

Nationalising Ruins: Contested Identities of the Ruins of Gour and Pandua¹

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Late 19th-early 20th century Bengal witnessed a renewed interest on behalf of Bengali scholars, to engage with the ruins of Gour and Pandua, from what has on retrospect been regarded as a Nationalist perspective. These nationalist narratives were however communally pluralised in correspondence to the religiously informed politics of the period. Gour-Pandua soon became a site of communal contestation on account of its multiple pre-colonial identities: that of a Hindu capital till the reign of Lakshmanasena and of a Muslim capital thereafter. This paper intends to analyse the multiple imaginations such accounts develop, viewing the ruins as a site for legitimisation of Hindu and Muslim nationalist sentiments and delegitimisation of colonial rule.

Between the late 19th and the early 20th century, Bengal experienced a new impetus to writing regional histories. The origins of this impetus could perhaps be better understood when read in context of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's 'Bangalar Itihaas', where he laments that in spite of its rich past in terms of places and personalities, Bengal and its people does not have a recorded history.² The proliferation of literature and the frequent breakthroughs

in unearthing new 'facts' about various regions of Bengal *vis-à-vis* India that was seen during this period, earned it the moniker of 'the great age of rediscovery.'³ Most of these projects, albeit focused on writing local histories, would eventually contribute to the composition of a larger national history through the prism of the 'local'. The 'regional' or the 'local' would therefore not be constructed on the basis of geopolitical boundaries and would be defined rather on linguistic and cultural terms in most of these projects. Texts from the period often bear testimony to voices contesting the colonial identities of Bengal *vis-à-vis* India's 'heritage' on the basis of a new-found knowledge of the pre-colonial history of the region. Questions of identity and ownership, pertaining to particular heritage sites, soon preoccupied Nationalists across the country, who sometimes regarded such sites as providing legitimacy to their aspirations. It is no wonder that projects intent on researching the history and 'heritage' of Bengal, and its inhabitants soon found patronage from a section of the Bengal elite—Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay received financial support from Narendranath Basu, of the Basu family of Masjid Bari Street, for the publication of his *Bangalar Itihaas* in 1914⁴, while other local history projects, such as Nagendranath Basu's compilation of the history of northern *Rarh*, found patronage from the likes of the Maharaj Bahadur of Dinajpur and Pandit Dineshchandra Bhattacharya.⁵ Among the manifestations of this sentiment, we could also consider the establishment of the Barendra Research Society in 1910 at Rajshahi, under the patronage of Sarat Kumar Ray, a member of the Dighapatiya Rajbari (the Royal family of Dighapatiya). The Society aimed to initiate dialogues between scholars like Akshay Kumar Maitreya and Professor Ramaprasad Chanda, and promote works on the history and 'heritage' of

barendrabhumi (part of ancient Bengal).

The identities of heritage sites would however not be contested only on the basis of a colonial/nationalist binary. In most cases, they would also be contested among the communally fragmented strands of Bengali nationalism. It is in this context that this article seeks to understand the contested identities of the 'heritage' of Gour and Pandua, in correspondence with the various strands of religiously informed Bengali nationalism of the late 19th-early 20th century. It would also try to situate primarily Hindu and Muslim nationalistic engagements with the ruins, within the discourse of identity politics, while attempting to map colonial narratives through these later accounts. In the process, it would also address the positions of Hindu nationalists, who subsumed all pre-Islamic cultures existing in ancient India, into one floccose rubric of 'Hindu heritage',⁶ constructing thereby a view of the ruins of Gour and Pandua exclusively as 'inevitable victimisation of a Hindu monument in the hands of Muslim desecrators and looters', while imagining for their region, what Tapati Guha-Thakurta has called, a proverbial 'golden age'.⁷

The Lost Capitals: References and Reflections

The paucity of dependable sources, which could give us a clear idea of both the geographical location and the historical identity of the city or settlement of Gour, has been widely lamented by historians. Even though Niharranjan Ray says that the word Gour, in ancient Bengal, referred to one of the numerous *janapadas*, he admits that it is extremely difficult to ascertain its exact position and map out its territory from available sources.⁸ The name, or rather the word Gour, in whichever context it may have been, appears in the works of Patanjali, Panini, Vatsayana and

Varahamihira but none of them, except for Varahamihira, shed any light on its position.⁹ The oldest sources through which the specific geographical position of the settlement of Gour could be ascertained are from the sixteenth century—the maps of Portuguese chronicler João de Barros (1550) and Italian traveler Garstaldi (1561), which situate Gour on the western banks of the river Bhagirathi, towards the north of *Rarh*.¹⁰ In Perso-Arabic sources of the 13th and 14th centuries, however, the region of *Lakhnauti*, which came to denote the area now known as Gour, does find mention.¹¹ The name *Lakhnauti* is a Persian distortion of *Lakshmanavati*, once the capital city of Lakshmanasena, the last ruler of the Sena dynasty.¹² This distortion, as the aforementioned sources suggest, happened subsequent to the Islamic conquest of Bengal by Ikhtyar-ud-din Muhammad bin Bakhtyar (Mahomed Bakhtiyar Khilji), a general in Qutb-ud-din Aibak's army, in the 12th century. Following the invasion, *Lakshmanavati* regained its status as the capital or seat of power in Bengal.¹³ Portuguese historian Manuel de Faria Sousa's *History of the Discovery and the Conquest of India* (translated), testifies that the city of Gour maintained its position of esteem in medieval Bengal polity until at least the sixteenth century. Sousa, in his work, regards the city as the 'principal city of Bengal' and describes Gour as a densely populated city housing almost twelve lakh families.¹⁴ That number, Sousa reports, would only go up further during festivals. Sousa also spoke of Gour as a well-planned settlement with trees lining both sides of its streets and its boundaries being marked by high mud-walls.¹⁵ Sousa's claims are seconded by the Portuguese historian João de Barros, who visited Gour in the 1550s.¹⁶

