What A Gazetteer Is Not

A village elder in Bibhuti Bhusan's *Ashani Sanket* is hard put to answer the query of a fellow villager about the location of Singapore, which, according to village gossip, has recently been captured by the Germans. Various guesses are made—is it in the district of Jessore or Khulna or somewhere in the vicinity of the neighbouring village of Manapur? No less ingenious is the guess ventured by the elder himself—since the place is one the seacoast it must be in the district of Midnapore near Puri. And he is supported in his view by the learned village pundit. What is significant here is not so much the villagers' ignorance about Singapore as their ignorance about the districts of Jessore, Khulna and Midnapore or their neighbouring village of Manapur. Here they have lived and died for generations. Here they will go on doing so unless swept away by famines and floods or some other calamity either natural or man made.

A master artist that he is Bibhuti Bhusan avoids the melodramatic, yet in his seemingly artless style depicts the horrors of the Bengal famine of 1943 to the life. What amazes his readers most is the utter helplessness of the villagers. Their very survival is at stake and steeped in superstition and ignorance they do not know the cause of the crisis and they passively suffer. This poignant tale of human tragedy shows how abysmal is the ignorance of the villagers about their native place. The root cause of the famine is remote no doubt and beyond their control but it would not be far from the truth to say that their helplessness is due not to a small degree to their ignorance. As a rational being man's goal is not mere survival but a civilized existence, decent and comfortable both materially and spiritually. Knowledge about the environment coupled with his ingenuity make the achievement of this goal possible for him. For betterment of the conditions of his existence he deliberately adjusts himself to his environment by suitable patterning of his behaviour.
and controlling the environment wherever possible. Instead of being fatalistic his attitude and outlook is possibilistic.

We have come a long way since the days of that cataclysmic event in our history and our ignorance about our immediate surroundings may not be as abysmal yet it is still quite pervasive. We know a great deal about a great many things but we very often know very little about things that concern us most—our home, our village, our district, our own little society. In the words of the poet, we travel long distances at great costs to see mountains and oceans but rarely bother to enjoy the simple beauty of a dewdrop on the blades of a grass at our doorstep.

It is here that gazetteers can be of great help to us. The British are said to have acquired on empire in this country in a fit of absentmindedness but at the hour of its consolidation they were wide awake and alert. Once the heroic deeds had been done they did something very prosaic indeed yet immensely useful. Good shop-keepers as they were they now settled down to take stock of their new acquisition which was a totally unknown entity to them. It was a sort of inventory preparation item by item. They surveyed its myriad aspects in order how best to administer it to their own interest. In the process they produced a genre of literature called gazetteer which was entirely new in this country. Geographical descriptions of our country are strewn in our ancient and classical literature but they are neither systematic nor comprehensive. Only Abul Fazl’s Ain-i-Akbari compiled during the reign of Akbar is a crude approximation to a gazetteer.

The purpose of the gazetteers compiled by these foreigners was to acquaint themselves with an alien land and its people. It was to be a kind of a manual or handbook which the administrators could carry about their person and consult as an aid to their administrative work. And the compilers were the administrators themselves. Not only gazetteers but many other scholarly works on various aspects of the place of their work and its people were produced by these bureaucrats most of which remain standard works of reference to this day. Such works appear to have been viewed as a mark of distinction in the service and received official encouragement. The Secretary of State had directed by his order contained in No. 82 (Public-Record), of 12th November, 1885, that particulars of “any literary work of a public or official character undertaken by an officer” should be duly noted in the Histories of Services. Every district and subdivisonal office had a small library of its own where gazetteers and allied literature were easily available. In fact the gazetteer was the field officer’s Bible. And the government took steps for their wide distribution. Today things have changed so much so that the district gazetteer has become a rare commodity in the district itself. A couple of years ago the Collector of a district,1 “found the only available copy of the gazetteer in a dilapidated condition in the Bar Library” of his district and had to make twenty copies of it “for the posterity.” Such being the state of affairs the question which one once asked “who reads your gazetteers, anyway?” does not appear to admit of any very satisfactory answer.

Though their utility was purely official these gazetteers also came in handy to those who cared to know and satisfy their intellectual curiosity about a particular geographical area. But the number of such non-official users has always been very limited—mostly scholars and academicians. In the matter of use of gazetteers during the post-independence period the picture has sadly remained more or less the same. Outside this exclusive circle, very few amongst the common people are aware that such things as gazetteers exist or that they are of any use to them. The chief reason of this seems to be that the linguistic medium of compilation has remained English making them inaccessible to the common man. The result is that the common man’s mental picture of his district or subdivision or block has remained hazy and a matter of guesswork, if not as wild as that of the villagers of Ashani Sanket.

