

Khan Chowdhuri Amanatulla Ahmed: A Pioneering Historian of Eastern and North Eastern India

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Introduction

Khan Chowdhuri Amanatulla Ahmed was a renowned administrator, litterateur and a social activist in Cooch Behar, a major princely state in North Eastern India which ruled from the fourteenth to the twentieth century India. But what brought him the highest and unparalleled glory is that of a historian. His book on history titled - Cooch Behar Itihas i.e., The History of Cooch Behar - has virtually made him an immortal personality. He was one of the very few indigenous historians of North Eastern India who made marks by their historiography up till now. The acumen he has displayed as a historian, without being from the field of academics, has been outstanding. It is my firm belief that he would always be remembered for this noble work.

Amanatulla Ahmed was born on 2nd January 1873 in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in India. Located in the south western part of Cooch Behar district, his village bordered Rangpur district of present Bangladesh. Amanatulla's father was Md Amirulla Ahmed who was an established and respectable Jotdar (landlord) of the area and was also known as the Patoari – a noble man of the village (Ray Sarkar, 2015, P-3). About the ancestral roots of Amanatulla, it is quite possible that his parents were off springs of the Muslim warriors who came along with Hussain Shah to invade Kamatapur, an ancient kingdom existed then, and settled down there. However, Amanatullah's family had completely adapted the life style, culture and language of their chosen home land Cooch Behar by the time Amanatulla was born. They had become an inseparable part of Cooch Behar in all respects as a Deshi Musalman (Mulsims who adopted culture of Cooch Bear) family.

During Amanatulla's time, facilities of education were not available in remote villages of Cooch Behar other than having some Islamic Madarsa and Muktabs. Amanatulla's village Baramaricha was not an exception. The people of the villages at large used to be deprived of minimum level of education. Only the socially conscious, forward looking and well to do families of some villages used to send their children to the towns for their secondary and higher education, as an exceptional case. Amanatulla was a brilliant student and had the fortune of receiving the elementary education in his village. Thereafter, Patoari Amirulla Ahmed sent the little boy Amanatulla to the capital town Cooch Behar for his higher education. In Cooch Behar town he used to live in Ranibagan area where Amirulla had his own shelter.⁸ Though not much of details are available about Amantulla's academic achievements, but it has been established through his works that he was well versed in languages like Rajbanshi, Bengali, English, Assamese, Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, Parsee and Sanskrit and the mastery of which had helped him in compiling history and pursuing the literary work of higher degree that he did. It is also estimated that Amanatulla must have been highly educated and knowledgeable; and without which he would not have been assigned with the administrative responsibilities in the court of Cooch Behar emperor. Besides his passionate administration involvement, the three major passions that Amanatulla had pursued vigorously were the study of history and literature and association with the social activism for the benefit of the common people.

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Amanatulla's appointment for the higher administrative post in the Estate of Cooch Behar was indeed a very prestigious opening in his life, as he hailed from a humble background of a village. It could be appreciated that by joining the rulers' team of administrators, he made his village as well as his family highly proud. Moreover, in due course of time, by dint of his hard work, efficiency and perseverance he rose to the post of Land Revenue Minister of the state. During his term of work in the Estate, besides his administrative tasks, he involved himself with various literary, cultural and social works with the intention of benefitting the common people. To highlight some of the socio-political works of Amanatulla, it could be mentioned that he was the founder of The Jotdar Samiti under the patronage of the state ruler of Cooch Behar and had the opportunity of administering the affairs of the Samiti for a long period. He was the Mohammadan Representative in Maharaja's Cabinet, was a member of the Royal Court of Cooch Behar, a member of The Indian History Commission and a member of The Regional Survey Committee of Bengal and Assam, while he was in his job with the Estate.⁸ In 1918, Hitashadhani Sabha was formed primarily by the sons of the soil of which Amanatulla Ahmed became a founder member.⁵ Later, in 1946, he contested the elections of Cooch Behar Legislative Council and got himself elected.