In the second half of the sixteenth century, Ganga, Mahananda and Kausiki (modern day Kosi), the main rivers

of Bengal, gradually began to change their courses and drift away from the city of Gour. Most notably Kosi, which would previously flow into the Brahmaputra, changed its course and became a tributary of the Ganga. Consequently, the city of Gour lost its main supply of water and gradually turned into a low-lying wetland unfit for living.¹⁷ A disastrous flood soon followed and this led to the eventual desertion of the city. The city was repaired and beautified in 1575, by Akbar, when Munim Khan again made it his capital and rechristened it as Jannatabad. This new status was however short-lived. Soon after, Munim Khan lost his life to a plague and Gour's unhealthy living conditions kept it from regaining its status as a populous settlement.¹⁸ Soon after, Gour also lost its 'capital city' status to Tanda which in turn conceded its status to Pandua. Opinions on Gour's longevity as the capital of Bengal have been varied and scholars such as Ratnabali Chatterjee have pointed out multiple occasions when the seat of power in Bengal, was transferred from one place to another. Ratnabali Chatterjee reports that a similar incident took place in the early fourteenth century when Shamsuddin Firuz Shah transferred his capital from Gour to Pandua and rechristened the place *Pandua Firuzabad*.¹⁹ This change was to be soon undone by the Tughlaqs who took back the capital to Gour only to see it being reversed, once again, under Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah, a few years later, in 1338.²⁰ The history of Pandua or Hazrat-Pandua's (also spelt at times as Pundooah) prominence in Bengal, according to Jogendranarayan Choudhuri, goes even further back than Gour: right up to the reign of Adisura when Gour was a settlement under Pandua.²¹ Unfortunately, even though Adisura's importance in the History of Bengal is undoubted—as he was considered to be the first to invite the *Five Brahmanas* from Kanya Kubja or Kanauj to Bengal and

thereafter give birth to a new social structure—his period and extent of reign have only been speculated upon at length without much evidence. Pandua too, much like Gour, is assumed to have been a flourishing 'Hindu city' under the name Pandunagara, prior to the Islamic invasion.²²

Colonisers Find the Ruins:

European Engagements and Indian Histories

As mentioned earlier, Gour and Pandua's tryst with European visitors goes back to the sixteenth century and in spite of a steep decline in both their prominence and grandeur, both the settlements somehow continued to experience visits from Europeans. Major James Rennell visited Gour and Pandua in 1760 to map its erstwhile territorial stretch and also gave a short account of its history in his book *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan*, published in 1788.²³ It is clear from his accounts that the situation at Gour, at least in terms of living conditions, had not improved drastically since the end of the sixteenth century. This is because in terms of description, he is not far away from Ralph Fitch, who, in spite of acknowledging the presence of a few villages, describes the area such:

We found but few villages but almost all wilderness,
and saw many buffs, swine and deer, grasse longer
than a man, and very many tigers ²⁴

Sometime in the 1770s Robert Orme, a surgeon, physician and historian in the East India Company also made a trip to Gour.²⁵ Despite these discrete visits from colonial officials that one is able to trace from their later published memoirs, no comprehensive account of the entire place can be traced. This void is finally addressed in 1786, when Henry Creighton, superintendent of Charles Grant's indigo farm at Guamalati (a place next to Gour), voluntarily takes up the

responsibility of surveying every monumental remain of the place. Creighton, through his topographical estimates, detailed sketches and descriptions of the ruins, published posthumously in the form of a book titled *The Ruins of Gour*,²⁶ in many ways pioneered historical research on Gour. A year after Creighton's arrival at Guamalati, British mathematician Reuben Burrow, back then an employee of the East India Company, visited Gour to calculate the latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates of an 'ancient round tower,' which in all probability was the Firuz Minar.²⁷ Unfortunately, apart from the coordinates no other records of his Gour visit remain. Incidentally, John Thomas, a surgeon under the East India Company, visited Gour and Guamalati in the same year. He did so, on orders from Charles Grant, to examine the material resources the ruins had to offer. He found the place "miserably desolate and unwholesome."²⁸

It is in the pioneering text *Ruins of Gour* by Henry Creighton that the perception of Gour having once been a successful Hindu settlement, which was later on ransacked and ravaged by Muslim invaders, was formulated. In other words, Henry Creighton, for the first time brought forth the idea that Hindu monuments were broken down and converted into Islamic structures, at Gour. He did so primarily by pointing out depictions of Hindu gods and goddesses on certain constituent stone slabs from the mosques of Gour and Pandua. Creighton's narrative generalises several Muslim rulers of Bengal as vandals and bears references to specific monuments to substantiate this claim. For example, while speaking of the Chhota Sona Masjid (which literally translates to Small Golden Mosque in English) he suggests that "[T]he stone used in these mosques had formerly belonged to Hindu temples destroyed by the zealous

