

Reconsidering Local History: Some Facts, Some Observations

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A Plea for Local History

The bureaucratization of history in the twentieth century has led to its transformation into a more professional academic discipline, but a growing distinction thus developed between professionals and amateurs. The former, sacerdotal in outlook and superior in attitude, regarded the latter with disdain. They, in turn, felt resentment towards professionals who increasingly dominated a field of study the amateurs had once ruled. In the end, the bureaucratization of learning inevitably meant the exclusion of those who did not possess proper academic credentials.¹

THIS WAS THE CANDID opening sentence of a well-known American historian, but the tenor in which he continued was equally incisive and applies to academics per se, without pinpointing on History alone. ‘The bureaucratization of learning’, he said, ‘led in turn to growing estrangement between the broad educated public and the world of scholarship’, and scholars who tried to ‘bridge the widening gap between abstract thought and everyday existence’ were dismissed as journalists, popularizers, or hacks. Though quite unexpected from a formal historian, this was part of Theodore S. Hamerow’s address at the annual conference of the American Historical Association of 1988, held at Cincinnati. What the immediate provocation was for Hamerow to deliberately heat up the atmosphere in the post-Christmas chill is not known, but let us first hear him out. According to him, ‘historical research had been conducted for over two thousand years, not by professional scholars but by self-taught amateurs who had spent most of their lives in politics, warfare, theology, bureaucracy,

journalism, or literature longer than in any other field of learning'. He was categorical that history had depended on non-historians 'longer than any other field of learning' and what attracted these non-historians,

... to the study of the past was a spontaneous curiosity, an instinctive interest in how the world had become what, it was, how society had changed and grown with the passage of time ... There was no cloistered scholarship fusty with archival dust, smelling of the lamp and leather binding. It was lively and vibrant, rousing and compelling. It had the breath of life.²

I chose to begin with this long sermon by a senior historian as he articulates quite effectively the angst of amateur historians like, say, late Tarapada Santra of Hoara, or Gopi Kanta Konar who is an established authority on the local history and customs of Bardhaman. They have been kept far away from the 'high table' of formal history in spite of decades of tireless work and prolific production. I empathize with the frustration of those who are derisively branded as 'local historians' and lumped into the dubious category of 'non-historians'. Most of such scholars who rose forth from the soil may well be school or college teachers, or may even possess outstanding qualifications in their own (and perhaps, equally-streamlined) academic disciplines. They may simply lack a formal methodological training in the science of history. Of course, there are several semi-lettered hacks among them, but even they did spend a large number of years collecting what they consider to be evidence and facts, many of which could well be just tall claims or parochial myths. Several have actually published their 'local histories' even though they knew fully well that their labours would hardly be accepted within the portals of an increasingly rigid discipline.

This article pleads for some tolerance towards the 'findings' of local historians. Despite obvious inadequacies in the treatment of their subjects and their unprofessional, non-academic language, several of these chroniclers deserve better treatment and encouragement. Formal scholastic history is written by historians mainly for other historians to read and this deters the rest of humanity from seeking to know it beyond what one had to cram in school or college. The attempt here is neither to demean the historian's hard-earned professional skills

nor to exaggerate the amateur's contribution, but to ponder for a while on what the discipline of history has done to profit from the energetic output generated by those at the margins. After all, most people can relate immediately to their town or local area in a more involved manner than they can with macro history. Since non-professional local historians will work anyway for catering to the need to know one's own area and really do not care much for what recognition they earn from the elite, it is better that they be nudged gently into using more professional empirical tools lest their often-coloured versions replace more 'authentic' histories.

Having said so, one wonders whether Professor Hamerow had cause for such an alarm, because his own American Historical Association (AHA) was among the earliest to establish a semi-autonomous 'Conference of State and Local Historical Societies'. This occurred in 1904, within 20 years of the existence of the fledgling mother body. By 1939 the AHA accepted a proposal moved by Christopher C. Crittenden, the Director of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History, to create a full-fledged local history organization. Its objective was 'to better coordinate the activities of historical societies and stimulate the writing and teaching of state and local history in North America'.³ This was agreed to and in December 1940 the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) was born. Its purpose was 'the promotion of effort and activity in the fields of state, provincial, and local history'. The AASLH made it possible for several generations of amateurs to become proficient local historians. It still provides methodological support and training through the dissemination of 'Technical Leaflets' and its popular quarterly magazine *History News* publishes quite regularly articles submitted by non-historians, bringing them closer to professionals.⁴

More than 650 local history groups have already benefited and Indians, with a reasonably-established history of some 5500 years, could imbibe a few ideas from those who have just three centuries to call their own history. But, obviously, this was not enough to hold back the enthusiasts or, why else would Hamerow plead so strongly? Besides, his concern was not only for amateur local historians, but for all non-professional seekers of history.

Defining 'Local History'

What exactly constitutes 'local history' as distinguished from mainstream history. Let us start with the views of a top-rated professional like Carol Kammen, also from the USA. She described local history as, 'a study of past events, or of people or groups, in a given geographic area – a study based on a wide variety of documentary evidence and placed in a comparative context that should be both regional and national'. While one may not agree that these studies have necessarily to be accomplished by a trained historian, we agree with her insistence that that the researcher must 'use methods appropriate to the topic under consideration while following the general rules of historical inquiry: open-mindedness, honesty, accountability, and accuracy'.⁵ Such a definition of course legitimizes all sorts of research projects, because local history is, as all history is meant to be – the study of the human condition in and through time, except that the field of enquiry is restricted to a relatively small area.

Kammen further elaborated that, 'Local history is, despite its limited geographical focus, a broad field of inquiry: it is the political, social, and economic history of a community and its religious and intellectual history, too. It is a place to look for individual reactions to historical events and the arena in which to practice demographic investigation'.⁶ In other words, while subaltern historians have posited the underdog as the little cog in a more gigantic apparatus and concentrated on how he viewed his world, local history broadens this type of a study to how a localized group viewed kings, wars and peace in terms of what impact they left on local societies. It also studies the impact of technology and major events on man in his habitat, whether it be a village, a locality, a community or even a larger body. But, unlike some schools of history, like the Marxist one, that may have a definite mission, local history is not generally supposed to have a left or a rightist view. Besides, there is no secret hero whose struggle needs to be ferreted out of depths of society and posited on the broad canvas; it is supposed to be ideologically neutral.

