

Akshay Kumar Maitreya and His Scholastic World in Historical View

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Abstract: *The present article studies and examines the academic circle of Akshay Kumar Maitreya, who was a historian and archaeologist per excellence in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengal. It was only under the initiatives of Akshay Kumar that in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century the term archaeology came to the fore and began to assume a distinct identity within Orientalist discourse, denoting a branch of study concerned with materials of the past with artifacts sites and monuments. This process and the role of other academicians on Maitreya will be examined in the present endeavor.*

Keywords: Akshay Kumar Maitreya, antiquity, historiography, academic circle

He (Akshay Kumar Maitreya) received the cultural and archaeological knowledge of ancient Bengal from the rural peasants, cultivators, Vaishnavists preachers, Bauls, fakirs, and common folks of this region. He began to love history and practice history over patriotism by virtue of this region.¹ ---Nirmal Chandra Chowdhury

Born at village Kumarkhali in Kustia (now in Bangladesh) on 1st March 1861, Akshay Kumar Maitreya was by no means unique for his contribution to the historiography and archaeology of Bengal and especially in North Bengal. Being a nationalist historian he was one of the main proponents of scientific history and archaeology and took main indigenous initiatives for archaeological explorations and collecting archaeological specimens. He never saw his history project as excluding from the history of art and literature. Maitreya was convinced of the prime value of such art objects as indices of civilization and as shreds of evidence for history, over and above textual sources. Like other nationalist writers, he was outraged at the Western disparagement of Indian art and iconography and wrote for the recognition of Indian art, archaeology, and literature. There is no doubt that his writings seemed to be a sharp break from the past practices of historical methodology. Ardhendu Kumar Ganguly observed, 'he played a pioneering role, showing the way to collect new materials of history by unearthing engraved specimen.² Few scholars complained about his amateur nature of history writing and the idea of a sub-regional entity.³ But we have to recognize the way of his writing history. To Maitreya, the best means of undermining the stature of the nationalist history was to emphasize the modernity and nontraditional nature of their construct of Indians.⁴ He concentrated on the Varendra region and tried to focus on north Bengal as the center of ancient Bengal's cultural heritage. His most important contribution was the foundation of the Varendra Research Society and Museum in 1910 with the help of the scion of the landholding family of Dighapatia, Sarat Kumar Ray, and Ramaprasad Chanda. Its objective was to search Bengal's ancient heritage, places of historical importance, and archaeological remains. Maitreya established Uttarvanga Sahitya Parisad for further explorations into Varendra's history. He was the president of the first session of Uttarvanga Sahitya Sammelan in the year 1908 (1315 BE) in Rangpur. In these perspectives, the present

chapter will examine the role of contemporary rural society, socio-economic background, excellences' of his academic circle, and friends as a nurturing role in his achievements in history.

At that time indigo merchants had factories in different parts of Bengal, they were very much oppressive. Kumarkhali also did not escape from the heat of that oppression. Calcutta's 'Hindu Patriot' and 'Sangbad Prabhakar' then began to write against the 'indigo prisoners'. Even from Kumarkhali, the fearless Mathuranath and Kangal Harinath fearlessly started spreading various news of the village in the 'Grambarta Prakashika' including the story of the oppression of the indigo merchants.⁵ Akshay Kumar was then a boy and went to the village school. Although there was a teacher in the school at that time, Kangal Harinath himself used to do teacher ship there. So not only did the students of this school learn alphabet identity and arithmetic, but they also learned to love the country, inspired to cherish knowledge, used to be fearless. Akshay Kumar's classmates in that art house of humanity were Raybahadur Jaladhar Sen, Shivchandra Vidyarnab, and other great thinkers. Their character and future life were formed in the teachings of Kangal Harinath.⁶ After the birth of Akshay Kumar, Mathuranath went to Rajshahi to take the advocacy exam. But that year the test is not taken. But Mathuranath got a government job and became a resident of Rajshahi. Akshay Kumar also had to come to Rajshahi. In childhood, till the age of ten, he lived sometimes in Kumarkhali, sometimes in Rajshahi.

