

**Historian Akshay Kumar Maitreya :A Pioneer in North Bengal Studies**

Sumana Das<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Guest Lecturer

Department of History

Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University

Cooch Behar, West Bengal, India

Email [dasbarmansumana94@gmail.com](mailto:dasbarmansumana94@gmail.com)

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***Abstract:** Akshay Kumar Maitreya was the pioneer of North Bengal studies. The present land, which is called North Bengal, was formerly called Varendra or Varendrabhumi. This land was part of the former kingdoms of Prag-Jyotispura, Kamrupa, Kamata, and Koch-Kamta. Akshay Kumar Maitreya, a son of Rajshahi, was a pleader by profession. Akshay Kumar Maitreya presided over the first session of the North Bengal Literary Conference organized by the Rangpur Sahitya Parishad. According to his interpretation, the boundaries of Greater North Bengal included Rangpur, Rajshahi, Pabna, Bogra, Malda, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Cooch Behar, and lower Assam. Akshay Kumar Maitreya's life was devoted to uncovering the historical truth of all countries. He removed the stigma that foreign historians had placed on the heroic heroes of Bengal through tireless research. He highlighted the heroic heroes of Bengal in his books 'Sirajuddaula' and 'Mirkashim', and his 'Goura Lekhmala' was a revelation of the glorious history of Bengalese. Akshay Kumar Maitreya's unique work was to establish the 'Varendra Research Society' for the study of the history of Varendrabhoomi. It was the first private research institution in the Indian subcontinent. In 1919, he established the 'Varendra Research Museum'. The main area of his study of history was North Bengal. His life was devoted to highlighting the history of North Bengal, a region far away from the metropolis of Calcutta.*

***Keyword:** Akshay, Association, History, North Bengal, Rajshahi, Varendra etc.*

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**Introduction**

Akshay Kumar Maitreya is a special name in the field of regional history studies. He was one of the main faces of the Saraswata Samaj, the intellectual society of late twentieth-century North Bengal. Akshay Kumar Maitreya's place in the scholarly society of Bengal at that time was one of the pillars. He has made outstanding contributions as an organizer and writer. He has continuously studied various aspects of the unknown history of North Bengal, the historical ruins of this region, coins, culture, etc. He was the main craftsman in bringing

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Varendrabhoomi, that is, North Bengal, into the spotlight of history. Therefore, I have taken up the pen in writing the present article to illuminate the contribution of Akshay Kumar Maitreya in the field of North Bengal studies. I freely admit that there may be imperfections in this writing as well. And every writing in the field of research has some imperfections. It is the job of researchers and writers to remove those imperfections. I hope to remove those imperfections in the next writing. Before entering into the main discussion, I would like to say a few words about the topic of the article.

The subject matter of the article is the contribution of historian Akshay Kumar Maitreya to the study of North Bengal. So first of all, I would like to give a little explanation about North Bengal. North Bengal is a geographical definition. North Bengal has its own history. Usually, the northern part of Bengal is called North Bengal. The land extending from the River Ganges in the south to the Himalayas in the North is known as North Bengal. Hemchandra Roy Chowdhury explained North Bengal in this way, “North of the main branch of the Ganges, now known as Padma, and West of the Brahmaputra lies the extensive region of North Bengal which embraces the modern Rajshahi Division and the State of Cooch Behar”.<sup>1</sup> This land is a witness to so many historical events. However, the name North Bengal was not used in ancient times. It was not used even in the middle Ages. The word North Bengal has been used since the colonial period. Even the name North Bengal was not used administratively.<sup>2</sup> Most recently, The Government of West Bengal has formed a department named ‘The North Bengal Development Department’.

The North Bengal region has been known by different names over time. The northern part of this region was part of the kingdoms of Prag-Jyotishpur, Kamarupa, Lauhitya, Kamata, and Kamata-Koch. And the southern part was known as Gauda, Varendra, and Pundravardhana. The name Prag-Jyotishpur is known from the Mahabharata. The king of Prag-Jyotishpur kingdom, Bhagadatta, fought on the side of the Kauravas in the Kurukshetra war. Again, during the reign of Harshavardhana, this part was named Kamarupa. The king of Kamarupa, Bhaskara Varman, was an ally of Harshavardhana. The Kamata kingdom, or Kamata-Koch kingdom, was formed here later. Again, the Gouda Kingdom was established in the Southern part of this geographical territory. Shashanka was its builder. The Pala and Sena kingdoms arose in the Varendra region. The kingdoms of Ilyas Shahi and Hussain Shahi arose in the Varendra region. The sole purpose of presenting these examples is to show that North Bengal was the political hub of Bengal in ancient and medieval times.<sup>3</sup> But after the Mughals occupied Bengal, the center of power shifted from North Bengal to Dhaka. During