Muhammadans, as will be evident from an inspection of Plates XVI, XVII and XVIII representing four slabs taken from this building.”²⁹

In plate XVI of his book, he collates the two faces of a stone slab obtained from the ruins of the Chhota Sona Masjid to demonstrate how one side depicts a Hindu deity: the *Varaha avatar* (boar) of Vishnu and the other side: an Islamic floral pattern.³⁰ In plates XVII and XVIII, Creighton once again highlights three constituent stone slabs of the Chhota Sona Masjid. While plate XVII depicts *Shivani*, consort of Shiva, the other (XVIII) depicts Brahmani and Bhawani, two *rups* or forms of *Durga*.³¹ Consequent to his findings, it appears to Creighton that it was “a general practice of the Muhammadan conquerors of India, to destroy all the temples of the idolaters, and to raise Mosques out of their ruins.”³²

This makes Creighton one of the earliest proponents to strike a direct relationship between mosque-building and temple-destruction in medieval India and to antagonise the Muslims (Muhammadans) or a section of the medieval Islamic elite as ‘desecrators.’ In the process, Creighton also becomes the first to explore the multiple identities of the monuments of Gour and Pandua, a discussion which has lately received valuable contributions from the likes of Richard Maxwell Eaton.³³

Creighton’s project coincided with a burgeoning British interest in exploring the subcontinent’s history.³⁴ Creighton’s work immediately became a part of this trend and his knowledge of Gour and Pandua was soon highly respected and revered. His work, post completion in 1801, was patronised by the erstwhile Governor-General Lord Wellesley and thereafter published posthumously by a certain James Moffat in Calcutta in 1808.³⁵ Creighton’s

work was, somewhat justifiably, perpetuated and influenced a section of the succeeding scholarship on Gour, which included the likes of Francis Buchanan Hamilton and J.H. Ravenshaw. Even though Francis Buchanan had later expressed how he felt that Creighton's paintings were at times manipulated to exaggerate the magnificence of the ruins of Gour, most of them recognised Creighton's work as valuable and kept falling back on it on multiple occasions. Montgomery Martin for example, in his 1838 work, took up Creighton's analysis of the stones of Gour and Pandua (of having originally belonged to Hindu monuments) and estimated the extent of the 'Hindu city' which housed the settlement and also inferred that the city had huge buildings and enormous tanks.³⁶ With regards to the study of monuments in the Subcontinent, another important British figure, James Fergusson, came up with his magnum opus *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, during the latter half of the same century (1876). For Fergusson the Gandhara school of art and architecture, which he initially reads from the monasteries at Jamalgi, Takht-i-Bahi and Shah-Dehri, represented the highest form of aesthetic purity in terms of Indian architecture primarily because of its Greek influence. He believed that the Bactrians had built magnificent monuments even in India and assumed that they too were subjected to Islamic destruction.³⁷ After his visit to Bengal, Fergusson realised that Bengal's productivity or supply of quality stones were almost non-existent and admitted that frequent arches were almost a compulsion given that most of the structures had to be made from bricks; in the process however, he also spoke of a distinct individuality which characterised the architecture of Bengal.³⁸

The Perception of Heritage: Medieval Monuments, Modern Perspectives

In the later stages of the 19th century, the Indians gradually involved themselves with the study of South Asian antiquities. The period was also incidentally marked by an escalating sense of cultural nationalism within the native elite, a consciousness which motivated him to recover his lost pre-colonial, at times pre-Islamic, identity. Consequently, as mentioned in the very first paragraph of this article, several Bengali scholars took to the study of regional histories and local 'heritage' in an attempt to 'unearth' their pre-colonial identities. Their nationalist sentiments would soon find resonance on a 'national' scale and eventually inspire direct protests against the colonial regime by means of questioning its legitimacy. Simultaneously however, this nationalist appeal would also get fragmented on communal lines. In an attempt to transmit the sense of cultural nationalism to younger generations, Raj Krishna Mookherjea compiled one of the earliest histories of Bengal, in the form of a textbook for children and young adults, during this time. Raj Krishna's work found high appreciation from Bankimchandra who endorsed it as one of the most important textbooks for children's education in Bengal.³⁹ In this work, Raj Krishna for the very first time claimed that Bengal was not entirely captured in the 13th century. Both he and Bankimchandra dismissed the theory that entire Bengal had fallen prey to a group of 18 cavalymen led by Mahomed Bakhtiyar Khilji,⁴⁰ and instead argued that even after Bakhtiyar's invasion, Lakshmanasena's successors ruled southern Bengal from Saptagram and Subarnagram, while 'keeping its independence intact' for at least another century.⁴¹ Raj Krishna and Bankim rethought the timeline of Bengal's history while selectively situating their

imagination of ‘Bengali independence’ in an historic pre-Islamic and an imagined post-colonial setting.