Akshay Kumar's knowledge of Sanskrit was not general. He did not concentrate on Sanskrit practice to expand the scope of his profound scholarship. This was his earnest attempt to get acquainted with the Indian soul. Read Impartiality, Grammar, Lexica, Philosophy, and Anthology; read the works of Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Bhrtahari. Akshay Kumar became fascinated.⁷ In his imagination, a new world of the Indian soul seemed to be revealed. He studied Vedas, Upanishads, Gita, Samhitas, Puranas with equal care. This was the great preparation of his later life. Akshay Kumar's erudite on Sanskrit literature was seen in his various Sanskrit works. One by one, Akshay Kumar extracted invaluable resources from this oldest language in the world; increased his store of knowledge. The mind that was so rich in English language and literature for so long, now Sanskrit language and literature has influenced that mind. That effect remained eternal in the mind of Akshay Kumar. This Sanskrit knowledge was especially helpful in his future life in discovering historical evidence and analyzing different historical events. This is why the Bandyopadhyay eulogized and acknowledged, "Maitreya Mahasaya interpreted a couple of verses in the part of 'Ramacharita' which is not condemned on."⁸

Akshay Kumar's passion for study and passion for literature sprouted from childhood and developed with his growing age. Like many writers, he started his literary works with poetry.⁹ The real history of Bakhtiya Khalji's conquest of Bengal is completely fictional, to prove this, he wrote a poem called 'Bongo Bijay' (Victory on Bengal) in his school life. This time he was a student in entrance class. Later, Akshay Kumar wrote a historical discussion on the story of the conquest of Bengal in the article 'Lakshmansener Polayon Kalanko' (Lakshman Sena's escape aspersion).¹⁰ Akshay Kumar's childhood works were published in 'Hindu Ranjika' in Rajshahi and 'Grambarta' in Kumarkhali. During this time another of his books, 'Samar Singha', was printed; and it was published in 1883. The book sold out in a very short time due to the efforts of the students of the school and Akshay Kumar donated the proceeds to the 'National Treasury'. The sense of nationalism of his future life began by donating the proceeds of the sale of books written in

childhood to the 'National Treasury'. Needless to say, Akshay Kumar was a lifelong devotee in the revival of the national ideology of the country and that is why he wrote most of his works in the Bengali language.¹¹

In this context, the name of another noble child of Rajshahi, the historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar came to be mentioned. Sir Jadunath Sarkar wrote most of the books in English except one or two. As a result, he has been honored as an established historical figure in the Western world. But hesitate to think about his contribution to the nurture of Bengali literature and the Bengali nation? Jadunath Sarkar is indeed a genuine Bengali in his personal life, but by writing most of the books in English, he probably stayed away from the mainstream of Bengali national life. Akshay Kumar Maitreya was a pioneer in this regard. Akshay Kumar ignorant of English, it was not, many of his essays and letters are written in English were found and appreciated.¹² But inspired by the national ideology, Akshay Kumar devoted himself to composing his books in Bengali. For this nationalism and historical fidelity, Akshay Kumar Maitreya sharply criticized the authors for distorting the character of 'Siraj' of Nabeenchandra Sen's 'Palashir Juddho' (Plessey Plunder) and the character of 'Taki Khan' of Bankimchandra's 'Chandrashekar'.¹³ Responding to Akshay Kumar's criticism, Navin Chandra Sen wrote in a letter, "He wrote - history, I wrote - poetry."¹⁴