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the Nawabi period, the center of power shifted from Dhaka to Murshidabad. During the Company period, the political center of power shifted from Murshidabad to Kolkata. And North Bengal became a remote and marginal region.<sup>4</sup> Old ruins, manuscripts, coins, etc., are scattered in various places in North Bengal. There is no doubt that Akshay Kumar Maitreya, a Varendra Brahmin from across the Padma, brought North Bengal into the light of history. No one has written a complete book on this subject before. Therefore, I have selected this topic and named the article 'Historian Akshay Kumar Maitreya : A Pioneer in North Bengal studies'.

Now, coming to the main topic. Many great men were born in Bengal in the 19th century. On March 1, 1861, Akshay Kumar Maitreya was born in a Varendri Brahmin family in Simulia village of Nawapara police station of the then Nadia district. Akshay Kumar Maitreya's father was the renowned Mathuranath Maitreya. He was a pleader by profession. He practiced in the Rajshahi court. Although born in Nadia district, Akshay Kumar Maitreya studied and lived in Rajshahi on the other side of the River Padma. Akshay Kumar Maitreya started his studies in Kumarkhali under Harinath Majumdar. Harinath Majumdar was Akshay Kumar Maitreya's teacher, who is better known as 'Kangal Harinath'. He passed the entrance exam from Boalia English School in 1878. This Boalia English School is now called Rajshahi Collegiate School. He obtained his First Arts degree from Rajshahi College in 1880 and his Bachelor's degree from Presidency College in 1883. He passed his B. L. from Rajshahi College in 1885. This year, he joined the Rajshahi Bar Association. He was a successful lawyer.<sup>5</sup> He settled in Rajshahi, a city on the other side of the River Padma. Gradually, he expanded himself in the Saraswat society of Rajshahi.

Although a lawyer by profession, Akshay Kumar Maitreya's passion was historical research and cultural studies. Rajshahi was the heart of intellectual studies (Saraswata Charcha) in North Bengal. On July 23, 1893, the Saraswata institution 'Bengal Academy of Literature' was established in Calcutta. The name of this institution was changed to 'Bangiya Sahitya Parishad' on February 18, 1894.<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, I would like to mention that Akshay Kumar Maitreya was acquainted with Kabiguru Rabindra Nath Tagore. It is worth mentioning that Akshay Kumar Maitreya was influenced by the ideals of regional studies. With the dream of revealing the history of Varendra, he immersed himself in Saraswata studies and established North Bengal as the cultural center of ancient Bengal.

'Rangpur Sahitya Parishad' was established in 1905 as the first Muffosil district branch of the 'Bengiya Sahitya Parishad'. The year was the year of the partition of Bengal by

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Curzon. Surendra Chandra Roy Chowdhury was its editor, and Mahimaranjan Roy Chowdhury was its president.<sup>7</sup> Akshay Kumar Maitreya was associated with the ‘Rangpur Sahitya Parishad’ and was one of its patrons. The main objectives of the ‘Rangpur Sahitya Parishad’ were-

1. Conducting archaeological excavations and discovering archaeological relics in North Bengal and Assam.
2. Conducting research on language and acquiring knowledge about agricultural and industrial arts.
3. Collection of historical information about poets, social welfare, activists, leaders, and ancient dynasties.
4. Collection and publication of rare and unpublished books and manuscripts.
5. To inspire and patronize the practice of Bengali literature.<sup>8</sup>

The ‘Rangpur Sahitya Parishad’ introduced the ‘Uttar Banga Sahitya Sammelan’ (North Bengal Literary Conference) in 1908. The main feature of the ‘Uttar Banga Sahitya Sammelan’ was to organize conferences every year by bringing together writers, researchers, archaeologists, and historians from North Bengal and Assam. A total of ten sessions of the ‘Uttar Banga Sahitya Sammelan’ were held in various cities of Bengal and Assam.<sup>9</sup> The first session of the ‘Uttar Banga Sahitya Sammelan’ was held on 27 June 1908 (1315 Bangabd, 13 Ashadh) in Rangpur and was presided over by Akshay Kumar Maitreya.

