

Kalyan Kumar Sarkar's Perception on Early India and Cambodia: Unveiling A New Source In The Historiography of India - South-East Asia Interaction

Debarati Ganguly*

Assistant Professor, Postgraduate Department of History,
St Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata, India

*Corresponding Author Email: debaratihistory@sxccal.edu

Abstract: *This article tries to analyze the writings of Kalyan Kumar Sarkar regarding Early India's interaction with Cambodia thus intending to highlight over a very intriguing aspect of India's historiography. Emerged as a significant part of India's cultural nationalism, this historiography aimed to focus on India's cultural contribution to her neighboring countries. Books and articles written by the authors under discussion, show how they successfully endorsed such concept of 'Indianization' where India's inclusive impact over Cambodia, like other Southeast Asian countries, led her to form a part of 'Greater India' or extended India. Efforts have been made by various scholars to discuss the contributions of eminent historians who were part of this academic endeavor. But the discourse also saw active academic participation from various scholars whose writings have failed to get necessary attention from the researchers. Study of these sources is equally important as they can provide a comprehensive understanding of the relevant historiography. My article thus attempts to discuss Kalyan Sarkar's writings and examines their limitations and significance - how far they showed biasness towards Indian impact yet acknowledged local characters. A comprehensive discussion has been attempted to understand the author's ability to interpret sources and rational analytical framework*

Keywords: Indian Impact, Cambodia, Greater India, cultural nationalism, Indianization, indigenous character, Historiography

INTRODUCTION

India's growing nationalist fervor in twentieth century helped the study of India's cultural relations with neighbouring South-East Asian nations to emerge as a fascinating subject of discussion. It is expected that such discourse on interaction between two civilizational and cultural entities will generate a dialogue of inter-connections and cross-cultural exchanges. Whether Indian scholars fulfilled this condition, could be a subject of investigation. Evidently, their writings depicted many facets of India-South-East Asia relationship to portray India's glorious past. It was claimed that her cultural influences spread throughout the Asian regions and helped those far-away places to become civilised. Thus, India began to be seen as the principal emitter or 'mother' of Asian culture. This idea emphasized on all-encompassing impact of Indian culture over local populace of various Asian nations, leading them to emerge as the extended parts, 'cultural colonies' of Indian subcontinent.¹ In this way, the image of 'Greater India' or 'extended India' became popular from early twentieth century. This theory can be posited in the larger context of the idea of Asiatic unity and Indo-Asian humanism. Asia's distinctive spirituality contrary to western materialism and imperialist endeavours as well as emphasis over mutual relation between countries, helped to create an image of united Asia (Hay, 1970). India, being the fountain source of Asia's unique philosophical traits, played a major role in bringing closer Asiatic nations through a peaceful, humanist approach.²

Calcutta based Greater India Society or *Brihattara Bharat Parishad* was established on 14th October, 1926 and emphasised on the study of this legacy of Indian cultural influence over neighbouring countries and her civilising role in those places. This perspective was about cultural impact of India and different from Western approach towards persuasion of power. The Greater India Society encouraged many erudite scholars and historians to popularise the notion through their regular research and publications. Among them, the names of Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, Nihar Ranjan Ray, Himanshu Bhusan Sarkar, Bijan Raj Chatterjee, Nilakanta Sastri, O.C. Gangoly, Debaprasad Ghosh, U.N. Ghoshal etc. can be mentioned. Their writings featured regularly in Society's journal.³ They also wrote individual books and monographs. Despite their nationalist character, these accounts cannot be overlooked for revealing information and exploring contemporary research on the subject. There were contradictions as differences of opinions occurred among scholars on various issues especially about the role of indigenous elements in forming South-East Asian cultural attributions. The all-inclusive impact of India was never doubted, but the authors could not deny presence of

local elements. However, the question was, how did the authors perceive the role of indigenous components? Whether they were active interacting with impending Indian culture and making choices according to their need? Or they were merely 'inferior' passive receivers of the 'superior' Indian culture? Historiographical analysis about cultural interactions between India and Cambodia came under the purview of such discursive context. Through this article, I have tried to discuss how the writings of Kalyan Sarkar reflected the familiar nationalist biasness of the Greater India studies yet maintained the standard of historical rationalism and critical analysis. These writings are yet to catch the attention of the scholars engaged in the research on this subject. They are not extensively studied like those written by the well-known historians associated with the concerned study. Written in a comparatively later period than other established historians of this genre like R.C Majumdar, they can offer a comparative study and help to raise the question that whether there was any characteristic change occurred in the historiographical discussion regarding the Greater India and India's contribution to the construction of South-East Asian identity or he merely followed the structural discourse of the study which hailed the idea of 'Indianization'.