From earlier life, Akshay Kumar has always engaged himself in searching for the truth. In his autobiography, Akshay Kumar writes, "Like my father, I was born with a sincere interest in history, in leisure time read history, wrote some essays when someone persuaded me to write an essay."¹⁵ Akshay Kumar's literary works began with poetry but the outcome with prose. His first prose essay was 'Farashi Biplober Itihash' (History of the French Revolution) and it was inspired by his teacher Kangal Harinath.¹⁶ He had a natural desire to eradicate untruth. He said, "We had texts from Macaulay, Clive, and Hastings at the time of FA (Formative Assessment) classes. At the time of studying this book, I used to quarrel almost every day with Mr. Dauding, the principal and professor of Rajshahi College. I searched for evidence to convince Mr. Dawdling that Macaulay's description was not true. This search operation is long overdue. On that occasion, I collected many details on the history of Bengal. My friends advised me to write the history of Bengal on that basis."¹⁷ This history is the keynote of Akshay Kumar's life of consciousness and here was his uniqueness with his classmates and contemporaries.

Historical works and archeological works have been practiced in Bangladesh for a long time. From the day Sir William Jones founded the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in 1784, the trend of Indian archeological investigation began to flourish in Bangladesh.¹⁸ Raja Rajendralal Mitra and Ramdas Sen helped a lot to accelerate that trend. Bankimchandra's works were also not less important in this case. After them, Mahamopadhyay Haraprasad Shastri and Nagendranath Bose were also helped a lot to keep this trend alive. Acharya Rameshchandra Majumder wrote, "I first came to know about the two major groups of people who research Bangladesh archeology, while I was at the university. There was a lot of rivalry between these two groups. Mahamopadhyay Haraprasad Shastri and Pracchovidyamoharnobo Nagendranath Bose were in the group of 'Sahitya Parishad' and on the other hand, Akshay Kumar Maitreya, Ramaprasad Chanda, and Dighapatiyar Kumar Saratkumar Roy were in favor of 'Varendra Research Society'. ...At this time a movement started between the two groups on the subject of archeology in Bangladesh. According to

genealogy, Maharaja Adishura was the first king to bring several Brahmins and Kayasthas to Bangladesh. Their descendants later got the status of Kulin Brahmins and Kayasthas. Akshay Kumar Maitreya denied the existence of Adishura. But according to Nagendranath Bose and Haraprasad Shastri, Adishura was a historical figure. There was a lot of debate between the two groups about the existence of Adishura. ...Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay was very hostile towards the Varendra group. Yet he joined the Varendra group in this matter. ...Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay had many faults but he had respect for the historical truth. That's why he joined Akshay Kumar Maitreya's team and also pulled me into that team. ...It seems that our efforts have changed a lot of research ideas about the history of Bangladesh."¹⁹ Despite being the son of a noble Brahmin himself, Akshay Kumar's determination and historical fidelity in refuting the nobility and the information of the Genealogical scriptures changed the course of research in the history of Bangladesh. It was a deep homage to the historical truth of Akshay Kumar Maitreya.

From his childhood, Akshay Kumar got associated with various organizations for the welfare of Indian society and culture. His first authorship received scholarly public attention, which was published in 'Grambarta Prakashiika' and edited by Kanganal Harinath. Akshay Kumar was a member of the Students Association of Rajshahi, The Calcutta Students Union, The Indian Association, and The Rajshahi Association and was also the secretary of the Rajshahi Association for seven years. He has also worked for a long time as a member of the Rajshahi Municipality, Local Board, and District Board.²⁰ In 1890, Akshay Kumar became the editor of the 'Shiksha Parichay Samiti' (Education Identity Association). This association was set up for the noble cause of education and national literature. It would seem unbelievable to hear that the devout Hindu Brahmin Akshay Kumar was an active member of the 'Rajshahi Brahmo Samaj'.²¹ The annual festivals and other festivals of the 'Rajshahi Brahmo Samaj' were successful in his endeavors. Notably, Akshay Kumar's father Mathuranath was also the editor of 'Rajshahi-Brahmo Samaj' for a long time. Inspired by the 'Bangiya Sahitya Parishad' (Literary Council of Bengal) established in 1894, branch centers of the Council were established at Rajshahi, Dhaka, Rangpur, Guwahati. Akshay Kumar was associated with two branch councils in Rajshahi and Rangpur. The Rajshahi Branch Council was finally merged with the 'Varendra Research Society' in 1912.²²