The establishment of the ‘Asiatic Society’ in 1784, the works of the ‘Sahityasamrat’, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, and the ideology of Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore deeply inspired Akshay Kumar Maitreya. Sri Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay wrote: “There is no accessible history of Bengal, whatsoever; there is no history, rather fictions only some narratives of the alien, invaders of Bengal and their biographers. We claim that the history of Bengal will be short of conviction. Who will write? You will write, I will write, all of us will be writing it.....”<sup>10</sup> Akshay Kumar Maitreya was a great follower of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. He was able to understand the essence of Bankim’s writings. ‘Bharatbasher Itihas’ and ‘Bharatbarsher Itihaser Dhara’ of Kabguru Rabindra Nath Tagore had influenced Akshay Kumar Maitreya. He was attracted to the philosophy of writing real history. His life’s vow became ‘to uncover the historical truth of all countries’.

North Bengal became his field of research. He defined the boundaries of Greater North Bengal as Rangpur, Rajshahi, Bogra, Pabna, Dinajpur, Malda, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling,

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Cooch Behar State, and Gouripur-Lower Assam. He edited a Bengali quarterly journal called 'Oitihāsik Chitra'. It was published from Rajshahi since 1899. 'Shiksha Parichay' was a Bengali monthly journal. He was its editor.

As a writer, Akshay Kumar Maitreya was praised by all in his time. His unique creations as a writer are 'Sirajuddaula', 'Mirakashim', 'Firingi Banik', 'Ajneyabad', 'Samarsingh', and 'Sitaram'. In the preface to the first issue of 'Oitihāsik Chitra', Kabiguru Rabindra Nath Tagore wrote: ".....in memorizing entirely the history written by others, one might become a scholar or might score high marks in the examination, however, the impetus that is required in indigenous writing of history by collecting the native historical ingredients, that results not into eruditeness alone. That will create current in the stagnant pool of our mindscape. That instigating, that endeavor will enliven us".<sup>11</sup> Akshay Kumar Maitreya wrote in the article called 'Golam Hussain': "Due to the death of our indigenous history, we have become the object of ridicule by the foreigners.....We don't write our history don't show deserving respect to someone who is writing history whether it is ancient or modern, we are equally indifferent to all. Presently in the newly awakened world of Bengali literature, fictions are acclaimed more day by day. On the other hand, due to Peoples' apathy, history of our land is getting dormant. Whatever is flourishing in the name of history is in majority, a mere derivation of the conclusions drawn by the foreign writers".<sup>12</sup>

Akshay Kumar Maitreya's greatest achievement was to establish the 'Varendra Research Society' to study the history of Varendrabhoomi. It was the first private research institution in the Indian subcontinent. In 1919, he established the 'Varendra Research Museum'. His life was devoted to highlighting the history of North Bengal, a region far away from the metropolis of Calcutta. On the second day of the first session of the 'Bangiya Sahitya Sammelan' (1314 Bengal, 18th Kartik), Akshay Kumar Maitreya proposed to establish a 'Saraswat Bhavan' in the heart of Bengal for the purpose of collecting, compiling, and preserving ancient manuscripts, myths, antiquities, etc. This conference was held in Kashimbazar, Murshidabad. But this proposal was not implemented at that time. Here I would like to highlight one thing that in a meeting of the 'Bangiya Sahitya Sammelan', Rabindranath proposed to establish a research society in the villages of Bengal. But such a society was not established anywhere else. The 'Varendra Research Society' was formed in Rajshahi at the initiative of Akshay Kumar Maitreya.<sup>13</sup>

'Varendra Research Society' was established in 1910. Akshay Kumar Maitreya, Kumar Sarat Kumar Roy of Dighapatia zamindar, and Ramaprasad Chanda formed this

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organization. Kumar Sarat Kumar Roy was the president, Akshay Kumar Maitreya was the director, and Ramaprasad Chanda was the secretary of this research society. For twenty years, Akshay Kumar was the director of this society and the center of all its activities. The works of this society were three-1. Collection, 2. Research and 3. Publication.<sup>14</sup> Kshitish Chandra Sarkar wrote about Akshay Kumar Maitreya, “His quick intellect and wonderful power of expression admirably fitted him to be the spokesman of the society and a fascinating guide to its collection”.<sup>15</sup>

Akshay Kumar Maitreya participated in the second session of the ‘Bangiya Sahitya Sammelan’ (Bogra) and the third conference held in Bhagalpur as a representative of North Bengal. Gradually, he devoted himself to collecting antiquities of North Bengal. After returning from Bhagalpur, Akshay Kumar, Kumar Sarat Kumar Roy, and Ramaprasad Chanda started an expedition to collect antiquities. In this regard, Dr. Kalyan Kumar Das Gupta has commented: “Maitreya was one of the pioneers who, along with his devoted band of scholars and researchers, embarked on a village-to-village survey in Varendra in search of core materials of the history of Bengal”.<sup>16</sup>