Let us now turn to how the British Association defined local history. It was said to be 'the study of history in a geographically local context and it often concentrates on the local community. It incorporates

cultural and social aspects of history and is often documented by local historical societies or groups and many works of local history are compiled by amateur historians working independently or archivists employed by various organizations'.⁷ Local history in the United Kingdom was assisted by several local records kept faithfully by churches and registries in the villages or by municipalities and even by families. It is best to admit right away that very little of such records exist in India, other than the minimal that had to be maintained by colonial rulers or enforced by their laws, rules or orders. We hardly have basic grassroots records except for dry records of properties as these were rarely maintained by local bodies, nor preserved properly. Or else, one could really write a data-based local history by relying primarily on the records of Santipur or Gobordanga municipalities in West Bengal that are more than one and a half centuries old. As one who has worked in, and also had the dubious distinction of 'administering', the West Bengal State Archives in Kolkata and the National Archives of India in Delhi for a few years, I fear that most of the mandatory records of the post-Independence era are either missing or are never preserved in any worthwhile manner. This is tragic, when one compares this callous attitude with the absolute sincerity with which all prescribed government documents were regularly sent by all departments to the State and National Archives in colonial India. In the India of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, most government records were destroyed to make space for new departments in an ever-expanding bureaucracy.

In the United Kingdom we find that local societies or communities came forth to preserve their local history or the history of a site in their area, or to prevent its planned destruction or its ruinous condition. The pride with which local citizens view their heritage, or remember a local contribution to the nation's history or culture does not exist in an ahistorical country like ours. Even the respect with which the British affix a 'heritage plaque'⁸ on a historic building or at a site is hardly visible in India unless it is an event sponsored by the 'authorities' or there is some political mileage to be gained from such token gestures. On the other hand, most owners of heritage properties in India can hardly afford their upkeep and openly invite or permit commercial development that begins by tearing them down.

The local community usually remains a mute or indifferent spectator in this irreversible act of erasing history.

The British tradition for recording and remembering local history is fairly old and scholars trace the first attempts in documenting local history to medieval chroniclers like Bede and John Leland.⁹ Their narratives contain references to local antiquities, even though these were not their central concern. The Tudor National Gazetteers like Camden also contained short local chronicles,¹⁰ but it was really in the eighteenth century that we see the first proper 'local histories' appearing in works of the county historians like Nichols and Morant.¹¹ These writers toiled on subjects like how the grand manors of England were passed along from family to family¹² that may be unfashionable now, but modern historians can still extract important clues or leads from such county narratives. By the nineteenth century, parish histories appeared in large numbers and were treated as professional local histories.¹³ These were charming accounts that focused on the county houses in England, which made fascinating reading and added spice to normally dreary narratives. In the UK, local and family history records are usually made available to anyone interested, even if he or she has no training in history. This is what makes it so popular and it is not like most other erudite works of historians written in a language that only historians understand. The very nature and purpose of recording local history is to reach out to the people and instil respect for one's own 'local region', whatever be its definition.

Even from my limited interaction, I always found that local archivists and the volunteers who run societies were eager to provide advice, encouragement and quite reliable information. It is widely acknowledged that the Victoria County History (VCH) series and the parish records of the local church in the United Kingdom are still among the most reliable basic books from which one could begin the study of the history of a locality. Many such local historians in Britain are confident non-specialists who have undertaken certain acceptable methodological approaches and have verified what they procure or present. One of the reasons why formal historians in India are wary about the proliferation of works on local history is that many of these appear to be just chronicles of claims, often untrue, or relate to legends

or traditions that have not been scrutinized carefully, with reference to already-established dates and historical characters.

As anthropologists are aware, the caste system in India has survived largely due to its unwritten rules that permitted variations and flexibilities to certain groups and also sanctified them after they had risen well above their ascribed ranks with political or economic power. History is thus replete with examples of how it condoned and even legitimized certain determined acts of upward mobility. Such groups that had sprung up from 'lower orders' in society were elevated and legitimized as 'royalty' by grateful Brahmin retainers, who were ever ready to fabricate respectable genealogies for the wealthy and the powerful. There are several volumes of work done on this process of 'kshatriyaization or the conferring of warrior-king status to those who managed to seize power, irrespective of their origins and oblivious to the methods adopted to reach there.'¹⁴ It is interesting to see, for instance, how the Malla rajas of Bishnupur were first delinked from their original tribal brethren, the Bagdis, and then conferred Kshatriya status through an obviously invented story.¹⁵

There are many such examples and the same story is copied to a large extent in tracing the history of the Maharajas of Bardhaman.¹⁶ In tackling such hagiographic tales, some knowledge of anthropology proves extremely helpful. We can thus trace the continuing emotional links that bind the Bishnupur raja's family with the Bagdi caste in the region through various socio-religious rites, rituals and beliefs even today – centuries after the royal family cleverly segregated itself from its original stock.¹⁷ When reviewing the best phase of local history in Britain that was produced by amateurs, one notices how this trend influenced bands of enthusiastic young British men who landed in India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They came here as administrators, army officers, engineers, doctors and the like, but took upon themselves the task of delving deep into local history, legend, geography, people, customs, botany, landscape and even religion and music.¹⁸ This burst of enthusiasm, that continued unabated for more than a century, produced the first set of district gazetteers, statistical accounts, narratives, ethnographic analyses, letters to friends and family and other valuable records. Numerous articles

were presented before erudite groups like the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal. Whether dated or not, they still form the starting point of many a scholar and happen to be the only reliable records of that period. Batches of young Indian graduates would soon emerge from the three modern universities and the colleges set up by the British in the Presidency towns of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. They also embarked on writing their version of India's history, and often challenged the imperial narrative and the colonial approach. The British tradition of inquisitiveness about their environs and its history and the habit of record-keeping thus produced the first crop of largely under-utilized books on local history and culture in India.

Even in the United Kingdom, we note that the serious stage of local history took a rather long time to be arrive. It did so as late as in 1955, when we finally get one of the defining works, when William George Hoskins firmly established local history as a formal academic discipline. His classic work, *The Making of the English Landscape*,¹⁹ had a great impact on both historians and the reading public. Unlike text books, it was illustrated with 82 monochrome plates, mostly photographs he had taken himself, and contained several maps and plans, which helped take his reader along with him. This seminal book attempted the history of some one thousand years of the English countryside since the Anglo-Saxon period in AD 450. Hoskins remains true to the title 'landscape' for he hardly dwells on cities. His book became a mandatory text in local and environmental history courses and has been admired immensely by generations of historians and readers.²⁰ But, at the same time, it was also criticized by some for 'his grandly emotive, populist, and openly anti-modernist narrative'.²¹ E.G.R. Taylor was critical and felt that Hoskins had taken a one-sided view of the industrial revolution 'with mounting horror'.²²

But let us now move to France, where Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre led a new school of historians from the third decade of the twentieth century. The *Annales* school was named after its famous journal, the *Annales d'Histoire Economique et Sociale*, which appeared since 1929 and was considered quite radical as it stressed on the history of all levels of society, and not merely on major political events. It focused on what it called 'the collective nature of mentalities' that shaped the decisions and studied events which emanated from such mental frameworks. 'The goal of the *Annales* was to undo the work

of the Sorbonnistes (and) to turn French historians away from the narrowly political and diplomatic, toward the new vistas in social and economic history'.²³ It was very powerful among French historians and in several other countries as well and opposed the powerful Marxist school of history. Where we are concerned, its main importance lay in its emphasis on society, community and the small man rather than on kings, kingdoms and politics. It helped to focus on the 'local' as distinguished from the 'universal'.