Akshay Kumar was also an active member of the Indian National Congress and attended almost every session of the Congress held in Bangladesh. The Rangpur branch is the oldest of branch of the 'Literary Council of Bengal'. This branch was established on 25th April 1905. From the first year of the establishment, the workers of the 'Literary Council of Rangpur' collected rare books and antiquities, regularly organized monthly sessions to read essays, and published rare and research Bengali books. 'Literary Council of Rangpur' started publishing magazines in September 1906. Akshay Kumar was its president for a few years.²³

Rabindranath had a close friendship with Akshay Kumar Maitreya. In 1892, on his way to Shilaidaha zamindari, Rabindranath visited Rajshahi and the house of his best friend, Rajshahi District Magistrate Lokendranath Palit. Literary connoisseurs often gathered at the residence of Palit Mahasaya; Akshay Kumar also participated there. At that time, at the request of Akshay Kumar Maitreya Rabindranath Tagore read his famous essay titled 'Shikshar Herfer' (Manipulation of Education) in 'Rajshahi Association'.²⁴ Needless to say, Akshay Kumar was not

only an influential member of the Rajshahi Association at that time, but also later became the secretary of the Rajshahi Association. Rabindranath started writing 'Ponchobhuter Diary' (Diary of Pentagonal) while staying in Rajshahi. Kumar Saratkumar Roy, president of the 'Rabindra Jayanti Utsav' held in Rajshahi in 1931, said, "I heard from Akshaybabu that he and the Maharaja of Natore Jagadindranath Roy were two ghosts of Rabindranath's 'Panchabhuter Diary'."²⁵ This is where Rabindranath's good-fellowship with Akshay Kumar has been revealed. Akshay Kumar befriended not only with Rabindranath, but the whole Tagore family had a good relationship with Akshay Kumar. Jyotirindranath Tagore's name may be mentioned as an example. Jyotirindranath was not only a writer, but he was also an excellent painter. He painted a picture of Mathuranath, and Akshay Kumar respectively in 1890 and 1891. Along with other paintings by Jyotirindranath, this painting is also preserved in Rabindranath Tagore's collection in Rabindra Bharati.²⁶ In this figure, the personality traits of both are obvious. On the occasion of Rabindranath Tagore's Nobel Prize award in a meeting held at Rajshahi Public Library, Akshay Kumar said, "In the glory of Rabindranath, not only Bengal but the whole of India became glorious. There is no shortage of people in Bengal to understand that Rabindranath would be world-renowned for his literary achievements. Fortunately, we also got to know some of his literary brilliance. Today is our day to rejoice and be proud."²⁷

Akshay Kumar Maitreya was the heart of the literary society in Rajshahi. He presided over the first session of the North Bengal Literary Conference held at Rangpur in 1908; the next year the North Bengal Literary Conference was held in Rajshahi. Akshay Kumar's mother had died just a few days before the conference, but he kept the pain in his mind and worked tirelessly for the success of the conference. Many could not hold their tears when they saw the fawned over the neck dutiful statue of Akshay Kumar Maitreya. This was written by the historian Nalinikanta Bhattasali in the contemporary magazine 'Manasi O Mornabani'.²⁸ In 1895, he became the President of the History Branch at the Seventh Session of the Bengal Literary Conference held at Calcutta. He was elected Assistant President of the Bengal Literary Council in 1904 and selected as a 'Distinguished Member' in 1911.²⁹ He received the 'Kaiser-e-Hind' Gold Medal (1915) and the 'CIE' (Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire) from the British Government of India.³⁰ At the invitation of Calcutta University, he gave several scholarly lectures on the 'Decline of the Pala Dynasty'.³¹ The manuscript of his English book 'Brahmanya Panchadevata' (Five Deities of Brahmana) has been translated into German by Dr. Stella Kramrisch and published in Germany.³²

