

# Nalini Kanta Bhattasali: A Pioneering Scholar

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## ABSTRACT

*Nalini Kanta Bhattasali (1888-1947) was one of the pioneers in the construction of regional identity for history of Eastern Bengal. He made a valuable contribution in the field of art, archaeology, epigraphy and numismatic study of India. His pioneering efforts in deciphering many unknown inscriptions of Khadga, Chandra, Varman and later Deva dynasties of Bengal are well known to the scholars of ancient Indian history and epigraphy. He served as the curator of Dacca Museum, later known as Bangladesh National Museum. He was a pioneer in the field of iconography also. He prepared a dependable sequence of chronology of the Sultans of Bengal. He was regarded as an expert of old Bangla Paleography. So the study covers almost whole Bhattasali's lifetime activities and achievements.*

**Keywords:** Bengal, Dacca, Iconography, Nalini Kanta Bhattasali, Vanga-Samatata, Varendra

**Introduction:** Nalini Kanta Bhattasali (1888-1947) was one of the pioneers in the construction of regional identity for history of Eastern Bengal. He was a historian, archaeologist, numismatist, epigraphist and antiquarian, whose contributions have gone a long way in clarifying many obscurities in the history and culture of ancient and medieval Bengal. He was a founder of Dacca Museum subsequently known as Bangladesh National Museum. He has a great contribution in the field of archaeology, epigraphy, numismatic and art history of India. Like his elder contemporary A. K. Maitreya, Sarat Kr. Roy and Rama Prasad Chanda who made a concerned attempt to explore the past of *Varendra* in relation to the border history of Bengal in India; N. K. Bhattasali turned his attention in eastern Bengal (*Vanga-samatata*) and made a sustained attempt to give a proper shape to the history of this region.

**Aims and Objectives of the study:** The study aims to analyses the contributions and activities of N.K. Bhattasali, in clarifying many obscurities of the history and culture of ancient and medieval Bengal.

Secondly, aims of the study lies in the fact that how Bhattasali untiringly wandered through the country side, exploring, discovering, photographing and collecting objects and gathering information, and trying to create local interest and consciousness for the preservation of our cultural heritage. It must be stated clearly that till his time, Bengal (specially its eastern part) had received scant attention from historians and archaeologist who had an all-India reputation.

Thirdly, as an art historian his career, life and his works should be known to academic world by working on his works and activities.

Fourthly, aims at understanding Bhattasali's contributions looking into the past chronological history through the tools of archaeology, epigraphy and intensive exploration through the country side of Bengal specially *Vanga-Samatata* region.

Bhattasali's identification of many unique images, which he proposed for the first time, had remained substantially unchallenged ever since. But, like every other pioneering enterprise, his study suffered from the lack of any sustainable method or system of classification.

**Discussion:** Bengali historiography passed on to a further stage of development during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. To the call of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a period of inquiry in Bengali historiography has been started<sup>1</sup>. Contemporary historians like Akshoy Kr. Maitreya, Sarat kr. Roy, Rama Prasad Chanda, R. D. Banerji who made a sustained attempt to explore the past of *Varendra* in relation to the border history of Bengal; N. K. Bhattasali turned his attention in eastern Bengal (*Vanga-Samatata*) and tried to give a proper shape to the history of this region. He infused a new spirit and a new vigour into historical research and carried historiography a long step forward.

Bhattasali was born on 24<sup>th</sup> January, 1888 in a Brahmin family of Vikrampura in Munshiganj district (now in modern Bangladesh). He passed the Entrance Examination of the Calcutta University in 1905 with a scholarship. Passing B.A. Exam in 1909, he obtained his M.A Degree in History from the same University in 1912. After serving as the Headmaster in a high school for some time Bhattasali got an appointment as a lecturer in History at the Victoria College, Comilla (now in modern Bangladesh)<sup>2</sup>.

In 1914 he joined the newly established Dhaka Museum as its curator. He remained in its service till his death, dedicating his entire life to its development. During this period, for some time, he also worked as a lecturer in History in the Dacca University.

Bhattachali won Griffith prize of the Calcutta University for his thesis on “The Coins and Chronology of the Early Independent Sultans of Bengal” which was published by the Cambridge University in 1922. In 1934, he received Ph. D Degree from the Dacca University. His efforts in collecting coins, inscription, sculptures of ancient Bengal for the Dacca Museum, helps to build a rich source material, till then unavailable<sup>3</sup>.

Bhattachali besides publishing his studies in English used to contribute to various Bengali periodicals. He was also adept in writing dramas, poems and short stories.

Even as a student N. K. Bhattachali had made his mark as a historian and archaeologist by publishing articles on history and antiquities of ancient Bengal which drew the attention of many distinguished scholars including Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, the then Vice-chancellor of Calcutta University. He untiringly wandered through the country side, exploring, discovering, photographing and collecting objects and gathering information, and trying to create local interest and consciousness for the preservation of our cultural heritage. It must be stated clearly that till his time, Bengal (specially its eastern part) had received scant attention from historians and archaeologist who had an all-India reputation. Bengal or more correctly, East Bengal (*Vanga-Samatata*) was Bhattachali’s special field of study. By his valuable contributions, extensive explorations and intensive investigation in different neglected areas of this region, he successfully dispelled much of the obscurity and ignorance that had surrounded its early history and civilization.