The generation after Febvre and Bloch was dominated by Fernand Braudel whose first book, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Époque de Philippe II* (1949) broke completely new paths.²⁴ It treated the Mediterranean not as a single region, but in its different layers and demonstrated how its environment and vulnerability nurtured the mentality of its varied people and communities. Braudel narrated how these men fought against nature and against each other, but his uniqueness lay in his stories of the lives and woes of the common men. They had names and identities that were not smothered by armies and rulers or by empires and revolutions. Braudel was widely acclaimed for sculpting serious history from local and regional materials and this is why his work is considered such a landmark for students of local history.

Among the others who led the second generation of the *Annales* school were Duby and Goubert, while those like Chaunu and Le Goff continued writing till almost recent times. The attention of students of local history is however riveted to Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie who would be considered the leader of third generation of this school. Ladurie's *Peasants of Languedoc*²⁵ and *Montaillou*²⁶ brought out the life of the medieval French peasants and village folk in vivid colours, at the closest range possible. *Montaillou* made full and adroit use of local church records of the dreaded period of the Catholic Church's Inquisition. It reconstructed the lives and religious beliefs of the villagers of Montaillou, a small hamlet in the Pyrenees with only around 250 inhabitants, at the beginning of the fourteenth century. It was first translated into English in 1978 by Barbara Bray, and was subtitled as 'The Promised Land of Error' and 'Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294-1324'. It is considered a masterpiece in the realm of local history and its perfect craftsmanship of historical anthropology advertised the contribution of the *Annales*

school to the whole world. It made its author Ladorie pre-eminent in the fraternity of those who strove to bring out the real history of the people from the much neglected layers at the bottom of the pyramid.

But the influence of the Annales school waned rapidly in the 1970s because it was unable to keep pace with newer technologies of history, like quantitative data, that was presented as the instrument that could really unlock all of social history. The Annales historians ignored the developments in quantitative studies which were taken up seriously in the UK and the USA and shaped economic, political and demographic research. Scholars moved in multiple directions, covering the social, economic, and cultural history of different eras and different parts of the globe without much coordination or any grand overview. The vast and unwieldy publishing and research network of the Annales school proved counterproductive as a branded school that hardly assimilated new ideas from others. By 1980, post-modern sensibilities undercut the swagger of overarching meta-narratives.

Even after traversing so many lands through several decades, we are still not perfectly clear on what exactly is meant by local history. In a number of countries, the term 'local' sometimes meant a small village like Montaignou or a wider region like the rural landscape of England of Hoskins. It could even cover a cross-border, multi-nationality zone like Braudel's Mediterranean. Sometimes, it is meant to be 'the view from below', like the history that the Subaltern school pursued later. It could be even look seriously at versions of local lore or legends. In a comprehensive sense, it is the study of many facets that pertain to a specific local area: covering its history, ethnography, geography, natural history.

Problems in Writing Local History in India

Two major problems confronting research in local history in India are (a) the unmanageable magnitude of the task, and (b) the woeful absence of worthwhile records to base history upon. Where the first is concerned, let us look at comparisons that would clarify the submission regarding the unwieldiness of our local units. The most

popular unit of local history in India is usually the 'district'. In most parts of India, it is purely a British creation that defined the area covered a group of police stations, which in turn, ruled over a large number of villages. While the contours of the village shifted, the police station areas (the *thanas*) have remained reasonably constant for a couple a centuries or more. However, police stations lack data other than crime and related records, which has discouraged historians from venturing further with the *thana* as their focus. The districts began as administrative units created by the British for their revenue purposes and they covered hundreds of villages and some urban agglomerations, which were grouped under several police stations. Because record keeping was better at the district headquarters and most were accessible, the districts became the base for a large number of works on local history.

But, once we view a district like Medinipur in West Bengal, which has mercifully been split now, we come across an area of 14,081 sq. km, which is larger in area than Qatar, Gambia or Jamaica, that have only about 11,500 sq. km each. Even smaller districts of this state like South Dinajpur would figure above at least a dozen members of the United Nations, in terms of area. The point is that if Malta or Maldives or Singapore or Seychelles, that occupy lesser fragments of the world's land mass, can have their own national histories, it appears so strange to describe the history of Bhagalpur or Bankura as tiny, local histories. But then, this is only one way of looking at issues and all we did was to bring in 'size' as a deterrent, though we are also conscious that the historian is not a cadastral surveyor who has to cover every part of it.

But then, landmass or size are poorer indicators of social concerns or human existence than, perhaps, the real number of people who inhabit an area. But India can overwhelm anyone who goes by statistics of population. For example, the 10 million people of just one district, North 24-Parganas, of the state of West Bengal, will be more than several nations of the world in number. Even a smaller district like Wardha in Maharashtra, with its one and a half million, has a bigger population than at least a few sovereign countries. Denmark and Norway have less about 6 million each, yet they all have proud and

continuous national histories. So how do we go about the issue of what exactly is 'local', what is 'provincial', or what can be called truly 'national' ?

Let us examine one district, such as Bardhaman, a little closely. It is a district in West Bengal that I am familiar with, as I began my field work in village studies, anthropology and history in 1976 and did manage to continue with some meaningful research for the next twenty-five years, with unavoidable gaps. Its eight million people make it equal to important world-class players, i.e, countries like Israel and Switzerland, that have so many local regions with their own separate histories. The history of Bardhaman district is usually beneath the level at which a professional historian, as distinguished from a local historian, would choose to work: unless he was working on a larger theme like coal mining or the Communist movement. Yet, more than 200 books have already been written on Bardhaman, covering different aspects of the local history. The list contains local histories of villages, zamindaris, temples, fairs, festivals, coal mines, settlements, towns and subdivisions, but a lot of it would find difficulty in passing strict tests of historical evidence, validation of claims and strict empiricism.

The point with special relevance to history in India is: how do we then arrive at some comfort in academics or in society for calling or accepting a history as 'local' under our conditions? I would submit that, however tempting be the urge to flaunt the large uncontrolled populations of the subcontinent's administrative units, many of these districts really do not qualify for research as local histories. With such huge districts in India, it is clear that many of them are too unwieldy to qualify as 'local' units for historical purposes, and they do not seem to display the signature traits that characterize the term 'local'.

