



The Forgotten History of an Explorer; Sarat Chandra Das (1849-1917)

Arnab Bera

Ph.D. Rabindra Bharati University

E-mail: beraarnab43@gmail.com | ORCID ID: [0009-0003-2797-5924](https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2797-5924)

Abstract

In the 19th century, due to the influence of renaissance in Calcutta and Bengal, there was an unprecedented success in Bengali scientific practices in India in accordance with the agitation that was created throughout India. From the renaissance in Bengal, through the efforts of Raja Rammohun Roy, western knowledge and science education first spread in India, especially Philosophy, mathematics, geometry, astronomy, literature and history. Many such people have to be mentioned in the field of map making, has contributed in many ways to map making without actually being a cartographer.

Keywords: *Map making, Tibet, Bengal, Science, Knowledge*

Maps have played an important role in the history of human civilization. Determining the location of different places on the surface of the earth, maintaining communication between different countries by rail, road and air, commercial exchange all these things require proper maps. The word map in Bengali conveys a much more significant meaning than the English word map. As a definition, it can be said that a drawing or a map is drawn according to certain standards or principles and through which a specific visual representation of a country, place or region is obtained, it is called a map. If you review the history, it can be seen that the people of the world have been using maps for their daily life since many years before the birth of Jesus Christ. Along with the development of human life, we notice the discovery of various types of maps on scientific basis.

From time immemorial man's life has been governed entirely by natural influences and later by his practical life activities. At the first stage of civilization, people were nomads. Divided into various groups, they roamed from place to place to collect the basis logistics of life i.e. food. Needless to say, this way of life of humans in prehistoric times was governed entirely by natural influences. To move from one place to another, they had the material provided by nature, such as plants, rocky mounds and natural watercourses. A Spontaneous map of the surrounding area would have been formed in their mind through regular commuting. In fact, it can be called mental map. After staying in one place for some time, if they go to another place, the previous image will be erased from their mind and the image of the new environment will be formed. The creation of these floating spatial images in the mind was based on their natural observational abilities and sense of experience of the environment.

At least, 2,300 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, traces of human attempts to map the world on clay discs have been found in Babylon in the Middle East. One of the major cartographic contributions of this civilization was the division of the entire circle into 360° at the center and the introduction and use of the 60-60-60 principle in angular measurement (Sarkar:2014, p.82). Cartography was actually introduced by the Sumerians. Egyptian civilization developed in the Nile basin. Those who excelled so much in the science of pyramids, that their

excellence in cartography can be easily surmised. The excellence lies in the fact that the later Greek Scientists used the Egyptian astronomical principles, methods and formulas and made them a path in the triumph of science. The maps created by the Aztecs of Peru are considered outstanding works of art. The Eskimos had extraordinary cartographic abilities. This map made of life and life needs is considered as one of the documents of the mental survey of that time (Ibid, p.82). Later, in Greece, the concept of the earth and the methodical technique of its mapping were specially developed by various scholars (Ibid, p.85). Christian Jacob said-

Theory in the history of cartography is not an esoteric option disconnected from the daily practices and thoughts of empirical historians' but an essential aid to understanding the history of maps, globes and atlases. It is a way of accessing some of the complex issues related to these artefacts, their makers and their users, and a tool of self-awareness that extends the range of research questions (Jacob:1996, p.191).

The map of Bengal was first published under the initiative of the first Surveyor General of India, James Rennell (1767-1777), which is still famous as the most valuable informative map of Bengal of that period. The Great revolt of 1857 dealt a major blow to the constitutional structure of India ruled by the then East India Company. Although this rebellion failed due to various reasons, the Parliament of England realized that the responsibility of a large country like India cannot be run by the East India Company. Hence, immediately after the rebellion, the British Parliamentary Monarchy directly took over the administrative responsibility of India. After assuming office, the British rulers realized with practical wisdom that in order to properly exercise their ruling power throughout India, which is vast and geographically diverse, it is first necessary to map the entire region with detailed natural and human data.