Kalyan Kumar Sarkar and His Study on Cambodia

Kalyan Kumar Sarkar's book 'Early Indo-Cambodian Contacts' stands apart from other Indian research works in the relevant study. Devoting his work to philological studies, Sarkar has expressed gratitude to his mentor Probodh Chandra Bagchi, the then Vice-Chancellor of Vishva-Bharati to initiate him to the study of Cambodian philology. (Sarkar, 1968) Sources used by him comprised mainly the inscriptional evidence in both Sanskrit and Old-Khmer. Sarkar could not ignore the impact of Greater India vision while analysing the inscriptional sources. This was evident in his effort to establish the impact of Sanskrit language and literature over literary and linguistics arena of Cambodia. Despite this, his writing offers a new dimension in study of Cambodian culture because such emphasis on philological aspect was unprecedented. Moreover, the questions he raised can also present some new problems regarding the linguistic connection between India and Cambodia. That we should study inscriptions and linguistic features of Old-Khmer through a different perspective to establish chronological order as well as the impact of Sanskrit literature, were some new possibilities discussed by the book.

Like Ramesh Majumdar, Sarkar duly recognized significant contribution of commercial interactions towards the cultural exchange between India and Indonesian countries. Familiar notion about the role of Indian merchants, priests and adventurers as the agents in this process had been accepted. Indian merchants who went to the South-East Asian nations in search of spices and other rich natural sources, Sarkar believed, were perhaps the founders of the earliest settlements. (Sarkar, 1958) They were followed by "Brahmana priests and the learned Indians of the upper castes..." (Sarkar, 1958, p. 2) Sarkar said those early settlements or commercial centres were transformed into small states. They did not have any political connection with the subcontinent yet followed Indian political ideologies. (Sarkar, 1958) Taking help from the Jataka stories and Chinese chronicles, he concluded that commercial relation was already established in 2nd century B.C.E which shows similarity with Majumdar and other scholars' theory about Such coexistence of Indian and indigenous terms for

administrative officials, divisions, posts and institutions were detected by the author. *Varh Panji* (sacred register) is one such local names. However, Sarkar mentioned those names which had Indian origin, e.g. *sasana, vyavahara, nagara, rajakarya, dharmadhikarana, Baladdhaksya* etc. Similarity with India had been traced in the cases of days, weeks, months, years etc. He was sure that inscriptional terms related to the calendar and dates showed influence of Indian Saka era. That the names of figures had the presence of both Indian and indigenous characters, had been duly noticed by the writer. We can take note of G. Coedes' influence here who discovered inscriptional references to the Sanskrit word *Sata* for hundred along with the use of Khmer words for numbers like one, two, three, four, five, ten, twenty etc. According to Sarkar, such custom was followed in the Old Khmer inscriptions of ancient Cambodia and these were issued to calculate numbers of slaves, animals, different objects, measurement of length etc. Noticeably, dates were written only in Sanskrit even in the Old Khmer inscriptional records. (Sarkar, 1958).