How do sociologists and anthropologists view feelings of bonding and pride that cement human relationships among face-to-face communities within localities as well as within wider networks? Such 'bonding' or 'district identity' grow over long periods of time, unless the rough boundaries of these districts coincide, or are somehow coterminous, with their historical bonds. In such cases, the district happens to cover a people who have some common social and historical heritage to share. We do not expect to come across what Ferdinand Tonnies described as the *gemeinschaft*,²⁷ the emotionally close

community of locals where everyone knows everyone and is relatively homogenous and compact. These are found only in some relatively small isolated hamlets in the hills or in other remote zones. Even in anthropology, this close-knit *gemeinschaft* moves on in time become more wide, urban, faceless, mobile, heterogeneous and of impersonal communities, the *gesellschaft*. It may not be appropriate to insist on proximity as a necessary 'binder' for any group to qualify for the term 'local'. Similarly, famous binaries like Emile Durkheim's 'organic versus mechanical' solidarities or Talcott Parson's dichotomy between 'particularism' and 'universalism'²⁸ that we borrow from classical anthropology are useful for enhancing our consciousness, but cannot take us far. We need only to see how anthropology has approached a similar problem of what constitutes a 'local community'. Thus, we may view the term 'local' as some sort of a reasonably compact area with certain distinguishing features of social behaviour or some historical linkages, however faint. It would be ideal if it is beyond just an administrative convenience and has some sort of a bonding of its own through some bits of shared memory.

Constituting the Local: The District, the Region and the Village

In such cases, districts become more appropriate for our study, even if many of them are, as we have seen, too big or too populous or even too diverse to fit in comfortably within this anthropological definition of bonding/impersonal. It is my submission that districts still constitute the most favoured unit for local historians to study because there are at least a few records to go by or because some enthusiasts find it a theatre of local glory. Though many of these district-produced district histories have reached respectable antiquity, very few have received anything more than recognition within the district or the state at the most. Among the ones that have made a mark are works like Sudhir Mitra's history of the district of Hugli, *Huglee Jelar Itihas*.²⁹ One does not recall too many works that obtained any worthwhile national or international acclaim, and the fact that language need not be the stumbling block is best proved from the numerous translations of the French historians.

The district is thus popular for non-professional local history writers, but professional historians are still not in a position to accept most of the local historical works produced at the level of the district. As mentioned, they find the district too small for serious history in comparison to the history of the nation or the state, or they feel that it is too vague where data is concerned, except for using tidbits for occasional embellishment. Moreover, the district is hardly uniform enough in its leading characteristics to really appear as a candidate for the type of history that we are straining to define as 'local'. But as it appears to be a winning proposition for most people who look at local history. The longevity of the district as an administrative unit is the prime motivating reason. It means that some data may be available for research and some local traits can be distinguished, without falling into the pitfall of district-based stereotypes. The 'district' appears to have been a stable feature during British rule in India and many districts have outlived their departure, in spite of the repeated fragmentation that several of them have gone in post-British India. The names and headquarters of most districts have remained reasonably unchanged, as have their surrounding 'cores', even when the mother district has been split more than once.

Districts in Bengal were comparatively stable during two centuries of British rule and they acquired thereby certain district-specific characteristics, which bordered on oft-repeated stereotypes. But, as stated, while the names and headquarters of many a district may have remained the same for more than a century, their boundaries have undergone considerable change. Monmohan Chakrabarti's painstaking and voluminous work of 1918 on the internal and external boundaries of districts of Bengal³⁰ relate in graphic detail how these boundaries were constantly changed. When this valuable work was updated in 1999,³¹ at least the part on West Bengal, many other modifications appeared clearly before the historian, indicating the numerous twists and turns in this rather fickle domain.

Let us take come back to Bardhaman, or Burdwan as it was styled in English records, for understanding some samples of the data. It was one of the first three primarily-rural territories of India that were be ceded to the British in 1760, by Mir Kasim. Between that year and 1916, the district's jurisdictions, both external and internal, were

tampered with as many as twenty-two times. In 1760, Bardhaman constituted more of an amorphous 'revenue-earning claim' rather than a very precise territorial formation. The government orders revealed changing kaleidoscopic images, as large parts of the original district were dismembered and joined to other districts. On the other hand, territories of entire police stations and Mughal *mahals* were taken away from other districts and merged with Bardhaman. We find that between 1939 and 1999, no less than twenty-four notifications were issued changing internal demarcations within Bardhaman district, mainly at the level of police stations, 'circles', blocks and other administrative and revenue units. The process slowed down between the two World Wars, but after Independence while several districts of India underwent alterations, Bardhaman remained quite unchanged.

Other districts have similar tales to tell. Despite such changes, we reiterate that the name and central mass of most districts usually did not undergo momentous alterations. And, despite the changes, none can deny the loyalty and identification that the districts managed to obtain from their inhabitants, and more so, from their émigrés. So strong has been the effect of these agglomerations that were created for bureaucratic convenience, that many people actually conferred on the district a strange socio-historical ethos or value. They became sentimental pillars of a person's existence in Bengal and in other states of the subcontinent.

The concentration of mainstream history and of formal historians is, however, on the national and the federal states, and there are quite a few on the latter, especially after linguistic states were streamlined in 1956. There is also a loose area of history called 'regional' that cuts across a few adjoining districts, i.e. the level just below the constitutive state, or could even mean areas that cut across some adjacent states. Since it is usually not very precisely defined in legal or administrative documents, it has both vagueness and popularity. There are, for instance, several local histories on the 'Bhojpuris' whose speakers cover mainly two major states, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, but are present in large numbers in adjoining states and are well-represented in the three metropolises of Kolkata, Mumbai and Delhi. We have also local histories written about regions like Sambalpur in Odisha that has strong emotive and integrative links, or even the Bundelkhand

area that overlaps parts of two states, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The 'region' has a greater felt bonding than the later construction called the 'district' and is often quite popular for historical research. It could very well be placed under the nomenclature 'local' even if this means that we are going around in circumstances over the different levels of historical geography: we have no choice. We would be the happiest if we could agree on a more precise terminology that would be universally applicable and monosemous.

In this framework, the term regional is applied to an area that, in the modern period of Indian history, could signify a group of districts either within a state or failing within adjacent states. To give an example of our 'region', we may say that the history of the Baro Bhuiyan's struggle or the depredations of the Bargis, both of which rolled over several 'districts' would constitute the stuff of regional history, as would the revolt of the Chuars or the Santals. Such regional histories that would fit in eminently within the term 'local history' have attracted disciplined historians. We see, therefore, that much of our academic history has generally shuttled between the national, the regional or the state, and only occasionally to levels below, which appears to have left that strata of local history open to others. But is there any iconic work by a professional historian on a particular village of India comparable to Ladorie's *Montaillou*?