Khan Saheb Maulvi Abid Ali Khan’s book *Memoirs of Gour and Pandua* (written in 1902), apart from marking one of the earliest engagements of a native scholar specifically with the history of Gour and Pandua, also makes an important intervention in this debate. Khan, who worked in the Public Works Department under the Colonial government, at the very beginning of his book, pursues, presumes and glorifies his lost identity as a descendant of the ‘great Pathan rulers of Bengal’ and strives to establish it as a parallel national identity:

I belong to the ancient family of the Pathan rulers of Gour and my ancestors came with King Firuz Shah from Delhi and settled at Gour. When my forefathers were much harassed by the Governors of the Mughal Emperors and their number grew less and less, they selected a high land close to Bisan Kot near Charkhi and Batna for their safe asylum; but as afterwards the place became full of jungle and unhealthy, the family transferred their residence to the present village of Arhidanga.⁴²

Khan intervenes by reappropriating the narrative of Minhaj-i-Siraj’s medieval text *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, which had come under severe criticism from Bankimchandra and later from Ramesh Chandra Majumdar. In fact, Bankimchandra, in his quest for rendering it baseless, even compared Minhaj’s claims about Bakhtiyar’s conquest of Bengal with 18 cavalymen, with his own claims of having seen a ghost the previous night.⁴³ Later scholars such as Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, Rakhal Das Bandopadhyay and Major H. G. Raverty (the man behind what is often considered the most appropriate translation of the *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*) also expressed

their fair share of doubts on the historicity of certain incidents depicted in the *Tabakat*.

Khan furthers the discourse with his glorification of the Islamic invasion of Bengal. He, most notably, claims that the 'recorded history' of the region does not begin until Bhaktiyar Khilji's conquest and in the process renders the pre-Islamic sources of Bengal's history inconclusive. He constructs his account of the Islamic conquest of Gour (Lakhnauti) *vis-à-vis* Bengal also from its descriptions in the *Tabakat-i-Nasiri* and considers the event inevitable and predestined, along the lines of the *Tabakat*.⁴⁴ He is also not emphatic in his treatment of the idea of Islamic desecration of pre-Islamic structures, unlike Creighton, Martin, Buchanan or even a part of the scholarship which follows his, and only passively mentions the discoveries of Hindu imageries on the disintegrated stones of certain monuments like the Chhota Sona Masjid and Chika Masjid.⁴⁵ For the Chhota Sona Masjid, he does refer to the works of Creighton but merely presents to the reader his own point of view in terms of acceptance or negation of Creighton's claims, as the small section almost becomes a quotation from Creighton's narrative.⁴⁶ In a latter part of his book, while talking about the Adina Masjid of Pandua, he suggests another theory that the stones bearing Hindu images, found in and around Adina, were brought from Sylhet by Sikandar Shah after his battles against Sylhet. The argument however remains deficient in terms of evidence.⁴⁷ To put into perspective, Khan constructs a nationalist engagement with the monumental ruins while almost exclusively emphasising their Islamic past, and in defence of his methodology he argues that no conclusive information about the ruins' pre-Islamic identities are available.

Khan's arguments have since been contradicted by the

works of a section of the scholarship subsequent to his. The scholars proved Khan's concern about the lack of sources for writing a pre-Islamic history of Bengal ill-founded on the basis of their own works on the pre-Islamic history of Gour-Pandua *vis-à-vis* Bengal. Many of these scholars considered the monuments 'twice victimised': first in the hands of the Islamic invaders and secondly in the hands of the colonisers (mainly the East India Company) who used them as a quarry of raw materials to build newer monuments elsewhere.⁴⁸ One of the earliest and most important among the aforementioned group of scholars was Rajanikanta Chakraborty, who contradicted M. Abil Ali Khan's narrative in his 1906-07 work *Gourer Itihaas*. Rajanikanta grounded his construction of the pre-Islamic identity of Gour on mythological narratives as well as 'scientific' deductions, of the Alexander Cunningham and Rajendralal Mitra from the several coins, inscriptions and other primary sources. Rajanikanta also widened the focus of research on Gour emphasising that any analysis of the history of Gour would necessarily involve a study of the history of all the settlements, such as *Anga*, *Banga*, *Rarha*, *Mithila*, *Utkala* and *Magadha*, which constituted *Gour Banga* in ancient India.⁴⁹ Interestingly, while discussing *Utkala*, he regards the pre-Islamic history of the settlement as the period of its 'Hindu independence', somewhat taking a leaf out of books of Bankimchandra and Raj Krishna Mookherjee.⁵⁰ He also pays substantial attention to the aspect of temple-defacing, unlike M. Abid Ali Khan, and identifies a section of the Muslims as perpetrators.⁵¹ Rajanikanta viewed the heritage of Gour-Pandua as a valued, tangible legacy of a glorious past and ended the first volume of his work—underlining a growing desire, in him and his contemporaries, of regaining the lost pride of the Bengalis through independence.

Although later scholarship has occasionally characterised such readings of monuments as exemplary of ‘Islamic iconophobia,’ and have emphasised on looking at what Rajanikanta Chakraborty viewed as temple desecration, as process as the remaking of monuments;⁵² it must be said that Rajanikanta’s view, in its time, had won many followers.

