

Nalini Kanta Bhattasali

[1888—1947]

Nalini Kanta Bhattasali was the second son of Rohini Kanta and Saratkamini Devi and was born on the 24th January, 1888, in the village of Nayananda in the Munshiganj sub-division of Dacca district. He belonged to a Brahmin family, known as Bhattasali for its devotion to scholarly pursuits. The family had settled in Paikpara village in the Vikrampur area of Dacca, where an ancestor, Pandit Viswanath Sarma, had received a land grant from the Mughal Emperor Akbar.

When only four years old, Nalini Kanta lost his father and was brought up under the care of his uncle Akhshaya Chandra, who worked as Headmaster in a number of High English Schools in North and East Bengal. Nalini Kanta spent the formative years of his life in these village schools and thus developed a deep love and affection for East Bengal. He passed his entrance examination in 1905 in the first division from Panam High School in Vikrampur and secured a scholarship. He graduated from the Dacca College in 1909. Thereafter, in order to relieve his uncle from the financial burden of supporting

his education, Nalini Kanta earned his expenses by private tuition and by undertaking odd literary jobs, which, for an unknown youngman, were not easy to secure in those days in a small place like Dacca. His diligence and talent attracted the notice of Professors Turner and Ramsbotham of Dacca College who gave him personal stipends and helped him secure position after he took his M.A. degree in 1912.

For some months he worked as Headmaster of Balurghat and Ichapur High Schools and for a period taught history in the Comilla Victoria College. In July 1914, on the recommendation of Sir Asutosh Mukherji, who was impressed by a paper he had read in the Asiatic Society of Bengal, he joined the newly established Dacca Museum as its Curator. Thirtythree years later, on the morning of 6th February 1947, he died within its premises, of a brief heart attack, leaving behind his widow, three sons and six daughters.

Nalini Kanta Bhattasali thus gave the whole of his active life to the Museum. Although technically only its employee, it was Bhattasali who really built it up and established its reputation. When he took over, the Museum was only a haphazard collection of sculptures, inscriptions, coins and a few zoological specimens, loosely stacked in a 3-roomed store in the old Secretariat building. It had no regular income and the staff consisted only of himself and two bearers. His own salary was poor and payment uncertain. But he had found his mission and, with singular devotion and energy he transformed this mufassil museum into an institution of all-India fame. He wandered through the country side, exploring, photographing and collecting objects, under-

took excavations, gave lectures and organised exhibitions to create local interest in the preservation of antiquities. Years before the Dacca University came into being, his efforts made the Dacca Museum a centre of historical research. Museology had not become an organised science and Dacca was then far away from the centre of new ideas and experience. Yet, in the way he arranged his exhibits, prepared labels, designed show cases within the pitifully small space and still poorer means available to him, Bhattasali anticipated many of the modern Museum techniques. The Museum could never afford to give him a clerk and for many years it had no typewriter. He had, therefore, to be his own clerk, draftsman, accountant, photographer and indexer. He classified the objects, treated them for repair and preservation, prepared a complete photographic record of the collection and wrote reports and published notices of the significant acquisitions. He lived with his family in a dilapidated house within the Museum compound and his family now recall how he often sat up alone in the Museum office far into the night, writing reports or deciphering a coin or inscription. Despite the financial worry which a growing family and a poor, uncertain pay naturally caused him, Bhattasali could never think of leaving the Museum for a more lucrative position. He had started on a monthly salary of Rs. 200. By the time he died, this had risen only to Rs. 260 and the Museum Committee could not afford to give him even a small dearness allowance during the war years. Only a passionate love for the institution he had built up sustained his enthusiasm till the end.

Before he joined the Museum, Bhattasali had published

original studies in the History and Archaeology of Eastern India. Over the years his contributions in these fields grew in volume, range and quality. Till then Bengal had received scant attention from historians and archaeologists whose interest was still largely centred on the imperial Maurya and Gupta dynasties. Bhattasali made Bengal his special field of study and by his contributions on significant areas of her past dispelled much of the obscurity that had surrounded the early history of this region. In determining the chronology and locale of the hitherto unknown Khadga, Chandra, Varman and Deva Kings, a number of whose copper plates turned up in the 2nd and 3rd decades of this century providing significant clues to the early mediaeval history of the East Bengal region, Bhattasali's studies proved definitive on many points. His expert knowledge of early Indian Numismatics and Palaeography was widely acknowledged and frequently invoked by scholars.

Unlike his co-workers Bhattasali did not limit his studies only to the Pre-Muslim period. When a collection of Muslim coins was received in the Museum, he set about studying Muslim Numismatics and with the evidence supplied by these coins, he wrote the first scientific account of the pre-Mughal Muslim rulers of Bengal. This work, published from Cambridge in 1922, not only initiated research into the history of Muslim rule in Bengal, but has remained, till now, a standard work whose main conclusions about the House of Raja Ganesh have not been seriously challenged. His continued interest in the Muslim Bengal was reflected in his two catalogues of the coins in the Dacca Museum which he published in 1936.