Bhattachali was an epigraphist and it is significant to reconstruct the past history of Bengal. Contemporary historian like Rama Prasad Chanda in ‘Gaudarajamala’, Akshoy Kr. Maitreya in ‘Gaudalekhamala’ throws light on the history of the Pala rulers of ancient Bengal on the basis of copper plate grants. But the other ruling dynasties who were ruling after the decline of the Gupta dynasty and during the Pala, Sena period in different parts of Bengal, were ignored by these historians. At this point, hitherto unknown Khadgo, Chandra, Varman and later Deva dynasties of Bengal came into light through the efforts of N.K.Bhattachali. His expert knowledge of early Indian paleography and epigraphy was of great help in deciphering and interpreting the copper plate records.

Bhattachali’s most outstanding contribution, however, was in the field of Hindu and Buddhist iconography which, till then was little known and much less studied. He was a pioneer in this field of study. Through his efforts to collect and interpret sculptures for the museum, he acquired an almost unsurpassable knowledge of the significance and identity of images, greatly reinforced by his in-depth and extensive studies of ancient texts of various religious sects, both Brahmanical and Buddhist ones. The Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in Bengal has been studied by a number of scholars in various context and varying degrees of details, from simple notices of the discovery of individual sculptures or studies of single cult to surveys covering a particular region or epoch or the whole of Bengal. The most important work devoted to the subject was by N.K.Bhattachali, “Iconography of the Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures of the Dacca Museum” and his efforts resulted in the iconographic survey of the of the sculptures of East Bengal which became one of the principal north Indian sources on the subject of Iconography.

T.A.Gopinath Rao’s “Elements of Hindu Iconography” (Vol. I & II) has so long been and still is the standard work on the subject. Some other works on it, such as H.Krishna Shastri’s “South Indian Gods and Goddesses”, B.C.Bhattacharya’s “Indian Images” (part I), J.Dubreuil’s “South Indian Iconography” have been published since then. But most of the works deal with the South Indian images only, while Bhattacharya’s book treats of several North Indian Hindu images of the Gupta and Post-Gupta period. But N.K.Bhattachali’s “Iconography of the Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptures of the Dacca Museum”, discuss the special features of the Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures found mostly in Eastern Bengal<sup>4</sup>.

Bhattachali’s identifications of many unique images, which he proposed for the first time, have remained substantially unchallenged ever since. At almost the same time as Bhattachali’s study was published, attempts were made for the stylistic assessment of Bengal sculpture by Stella Kramrisch and J.C. French, shortly followed by R.D.Banerji, S.K.Saraswati, J.N.Banerjea, later period, also focused on the stylistic as well as iconographic evolution. They were indebted to Bhattachali for made their monumental works<sup>5</sup>.

But he never limited his studies to the pre-Muslim period. He examined very carefully and diligently the Muslim coins in his Museum collection. In course of time he became a recognized expert and authority on Muslim numismatics. N. K. Bhattachali’s expert knowledge on numismatic study clarify many obscure phases of the Indian history. He wrote the first scientific account of Bengal Sultan’s, “The Coins and Chronology of the Early Independent Sultans of Bengal” on the basis of numismatic evidences, which till now remains a standard work on the subject. In them he had tried to appraise critically the views of previous scholars on

the above problem. Through his efforts we came to know about the two Hindu kings of medieval Bengal, Danujmardana deva and Mahendra deva, "who broke the domination of the Muhammadan line of kings for however short a period"<sup>6</sup>, would have otherwise remained unknown to us.

It is seen that his interest also extended to old Bangla literature and he is regarded as an authority of Bangla paleography. Bhattasali has written a few books on Bangla literature. His research articles were published in leading contemporary journals and periodicals, both at home and abroad. Published works on N.K. Bhattasali give information for the theoretical framework of the study. Saifuddin Chowdhury wrote on the subject a short biography "*Nalini Kanta Bhattasali: 1888-1947*" (in Bengali), 1989, published from *Bangla Academy*, Dhaka. N.K. Bhattasali commemoration volume edited by A.B.M. Habibullah, Dacca Museum, 1966, also throws light on Bhattasali's contribution to the history of Bengal. Though not much known for literary work, Bhattasali has written a few books on Bangla literature. A collection of his short stories, *Hasi o Ashru* (Lough and Tears) was published in 1915 and an edited version of Abdus Sukur Mohammad's *Gopi Chander Sannyas* was published in 1332 BS. It was mainly through his efforts that the Dhaka University established a cell for collecting Bengali and Sanskrit manuscripts. Mallar Mitra's *Journal of Bengal Art* also gives us much information about N.K. Bhattasali's activities and research works on the art history of Bengal. He received a few prizes and awards for his works and for several years he taught Bangla literature, paleography and history in Dhaka University. He had to his credit to competent edition of the Ramayana (*Adikanda*) of *Krittivasa*. Bhattasali was a stout controversialist and his powerful pen could occasionally be painfully incisive. Bhattasali never yielded from any conclusion he had arrived at, which he thought, was justified. An uncompromising individualism and spirit of independence was a marked trait of his character.

**Conclusion:** In the conclusion it can be said that Bengali historiography at least in relation to works of N. K. Bhattasali on the province of Bengal, has reached the stage of maturity. So it can be said that N. K. Bhattasali made a valuable contribution in the field of Indian art, archaeology, epigraphy, numismatic and history. He made a sustained attempt to give a proper shape to the history of eastern Bengal (*Vanga-Samatata* region). On the medieval history of Bengal, he prepared for the first time, a dependable sequence of chronology of the Bengal sultans on basis of numismatic evidences. But Bhattasali's most outstanding contribution, however, was in the field of Hindu and Buddhist iconography. He was a pioneer in this field of study. On the conclusion it can be said that N.K. Bhattasali was a multi-faced genius.

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