

Paper: 11; Module No: 24: E Text

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(B) Description of Module:

Items	Description of Module
Subject Name:	English
Paper No & Name:	Paper 11: Indian Literary Criticism and Theory
Module Id/No:	24
Module Name:	Bankimchandra and His Literary Thought
Pre-requisites:	
Key Words:	Bankimchandra, historiography, nationalism, literary criticism, Aesthetics

C) About the Module

This module talks about Bankimchandra and his contribution to Indian intellectual tradition with his original thoughts in the field of literature, religion, philosophy and history. He is not only a great novelist in Bengali but his literary contribution is widely acclaimed by the other Indian critics too. He is also widely translated in different Indian languages along with English. He is also debated and sometimes misunderstood or sometimes interpreted only as Hindu fanatic for his novel *Anandamath*. But it is debated and whole lot of intellectual works have been done on this subject. He has been interpreted in different ways by the different scholars during the course of the time.

He was the child of renaissance and modernity and he acquired knowledge from east and west both. He has synthesized eastern and western knowledge what he gathered throughout his life in his works, thoughts and activities.

In this module we have discussed about his contribution in literature, religion, philosophy and historiography. Through this study we try to understand the aesthetics of modernism and historiography.

Introduction

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay was one of the brightest stars of Bengali literature. In 19th century Indian literature, the genre of novel was developed with very few literary genius and he was one among them. The language of Bangla prose style and also discursive language for essay writing gained a new turn with him. He was one of the brightest child of Indian renaissance and modernity. He composed India's national song 'Vande Mataram'. Even after his death, his literary works still equally relevant to the present Indian context.

His contribution to the development of Bengali literature is remarkable. Sri Aurobindo praised Bankim's intellectual role and said that "Bankim gave his countryman a language, literature and a nation"¹. Sri Aurobindo claimed that Bankim not only created a

¹ <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399318/obo-9780195399318-0170.xml>



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new language, and at the same time, he protected Bangla prose from the poetic and decorative language of Sanskrit.

Bankimchandra holds an important place in Indian literature as he was the first among early nationalist writers and novelists. Besides this, he was an intellectual who was particularly concerned about the harmful effects of the British colonial rule in India and its ancient civilization. He believed that to find the answer to the problems of the present day, we need to embrace India's heritage and past. In his lifetime and also after that Bankim Chandra's works got translated into several languages and influenced different political movement and thoughts.

A Short Bio-note²

Bankimchandra was born on 27th June, 1838 in the village of Kanthalpara in the North 24 Parganas district of present West Bengal. His father, Jadav Chandra Chattopadhyay was a government employee under the British government at Midnapur. He had early education in Midnapore and there after he studied for six years in the Hoogly Mohosin College. In 1856 he joined in the Hindu College, Calcutta and he completed his B.A. in 1859 from the University of Calcutta. In the same year he was appointed as Deputy Collector. After 32 years of government service he retired in 1891. Bankimchandra was died on 8th April, 1894.

List of Bankimchandra's Works

The below is the complete list of Bankim's works,

Novels

- *Durgeshnandini* (March 1865)
- *Kapalkundala* (1866)
- *Mrinalini* (1869)
- *Vishabriksha* (The Poison Tree, 1873)

² <http://www.iloveindia.com/indian-heroes/bankim-chandra-chatterjee.html#4fgFDmxIthATRbAm.99>

- *Indira* (1873, revised 1893)
- *Jugalanguriya* (1874)
- *Radharani* (1876, enlarged 1893)
- *Chandrasekhar* (1877)
- *Kamalakanter D aptar* (From the Desk of Kamlakanta, 1875)
- *Rajani*(1877)
- *Krishnakanter Uil* (Krishnakanta's Will, 1878)
- *Rajsimha* (1882)
- *Anandamath* (1882)
- *Devi Chaudhurani* (1884)
- *Kamalakanta* (1885)
- *Sitaram* (March 1887)
- *Muchiram Gurer Jivancharita* (The Life of Muchiram Gur)

Works on Religion

- *Krishna Charitra* (Life of Krishna, 1886)³
- *Dharmatattva* (Principles of Religion, 1888)
- *Devatattva* (Principles of Divinity, Published after his death)
- *Srimadvagavat Gita*, a Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita (1902 – Published after his death)

Poetry

- *Lalita O Manas* (1858)

³ This text is also considered as his thought on historiography.