Bhattasali's most outstanding contribution was,

however, in the field of Hindu & Buddhist Iconography which till then, was little known and much less studied as a branch of Indology. Through his efforts for collecting and interpreting archaeological objects for the Museum, he had acquired almost a perceptive knowledge of the significance and identity of the images, which was reinforced by his deep study of texts of the various religious sects. Result of his studies on this field was embodied in his "Iconography of Buddhist & Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum" and published in 1929. This work established him as an authority on Indian Iconography both in India and abroad. As a comprehensive survey of Pala & Sena images of Bengal it has remained a basic work and over the years his conclusions have tended to find increasing acceptance among experts.

Though primarily known for his contributions in the field of History, Archaeology & Art, Bhattachasali also made his mark as a creative writer in Bengali. In the early years of his life he attracted notice by his poems, plays and short stories. In 1915 he published a collection of his stories under the title '*Hashi o Asru*' (Laughter & Tear). Several of these were translated in other Indian languages and two were included by Professor Reinhard Wagner in his collection of Bengali short stories entitled "*Bengalische Erzählungen im Urschrift und Umschrift*" published from Berlin in 1926. As a literary critic he was read with respect. It is a measure of his literary insight that years before the talent of the Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya was recognised, Bhattachasali drew attention to the extraordinary quality of one of his published short stories and hailed the obscure writer as a new

star in the literary firmament of Bengal.

His interest in Bengal's past extended to old Bengali literature also. Early in life he had edited four medieval texts and had come to be regarded as an authority on Bengali Palaeography. It was mainly through his efforts that the Dacca University set up a Committee for collection of Bengali and Sanskrit manuscripts. As its Secretary Bhattasali wandered, mostly on foot, through the East Bengal countryside and brought together an enormous number of palm leaf and paper manuscripts now preserved in the Dacca University and Dacca Museum libraries, but alas, still uncatalogued. Latterly, he engaged himself in preparing for the Dacca University a critical edition of the authentic text of the *Krittibasi Rāmāyana*, the most popular classic of medieval Bengali literature. This involved him in the immense labour of collating through every line and word of a vast number of old palm leaf and paper manuscripts. Undaunted, Bhattasali set about this task without any assistance and planned to publish it in parts. The Ist (*Adikanda*) of its seven parts published by the University in 1936 embodied an annotated text which has come to be accepted as definitive in academic circles and is used in several Universities for post-graduate study. Subsequently on a disagreement with the University authorities he suspended the work intending to publish the completed text elsewhere. This he was never able to do, and his draft text of the other parts still lies in the Museum archives awaiting a competent editor.

Nalini Kanta was awarded the Griffith Prize of Calcutta University in 1922 for his 'Coins & Chronology of Early Independent Sultans of Bengal'. In 1934 the

Dacca University conferred on him the degree of Ph. D. for his published works on Archaeology & Art. For several years he taught Bengali literature and palaeography and also history in the University. When Dacca University decided to compile a comprehensive history of Bengal, he was appointed Secretary of the Editorial Committee in 1935, but a disagreement on principles led to his resignation and total dissociation from the project. The History of Bengal, the first volume of which was published in 1943, thus lost an outstanding contributor. He was intimately connected with *Dacca Sahitya Parishad* from its inception and also with the *Vangiya Sahitya Parishad*, and presided over the history section of the Bengali literary conference held at Krishnagar. During the war years he frequently broadcast live talks from the gallery of the Dacca Museum.

Paying a tribute to his memory, Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee writes in a paper sent to this volume : "Prof. Bhattasali would never budge an inch from any conclusion he had arrived at, which he thought was justified by science and reason. I am reminded specially of a case in which his opinion was sought by a very eminent literary man and journalist of Bengal—about the authenticity of a Bengali manuscript giving a version of the life of the great mediaeval poet of Bengal, Chandidasa. There was a controversy about the genuineness or otherwise of the manuscript. Prof. Bhattasali at first thought the manuscript was genuine, and his scholarship was requisitioned by those who were supporters of the genuineness of this manuscript to give a dispassionate opinion on the subject. Prof. Bhattasali, through whose hands thousands of Bengali manuscripts had passed, looked closely into the manuscript—its paper, its writing and everything, and came to the conclusion that it was spurious and was not at all as old as it was claimed to be. He sent this dispassionate

opinion to the gentleman who had asked for it, even at the risk of displeasing him. As it happened, it had to be given the hospitality of another paper. The selfless manner, without any *parti pris*, which was displayed in this article obtained the highest admiration of disinterested scholarship in Bengal.