The problem with the 'village' in India has been its romanticization in literature and in politics, buttressed by the performing arts and the cinema. It is viewed as an idyllic hamlet surrounded by verdant green fields and bounteous orchards with graceful rivers flowing past it. In Gandhian lore, villages were portrayed as ageless and pristine, almost akin to holy. We shall not discuss the stark reality here, but simply mention that there are several basic issues and problems that accost anyone who is seriously interested in working even on some selected aspects of village life. I confronted my own difficulties in the 1990s, when I started a socio-historical survey as the Project Director of a research supported by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). It took me to the interior of several villages in five districts of West Bengal through every conceivable mode of public transport. It was then that I realized what scholars like Richard Eaton³² had bemoaned: villages in Bengal are not historically-fixed places but

are loose, amorphous networks of households, hamlets, paras or localities. These were often held together, quite vaguely at times, and the habitations were largely unstable. They were prone to physical shifts after many a natural disaster and this continued till recent times, when overpopulation and rising land costs restricted their horizontal mobility.

Another problem relates to the perceptible difficulty in agreeing on what constitutes a village with reference to official records. A reliable starting point for grassroots research is the Village Directory that is published after each Census operation and it contains a lot of valuable socio-economic data. On closer examination, however, it is found that this data does not relate to villages as we understand them in common parlance, but to local level 'revenue villages' called *mauzas*. The *mauza* is a precisely demarcated area within the boundaries of which we may or may not find any human village, or we may locate just a part of a village or in some cases, even more than one village. Parts of the same habitation could very well lie within another *mauza* or even over two or three adjoining *mauzas*. Basically, a *mauza* is the collection of a large number of numbered 'plots of land or water', each of which is precisely marked on a revenue map. The lowest unit of territory for revenue purposes is this numbered 'plot', which in Bengal did not usually exceed an acre and was often even less.

In Bengal Presidency the British colonial rulers improved upon the existing Mughal system of land revenue and usually ensured that every plot of land was surveyed and documented with numbers. These numbered 'plots' fit tightly next to each other, somewhat like different countries or states do on a map. A demarcated 'plot' may cover patches of agricultural or non-agricultural, homestead lands, or even water bodies, fragments of rivers, hillocks, forests, roads and pathways – in fact, any type of land use. When all the contiguous areas of individual plots in a surveyed tract are clubbed together, they constitute the next higher level of revenue records, i.e. the *mauza* or the revenue village. It is not coterminous with the village as we understand it, i.e. a reasonably compact conglomeration of dwellings, in a rural setting. A *mauza* is, however, a territory with defined boundaries that may or may not contain such a human hamlet or a village. There are also 'depopulated *mauzas*' that do not have a single village or even a part

of it within their boundaries, or even a single human household. These areas may have contained human habitation once upon a time that may have been wiped out by malaria or attacks or floods, or it may be that the entire 'village' moved out of that area as the river threatened it year after year or the land became fallow.

Whatever be the reason, once surveyed and demarcated, the *mauza* remained the same under British administration and continued to be quite a permanent unit in the post-Independence period. While the human village hardly finds mention in permanent official records in Bengal and adjacent states, the revenue village exists and thrives therein as an immutable area. Moreover, in this part of India the human village hardly ever has any reliable official or historical record. So, when the term 'village' is used in government publications it does not necessarily mean a village. How and where is the solid data for one to anchor one's field research? If we look up the 'Village Directories' or any other such basic publication in order to trace a particular village somewhere in Bengal the chances of finding it by name are very remote. Providence may, occasionally, bless the researcher with the accident of having a human village that shares the same name as the official *mauza* village. To locate a 'real' village, we are compelled to find out the name of its parent *mauza*, since land records, the census books and other regular government publications mention and measure only the *mauza*.

Since our villagers or even their counterparts in the towns of India do not have any great penchant for noting historical events or details, or even keeping routine records like the Church registers in the Christian world, we are left high and dry where raw materials required for micro-history are concerned. The official process of identifying and recording administrative units continues in the same manner as we move upwards. A large number of *mauzas* thus join together to constitute the area of a *thana* or a police station. Each lower unit fits in perfectly with the rest, however irregular be the shape, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. In 1978, West Bengal introduced direct elections to panchayats, first at the 'gram level' that covered a small number of real inhabited villages, where voters lived. Some six to ten such gram panchayats (GPs) constitute a Panchayat Samiti, which is the next level of elected body that is usually coterminous with the police

station or *thana*. This is where 'revenue' meets 'reality' as the same area is called PS or police station for law and order, and is termed as Panchayat Samiti, also unfortunately shortened to PS. Sometimes, villagers are more familiar with the name of 'Blocks' even though the Panchayat Samitis superseded and subsumed the name and area of the Block. A lot of basic data is available at the level of the Panchayat Samiti that has lasted four decades and in the erstwhile Block offices that were set up in the 1960s. Just to complete the story, we may note that several police stations or Panchayat Samiti areas are added to form a 'subdivision'. Usually, two to four subdivisions then add together a form districts

Identifying Local Sources

Reverting to the original issue of how to can glean reliable historical data from a particular village or a group of villages, my contention is that in is the absence of neutral records, we may try examining family records or even genealogies that some families maintain or kept up to a point. These are quite unreliable unless they can be corroborated with official records. Around 1995, a family mentioned to me during field-work, that they could trace some twelve generations of ancestors, though they could not name each one of them, and some descendants started debating on some names in my presence. They stated categorically that they had moved out of the Salar region of the Rarh when the Bargis attacked their 'zamindari'. On verification, it appears that this is quite plausible as the number of generations gives us some 250 years of time and in the 1740s the Marathas did attack that region of Murshidabad, which is very much a part of Bengal's Rarh. But most claims, especially to high caste, royalty and pedigree are conjured even (or more so) if they have the stamp of pandits who would, like many clerks and inspectors of today, would do anything for a 'fee'.

Local history in India has a pronounced bias towards society and religion, unlike the 'view from below' that concentrates on human pawns *vis-à-vis* rulers and great events. Oral history is an area of research that has been practiced successfully by Indian historians and it could shed a bit of its current width and pinpoint to local areas

and how major events impacted on local society. Historians have covered much broader themes using this tool, like the freedom movement or the partition of India and some could always surely record memories of the local persons in a village or in a group of villages, in some specific context. We could record, for instance, the impressions of the surviving participants and police officials who can still recall the incidents that took place in 1959-60 during the Food Movement of West Bengal in the refugee colonies of Dum Dum. We are sure to gain a perspective that is different from either the official narrative or part of the Marxist lore. Or if we captured the old memories of the chronic, endless violence in Gourandi village in Asansol subdivision in the context of the coal mafia's operations after nationalization of the industry in the 1970s, one could write a powerful but highly realistic local history that could either challenge or modify the picture that films like the *Gangs of Wasseyapur* propagate.