Collections of Essay

- *Lok Rahasya*⁴ (1874, enlarged 1888)
- *Bijnan Rahasya*⁵ (1875)
- *Bichitra Prabandha*, Vol 1 (1876) and Vol 2 (1892)
- *Samya* (Equality, 1879)

Bengal in Bankim's Time

Since the time of Bankimchandra, the English education system as well as the western knowledge practice began to expand in Bengal. The expansion of English education made emergence of two groups of people who were culturally different than each other. There was a group of people who were educated in English and were submerged themselves in the imitation of English culture and life style and on the other hand there was another group developed an independent power of thinking, who had their own opinion and subscription of culture and knowledge. This latter group stood up against the odds and they showed their courage in protesting against the many superstitions, beliefs and evil customs of the Hindu society. Bankim was one of them. So many literary critics have described Bankim as the life-force of the Bengali Renaissance.

The advent of modern western education made Bengali educated class bit confused about their subscription and perception of knowledge and culture. The conflict between existing old education and the modern western education system dropped a great question in front of them. Bankim also faced this situation. However, he did not restrict himself to any narrow range. When in one hand he welcomed western education system, on the other hand he learned Sanskrit and Persian language and had a deep knowledge in Hindu Dharmasastra.

Bankim had great love and sympathy to his people and his time. It is worth to mention renowned critic Shashibhushan Dasgupta's comment on this context. Dasgupta said,

⁴ This collection is on society.

⁵ This collection is on science.



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"About Bengal and the Bengalis he had in him an immense hope which knew no limit, the fulfilment of this hope filled him with sorrow and grief. The expression of sorrow came out in his harsh language and chastisement! His objective was to reinstate the Bengali people in their own glory and honour, hence he had dealt with cruel blows to the sleeping people and through this he not only wanted to make them weep but he also wept with them"⁶.

Knowledge, Colony and Civilisation

Bankim's contribution was not only in the field of literature but he put his original thoughts in the field of religion, philosophy and history. "Bangadarshan" (1872), the periodical which was introduced and edited by him, was not to serve the literature only but it served all the fields of human knowledge practiced in 19th century. He also had successfully made a group of intellectuals who contributed a lot to the society with their writings published in "Bangadarshan" along with their writings published from other places. Partha Chatterjee in his essay published in 1985, writes,

"There were three kinds of knowledge, Bankim argued: knowledge of the world, of the self, and of God. Knowledge of world consisted of mathematics, astronomy, physics, and chemistry. These, one would have to learn from the West. Knowledge of the self-meant biology and sociology. These, too, one would have to learn from the West. Finally, knowledge of God. In this field, the Hindu sastra contained the greatest human achievements — the Upanishads, the *darsana*, the Puranas, and, principally, the Gita"⁷.

According to Nirad C. Chaudhuri, the problem of culture was the main concern of Bankim. In his masterpiece *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, he clarified the issue,

⁶ "Bangladesh O Bangalee jati_ Sambandhe tahar mane chitribhuban byapini asha; ei ashar apurnatai chitter kshovt sristi karita. Sei kshoveri prakash bhartsana o katuktite Bangalee jitike swamahimiy atmpratisthita karai miltar udyeshya, sei janya ghumanta jatike barbar nisthu> aghat kariachen, se aghate shudhu kandaite chesta karei nSi, nijeo sange sange kandiachen". Sashi Bhusan Das Gupta : 1993 : "Bangla Sahityer Ekdik"

⁷ 8th April 1894: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Bengali writer, died. <https://www.mapsofindia.com/on-this-day/8-april-1894-bankim-chandra-chattopadhyay-bengali-writer-died>



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“The problem of culture was the main preoccupation of [Bankim Chandra]; for he believed that the proper cultivation of all the faculties resulting in action and knowledge was the natural function of man. . . . His life-long search was after the means of expanding and deepening culture”⁸.

He tried to understand Indian culture and western impact on it and emergence of new culture in 19th century Bengal. His thoughts on history, religion and divinity in his essays was actually his lifelong study to understand the synthesis of Indian culture and the identity crisis of new generation of 19th century Bengalis. His interpretation of the Bhagbat Gita was search for new language, new knowledge and method to offer eastern knowledge to the generation educated in western educational system. His essay *Anukaran* or imitation was his reading on Bengali literature and culture which was imitation or mere imitation of Europe. Emancipation from cultural imitation was the way to be emancipated from the identity crisis, he understood. In the beginning of 20th century, another Bengali scholar Pramatha Choudhury also focused on this problem and found way in translation for crystallising Bengali cultural identity.