While addressing the prevalence of Sanskrit literature, Kalyan Kumar hailed "the excellent state of the Sanskrit language and literature in ancient Cambodia". (Sarkar, 1958, p. 29) He accepted that Old khmer inscriptions were the earliest literary product in Cambodia and even inscriptions were written in both Sanskrit and local languages. (Sarkar, 1958) But he also emphasized on the poor state of Khmer language and the absence of literary productions. Sarkar argued that Old Khmer, being the language of common people, was primarily used in inscriptions to describe mundane details. Whereas Sanskrit, regarded as sacred language, was used to write royal genealogies, eulogy of monuments' founders and various donors. Sanskrit inscriptions began to be prevalent from 6th century C.E onwards and the language was "flawless". (Sarkar, 1958) They referred to popular Sanskrit literary works and authors, Ramayana, Mahabharata and their characters etc. Even Khmer inscriptions were also replete with similar examples. Most inscriptions, as shown by the author, issued by different Cambodian kings. They mentioned contemporary Brahmana priests (*purohita*) and teachers (*guru*) who possessed deep knowledge about Sanskrit *sastra* and literary traditions. (Sarkar, 1958) Sarkar was doubtful about local people's contribution in producing Sanskrit inscriptions. The mediocracy of Khmer language, he noticed, did not match with the excellent and flourishing Sanskrit language present in the inscriptions. (Sarkar, 1958) In his opinion, Sanskrit inscriptions, "written in the highly developed Kavya style", might have been produced either by "the cultured migrants from India or the learned Khmers.". (Sarkar, 1958, p. 29)

Kalyan Sarkar's discussion of bas reliefs of Angkor Vat and sculptures of Baphuon temples to show the popularity of Ramayana and Mahabharata introduced a crucial approach in this regard. He discussed how these reliefs depicted episodes and characters especially from Ramayana and how some reliefs showed divergences from Sanskrit Ramayana. According to him, such differences proved that the Cambodian version of Ramayana did not always follow the Balmiki recension of the epic but other local traditions of India. (Sarkar, 1958) These local recensions available in Prakrit or other Indian local languages, Sarkar argued, were brought by Indian emigrants or "colonisers" during the time of Angkor Vat. (Sarkar, 1958) Interestingly, he also

acknowledged sculptors' "great liberty in depicting the scenes" (Sarkar, 1958, p. 32) and presence of local traditions resulting in such altered artistic representations. Thus, the author appreciated active role of indigenous agencies.

Sarkar might have accepted indigenous elements' role in creating the Cambodian cultural identity. But he probably did not think this culture was an assimilative one created by the interaction between Indian and local culture. Because he was certain about the superior and determining role of India in this process. Sarkar believed that Cambodia achieved civilizing status because the 'superior' and 'advanced' Indian culture offered the platform. Thus, his interpretation did not show any difference in approach. But he was among those few scholars who clearly expounded that "this civilising influence of India was the privilege of the elite and remained foreign to the mass of the population." Kalyan Sarkar assumed that Sanskrit language, literature and Indian religious traditions in Cambodia were spread by immigrant Indian Brahmanas and other learned people. Royal patronage also played a key role here. Following Levi, Sarkar argued that the religious and literary tenets of India were adopted by the royal and noble classes who considered them as elegant and refined cultural traits. But the author doubted whether this influence at all reached the common people. This Indian influenced culture, following Sarkar's proposition, was limited within the higher social classes leaving a question on the all-inclusive character of Indian impact as claimed by the writer himself. Not only that, he also proposed the idea of culturally divided society where one social section, became 'superior' through adopting Indian influence and other section remained inferior. However, Sarkar did not make it clear whether this 'superior' social class primarily included immigrant Indians. But this possibility appears to be more viable as intermarriages between immigrant Indians and royal families might have created a strong Indianised aristocracy. That this Indianised section had a major role in disseminating Indian influence was not hard to grasp. What remained unaddressed, was the culture and role of indigenous section who remained outside of this 'Indianised aristocracy'. Sarkar's use of the term 'inferior' for this section and emphasis on their being outside of Indian impact, indirectly made his position clear to readers.

Following this proposition, Kalyan Kumar tried to examine the process through which Sanskrit was spread. Sarkar rightly pointed out presence of unfamiliar Sanskrit words which he assumed was probably either derivation from indigenous words or continuation of local Indian words brought by Indian people. But, on a simultaneous note, the author emphasised that presence of such words perhaps showed that the impact of Sanskrit language did not penetrate equally within society. Or in other words, influence of Sanskrit was much deeper and extensive in upper sections of society than among the general mass. As a result, the basic structure of Old Khmer language remained less or unaffected by Sanskrit. He made it clear that unlike in India, Sanskrit in Cambodia did not receive or assimilate local words and idioms. In Cambodia, Sarkar emphasized, Sanskrit remained unresponsive to the native language.