There are indeed people who may scoff at the gazetteers yet their usefulness cannot be over emphasized. From ancient times the district has been the basic unit of administration in

1. G. Baluchandhran, Collector of Midnapore.
this country and a synoptic knowledge about its geography, history, its people and their socio-economic conditions is an essential requirement in a successful administrator. As a geographical unit many Indian districts are larger than some States elsewhere and the number of souls the former contain is more than the latter do. This is what O'Malley had to say about the district of Midnapore about a century ago: "The largest and most populous of the Bengal regulation districts, it has an area of 5,186 square miles and contains a population, as ascertained at the census of 1901, of 2,780,114 persons. Its area is, indeed, nearly equal to that of the Patiala State or the kingdom of Saxony while it contains more inhabitants than Berar, or the kingdom of Denmark." With the devolution of greater powers of governance both political and financial to the Panchayat bodies we have to take serious notice of the district administrative units not in the older sense—a district officer reigning over it as a guardian angel—but in the modern sense—the common people at long last taking things into their own hands and deciding their own fate. They need information for identification of their needs and aspirations, planning for their realisation and for assessing their achievements and failures. They need facts perhaps to argue their case over allocation of resources before the State Finance Commission or the State Election Commission over the question of delimitation. Instances could be multiplied where a gazetteer is an immensely useful manual. The compiler's aim should therefore be to best serve this practical purpose.

About the kind of information that should be collected and compiled in a gazetteer opinions may vary, but it is generally agreed that it should cover as many aspects of the area as possible within a short compass so as to present a fairly comprehensive picture of that area—its physical aspects, its history, its inhabitants and their social, economic and cultural life etc. In doing so the compiler cannot undertake any original research or field survey. He has to depend on the published works of various scholars and authorities, reports of organs and departments of governments, publications of reputed educational and research institutions and relevant literary works. His motto is to make the compilation as authoritative as possible. Limitations of time and space of course do not allow him the liberty to go into great details. For intensive and extensive information on any specific matter the reader will have to consult the scholarly works on the subject. In this respect a gazetteer is also a kind of bibliography for a thorough study of the area. In the collection and presentation of his materials the compiler has to be selective. For, metaphorically speaking, every district has a kind of personality of its own—certain peculiarities which are unique and uncommon and it should be the endeavour of the compiler to bring out that personality. And his motto should be, in the words of Lytton Strachey, "To preserve a becoming brevity—a brevity which excludes everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant." He need not, however, sacrifice the uniformity or general plan which is essential to facilitate comparison between districts.

Another thing the writer of the gazetteer does rather unwittingly. He writes history—the history of the district of his time. Much of what he includes in his gazetteer will most probably perish with the files in government offices or periodical publications of the time, but they will definitely live on in his compilation. We do not know if any such pretensions were harboured by Hunter or O'Malley or their likes but the fact remains that today their works partake of the character of history. Many eyebrows may be raised at such a presumptuous claim but if one wants to know how a Bengal district was a century ago one will have to consult Hunter and O'Mally. Posterity will similarly view the gazetteers of the present. This fact devolves a great responsibility on the shoulders of the compiler. He must be scrupulously objective, for he is an historian inspite of himself.

Those who are reluctant to accept this claim for the gazetteer in general will certainly scoff at the idea of reissue of old gazetteers and consider it a waste of public money. They may dispute the claim that all history is contemporary history or it is the elucidation of the present by the past, yet they may do well to heed what Trevelyan has to say on the matter: "Disinterested intellectual curiosity is the life-blood of real civilization—the appeal of history is imaginative. Our
imagination craves to behold our ancestors as they really were, going about their daily business and daily pleasure." In a modest way gazetteers satisfy such cravings of ours. It must, however, be admitted that what an old gazetteer gives us is a photograph—a skeleton of the past. In order to see the past in flesh and blood we have to seek elsewhere.

Finally, the compiler should have no pretensions to originality, for whatever he does he does it by taking materials in bits and pieces from others. At his worst he is a tinker or mechanic and a drudge. At his best he is a florist who makes a beautiful bouquet with 'other men's flowers.' He has a chance of success if he is diligent and intelligent. If his sources fail him, or he is lazy and careless, he is doomed to failure.

Of the 38 volumes of the Bengal District Gazetteers 29 are by O'Malley and the rest are by diverse hands. The present volume is by Mr. J. C. K. Peterson about whom very little is known today except that he was a Bengal cadre ICS Officer and for some time served in Burdwan. We have included Mr. W. B. Oldham's pamphlet Some Historical and Ethnical Aspects of the Burdwan District as an Appendix to this volume. Both, the maps have been prepared by Dr. P. Nag, Director, NATMO. The relief map is a new addition while the other one is based on that of the original book. Shri Tarapada Pal, Shri Tarun Pain, Shri Shyamsundar Ghosh and Shri Mrityunjay Das, all of my office have helped me at various stages. Shri Timir Mukherjee, Shri Pratap Singha and Shri Ram Chandra Pandit of Basumatari Corporation Limited have taken special care in the printing of the book. Sm. Subhra Pal of Prauto Binda has given the finishing touch. Shri Satya Sadhan Chakraborty, Minister-in-Charge, Higher Education Department and the members of the Advisory Committee have given me the moral support. I am grateful to all of them.

Doliatra
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J. C. K. P.