Bankimchandra and Aesthetics of Nationalism

Bankim's early writings were published in Ishwar Chandra Gupta's weekly newspaper Sangbad Prabhakar. His first novel to appear in print was *Rajmohan's Wife*. Although it was written in English and it is considered to be the first Indian novel written in English. But his first major publication was his novel *Durgesnandini*. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's most famous novel was *Anand Math* (1882). Later Indian national anthem *Bande Matram* was adapted from this novel. He started publishing "Bangadarshan" for the revival of the culture and literature of his people, culture and community. Renowned scholars of that time who used to write in "Bangadarshan" are, Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Ramdas Sen, Ramgati Nayaratna, Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay, Ganga Charan Sarkar, Baikuntha Nath Sen, Tara Prasad Chattopadhyay, Dinanath Gangopadhyay, Gurudas Bandhopadhyay etc.

⁸ 8 April 1894: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Bengali writer, died. <https://www.mapsofindia.com/on-this-day/8-april-1894-bankim-chandra-chattopadhyay-bengali-writer-died>

Bankim Chandra's literary essays and novel have secured him a dignified place in the history of Bengali literature. Famous historian and novelist Ramesh Chandra Datta made a nice remark on Bankim's contribution and literary achievements. He mentioned,

"Bankim Chandra was in prose what Madhusudan was in verse, - the founder of a new style, and the exponent of a new idea. In creative imagination, in gorgeous description, in the power to conceive and in skill to describe, Madhusudan and Bankim Chandra stand apart from the other writers of the century; they are the first, the second is nowhere...."⁹.

It would be wrong to think that before Bankim there had been no development in Bengali literature. Bengali literature went through gradual improvement in various aspects before Bankim chandra Chattapadhyay. But it is true that he had a major role in shaping Bangla literature and language.

He was a man of versatile talent. In his novel Bangla got the first taste of Nationalist Consciousness. Dr. Anil Baran Dey in his article "Bankimchandra: Development of Nationalism and Indian Identity", aptly said,

"Bankimchandra gave his countrymen a mantra as also the benefit of a vision. He showed them the way to achieve oneness between their individual interests and the interests of the national community to which they belonged. Having thus taught them the first key element of nationalism, he also taught them the other element, that is, their sense of differentiation from other nations, particularly the English, which, by virtue of its being the ruler of India at that time, was a source of great concern to Indians."¹⁰

⁹ Ramesh Chandra Dutta: History of Bengali Literature (Taken from B. Choudhury: 1960: Bangla Sahityer Itikatha p. 374).

¹⁰ Ray, Anil Baran; Bankimchandra : Development of Nationalism and Indian Identity http://www.eng.vedanta.ru/library/prabuddha_bharata/August2005_bankimchandra_development_of_nationalism_and_indian_identity.php

The subject matters of many of his essays and novels were national life and social matters. He offered a common ground of national identity card. His message was to be united. In this way, he conceptualised the first systematic structure of nationalism in India.

In all his work, one after another one thing is clearly evident that is his high thinking, intellect and poetic talent and for this reason he is considered to be an extraordinary and one of the most celebrated author of the 19th century. In addition, in his entire works one can sense nationalist feelings of the author.

Aesthetics of Historical Novel

Bankim's writings contain a historical background in almost nine novels. It is noteworthy to refer Harprasad Shastri's comment in this context. He said, "Bankim was a voracious reader of history and he always longed to be a distinguished historian when he was at college"¹¹. Even in early age of Bangadarshan he had started writing about history but failed to continue it. However, it would be wrong to think that Bankim's personal interest was the only reason behind it. These historical novels had a great socio-political significance. To counter colonialism in the nineteenth century it was necessary for colonized to create a counter-colonial narrative of their own, which will strongly establish the fact that colonized have their own history and which will build a feeling of patriotism among them. Through his novel, Bankim wanted to spread a sense of unity among the colonized. Historian Bipan Chandra has pointed out that,

"When Bankimchandra first appeared, educated Bengalis used to think of their race as an inferior one. They used to bow their heads when compared themselves with Europeans...Bankimchandra begun to counter-act this self-abasement of the Bengali psyche"¹².

Bankimchandra's historical novels are not only written for knowing the past. They had a great political purpose to serve. It was not a remedy or a way of escapism to forget the suffering of Colonial rule. But it had a strong role in awakening the nation's ignorance in

¹¹ Bhattacharya, Swagata; Reading Historical Novel as genre: Hybridity in Bankimchandra. https://www.academia.edu/24273847/Reading_Historical_Novel_as_a_Genre_Hybridity_in_Bankimchandra

¹² Bhattacharya, Swagata; Reading Historical Novel as genre: Hybridity in Bankimchandra. https://www.academia.edu/24273847/Reading_Historical_Novel_as_a_Genre_Hybridity_in_Bankimchandra

identifying his 'self'. By various narrative such as adventurous story of Rajput prince Jagatsingha or the story of Durgesnandini, Bankimchandra tried to revive long lost spirit and confidence of the colonized and this is how he succeeded in promoting nationalist sentiments among them.