Amanatulla gradually became one of the luminaries of the Cooch Behar state due to his own ability. It was due to his administrative efficiency, popularity and literary work that he could create a place of pride in the Estate and was honored with the title of Khan Chowdhuri in 1911 by Maharaja Raj Rajendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur.¹

Cooch Behar palace was an epicenter of literary work in North Eastern India in the eighteenth and nineteenth century where even the members of Royal family, including the queens, were active in creative pursuits. Several noteworthy books of literature and history came out at that time. Khan Chowdhuri too was one of the very active participants in this field. He was one of the members of Uttar Banga Sahitya Parishad which received the much needed patronage of the Maharaja Raj Rajendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur. Amanatulla used to actively participate in the conferences of the Parishad and present articles on archeology, history and literature. He had the privilege of being the youngest member of the eight member delegation that represented the Cooch Behar state in the Third Literature Conference of Uttar

Banga hosted by the King of Gouripur in his capital town Gouripur in Assam in 1910.⁸ Panchanan Sarkar, the founding father of the later Rajbanshi Movement and the eminent leader of the Rajbanshis, was also present in the conference. Amanatulla was also a member of Kamrup Anusandhan Sabha. It was with the initiative of Amanatulla that Cooch Behar Sahitya Sabha was formed in Cooch Behar in 1915 of which he was the founder Secretary. Kumar Victor Nityendra Narayan was its founder Chairman.⁴

The Koch Dynasties of North Eastern India had the culture of getting history about their kingdoms written in brief, in the form of genealogy or Vamsabali in the medium of verses, much before Amanatulla came in to write The Cooch Beharer Itihas in 1936. A history based writing which was available that time within Cooch Behar was Munshi Jay Nath Ghose's Rajopakhan as the regional history of Bengal written in 1845. Ripuraja Dash's Maharaj Vamsavali of 1847, Maharani Brindeswari's Beharodanto of 1859, Ananda Chandra Ghose's Cooch Beharer Itihas of 1864, Bhagabati Charan Bandopadhyay's Cooch Beharer Itihas of 1882, Jadab Chandra Chakraborti's Cooch Beaherer Itihas of 1883, Devija Birupaksha's Shiva Vamsabali presenting the details of Koch kingdom, Rajakhanda in Sanskrit by one of the court poets during the reign of Maharaja Prana Narayan dealing with the history of Cooch Behar, Visvasinharcharitam of seventeenth century and Haribhaktitaranga by Durgadas in eighteenth century, Gosanimangal and Shangitsankar in nineteenth century etc. Some of the works outside Cooch Behar were Darangraj Vamsavali by Suryakari Daibagna, Bijni Rajvamsa by Tariniprasad Sen etc.³ But such works could not serve the purpose of a History in the true sense of the term. They were based on myths and legends devoid of facts and some of them had exaggerated praises for the members of the royal families in order to please the masters.

It was in the second decade of the twentieth century that the Maharaja of Cooch Behar felt the necessity of getting an authentic history of the state compiled by a competent officer of the court. It became the obvious and unanimous choice for the Maharaja to have Amanatulla to undertake such a responsible and challenging task. The decision was made public by Maharajkumar Victor Nityendra Narayan while delivering the presidential address at the third annual meeting of the Cooch Behar Sahitya Sabha in 1918 in Cooch Behar, on behalf of the Maharaja by saying, "I am glad to announce that His Highness has sanctioned the publication of an authenticated History of the State. The task of collecting all materials and writing

up preliminaries has been left in the capable hands of our able secretary Khan Chowdhuri Amanat Ulla Ahmed. I ask all members for their cordial help, and I am sure none will be more thankful than Khan Chowdhuri himself". An amount of Rs. 3,500.00 was also sanctioned.²

Amanatulla compiled the history of Cooch Behar with utmost diligence and brought out the most coveted history of the Cooch Behar state combined with the history of eastern and north eastern India. He took it as a major task that the history should be separated from myth and he did full justice to this commitment. He had to be very judicious and skilled to accomplish this task. In order to obtain reliable data he had to read all possible history books of his time, had to make use of the documents of different departments of the state, Imperial Library of Kolkata, Library of Bangiya Sahitya Sabha of Kolkata, the royal documents of the kingdom of Punjab, Bihar, Nepal, Bhutan and Rajasthan. He obtained necessary materials from the British Museum, London too. He travelled not only through the length and breadth of the state but also through the entire north eastern India. As to visits to the archeological sites, Amanatullah visited Gosanimari Fort and temple, Baxa Fort, Chila Ray Fort, Beltala of Guwahati, Hajo of Rangamati, Mahasthan Garh of Bagura, Ghoraghat of Dinajpur and various other places. He consulted renowned historians like Jadunath Sarkar, the Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University, Padmanath Bidya Binode Tatwasaraswati, the retired professor of Cotton College, Guwahati for necessary technical clarifications (Amanatulla, 1940, Introduction page - V).