In British India, not only the English but also the Indians showed considerable skill in making maps. Nain Singh Rawat, Sarat Chandra Das, Rajendralal Mitra etc. have also presented us with many map data through their works. It would be a big mistake not to mention Radhanath Sikdar in this context. It is to be noted that at a time Bengali mind was full of superstitious attitudes and superstitions, he made many complex calculations using developed machinery and mathematics. Rajendralal Mitra was a pioneer in the practice of knowledge and science in Bengal in the 19th century. He realized the importance of the map of Bengal.

Sarat Chandra Das was born in 1849 in a Hindu Vaidya family in the then East Bengal. He was educated at the Presidency College, Calcutta, where he soon became acquainted with Sir Alfred Front, the then Director of Public Instruction in Bengal. Sarat Chandra Das was his companion in geographical and literary expeditions, and it was mainly because of his acquaintance with the Government of India that Sarat Chandra was able to undertake the expedition to Tibet (Das:1902, p.v).

While still in the engineering department of the college, in 1874 he was appointed headmaster of the newly established Bhutia Boarding School in Darjeeling on the orders of the then Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sir George Campbell. Shortly after his return the then Government of Bengal published an account of his first expedition, with a forward written by his friend Sir Alfred Crust. In the book now published the route of his first expedition is relegated to a footnote, as he followed the same route in a second and larger expedition in 1881-1882 and this report shows the achievements of his expedition to Tibet in 1879, they seem to have been mainly historical and religious. Complete details of the geographical and cultural castes of Tibet are missing from later full reports (Ibid, p.vi).

Sarat Chandra spent the 1880s sitting his home in Darjeeling documenting the history, religion, culture and folklore collected during the Tibet expedition. These documents, which were valuable to students of oriental studies, were published in the journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and in the journal of the Buddhist Text Society founded by Sarat Chandra Das in 1892, of which he was the Secretary. In November 1881 Sarat



Chandra set out for Tibet a second time to fulfil his promise to Prime Minister Aying Rinpoche, again accompanied by U gen Gia-t so, who was both secretary collector and surveyor, although much of this survey, even the very important survey up to Lake Palti (Yam do Tso), was completed by the explorer himself. Once again Sarat Chandra established his headquarters at Tehsil hanpo, while he made various expeditions along both banks of the Tsangpo river from Sakya in the West to Samae and in the east to Tae-sang. Fortunately, he even managed to recover from a short trip to Lhasa. Where only two native explorers had been able to go before him. Nain Singh in 1866 and Kishen Singh in 1880, he later made a comprehensive map of the entire city and its surroundings and was also present in the audience at a ceremony at Tell Lama, visited various important monuments of the town, but he was prevented from visiting various places around the town by his commercial spirit. The notes are as primitive as the sages of earlier explorers (Ibid, p. vii).

After a brief visit to the capital of Tibet, Sarat Chandra Das travels to the Yang Basin the Tibet civilization is believed to have been first discovered. He collected all the information in the area he visited. He entered India in January 1883 after an absence of about fourteen months. An account of his journey was published in two parts by order of the Government of Bengal. For many reasons these documents were kept secret by the Government of India until the 1890s(Ibid, p. vii). In 1882 when the Government of India contemplated sending a delegation to Tibet and the now deceased Konan Macke lake was sent to Peking to obtain the necessary permission from the Chinese Government, Sarat Chandra Accompanied him there and spent several months in the early part of that year. During his visit to Peking, Sarat Chandra was attracted to acquire deep knowledge about Tibet. While in Peking, he stayed at the lama's monastery called Si-yangsu outside the An-ting Gate, where all the Tibet merchants stayed during their stay in Peking. He dressed like a Chinese lama at this time and he was known as Ka-Cha-Lama or Lama from Kashmir. But this plan was abandoned and from that time Sarat Chandra Stayed in Darjeeling and devoted all his enthusiasm and energy to the publication of his book on Tibet and to the writing of books on Buddhism, while he also acted as a translator for the Government of Bengal (Ibid, p. viii).

As a reward for the services he rendered to Macke lake while at Peking, on his return to Bengal he was given the title of Rai Bahadur, and was created a company under the orders of the Government of India. In 1887, the Royal Geographical Society awarded him the Black Premium for his geographical research. From this brief discussion of the matter it appears that he devoted himself as much to literature as to geographical research. He joined the school as a teacher in 1874 and worked there till 1878. He then took some gifts to the abbot of that Tibetan lama. During his stay at the Lama monastery in Darjeeling he was trained in the use of various survey instruments which were important for the survey of the border provinces. Evidence of the care with which he did his work through that training and self-effort can be found in the book he wrote.