Bankimchandra's Thought on Translation¹³

Bankim's thought on translation is expressed in his interpretation of Srimadbhagbat Gita. His comments on Gita translation was mainly about the strategy of translation in the context of his time and newly emerged educated class. His translation method was based on the imagination of the role of the readers. He understood, that the old commentaries written in Sanskrit on the Gita was not the language of his time and the newly educated Bengali urban class with their all the exposures to the European knowledge, would not be able to understand the earlier commentaries. And other sides, English does not have equivalent language power as of Bengali and Sanskrit to explain the Gita. So, Bankim felt, a new language is required to prepare the commentary on a complex text like Gita. Here we observe commentary as translation and translation as search for new language for new generation.

Bankim and Literary Criticism

Bankimchandra has very few texts on literary criticism. At most total number of his critical works will be thirty or less. But through these few texts he strongly established his own idea of literary criticism and proposed models of literary criticism. A renowned Bengali critic Satyendranath Ray¹⁴ has mentioned that the period of Bankim's writings on literary criticism is roughly from 1872 to 1892. But bankimchandra never overtly commented on the definition of literature, poetry or poet. He believed that it was not his duty, there are any other scholars in India and Europe who will focus on these. Ray commented that principal subject of Bankim's criticism was duality (44). Duality was present very much in the intellectual psyche of 19th century Bengal. Bankim's duality was between scientific knowledge of the west and the religious mind of the east, western logic and eastern devotion, western modernism and eastern tradition, modern individualism and medieval community centrism. This duality is

¹³ <http://www.bankim.rachanabali.nltr.org/node/1638>

¹⁴ Ray, Satyendra; *Sahitya Samalochanay Bankimchandra O Rabindranath*, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2003.

between his role as social reformer and the mind of an artist. According to Ray there is no consistency of Bankim's intellectuality.

The essays what reflect his method of criticism are "Uttarcharit", "Ray Dinabandhu Mitra Bahadurer Jibani O Granthabali Samalochona", "Iswarchandra Gupter Jibancharit O Kabitwa", "Dharma O Sahitya", "Bangalar Nabya Lekhakdiger Prati Nibedan", "Vidyapati O Jaydev", and "Sakuntala, Miranda O Desdemona" etc. "Dharma O Sahitya", according to Ray, is important not because of its literary value but historical value. This essay reflects the ideology of New Hinduism of 19th century (45). His "Aryajatir Suksha Shilpa" is a significant text on the aesthetics of Indo-Aryan art.

According to Ray Bankim's literary thought can be divide in two major category. One is classical trend with romantic touch another is romantic trend with classical touch (46). But another trend also can be found in Bankim's writing that is literary theory with religious thought. Here literary significance of literature is not principal objective of literature but literature is for religion and religious purity (47). Ray claimed that this religious mode in literature is not dominating in Bankim's idea of literature or criticism and this trend also does not have any coherent relation with the classical trend of his work but this trend has historical significance what helps critic to read different layers of Bankim's mind and the characteristic of Bankim's time.

Bankim's Concept of Beauty

In Bankim's understanding the beauty is the creation of the God, which means beauty is the *Bastab-Satya*, the reality of the real world. The creation of poet is the imitation of the creation of the God, and because of that the creation of poet is beautiful (60). According to him, literature imitates the *Swabhab* (natural character of one). And if this imitation is perfect it becomes beautiful. The great literature is the example of perfect imitation of *Swabhab*. Another view is found in his "Uttarcharit", where he said this *Swabhab-Anukaran* or the imitation of *Swabhab* is not entirely same as literature and also not entirely different than literature (61). But this *Swabhab-Anukaran* is primary condition of beauty in literature.

Bankimchandra also tried to analyse European Romanticism with reference to the Indian Rasa theory which is no doubt interesting.

Conclusion

Bankim is one of most debated literary figure in modern India. He has immense contribution in the development of prose language in Bengali and novel as a genre in Indian literature. He has successfully proposed a model for historical novel in Bengali. Along with this his contribution in developing discursive language is also remarkable. He is a pioneering figure in introducing comparative literary methodology in literature with his essay titled, “Sakuntala, Miranda O Desdemona”. He is a modern interpreter and commentator of ancient Hindu religious texts and divinity and spirituality. He was more advance than his time, especially in practicing literary criticism both in methodology and language. His “Krishnacharitra” is finest example of his scholarship which offers historiography which is Indian and modern together. He is a biographer, critic, novelist, commentator, and poet all together. His contribution in the thoughts of nationalism, historiography and criticism is modern aesthetics of literature and politics.