Finally Amanatulla's most acclaimed book on history titled Cooch Behar Itihas - Part I (History of Cooch Behar - Part I) of about 475 pages came out. The book was originally written in Bengali and was printed in the Cooch Behar Estate press in 1936 in hard and cloth bound form. The book became so popular that it went in for reprints several times and was translated in English in 1942. As to the coverage of the book, Dr. Ishimuddin Sarkar, a professor of History of North Bengal University said, "The book gave detailed account of the history of once powerful Cooch Kingdom".⁷ In fact, this book is considered to be the most authentic and most sought after book on the history of Cooch Behar as well as the whole of eastern India. The book has found its place in every educated household in eastern India over the period.

At the fag-end of his life Amanatulla had to live outside his own country when he was of ill health.

Due to certain political developments Khan Chowdhuri was expelled from India by the Government of India in 1950 with a 12 hour notice, when he was of 77 years of age. On receipt of the order, Chowdhuri moved to Rangpur of East Pakistan, the neighboring country. The three other people who were also expelled from Cooch Behar during that period were Ansar Uddin Amad, Bajley Rahaman and M. Makbul Hussain, the father of the former President of Bangladesh Mr Ershad. While leaving for Rangpur, Amanatulla left behind his son Motihar Miah in his native land. Motihar Miah's descendents are yet staying in Baramaricha with their nostalgic memories and financially in broken condition.

With regards to banishment, Amanatullah's fate, to some extent, resembles that of Ray Saheb Panchanan Barma. Born in the era of renaissance, both Panchanan Barma (1865-1935) and Amanatullah (1873-1957) hailed from Cooch Behar. Ray Saheb too had been expelled from Cooch Behar and took shelter in Rangpur. Both of them had common interest in literature, archeology, culture and history. Coming from the similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds both of them shared similar feelings for the common people of their time and wanted to uplift the moonivasis of their time from their fallen state of affairs. While Panchanan Barma worked for the people through Kshatriya Samiti (later Khatriya Party) Amanatulla undertook the same task through his involvement with various social organizations and finally with Hitasadhani Sabha. Both of them worked together in the platform of Sahitya Sabha and had scope of their personal inactions. Panchanan Barma seems to have had considerable degree of confidence on Amanatulla which he revealed by including the name of Amanatulla as a member of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Rangpur. He recommended Amanatulla's name during the two days 4th Annual Conference of the Sahitya Sabha held in Rangpur on 25 and 26 June 1909. Amanatulla's name was in the list of 11 eminent scholars of Cooch Behar to be inducted.⁶

Amanatullah's nomination as the member of Hitasadhani Sabha, the only political outfit patronized by the Cooch Behar Maharaja, speaks volume about the positive impression that Amanatulla has had in the royal family. The Hitasadhani Sabha was formed by the natives of the Cooch Behar under the patronage of the Maharaja to strengthen bonding of the native subject, so that after Cooch Behar come under the Indian Union, the natives of Cooch Behar could flourish adequately nullifying the supremacy of the privileged class Hindu people of Southern Bengal.⁵

The very fact that Amanatulla was also its Chairman could be considered as a testimony and recognition of the leadership quality that he had.⁸

Though Amanatulla breathed his last on 31 October 1957 in Bangladesh, the people of Cooch Behar and the eastern India hold him in high esteem even now. Different organizations of Cooch Behar have been organizing memorial programmes to pay homage to him. The people of his village in Cooch Behar have been raising their demands to the Government of West Bengal to recover 24 acres of his en-crossed land that he left behind and renovate his dilapidated house and convert it into a memorial. The Historian Amanatulla has compiled the Volume - I of Cooch Beharer Itihas and he could not write the subsequent volumes to complete his work. Let us hope that some historian of future generation would take inspiration from this great personality and complete his unfinished work.

It is due to love and respect for the legendary historian that we find people of Eastern and North Eastern India remember him on his birth anniversaries and bring out commemorative issues to pay homage to him even these days.

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