In 1882 Sarat Chandra measured the exact boundaries and size of Lake Palti, and Sir Albert Croft found this work so important that in June 1883 he sent that Lama to resurvey and examine the same area and complete Babu Sarat Chandra's survey. Lama did this success fully, only by adding to Babu Sarat Chandra's work the description of a small part North-West lake, but his greater task was to establish a perfect survey of the former. He discovered Lobraak (Manas Valley) and again travelled to Lhasa and returned to India via Tang-la and chumbi valleys and reached Darjeeling in December of the same year. A report of this expedition was prepared by the then Colonel Sir Thomas Holditch, which was published in the Trigonometrical Survey of India, Account of the expedition to Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet from 1856 to 1886, and from which many quotations have been made in the present text (Ibid, p. x).

According to W. W. Rockhill, a well-known Tibetan explorer, Sarat Chandra Das was one of the pioneers in the discovery and exploration of Tibet in the 19th century. From 1879 to 1882, when Tibet was a forbidden place

for foreigners, Sarat Chandra visited Tibet twice in the guise of a Buddhist lama and surveyed many places in the Kanchenjunga Hills and Tibet on behalf of the British Government of India. During this journey he traversed a height of more than 20000 feet without the aid of any modern engineering device. According to Frank Smith is recognized as one of the most daring expeditions as record. As a scholar of Tibetan language and Buddhism, apart from his contribution to geographical research, Sarat Chandra collected a valuable information on Tibetan culture and social life, religion and politics (Das:2008, p.7).

To understand the true significance of Sarat Chandra Das' journey to Tibet, a brief discussion of Tibetan politics at that time is necessary. It has already been said that the 19th century Tibet was a forbidden place of foreigners, especially Europeans. Both brave European explorers who ventured into Tibet and Tibetans who helped them were severely punished. As a result, even in the 1860s, the British government in India knew very little about Tibet. The British did not even know the exact location of the capital town of Lhasa and the second largest town of Tibet, Shigatsé. Like geographical information political information about Tibet, like Russia and China, was not very accessible to British intelligence agencies, who mainly gathered information from missionaries near the border, and local traders. At this time the British government was alarmed by news of the rapid arrival of the Russian Tsar's army in Central Asia, as the British capital Calcutta was only 300 miles from the Tibetan border. The British government realized that it was very useful to bring news from Tibet but at that moment there was no easy solution (Ibid, p.15). In 1863, Captain Thomas George Montgomery, a young Royal Officer trained engineer in the Survey of India, secretly sent to Tibet under the guise of Indians. He advised to carry out survey work there. This seemed a very good proposition to the government as it was probably easier to identify the Europeans and political trouble could be avoided if the Indians were caught by official denial. So, from then on, some selected Indian Buddhists of the Survey of India started entering Tibet in the guise of Buddhist lamas. The prayer wheel drums they carried were used to hold survey notes and sketch maps, thermometers were hidden in the tops of their sticks, and small sextants and telescopes made in the ordinance factory were hidden in the groove's of their tin Trask floors. Instead of 108, the Buddhist rosary in their hands had 100 beads so that they could easily hear their footsteps while walking and understand how far they walked. When in 1879 Sarat Chandra secured an invitation from Shigatsé to go to Tashi-Ichanpo, the British government took the opportunity to survey eastern Tibet through him. Both of his Tibetan expeditions were planned and financed by the British government which marked the beginning of his knowledge of Tibet (Ibid, p.16).

Parjanya Sen wrote in this context-

Enthusiastic about Tibetan culture and public life, this foreigner did another remarkable work. He wrote down every mountain, stream and landscape feature on the way, surveying the Chumbi valley (Sen:2017, p.9).

Sarat Chandra Das was honored by the Royal Geographical Society of London for discovering many unknown geographical details of the Himalayas. The Surveyor General of India at that time, wrote about the report sent by Sarat Chandra Das (Ibid, p.10). In fact, the need for a map first becomes very important if one wants to know, to conquer, an unknown, unknown country (Ibid, p.10).

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