Akshay Kumar also gained a reputation in the legal profession. He was adept at subverting his opponents in argument by the practical application of sharp intellect. His erudition and eloquence in English brought him fame as an advocate.³³ He was free to roam in both civil and criminal cases. Akshay Kumar had a birthright to eloquence. That manifestation of the power of speech was seen in him, reminds the speeches of Surendranath Bandyopadhyay and Chittaranjan Das. His colleague and admirer Bhabanigobind Chowdhury wrote in his memoirs, "He has fascinated everyone on the stage of Brahma Samaj, in the meetings of students by his speeches on various subjects. I did not hear him speak in Congress. If he had developed this power in Congress, his Bengali and English discourse had been flourishing all over India. Not many people can speak in such a fluent word format in both English and Bengali. I have seen this power of Bipin Chandra Pal and Akshay Kumar."³⁴ In the Swadeshi era, his eloquence touched the hearts of Bengalis. In

fact, from an early age, he was associated with various institutions and associations. His ability to present his speeches in these institutions and associations and to acquire the skills of speaking and speaking as postulated by the advocacy profession made him an orator. His attractive speech at the stone foundation ceremony of the Varendra Research Society House brought tears to the eyes of the audience.³⁵ Bhabanigovinda Chowdhury writes, "At the end of the lecture describing the Aryan civilization, Varendra Research Temple said that if it is God's it will stand up forever; if it is man's it will fall."³⁶ The future proved how true his words were.

Akshay Kumar Maitreya's first historical book 'Samar Singh' was published in 1883. Although not well-received in the court of history, this work reveals his sense of history to the public. 'Sirajuddaula' (1897), 'Sitaram' (1898), 'Mir Qasim' (1906), 'Gaur Lekhomala' (1912), and 'Firingi Banik' (1922) were published one after another. However, the book that established Akshay Kumar as a rationalist historian and writer among the Scholars was 'Sirajuddaula'. While Rabindranath Tagore was editing 'Sadhana', 'Sirajuddaula' started appearing regularly in that magazine. Later, when the publication of 'Sadhana' was stopped, the remnants of 'Sirajuddaula' were published in 'Bharati'.³⁷ The arrangement of events, the rational analysis of information, and the skill of his style of writing which he showed in this book amazed the contemporary scholarly society. Rabindranath himself praised 'Sirajuddaula' and his metaphor. The information gathered from many documents kept in Murshidabad and the offices of the British government has become the subject of history in this book only after it has been digested in the argument of the lawyer Akshay Kumar Maitreya.³⁸ There is no doubt that he played a pioneering role in the practice of such logical history in Bengali. Akshay Kumar's 'Sirajuddaula' caused disgust in the minds of the English. The 'Anglo-Indian' newspaper criticized the book 'Sirajuddaula'.

Akshay Kumar's enthusiasm for exploring the history of ancient India was boundless. He was interested in the discovery of ancient archeological material and the history associated with it and the collection of the necessary material for it. Naturally, that interest was reflected in the newly published 'Aitihāsik Chitra' (Historical Picture) magazine. In the editorial, he stated the purpose of the magazine, "The 'Aitihāsik Chitra' will not be the mouthpiece of any individual or community, but it will take only the utmost care for the collection of archeological materials in India in general and Bengal in particular."³⁹ Rabindranath wrote the introduction to the first issue of 'Historical Pictures'. Rabindranath wished the newspaper longevity. He was also eager to help with the necessary money. In one of his letters, Gaganendranath was asked to contribute to 'Aitihāsik Chitra'.⁴⁰ The friendship that developed between Akshay Kumar and Rabindranath from that time onwards brought them closer to each other. Just as the historian was in regular contact with the poet, Rabindranath Tagore also welcomed Akshay Kumar Maitreya and acknowledged his academic scholarship. Rabindranath Tagore said in his autobiography that Akshay Kumar Maitreya was one of those who used to visit 'Thakurbari' (House of Rabindranath Tagore) regularly at that time.