Rajanikanta’s work also contributed in developing a renewed interest in the study of the history of Gour and Pandua among his contemporaries. One of them was Akshay Kumar Maitreya, the first of whose three edited volumes, called *Gourlekhmala*, was published in 1912. Akshay Kumar dedicated two of his three volumes to the pre-Islamic history of the region and much like Rajanikanta, depended heavily on the contemporary discoveries and readings of inscriptions.⁵³ He suggested that the *Kesava Prashasti*, on the Khalimpur copper plate discovered in 1893 from the ruins of Gour, spoke of the installation of a Shiva sculpture at the site of a Buddhist monastery, named *Mahabodhi*, during the reign of Dharmapala.⁵⁴ In doing so, Akshay Kumar pluralised the narrative of the pre-Islamic identities of the monuments of Gour-Pandua and raised serious questions regarding the number of times they were converted. His work was one of the earliest to establish that the conversion of monuments, in Bengal *vis-à-vis* India, did not essentially follow a strict ‘Hindu to Islamic’ syntax. Unfortunately, his questions would gain limited popularity and would be somewhat subsumed under the larger Nationalist agenda, of using the ruins of Gour as a metaphor for ‘lost Hindu pride and sovereignty.’⁵⁵ The scholarship on Gour, which followed that of Akshay Kumar Maitreya, would not lay substantial emphasis on the plurality of the pre-Islamic identity of the monuments and would mark a retreat to the binary of the Hindu temples falling victim to the

Islamic invaders, who built mosques from their ruins.⁵⁶ Jogendranarayan Choudhuri, for example, contextualised the aforementioned sense of 'lost pride' with the apparently innumerable riches ancient Gour possessed, in his book *Gour o Pandua*, and spoke of monument conversion only in terms of the 'Hindu-creators/Muslim-destroyers' binary.⁵⁷ The distinction of Jogendranarayan's narrative however lies in his underlining of the contributions of Islamic rule to the city of Gour and his appreciation of the efforts of Lord Curzon in preserving the ruins. Another travel account, *Gour Pandua* by Charu Chandra Mitra, published in 1922, also credits the efforts of Lord Curzon and considers him almost solely responsible for whatever little could be preserved of Gour and Pandua.⁵⁸ Charu Chandra constructs pre-Islamic Gour and Islamic Gour as two distinct phases separated by a period of large-scale conversion (of both monuments and people) but more interestingly revisits Akshay Kumar's argument of the monuments of Gour and Pandua having a plural pre-Islamic identity. He does so in his discussion of the history of the Adina Masjid, where he mentions that a huge Buddhist stupa was broken down to clear the ground for its construction. He substantiates his argument by referring to a large sculpture of the Buddha, which would previously stand next to the gateway of the mosque before it was broken down along with several other smaller sculptures behind the walls of the mosque. This, he claims, is readily attested to by local Muslims who also report that all the Hindu and Buddhist traces of the monument/area were erased in order to reconstruct an exclusive Islamic identity of the mosque.⁵⁹ Charu Chandra also contests M. Abid Ali Khan while suggesting that the Adina Masjid was built from raw materials gathered from Hindu temples.⁶⁰ He calls Gour a '*smritir shasan*' which means a graveyard of

memories, and exalts the ruins, like various others, as a specimen of extraordinary artistic merit. His nationalism is expressed in both his celebration of the Islamic and pre-Islamic past of the ruins of Gour-Pandua and his lamentation of the present which has rendered this cultural heritage a 'graveyard of memories.'⁶¹

The scholarship of Rajanikanta Chakraborty, Akshay Kumar Maitreya and their contemporaries on Gour and Pandua, had a major influence on successive generations. One scholar, from this generation, who involved himself with the study of the ruins of Gour and Pandua, was Sarasi Kumar Saraswati. Unfortunately, Sarasi Kumar also singularised the pre-Islamic identity of the monuments as 'Hindu' and while commenting on Pandua he stated, "What little evidence we still have of this Hindu city [Pandua] calls up a vision of its ancient magnificence, with temples thronged with worshippers and tanks smiling with lotuses."

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He in fact went on to write that during his two tours in the districts of Malda and Dinajpur, he was able to unearth the 'Hindu pasts' of most of the monuments in Gour and Pandua. He justified his claim by drawing reference to a stone he claimed he had discovered from the disintegrated stones of the Adina mosque, which carried the inscription "Indranatha".⁶³ Later in an article written for the *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, in 1941, he also suggested that the entire structure of Adina actually stands on the base of a pre-Islamic temple.⁶⁴ Sarasi Kumar specifically suggested that the *Eklakhi Mausoleum*, the buildings around the *shrines of Qutb Alam and Shah Jalal* and even the *old bridge* that lies to the south of Pandua, were all made of materials obtained from the desecration of Hindu temples. He believed, "Every structure of this royal city [Gour]

discloses Hindu materials in its construction, thus indicating that no earlier monument was spared.”⁶⁵

Dinesh Chandra Sen's 1935-book *Brihat Banga* attempts to present a somewhat plausible explanation to the pre-Islamic (Buddhist-Hindu) part of the identity debate. Dinesh Chandra Sen, unlike Rajanikanta Chakraborty, maintained that the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* could not be considered historical texts, yet he firmly believed that their historical essence could not be dismissed altogether. From sources such as *The Mahabharata* and *Harivamsa*, Dinesh Chandra maps a genealogy of hatred that Brahmanas possessed for their contemporary Jains and Buddhists. He follows this up with the description of a period where he believes Hindus looted and tortured Buddhists and their settlements. However, destruction or deconstruction *per se* does not find much mention in Dinesh Chandra's work as he suggests, with reference to an article called *Chodmobeshey Debdebi* (“Gods and Goddesses in Disguise”) written by Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, that a lot of Buddhist and Jain idols and structures were reappropriated as Hindu idols and structures instead of being destroyed.⁶⁶ Comparatively, in the latter stages of his book, the advent of Islamic rule in Bengal and its subsequent destruction of existing monuments, finds severe criticism. Without specific references to any particular site, Dinesh Chandra rues that all that was built by Hindu rulers to immortalise their legacy, fell to the 'tormenting sword of Islam'.⁶⁷ He metaphorically says, one could perhaps have witnessed pre-Islamic 'Taj Mahals' had the 'barbaric sword of Islam' not come down upon Bengal.