For scholars with a penchant for the folk, the field abounds with spontaneous expressions in the popular idiom, like local doggerels, folk songs, crude skits and lampoons and bardic tales of heroism. For instance, when I was on the trail of the Dharma cult in Jamalpur village under Purbasthali *thana* of Bardhaman district, I was told local stories of a communal riot there in 1964 which were then of little interest to me as my concern was to document certain modes of worship and specific folk rituals. During later visits to the village, I came across a forlorn folk singer sitting in one corner of the temple of Dharmaraj, humming tunes and singing quietly about the events of that selfsame riot. My friend later decided to tape this song and actually managed, several years later, to have the singer and the song filmed into a documentary.³³ I was quite sceptical about accepting the evidence of this particular communal affray because formal history has no mention of it. I had even checked up the I.B. records³⁴ of Bardhaman and came across a total blank. But something appeared amiss as the living traditions of Dharmaraj worship at Jamalpur village invariably had some frenzied dances by the 'devotees' with dangerous machetes and firearms. Many an old man mentioned that these fearsome displays had started from that 'year of the riots, just before the Partition of India'. They were ritually enacted every year at

Jamalpur till the 1990s after which the police clamped down on them as open and flagrant violation of the laws of the land.

It was only much later that I stumbled across some news items in leading Bengali and English newspapers of Kolkata of that particular period which clearly mentioned this localized riot, though in small print. Thus I had, by sheer chance, a perfect example of how 'oral memory' remembered a slice of 'local history' and was captured in field notes, print and on celluloid. It was embedded in the hearts of the people so strongly that it defied official records to erase it. The memory of the people is thus often a better guide than official documents or other written records that many historians are so fond of. It is, of course, pertinent to mention that all folk history and expressions are not reliable and their very spontaneity make them susceptible to charges of distortion and colourful exaggerations. But is not some amount of national or regional history also open to such charges? Folk history and memory cannot, therefore, be singled out for reprimand on grounds of over-dramatizing facts, but all the same, it is best to be cautious when dealing with such popular sources.

Local Histories of Bengal

It is finally time to take a look at some of those local histories of Bengal that appeared in India in English till 1950. W.W. Hunter deserves a very special position as the first real local historian, though he preferred the terms 'annalist' and 'rural historian'. As a junior Assistant Magistrate in Birbhum in the late 1860s, Hunter had displayed extraordinary mettle by publishing the now forgotten book called *The Annals of Rural Bengal*,³⁵ several portions of which amounted to outright condemnation of the early years of British rule in Bengal. We can still sense his anguish at the 'eloquent and elaborate narratives' that have been written on 'the British ascendancy in the East', while 'the silent millions who bear our yoke have found no annalist'.³⁶ His graphic portrayal of the devastated landscape after the famine of 1770, which wiped out one third of Bengal's population, is touchingly personal and is replete with eyewitness accounts that would otherwise have been lost forever. His notes on the daily life and cares of the

Santal, as also their rebellion, leave behind lasting images, as do the chronicles of 'The Pandit and the Cook of Birbhum'.

The Gazetteer series have carved out its own position in so far as local history in India is concerned. Here again, it was W.W. Hunter who led the way in the 1870s, with his multi-volume *Statistical Accounts of Bengal* that clubbed an average of three districts in each volume. He plunged into his analysis and narrations as soon as the results of the first systematic 'Census of The Lower Provinces of Bengal of 1872' were made available to him. Until the publication of the independent district volumes, popularly known as the *Imperial Gazetteers*, these Hunter Accounts were the district officer's first text, for over three decades. The next name that appears here is L.S.S. O'Malley, who set the pace in the second decade of the last century, with the 'Imperial' or (properly speaking) the *Bengal District Gazetteers*. They are still quite reliable as comprehensive local histories (and more) and as most of them have been reprinted, with some amount of updating, by the West Bengal District Gazetteers they are available in print. Professional historians, such as Barun De, Hitesranjan Sanyal, Saugata Mukherji and Pranabranjan Ray, as well as specialized civil servants, like Amiya Kumar Bandopadhyay, Sankarananda Mukherji and Kumud Ranjan Biswas, were involved in updating and rearranging materials and re-publishing these valuable books and the work still lingers on for four decades and more. Complementary to this effort, Asoke Mitra made his valuable contribution to local and social history, working almost single-handedly among the upper echelons of the bureaucracy, immediately after his outstanding Census of Bengal in 1951. His *Castes and Tribes of West Bengal* and his compendium on the fairs and festivals of West Bengal³⁷, especially the detailed Bengali volumes of the latter, provide a mine of dated, local micro-histories.

As we move away from works of home-trained ethnologists and civil servants to the earliest Indian chroniclers, we note that some were not lagging behind. It appears that among the first English publication of consequence is a charming book by Bholanath Chunder called *The Travels of a Hindu*,³⁸ which appeared in print in 1869 just a year after Hunter's *Annals* and contained interesting snatches of local history. But the credit for the first dedicated local history may go to Chandranath Banerjee for *An Account of Howrah, Past and*

Present that was published in 1872, even before Hunter's *Statistical Accounts* was conceived. In 1896, A.G. Bower brought out *The Family History of Bansberia Raj*, while a decade later, Purna Chandra Majumdar's *The Musnud of Murshidabad* appeared. Continuing the tradition of publicizing the glory of the small rajas of Bengal, Akshoy Kumar Maitra brought out *A Short History of the Natore Raj* in 1912, while Abhoypada Mallik's *History of Bishnupur Raj* appeared a decade later. In this coverage of local histories, we have deliberately omitted the several histories of Calcutta town and the reports of specific archaeological spots. As this is a review of books published, we do not focus on the numerous articles on localities that appeared in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, the *Calcutta Review*, *Bengal Past and Present*, the *Sahitya Parishat Patrika* and similar journals.