CONCLUSION

Kalyan Sarkar's writings on Cambodia introduced an abridge yet competent summary about the country's relation with India and the consequent Indian influence. While exploring cultural connections between the

two countries, the writer exhibited a narrow approach where primacy was given to the overarching influence of Indian culture, religion, political ideologies among local inhabitants of Cambodia. Moreover, a significant biasness of nationalist historiography was to equate Indian culture with that of the 'Hindu' was very much present in his analysis. The author made it clear that the spread of Indian culture and the spread of 'Hindu' culture was coterminous. This process was impeded with the arrival of Islam in both India and South-East Asia. Kalyan Sarkar did not include a comparative discussion between literary works of two countries. Whereas such treatment had already been followed by Himansu Bhusan Sarkar and Bijan Raj Chatterjee in their books. Instead offering a broader approach, Sarkar's discussion of the Cambodian language mainly tried to show its similarities and contrast with the Sanskrit. Relation between the Cambodian language and other South-East Asian languages also remained unexplored. His survey primarily included inscriptional data, especially Sanskrit loan words and literary references. However, such inherent biasness of these works i.e. to establish an inclusive impact of 'superior' Indian culture over 'inferior' indigenous South-East Asian cultures, perhaps shows a general tendency prevalent among the historians of nationalist era, especially among those who were actively involved in the research on the idea of Greater India. This was intrinsically related with the formation of cultural nationalism under which glorification of India's ancient culture became an important part of nationalist identity. Keeping this context in mind, we should analyse the significance of Kalyan Sarkar's research. We cannot ignore his excellent scholarship. Despite his emphasis over Indian influence in South-East Asia, Kalyan Sarkar offers knowledge of historicity, power of critical analysis of historical narratives. His descriptive account is majorly based on inscriptional information and the initiative unveiled scope for research on Cambodian inscriptions. Sarkar's discussion on relation between indigenous language and Sanskrit, could pave the way for future research in the study of South-East Asia's indigenous cultures and languages. The writers' huge collection and scientific analysis of sources showed that they were aware of the duty of historian. While writing about India's relation with Cambodia, undoubtedly, Kalyan Sarkar tried to maintain profound scholarship and ingenuity as a historian.

REFERENCES

1. Asian Relations, Report of the Proceedings and Documents of the First Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, March-April, 1947, New Delhi, Asian Relations Organization, 1948. https://books.google.com/books/about/Asian_Relations.html?id=OOgbAAAAAAAJ
2. Ghosal, U.N. Nalinaksha Dutt & Kalidas Nag ed (1934-1959), The Journal of the Greater India Society, 18 Volumes, The Greater India Society, Kolkata
3. Guan Kwa Chong (2013), Early Southeast Asia as Viewed from India, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore .<https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/6343337>
4. Hay, Stephen N (1970), Asian Ideals of East and West, Harvard University Press, Cambridge. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674492387>

5. Keenleyside, T.A. (1982), Nationalist Indian Attitudes Towards Asia: A Troublesome Legacy for Post-Independence Indian Foreign Policy, Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia, Vol. 55, No. 2 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2757594>
6. Levi, Warner (1954), Free India in Asia, Minneapolis. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2126355>
7. Prasad, Birendra (1979), Indian Nationalism and Asia (1900-1947), B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi. <https://archive.org/details/dli.bengal.10689.12981>
8. Sarkar, K.K. (1968). Early Indo-Cambodian Contacts (Literary and Linguistics). Visva-Bharati. https://library.khmerstudies.org/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=12916&shelfbrowse_itemnumber=3850

END NOTES

1. This idea of 'cultural colonies' had been emphasised in all the works relating 'Greater India' to represent the core idea of the subject.
2. The idea of Indo-Asian Humanism attained a political approach through this emphasis on India's central role among the Asian nations. This perspective was evident in the works and speeches of Keshab Chandra Sen, Aurobindo Ghosh, Swami Vivekananda etc. In later times, with the growth of the nationalist movement, this image appeared in the speeches of notable freedom fighters like Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu etc. Initiative to organise an Asian Relations Conference in Delhi to highlight India's role as the pathfinder of Asian nations and their leader in the anti-imperialist struggle, should be remember.
3. The Journal of the Greater India Society was published from 1934-59, with an interruption from 1947-54. The editors of this journal were U.N. Ghoshal, Kalidas Nag and Nalinaksha Dutt