Conclusion

The nationalist engagement with the ruins (of Gour-Pandua), and their history, was almost entirely based on the issue of

identity politics, where the departure from one identity to another was fiercely contested. Reflection of similar sentiments could also be found in the contemporary non-elite combative movements even though the direct influences of the texts mentioned above on them remains to be ascertained.⁶⁸ The idea that an imagined temporal identity of a particular heritage site was metaphorical, also entailed a vague adherence to the colonial historiography of James Mill and Montstuart Elphinstone.⁶⁹ The legacy of identity politics, centring on monuments and heritage sites, among multiple religiously informed strands of nationalism continues even today. The most prominent is perhaps the Ram Mandir-Babri Masjid saga. Hindutva ideologues have claimed that around 60,000 temples were destroyed by Muslim invaders, without even being able to prove the existence of so many temples in early medieval India.⁷⁰ Richard M. Eaton has thus far confirmed the destruction of 80 Hindu temples from existing sources but has maintained that it is impossible to ascertain the exact number of temples desecrated in Indian history.⁷¹ Eaton also laments the absence of any hitherto discovered record which would shed light on the conversion of monuments by Hindus. This Eaton says, undoubtedly took place, “but the facts in the matter were never recorded, or the facts were recorded but the records themselves no longer survive”.⁷² On the contrary, records for Islamic conversion of monuments exist in abundance. For Eaton, sources on monument conversion and destruction in medieval India are “almost always fragmentary, incomplete, or even contradictory,”⁷³ and it is these limitations that the Nationalists have made full use of. In the words of Eaton, Hindu Nationalists have attempted to “fill up the blank spaces with pieces that don’t exist, or that you think must have existed”, and have used the limitation of history to suit their political needs.

Notes

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² Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, "Bangalar Itihaas", *Bankim Rachanabali II* (Kolkata: Sahitya Sansad, 2004), 285.

³ Brajadulal Chattopadhyay used the phrase "the great age of rediscovery", coined by geographer Hugh Prince, to describe the intellectually relevant activities of the concerned period. Brajadulal Chattopadhyay, "Foreward" in Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay, *Banglar Itihaas* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishers, 2010), i.

⁴ Hemendrakumar Ray (pseudonym of Prasad Ray), "Jatindra Guho," *Samaychitrakatha* (Kolkata: Talpata, 2014), 107.

⁵ Swarupa Gupta, *Notions of Nationhood in Bengal: Perspectives on Samaj, c. 1867-1905* (BRILL, 2009), 274.

⁶ This was done somewhat in tandem with the colonial practice. The history of India was periodised by colonial historians, starting from James Mill, as the Hindu period, the Islamic period and the British (or Colonial) period. James Mill, *The History of British India I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁷ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 125. The Nationalist conception of a region having its "Golden age" at a particular point in its history was however also identified by the likes of Brajadula Chattopadhyay and others, apart from Tapati

Guha-Thakurta.

⁸ Niharranjan Ray, *Bangalir Itihaas: Adi Parva* (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2009), 79, 121-22.

⁹ A large region of modern-day northern Bengal was referred to as Gourbanga in ancient times. This is however not to be confused with Gour, the subject of this article. Varahamihira indicates that the place was somewhere in the modern-day Murshidabad-Birbhum-West Bardhaman region. Ibid: 121-122.

¹⁰ *Rarh* was another *janapada* of Bengal, somewhat akin to Gour. See Ray, *Bangalir Itihaas*, op cit, 79.

¹¹ Ibid: 122. Lakhnauti also finds mention in Minhaj-i-Siraj's *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*.

¹² *Lakshmanavati* was founded by Lakshmanasena, when he decided to shift his capital from *Ramabati*, the most prominent establishment in the region since the end of the *matsyanyaya* period and the start of Gopala's reign. Later on in Lakshmanasena's reign, the capital was again transferred from Lakshmanavati to Nabadwip, in Nadia (or Nuddiea). *Matsyanyaya* is a Bengali word meaning the law of the fishes, i.e., the larger fish would inevitably consume the smaller fish. The period of instability in Bengal, when more powerful chiefs were often defeating smaller chiefs and conquering their territories, anteceding the reign of Gopala and foundation of the rule of the Pala dynasty, is referred to by this term.

¹³ Major H. G. Raverty trans. *Minhaj-i-Siraj's Tabakat-i-Nasiri* (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 2010), 559. James Rennell's *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan* testifies that the region was recognised by the name of *Lakhnauti*, even in the mid-eighteenth century. See James Rennell, *Memoir of a map of Hindoostan; or The Mogul Empire: With an*

introduction, illustrative of the geography and present division of that country: and a map of the countries situated between the head of the Indus, and the Caspian Sea (London: George Nicol, 1788), 55.