After Independence, we have several works of our focused area in English. Mention may be made of N.K. Sinha and his *Midnapore Salt Papers, Hijli and Tamruk, 1781-1807*,³⁹ which is definitely local-centric as also David McCutcheon's *Temples of Bankura District*⁴⁰ published in 1967. Thereafter, the volume and frequency of local histories increase dramatically, and hence we shall restrict our view to numbers only, covering both English and Bengali works on local history. But even a cursory discussion on local histories of Bengal that appeared in English cannot be complete without recalling Ranjan Kumar Gupta's *The Economic Life of a Bengal District: Birbhum, 1770-1857*,⁴¹ which stands out as an example of how local materials can be handled and crafted into skilful history. It is a pity that local economic or social histories of other districts have not been worked on a sequel to Gupta's thesis, which made full use of the District Collectorate documents. Incidentally, our district level records have been deteriorating at such a rapid rate, that most old revenue and correspondence papers may not be available, traceable or readable later. This is due to a whole range of factors: from their inadequate and improper maintenance to the use of insensitive contractors handling their fumigation and lamination. Besides, as a low priority subject, the availability of government funds is also low and most overworked bureaucrats are not in any position give any directional priority to the archives and record rooms unless harassed scholars descend upon them. Sinha's and Gupta's works are excellent specimens

of two levels of local economic history, while Barun De's 'Death of a Maharani',⁴² is a political view of a mofussil constituency, garnished with social spice. All these books make it clear that local history need not be only social history, but at the same time, I would submit that social customs and behaviour are such complex and area-specific variables that they appear in true colours only in localized renditions – losing larger degrees of their spontaneity and quaint individuality to broader sweeps of generalizations, as they move on to larger canvases.

In 1977, Satish Chandra was among the early professional historians to point out that there is 'a distinctive genre is the district or local histories ... and most of them were written between 1895 and 1948.'⁴³ He mentions that 'these district histories throw ample light on socio economic conditions' and also that a large amount of unconventional materials have gone into their architecture. Most of the Bengali local histories have not acquired the acceptability that formal historians have granted, with footnotes on some limitations, to a select few. These may include Girishchandra Basu's *Sekaler Darogar Kahini* (Dhaka, 1888); Trailokyonath Pal's *Medinipurer Itihas* (3 vols., Calcutta, 1888 & 1896); Tarakchandra Dasgupta's *Chattogram Itibritta* (Chittagong, 1897); Nikhilmath Roy's *Murshidabader Itihas* (Calcutta, 1902); Jogendranath Gupta's *Bikrampurur Itihas* (Dhaka, 1909); Satishchandra Mitra's *Jashohar Khulnar Itihas* (2 vols., Calcutta, 1914 & 1923) and among others Sudhirkumar Mitra's *Hughli Jelar Itihas* (1948). Their degree of their acceptability among professional historians varied considerably and some discount on factual accuracy or for lack of methodological propriety were accepted. After all, these older histories appeared to compare well with efforts made in the adolescent stages of new disciplines. And, returning to Hamerow, history itself was not yet so dogmatic or ruthless with intruders.

In 1953, Prabodh Chandra Sen published his well-known *Banglar Itihas Sadhana*,⁴⁴ that mentioned local or district histories and in 1998, Sunil Behari Ghosh brought out his edited compendium entitled *Bangla Bhasay Itihas Charcha*.⁴⁵ Local history in Bengal will remember Tarapada Santra for his *Banglar Anchalik Itihas Charcha: Ekti Samikhyā*, that came out in 2000 listing as many local and regional histories that he could find out till 1997. Santra was one of the few persons who could bridge the great divide that separates the field historian from the desk-bound, the amateur from the professional,

the flexible from the formal, thanks mainly to his indefatigable and detailed researches at the grassroots level. The wide variety of his knowledge, experience insight and consequent database that he could recall to substantiate his hypothesis impressed many a well-known historian. Many other field historians or local specialists of popular culture have fallen victims to the overwhelming, standardizing values of the city establishment and after some time, their writings become indistinguishable from those of their urban patrons. If this loss of spontaneity is not disappointing enough, they dress up as clones of university dons and some become so urbane that their subsequent field-work becomes (in effect) some occasional touring of the rural areas, preying upon their less fortunate former companions, for materials that will be refined by them for their next publication in the city. But this was not the case with Tarapada Santra who remained essentially a field worker who hardly changed till his unfortunate demise. Despite his extreme problems of health and disease, he continued to publish genuine field histories and other monographs at regular intervals.

Santra's list of local histories of Bengal had a few major omissions, like those of W.W. Hunter and Ranjan Gupta. His definition of 'local' included some 'provincial' and 'archaeological' works and he mentions genealogical treatises and books on local pilgrim spots, as they are also part of the local heritage, though not reliable as history books. Such issues notwithstanding, his exhaustive, year-wise and (often) publisher-wise list of publications is an invaluable asset to our study of local history, and further, provides the requisite figures for establishing and observing the curve of growth in this realm. We thus see that, while no local history is available in Bengal before 1850 (only two genealogies of Rajas Pratapaditya and Krishnachandra are there), thirteen publications appear in the next twenty-five years, excluding Hunter's. Kalidas Maitra's delightful account of the towns and areas connected by the new steam engine on rails that appeared in 1855,⁴⁶ and the first local histories of Bogura (1861), Murshidabad (1864), Bikrampur, Bakharganj, Dhaka (all 1869), as well as Mymensingh-Sherpur, Haora, and Tamluk (all 1872) are valuable works of this period. Districts jostle with smaller local areas in claiming the attention of chroniclers, and our appellation 'local' covered both, right from the infancy of this genre. In the last quarter of the

nineteenth century, the number of local histories went up from 13 to 23, which appears quite encouraging.

The twentieth century opens with a veritable quantum jump, with at least 70 such publications surfacing in the first quarter of the century, representing a threefold increase. Interestingly, there are quite a few of these that are on villages, small towns and localities, on which historians now appear to be focusing. Among such locations feature Natore, Cachar, Chandradwip, Kedar village of Debra in Medinipur, Syedpur village of Khulna, Chakrashal and Goirala of Chittagong, Tarakeswar and Uttarpara in Hugli, Sirajgunj in Pabna, Garbeta in Medinipur, and Kakdwip in 24 Parganas. Santra could trace some 56 publications in the next quarter and for want of any alternate database, we have to accept the fall in the number. Again, according to our authority, 111 local histories (including state-level histories) were brought out in the next twenty-five years up to 1975. This figure and list relate now only to the western part of the erstwhile undivided Bengal, but we may halt this analysis based on Santra's compilation, as we have reached recent times and events may need to marinate a bit to qualify as history. It is also time for us to appreciate that, in spite of the best of efforts and sincerity, it is just not humanly possible for any single (or even a few) compilers to keep track of the numerous local publications that flood the market from the remotest corner of a state. The mandatory registration of new publications and the compulsion to send copies to the National Library have effectively collapsed as none other than reputed publishers comply. There is, therefore, no alternative to the laborious and primitive method of keeping track of the work in the districts through personal knowledge, which incidentally, is hardly ever infallible. It is wiser to rely on the experts of local history and culture of every district and update compilations based on their database, but this again is far from perfect.