Another achievement of Akshay Kumar Maitreya was the establishment of the ‘Varendra Research Museum’ in 1919. It is an integral part of the ‘Varendra Research Society’. The foundation stone of the museum was laid by the late Lord Carmichael of Bengal on 13 November 1916 and the doors of the newly built building were opened by the late Lord Ronaldshaw on 24 November 1919.<sup>17</sup> Akshay Kumar Maitreya declared, “I may now reasonably hope that our educated young men, bent down with the load of heavy text books of the University and sent put to the world with indifference or a scoffing spirit in respect of further study, will take interest in the study of the antiquities of the land of their birth”.<sup>18</sup> Kshitish Chandra Sarkar wrote in this regard, “This being the instance of such a privilege allied to a non-official institution outside Calcutta”.<sup>19</sup> Shri Panchkari Banerjee, fascinated by the collection of the ‘Varendra Research Society’, wrote: “We had forgotten the descendants of the people we were; we did not know the nature of the nation we were; we had forgotten the mantras of knowledge and the four arts. He broke his spell by going to the speaking area of Rampur Boalia. The exhibition organized by the ‘Varendra Research Society’ is the speaking area of Bengal: The confluence of the past and the present, the sign of the future”. He concluded his long article by saying that “When I see the exhibition of the ‘Varendra Research Society’, I can understand that all these belong to Bengal and Bengalis.

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No perfect priest has been able to inaugurate such a sense of self that has not been felt for thousands of years. Akshay Kumar Maitreya played the role of that perfect priest”.<sup>20</sup>

Akshay Kumar Maitreya undertook a grand plan to write a detailed history of Bengal in the Bengali language. As a result of this, we have his ‘Gaudalekhamala’. When this book was published, there was a stir in the contemporary intellectual society. Bijoy Chandra Majumdar commented, “I feel proud to call a learned director of the ‘Varendra Research Society’ a friend; he is Shri Akshay Kumar Maitreya”.<sup>21</sup> The prosperity of the ‘Varendra Research Society’ began to occur rapidly due to his sincere efforts. When the doors of the ‘Varendra Research Society’s own building were opened, Akshay Kumar Maitreya declared with joy, “I may now reasonably hope that our educated young men, bent down with the load of heavy text-books of the University and sent out to the world with indifference or a scoffing spirit in respect of further study, will take interest in the study of the antiquities of the land of their birth”.<sup>22</sup> Lord Ronaldshaw, the then Governor of Bengal, mentioned two invaluable works of the ‘Varendra Research Society’ while inaugurating the building of the society. These two are the disclosure of various necessary hidden information and the setting of novel examples and the increasing curiosity and enthusiasm of educated people in other parts of the country. Parimohan Sengupta highly praised the museum and its director.<sup>23</sup>

The excavation work at Paharpur (near Rajshahi) was conducted under the direction of Akshay Kumar Maitreya. In this context, historian Ramesh Chandra Majumdar wrote, “This regular excavation of an archaeological site through private efforts is the first of its kind in India and may be regarded as the crowning glory of Akshay Kumar Maitreya”.<sup>24</sup> Akshay Kumar Maitreya clearly realized that to restore the history of Bengal, it is not possible to just sit at the reading table. For this, the restoration of antiquities and their correct and impartial reading are necessary. This realization was realized in the establishment of the ‘Varendra Research Society’ and the ‘Varendra Research Museum’. Parimahan Sengupta rightly said that “Although the ancient Gaur and its activities are dead and past, today they are alive and awake in front of us in the beauty of the diverse rock paintings thanks to the welfare of the Varendra Research Society”.<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusion**

So, at the end of the discussion, it can be said that Akshay Kumar Maitreya gave institutional form to the study of North Bengal. The intellectual society of Calcutta became aware of the history of the marginal and remote North Bengal outside Calcutta through the ‘Varendra

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Research Society'. He was one of the faces of the intellectual society of North Bengal. This great man passed away on 10th February 1930. 'The Varendra Research Museum' is currently located on the campus of Rajshahi University. The University of North Bengal established a museum in the name of Akshay Kumar Maitreya in 1965. It is called the Akshay Kumar Maitreya Museum. It is necessary to give attention to the study of Akshay Kumar Maitreya.

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