¹⁴ Manuel de Faria e Sousa, *The Portuguese Asia: Or, The History of the Discovery and Conquest of India by the Portuguese*, trans. Captain John Stevens (London: C. Brome, 1695), 416-18.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Charuchandra Mitra, *Gour Pandua* (Calcutta: Bengal Book Company, 1922), 48-49. Also see Ray, *Bangalir Itihaas*, op cit, 79.

¹⁷ Ibid: 90.

¹⁸ James Rennell in his *Memoir of a map of Hindoostan* cites the account of a *Ferishta*, who says that the place was deserted in consequence of a pestilence. See Rennell, *Memoir of a map of Hindoostan*, op cit, 55. Also see Ratnabali Chatterjee, "Historians among Archaeologists: Exploring Urban Sites in Medieval Bengal," in Ishrat Alam and Syed Ejaz Hussain ed. *The Varied Facets of History: Essays in Honour of Aniruddha Ray* (Kolkata: Primus Books, 2011), 43.

¹⁹ Chatterjee, "Historians among Archaeologists", op cit, 37.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jogendranarayan Choudhuri, *Gour O Pandua* (Calcutta: Upendranath Bhattacharya, 1921), 52.

²² S.K. Saraswati, "Two Tours in the District of Maldah and Dinajpur," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, XXVIII (1932): 174.

²³ Rennell, *Memoir of a map of Hindoostan*, op cit, 50, 55-56.

²⁴ Ryley, J. Horton (John Horton), *Ralph Fitch, England's pioneer to India and Burma; his companions and contemporaries, with his remarkable narrative told in his own words* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1899), 113.

²⁵ Henry Creighton, *The Ruins of Gour Described, and Represented in Eighteen Views; with a Topographical Map: Compiled from the Manuscripts and Drawings of the Late H. Creighton* (London: Black, Parbury, & Allen, 1817), i.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ *Asiatick Researches, Or, Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal, for Inquiring Into the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences, and Literature of Asia*, 4 (Calcutta: East India Company Press, 1795), 326.

²⁸ C.B. Lewis, *The Life of John Thomas, Surgeon of the Earl of Oxford East Indiaman, and First Baptist Missionary to Bengal* (London: Macmillan, 1873), 131.

²⁹ Creighton, *The Ruins of Gour*, plates VI and VII.

³⁰ Creighton, *The Ruins of Gour*, plate XVI.

³¹ Creighton, *Ruins of Gour*, plates XVII and XVIII.

³² Ibid, 90, plate XVI

³³ Richard Maxwell Eaton, "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States", *Frontline* (2001), 70-77. Apart from his article, Eaton has specifically discussed the desecration/destruction of a temple in Gour by a Sufi Shaikh named Jalal al-Din Tabrizi, in his book *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*. See Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204- 1760* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 73.

³⁴ Incidentally, the compilation of *Riazul Salatin* by Ghulam Hussain, which is often considered to be the first historical work on medieval or Islamic India, went almost

simultaneously with Creighton's research (1787-88) and was patronised by a factory owner based in Malda named George Udny. See Atulchandra Ray, "Rakhaldas o Madhya-Juger Banglar Itihaas Charcha" in Kalyan Kumar Dasgupta ed. *Satabarsher Aloy Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay* (Calcutta: Sarat Samiti, 1990), 33.

³⁵ Pratip Kumar Mitra, "Henry Creighton (1764-1807)" in *Pratna Samiksha*, New Series 3 (Kolkata: Centre for Archaeological Studies & Training, Eastern India, 2012), 214.

³⁶ Montgomery Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, III (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1838), 71-72.

³⁷ James Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (London: John Murray, 1876), 169.

³⁸ Ibid: 253-54.

³⁹ Bankimchandra, "Bangalar Itihaas", op cit, 286.

⁴⁰ Raverty, *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*, 557.

⁴¹ Raj Krishna Mookherjea, *History of Bengal for Beginners* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Press Depository, 1879), 20.

⁴² Henry E. Stapleton ed., *Memoirs of Gour and Pandua by M. 'Âbid 'Âli Khân* (Calcutta: Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, 1986), 12.

⁴³ Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, "Bangalar Itihaas Sommondhe Koyekti Kotha," *Bankim Rachanabali II* (Kolkata: Sahitya Sansad, 2004), 290.

⁴⁴ Stapleton, *Memoirs of Gour and Pandua*, op cit, 15.

⁴⁵ Ibid: 65.

⁴⁶ Ibid: 82.

⁴⁷ Ibid: 129.

⁴⁸ Colonial officials often merchandised the better quality bricks obtained from the ruins to neighboring areas and at

times also utilised them in building colonial monuments. The floors, chimney pieces and sepulchral monuments of the St. John's Cathedral, which was one of the earliest colonial monuments in Calcutta, were made using stones obtained from the ruins of Gour. Henry Creighton was asked by Charles Grant, the erstwhile Director of the East India Company, to look for flat stones, one foot to two feet long, seven inches to fifteen broad and less than six inches deep from the ruins, to which Creighton obliged. The entire project cost the Company only Rs. 1258. See Lewis, *The Life of John Thomas*, op cit, 131; Soumitra Das, "Gour to St. John's", *The Telegraph* (June 22, 2008). However, stones and bricks, from the ruins of Gour-Pandua, were also utilised by the natives to build newer structures. Jogendranarayan Choudhury in fact says that most of the houses (irrespective of their ownership) of early twentieth century Malda, Katwa (Bardhamman district) and Jangipur (Murshidabad district) were made of bricks gathered from the ruins of Gour-Pandua. See Choudhuri, *Gour O Pandua*, op cit, 20.