I have not been able to include a lot of valuable governmental publications that cover different specific local areas and are, in a way, also local histories. For instance, the *Jelar Purakirti* series published by the Directorate of Archaeology of the West Bengal government since the 1970s and continued till the nineties of the last century was an excellent series started by Amiya Bandyopadhyay. It was continued by other worthy historians and archaeologists and documented most

of the notable items of ancient art, archaeology and architecture in each of the districts covered. We may include the seven or eight districts, including Bardhaman, that have been covered by the Information and Cultural Affairs department of the state through the 1990s, by what they called the *Jela Sankhyas*, most of the articles of which relate to the history and culture of the districts and are, therefore, within our study. Around the same time, the state's Folk and Tribal Culture Centre has also brought out several volumes of its *Jela Lok Sanskriti Parichay Grantha* series, featuring different aspects of the folk life and the cultural heritage of the districts. Our lists would have, thus, been even longer had we included all such publications. The sheer popularity of treatises on local history and culture appears to have been understood and appreciated by the government's culture wings, but we need to convince mainstream scholars to enter this domain and lend their expertise.

The issue, therefore, is not any more whether local histories require to be written, or whether it is better to concentrate at the level of localities rather than on any district as a whole. It appears more of a choice whether the formal, more positivist and trained historian would take up the task, or let it be continued to be written by scholars from other disciplines or by general enthusiasts. If we assume that students of history would enter the arena seriously, it is obvious that their mission would not be to valorize local persons or incidents. Professionals would take a more dispassionate view of the entire proceedings so far and make selective choices of niche areas of work and then start burrowing for hard evidence. It is here that the district record rooms, the much neglected *mahafez-khanas* may come to life. The records of the District Collectorate of Bardhaman consist of quaint 'Old English Correspondence' volumes dating back to the 1770s, which need to be fully digitized and examined before harm befalls them. Bardhaman's old Settlement Office's land revenue records contain gems like the Khas Mahal estates and allied registers and those relating to *chakran* and other *baze zamin* are the stuff that pines for the historian's touch. So do the registers of land sales, Burdwan Raj papers, the Chowkidari and Thanadari registers, the bound volumes of *sanads* (grants) written in Persian and Bengali distributing rent-free lands. When I last saw them, whole series and shelves full

of civil and criminal cases were available in the Judicial and Revenue record rooms of the district headquarters, in varying stages of indifferent maintenance.

The District Magistrates and Police Superintendents also have or had other records that have hardly ever been used, like the 'Notes to Successors'. They may still have survived in some districts and subdivisions, though it is also likely that many such 'informal' records have been lost forever, as such traditions just withered away. At the sub-divisional level, not too many records are available as the important ones were transferred to the district headquarters, but in the older *thanas*, the crime records may still be found, along with the village crime note-books, from 1916 to 1970 or more.

The materials on district level historical events that are available in a state capital like Kolkata are located not only in the State Archives, but also in the record rooms of the High Court, the Police headquarters, the Intelligence Branch and in the Board of Revenue. As Partha Chatterjee and Gautam Bhadra have proved, one can glean enough of the history of a 'local incident' of relatively small areas of Dhaka and Mymensingh districts of Bangladesh, sitting in Kolkata. Among the problems in the State Archives the one that confronts a certain category of scholars is that Home department records, pertaining to the political or communal situation were largely 'classified' and required to be 'screened' before their copies could be taken out.

What is less known is that we have equally interesting records pertaining to 'open' departments, like those dealing with Education, Health, Irrigation, Food, Industries, Public Works and others that provide a wealth of materials for scholars to use in the different contexts of history, including local histories. The travails of an 'Assistant Engineer' of the Public Works Department (PWD) as he struggled to remove the resistance of villagers to a new road that was being aligned over their fertile fields, the woes of an overseer who rushed around different lock-gates of the Eden Canal near Bardhaman trying to ward off local farmers who refused to let water flow past their fields as their crops wilted in the dry season, the chronicle of the District Inspector of Schools as he moved from village to village in Nakashipara and the Sanitary Inspector's report on the state of the temporary

toilets built at Mahesh village during the annual Rathayatra festival in the 1890s can all be used imaginatively. The local songs on the Battle of Plassey that Rajat Kanta Ray has touched upon in his *Palashir Sarajantra o Bangali Samaj*⁴⁷ is a case in point that local cultures often contain frozen evidence of history through rhymes, songs, skits and lampoons.

Conclusion

To conclude, I really do not know whether I have been able to construct a case for the formal historian to consider entering the domain of local history, with his inherent skills and wider perspective to the advantage of eager readers. Since the production of local histories is increasing in leaps and bounds and is assuming an important position in the hearts and minds of the average Bengali reader, this category of history is worth a serious look. It has waited a long time for the formal historian to make up his mind, and we may soon have a 'class divide' in history between the Western-inspired academics, writing mainly for themselves and their seminars in India and abroad, and those teaching the subject (or allied disciplines) in the mufassil colleges, producing local histories that the formal historian refuses to take seriously. While we lack a tradition of record maintenance to produce a *Montaillou* in this state, yet Hitesranjan Sanyal could harvest a rich crop of social history by studying the caste character of the temple builders of medieval and early modern Bengal.⁴⁸ The pedestal inscriptions of the idols of a cluster of temples in a particular district may perhaps yield original, unpredictable results, for they have hardly ever been given any serious attention.

This is a wake-up call, however mildly, to city-based historians to de-sacralize their methodology in order to get closer to primary materials and original evidence that are still available in the field. These may never be classified, scanned and bound for the reasonably comfortable and leisurely pace of trained researchers who work in air-conditioned archives, record rooms and libraries. The 'text' available therein is always important, but scholars could refer occasional to the 'context' as well. This lies in visiting specific 'local areas' that have to

be reached by all modes of transport, including the cycle vans on which one has to sit upright at the edges, dangling one's legs on the sides, for several miles without relief. During such a journey, one recalls with horror how the main cargo of the cycle van was a wrapped up but smelly corpse that was being taken for a proper cremation. It kept rolling all over and had to be pushed back, every now and then. Such hazards are minor when compared to researchers who need to perch quite dangerously on the roofs of overcrowded buses, next to squawking chicken flapping their noisy wings in the circular baskets, as numerous boxes and bags jostled for space. Even so, trained historians need to venture to visit the interior. They can guide local researchers to sift materials for their local history with some professional empiricism, or else the urban-rural and the professional-amateur binaries will continue to plague us. Formal historians could actually partner as joint authors and local history clearly requires professionalism and quality and cannot thrive only on enthusiasm and energy.

Notes

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