Akshay Kumar was not only a historian or a writer but also an enthusiastic archaeologist. Saratkumar Roy of Dighapati and Ramaprasad Chanda Akshay Kumar Maitreya formed the 'Varendra Research Society' in 1910 in a relentless effort to encourage the search and exploration of historical monuments in Bengal.⁴¹ Their indefatigable perseverance and unwavering passion for

history soon established this institution in a position of prestige in the field of Varendra Research. At the initiative of this research center, several exploratory tours were organized to discover archeological specimens at historically important places in North Bengal. Although he was old, Akshay Kumar's enthusiasm in archaeological works was like that of a young man. The Varendra Research Museum was established in 1910 under the management of the Varendra Research Society for the proper preservation of the discovered specimens. Akshay Kumar Maitreya was the lifeblood of both Societies.⁴² For a long thirty years, the Varendra Research Society has traversed many new paths in the history of ancient Bengal under the guidance of this skilled charioteer. An attempt was made to compile a book called 'Gaur Biboron' (Description of Gauda) by combining the knowledge and historical information obtained from their research.⁴³ The responsibility of editing fell on Akshay Kumar. Whose first result was 'Gaur Rajmala', Akshay Kumar himself wrote the book, composed by Ramaprasad Chand, and he (Akshay Kumar) also carried the responsibility of compiling the second monograph 'Gaur Lekhmala' on his shoulders.

Like other famous historians, Jadunath Sarkar of Rajshahi was also in favor of adopting the scientific approach in writing history. Just as Rajendralal Mitra emphasized composing history based on the analysis of historical material and search for archeological patterns, so did Akshay Kumar emphasized compiling necessary material as the basis of historiography. Abandoning the luxury of historiography at home, he considered logic essential in the field of historiography based on archeological excavations, collection of available archeological specimens, and experiments. Like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, he wrote in the preface of 'Gaur Rajmala', "The history of Greenland has been written; there is also the history of the Maori nation, but the country that had the city of 'Gaur-Tamralipti-Saptagram' has no history. Lack of materials cannot be acknowledged as the real cause; the main lack of search-effort."⁴⁴ And to fill this gap, he would go out on his own in search of the rubble that was buried in the ground. As a result, all the archeological sites and archeological specimens that were recovered helped to compose the history of ancient Bengal. At one point he lamented, "It is unfortunate that the Archaeological Survey of India, like other provinces in India, has been excavating and unearthing various underground specimens, but nowhere in Bengal has it been excavated."⁴⁵ It was Akshay Kumar who first drew the attention of the government to Paharpur, which is reminiscent of Buddhist monuments. Later, with the encouragement of the government, excavations started under the leadership of Ramakrishna Bhandarkar. This was the first attempt at an excavation in Bengal. Akshay Kumar felt that the main duty of a historian was to reveal the truth like a just judge by judging the material obtained by justification. He had a surprising resemblance to Devadatta Ramakrishna Bhandarkar in this regard. Like Bhandarkar, in writing history he was a neutral, independent-minded judiciary.⁴⁶

After the death of Akshay Kumar, the director of the Varendra Research Society convened a special general meeting to accept the offer of condolences to Akshay Kumar and take steps to determine how his memory could be preserved on 27th February 1930. A prominent highway in the city of Rajshahi Municipality has been named after him.⁴⁷ The 'Bangiya Sahitya Parishad' has preserved his memory by placing an oil painting of Akshay Kumar in their assembly hall. Despite the delay, in 1965, the North Bengal University authorities renamed their museum as 'Akshay Kumar Maitreya Heritage Museum' to pay homage to him and paid the national debt.⁴⁸ But his works and the Varendra Research Society were Akshay Kumar's best monuments, through which

Akshay Kumar will live forever. Thus the intricate historical product of Maitreya employed an elaborate combination of both literature and archaeology to get the contribution to the real history of Bengal because he always asserted that 'historians needed to maintain professional objectivity and detached impartiality from the subjects of their research.'⁴⁹

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