⁴⁹ *Gour Banga* or *Gour*, in the context of ancient India, refers to a *janapada* (or settlement), whose location could not, thus far, be ascertained with optimum precision. Rajanikanta Chakraborty, *Gourer Itihas I* (Rangpur: Rangpur Sahitya Parishad, 1910), 1-2.

⁵⁰ Ibid: 21.

⁵¹ Rajanikanta Chakraborty, *Gourer Itihas* (Kolkata, Dey's Publishing House, 1999), 113.

⁵² Finbarr Barry Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 165.

⁵³ The Khalimpur Copper Plate was discovered by a farmer while ploughing his field, in Khalimpur, within the area of

Gour. Akshay Kumar Maitreya, *Gourlekhmal*, I, 2 (Rajshahi: Barendra Anushandhan Samiti, 1912), 9-10.

⁵⁴ Ibid: 30.

⁵⁵ The pre-Islamic Buddhist identities, for example of monuments, would often fall victim to generalising practices of Hindu nationalists. Their identities would be subsumed under the colonial theory of periodising Indian history, which was taken up by the first generation nationalists: Hindu period, Muslim period, British period. See Mill, *The History of India*.

⁵⁶ Ibid: 7-8.

⁵⁷ Choudhuri, *Gour O Pandua* (1921), 2.

⁵⁸ C.C. Mitra, *Gour Pandua*, 5.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid: 30.

⁶¹ Ibid: 49-50.

⁶² S.K. Saraswati, "Two Tours in the District of Maldah and Dinajpur", in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* XXVIII (1932), 175.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ S.K. Saraswati, "Indo-Muslim Architecture in Bengal" in *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, IX (1941), 18.

⁶⁵ Idem, "Two Tours in the District of Maldah and Dinajpur", *op cit*, 174.

⁶⁶ Dinesh Chandra Sen, in this regard, gives examples of how Jain Tirthankara idols, at certain places, were worshipped as Lord Shiva. He also recounts the example of Bodhgaya where locals were referring to an idol of Buddha by the name of 'Jatashankar', another name for Shiva. See Dinesh

Chandra Sen, *Brihat Banga I* (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2006), 7-9.

⁶⁷ Ibid: 554-555.

⁶⁸ On 15th December 1932, hundreds of Santhals (a native tribe), armed with swords and arrows, led by the Samu of Banshar, who 'styled himself as Gandhi,' occupied the Adina Mosque in Pandua and declared the district of Malda independent. See *Gloucestershire Echo*, December 16, 1932. This can be considered the most prominent non-elite engagement with the ruins of Gour and Pandua. The larger part of the movement has been discussed by Tanika Sarkar in Tanika Sarkar, "Jitu Santal's Movement in Malda, 1924-1932: A Study in Tribal Protest" in Ranajit Guha ed. *Subaltern Studies IV* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 136-164.

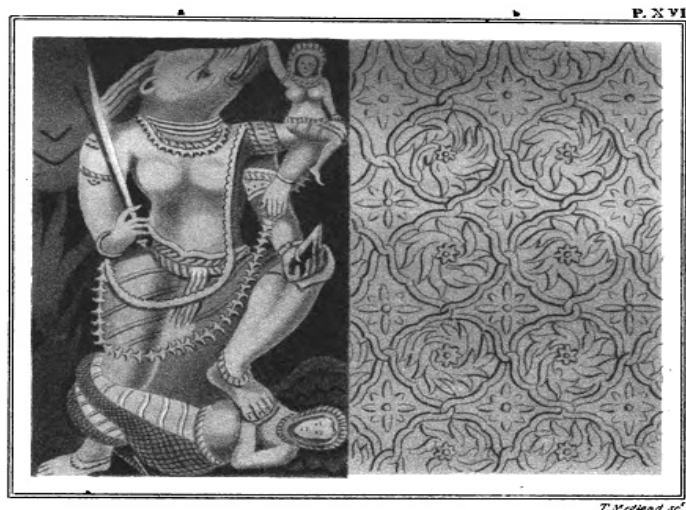
⁶⁹ Elphinstone and Mill's works on the history of India were a part of the academic curriculum, which Bankimchandra engaged with as a student.

⁷⁰ Vivek, *Lies, Lies and More Lies: The Campaign to Defame Hindu/Indian Nationalism* (Delhi: iUniverse, 2014).

⁷¹ Richard Maxwell Eaton, "Temple Desecration", op cit, 72-73.

⁷² Richard Maxwell Eaton, *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 107.

⁷³ Ajaz Ashraf, "'We Will Never Know the Number of Temples Desecrated through India's History': Richard Eaton," *Text*, Scroll in <http://scroll.in/article/769463/we-will-never-know-the-number-of-temples-desecrated-through-indias> [accessed November 24, 2015].



VARĀHA AVATARA,
or descent in the Boar

MHAMMADAN SCULPTURE
in the Small Golden Mosque

Plate : XVI



SIVĀNI, A HINDU IMAGE

Plate : XVII



BRAHMĀNI,
a Hindu Image



BHAWĀNI,
a Hindu Image

Plate : XVIII