“Prof. Bhattasali had a dry sense of humour which also endeared him to all his friends, just as he was respected for his learning and erudition. On one occasion at Dacca, Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, the eminent linguist and scholar of Bengali, gave out as his opinion that the over-rich Sanskrit vocabulary of Bengali was a plethora and a drag on the language. He said that in English one single word ‘*hand*’ was enough, but in Bengali, besides the native Bengali word *hāt* (হাত), quite unnecessarily the language has borrowed Sanskrit words like *kar*, *pāṇi*, *hasta* (কর, পানি, হস্ত) etc. Prof. Bhattasali gave a rejoinder sparkling with humour, and said that an extensive vocabulary for the same object or idea brought in expressiveness in language and subtle nuances in meaning, which were valuable assets in any speech. With a set of examples which brought in hilarious laughter in the meeting, he pointed out the difference among expressions like *hātāno* (হাতানো) and *hastāntar karā*, (হস্তান্তর করা) *kara-mardan* (করমর্দন) and *pāṇi-pīḍan*, (পানি-পীড়ন) the pun in *kara-grahan* (কর গ্রহণ) beside *hasta-grahan*, (হস্তগ্রহণ) etc., and Dr. Shahidullah in the midst of laughter admitted the validity of Professor Bhattasali’s contentions. He was a good and effective stylist in Bengali and his short stories on Bengali life are quite valuable, with their East Bengal background. My friend, the late Dr. Reinhardt Wagner, Professor of Bengali in Berlin University, published from Berlin, some 25 years ago, one of his stories in his book, *Bengalische Erzählungen im Urschrift und Umschrift* (Bengali Stories in the Original Script and in Transliteration). and this shows how his literary qualities were appreciated by a discriminating scholar of Bengali from a far-away foreign country.

“In social matters he was progressive, but at the same time he had a genuine love and admiration for the great ideals for

which Hinduism and India stood. He entertained some controversial views about many historical matters. He attended with us an All-India Oriental Congress held in Western India, and there I had occasion to discuss with him a theory which he had about the settlement of the Yadavas in Saurashtra, which was something quite novel. I do not remember the details, but Prof. Bhattasali did create an impression.

“He had a great sense of duty and would not allow his private affairs to interfere with what he thought he owed to the public. On the occasion of the Bengali Literary Conference held at Krishnagar, Prof. Bhattasali had taken upon himself the task of presiding over one of the various sections of this Conference. But just before the Conference, he suffered from a most cruel blow—the death of a son-in-law in Calcutta. He had to come to Calcutta from Dacca to take his daughter back, after this terrible calamity, to his home in Dacca. But he was also expected to preside over the function which he had accepted. Any other person would have been prostrated by such a cruel and tragic occurrence—the widowhood of a young daughter. But Prof. Bhattasali did not let anyone connected with the Conference know what had happened to him. He came to the Conference and did his work very well, and nobody had the slightest idea about the mental agony he was suffering from as a Hindu father. When everything was over, he could not hold himself any more. He broke down at the final thanksgiving ceremony, when he made a brief reference to his calamity. This certainly raised him very high in the estimation of the intellectual *elite* of Bengal.....”

“Prof. Bhattasali was sympathetic to Muslim aspirations in East Bengal and he told me that on one occasion some Muslim fellow-travellers met him in a train and asked his support for the building of a mosque in their village. Prof. Bhattasali used to wear a beard, and for this he was taken to be a Muslim. But when he gladly offered his little contribution, some orthodox members of the party would not receive it on Bhattasali's declaring that he was not a Muslim as, they explained,

they intended to take financial help from Muslims only. But Bhattasali made a very fine appeal to them, telling them that 'God as the God of all human beings could not object to a respectful offering in His honour and service from any individual, no matter what was his religion'; and then his small contribution was accepted, and the Muslim gentlemen appreciated the reasonableness and justice of his contention."

In his search for and study of historical materials Bhattasali was unsparing of himself. Once he sat for four days beside a tank while fishermen dragged the waters in the vain hope of finding the missing fragment of a copper plate which some one had reportedly found in the tank. He was a stout controversialist and a writer whose pen, though endowed with felicity, could also, on occasions, be painfully incisive. An uncompromising individualism and spirit of independence was a marked trait of his character. This sometimes led to situations in which his colleagues found him rather difficult to work with. But it is a measure of the respect Bhattasali had earned for his intellectual honesty and sound scholarship that many of his erstwhile critics and opponents have readily joined in contributing papers to this volume in honour of his memory. It is perhaps relevant to record that he was singularly free from communal or religious intolerance and his friends recall the courage with which he often supported the Muslims against his Hindu friends and colleagues.