. Even in the same period, different versions of Bengali gave different meanings to different classes of people. It is when Bengalis as a community faced the imposition of other linguistic domination, that the concerted fierce effort to unite as a group resulted in movements. One such memory, surfacing at the top of the map of movements, is the *Bhasha Andolon* or Language Movement of 1948, in the backdrop of imposition of Urdu as the official language in East Pakistan on the Bengali speaking majority, movement which resulted in the birth of the nation of Bangladesh in 1971. Another such language movement which never drew such worldwide attention was the movement in south Assam or in Cachar, against the imposition of Assamese on the Bengali speaking majority in 1964. 21st February which is celebrated as International Mother Tongue Day, overshadowed the struggle of 19th May in Silchar which is only locally commemorated as *Bhasha Sahid Dibosh* or Language Martyr day where it took place. Discovery, recognition, preservation of these texts in the period which followed the prolific endeavors to collate the entire corpus of Bengali texts by the enthusiastic litterateurs led to generation of interest among scholars. And therefore, corpuses of analytical studies, edited volumes of the compositions and

other valuable secondary literature have been produced in the previous decades. In case of Tripura both the recognition and reception of its Bengali culture had been on a much better pedestal and continued for a longer period in comparison to Cachar. The efflorescence of the Bengali literary culture also lasted well into the twentieth century. Tripura, like other regions in the northeast, featured quite late into the British imperialistic designs. Even after its inclusion into the British territory during the middle of the nineteenth century, the Manikya Rajas of Tripura kingdom used to reside in palaces, they built new ones and the accession ceremonies of the later rajas used to be spectacles attended by hundreds of his subjects, as late as the in the 1920s. Portraits of such pompous coronation ceremonies adorn the walls of the royal palace cum museum which I witnessed during my visit to Agartala, exudes a sense of pride which the royal palace preserves in the bosom of it alongside other artifacts from the royal household.
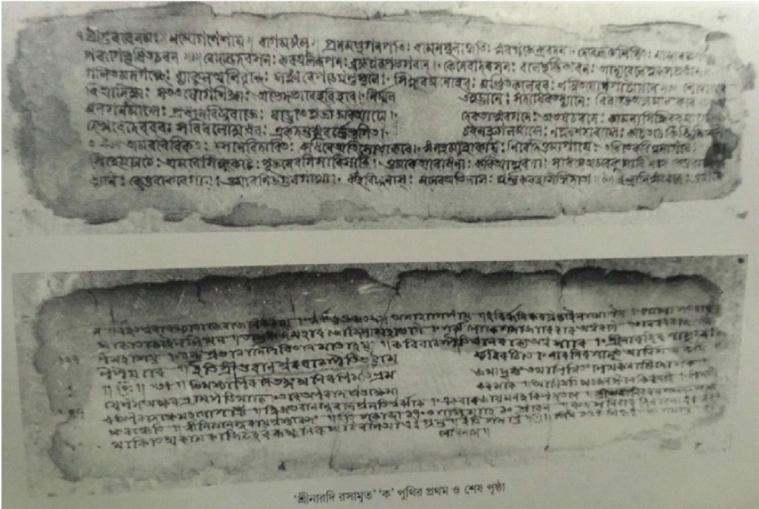
Manuscript of *Sri Naradi Rasamrita*. First and last page of the 'A' Manuscript. Source: Bhattacharya, Sri Naradi.

The above image is of the Radha Madhav temple built during raja Krisna Manikya's

time and the inscription which was found on the temple. This temple was built in the place called Akhaura, which is presently in the Chittagong district of Bangladesh. This inscription which stated that this temple was dedicated to Vishnu by the Raja who was devout follower of Vaisnavism was written in Sanskrit language and in Bengali characters. This temple was built in 1745 CE.

Notes

[1] This was a term essentially used to denote the area on the northeastern side of Bengal, the British capital. But like many residual ideas propounded by the British colonialists, this term continued to be used without any critical enquiry regarding the relevance of the term in the aftermath of Bengal's relegation as the important centre of power.

[2] The region ruled by Heramba and Tripuri kingdom broadly correspond to West Bengal and Bangladesh in the present day. This overlapping of controlled territories by the two kingdoms was instrumental in designing the demographic, cultural and literary fabric of the region. The prolific Assam Bengal trade since the fifth century BCE also acted as one of the major links between the Bengal and Brahmaputra-Barak Valley.

[3] In 1874 the province of Assam was created with three predominantly Bengali speaking districts of Cachar, Sylhet and Goalpara.

[4] The Barak Valley consists of three districts in Assam, namely Cachar, Karimgunj and Hailakandi in Assam.

[5] It has to be mentioned here that before the arrival of the Ahoms in the scene i.e. before the thirteenth century the Dimasa kingdom included quite a vast territory in the valley, which included western part of Shibsagar, the Dhansiri Valley, the Nowgang district and the North Cachar Hills of the present times.

[6] Mentioned in B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteer*, (Cachar), Vol. 1, 1905, p. 23.

[7] All the translations from Bengali to English in the present paper are done by the author unless the source is stated.

[8] Mentioned in Bhattacharya, Sri Naradi, pp. xxiv-xxv

[9] Mentioned in *Sri Naradi Rasamrita*, p. xxiv

[10] Mentioned in Nath, Dimasa Sankritir, p. 80.

[11] Mentioned in George Michell ed. *Brick Temples of Bengal -From the Archives of David McCutchion,* Princeton University press, New Jersey, 1983*, P.* 15 Plate number 23.

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