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Rup Kumar Barman: *Paribarta Anusandhan: Rashtra Nagarikatwa, Bastuchyuti O Ithihascharcha* (In Bengali), (Search for Alternative: State, Citizenship, Displacement and Historiography), Kolkata, Gangchil, 2022, Hardback, ISBN 978-93-93569-38-7, Price: 450/- INR, pp 170.

A New Approach of Writing Contemporary History

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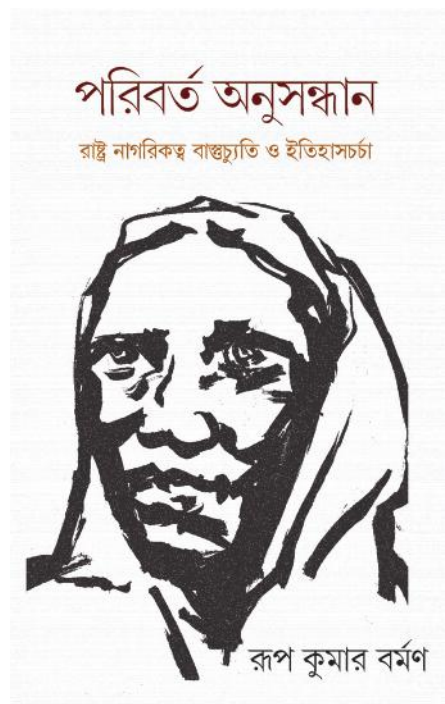
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We usually read a lot of books. Out of them very few touch our heart. Recently I have read such a book that instigated my understanding of contemporary history. That is a newly published book titled *Paribarta Anusandhan: Rashtra Nagarikatwa, Bastuchyuti O Ithihascharcha* (In Bengali) [Search for Alternative: State, Citizenship, Displacement and Historiography]. This book has been written by Rup Kumar Barman, a Professor of History. In the academic domain of history teaching and research, the author needs no introduction. He has authored several books based on his research and has contributed a lot of thought-provoking articles to reputed national and international academic journals. His research interests include social history, environmental history, history of folk medicine, partition, migration, citizenship, human rights and so on. The taste of the aforementioned book, however, is somewhat different.

Divided into four chapters, this book tells us the story of a boy's journey of life; with his deep observations on crucial changes those were taking place in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres at the regional, national and international levels. While reading this book, students and young scholars may find themselves in the story of the boy.

They will be inspired by the boy's struggle, his mentality of not giving up, his courage to ask questions, his straightforwardness and his enthusiasm in studying. But the present book is not an autobiography. It is an attempt to investigate contemporary history in the light of the author's own experiences.

The book is a rare combination of macro history and micro history. The first chapter, on the one hand, depicts a picture of world politics of the 1970s, particularly of South Asian politics, along with the issue of environmental consciousness. On the other hand, it attempts to explore the history of *Chhoto Chowkir Bos*, a remote but green village situated on the banks of the *Raidak* River in Alipurduar district of West Bengal. While discussing the state of emergency in India (1975-1977), the author mentions some anti-Indira Gandhi slogans of that time. The residents of *Chhoto Chowkir Bos* were familiar with such slogans. They marched with the slogans of '*Babu hato! Babu hatto!*' to get rid of the attack of the *Babus*. These *babus* were the wild elephants who sometimes invaded the locality of inhabitants.



While introducing the geographical and demographic diversity of *Chhoto Chowkir Bos*, the author touches the issues like the role of rivers in people's lives, development of the agro-economy, social and religious festivals, cultural exchanges etc. The author focuses on the education policy of the Left Front Government (1977-2011) and its land reforms experiments. At the same time, he brings up the issue of the 'Marichjhanpi massacre' (1979). He opines that the well-known intellectuals and historians did not include the *Marichjhanpi* massacre in their discussions to please the ruling authority of the then the West Bengal Government.

The author's school life began in 1980s. At that time the '*Bideshi Kheda*' movement i.e. Anti-Foreigners Agitation (1979-1985) was going on in Assam. The book contains an informative discussion regarding its effect on North Bengal. Author shares his personal experience of studying at 'Mahakalguri Mission School' and 'Alipurduar College' which is fascinating. The fact that, globalization and the neo-liberal economy were creating a new world order that time, which did not go unnoticed by that college student. The book portrays those changes of the 1990s.

The second chapter shows that the boy entered University of North Bengal in 1990s as a student. He realized the importance of local history. He felt that 'history of common people' had been repeatedly ignored. In this context, the author introduces the readers to several new trends of historiography of the 1980s and 1990s. The boy visited the main centre of '*Naxalbari* movement' (1967-1971). Sharing that personal experience, the author discusses the politics of West Bengal in the 1960s. Issues such as the split of the Communist Party (1964), the formation of the United Front government (1969, 1969-70), and the imposition of presidential rule came up in the discussion. The author's experience of visiting *Hatighisha* village shows how terrified the people of that village were about vaccination. The author time and again tries to narrate both macro and micro history at the same time. He discusses the politics behind the *Kargil* War in the late 1990s, as well as political instability in North Bengal.

The third chapter starts with the event of joining of the author as a permanent teacher in ABN Seal College established by Raja Nripendra Narayan (1864-1911). In this context, he has presented the history of the Cooch Behar state to the readers. The author describes his experience of noticing selective reaction regarding the contemporary happenings among his colleagues at A.B.N Seal College. At that time the World Trade Centre was attacked by al-Qaeda terrorist group and the Durban Conference (2001) against racism was held. The author laments that although the staff room of ABN College was against the militancy yet no one spoke about the Durban Conference.

The author tries to evaluate the influence of colonial anthropology on the historiography of Indian society. He throws light on the question of caste system. He narrates the interpretation of the caste system by the western-educated Indian scholars. At the same time, by analysing the contents of each and every volume of the *Subaltern Studies*, the author shows that the people of *Nimnabarna* (or the lower castes) have not received enough importance in the discussion of Subaltern historians.

The fourth chapter is devoted primarily to discuss the development of historiography. Along with that the author narrates his personal experiences also. Here he narrates the story of his joining as a faculty in Jadavpur University. There the personal experience of the author on the question of caste was very painful. The author also describes the story of his research days. The story of his field study in Guwahati, Assam is an interesting one. He has to face harassment while submitting his thesis at the University of North Bengal. But the passion for research gives the author the strength to overcome all odds.

He continues his research on various subjects after getting doctoral degree. The subjects include the history of the *Kamatapur* movement in North Bengal, the history of Bengali fishermen, the history of the struggle of Scheduled Caste refugees who had to flee from East Bengal to India, *Chhitmahals* (Enclaves of India and Bangladesh), NRC (National Registrar for Citizens), CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act), history of rivers, medicine, etc. The way Dr. Barman has discussed the Dalit discourse is commendable. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the author as a meritorious researcher has carefully provided references to the latest researches published on the Dalit studies.

The chapter ends with a brief description of Covid-19 and its effects. In addition to the four chapters, this book has an introduction and conclusion. There is also a rich bibliography at the end of the book. Overall, it can be said that the author goes beyond the traditional history writing through this book. It introduces a new genre of history to the readers. The author's skill in presenting the subject in simple and fluent Bengali language has made the book enjoyable. Those who are not the students of history can understand the chronology of events as the author pays attention to mention the year of all significant events. Being a professional historian, Dr. Barman presents an alternative approach in reconstructing history. This book gives a clear indication that on which things a historian is expected to pay attention while writing history.