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Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1813-1894) and the Emergence of Nationalist Histoiography in Bengal

KEYWORDS: Nationalist historiography, Varendra Research Society, Aryanisation, Sanskritisation.

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ABSTRACT *There can be no denying the fact that it was Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay who set an agenda for a nationalist historiography in Bengal, although Bankimchandra was neither a historian nor did he attempt to reconstruct a history of Bengal. Being inspired by Bankimchandra a large number of Bengali scholars began their search for an indigenous history of Bengal which would be free from the bias as it was shown by the western scholars. Present paper seeks to understand the context which prompted Bankimchandra to look for an indigenous history of Bengal and how it influenced then following generation of historians as well as the limitations of Bamkimchandra.*

The nationalist historiography of Bengal drew its prime inspiration from Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay who is regarded as the philosopher and the preceptor of modern Indian nationalism. He felt aggrieved when he had found that our country's history was not properly written and India of the Indians was almost absent from the accounts taught in the schools [1]. Rajendralal Mitra's researches had raised high hopes in his mind. But he was disappointed when he had found that Rajendralal ultimately could not produce a full-fledged history of Bengal [2]. However, the silver lining was discovered by him behind the dark cloud when Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay's Prathama Śikṣā Bāṅgālār Itihāsa had been published. He found in it a true picture of Bengali society and culture for which it was referred to by him as 'a fistful of gold' [3]. He also appreciated the literary qualities of Isvarachandra Gupta [4]. Because, in his literary works on the lives of Bengali rural poets, he had proved his native quality. However, Bankinchandra Chattopadhyay deeply felt the necessity of reconstructing the socio-economic-cultural history of Bengal. He gave a clarion call to the nation, Bengalis in particular and said:

A history (proper) of Bengal is needed; otherwise, Bengal has no hope. Who will write? You will write, I will write and all will write. Let us all search for a history (true) of Bengal together. [5]

The attitude of Bankim was well demonstrated in several essays published in the Baṅgadarśan from 1872 to 1882. In his essay 'Bhāratkalaṃka' Bankinchandra Chattopadhyay raised the question why India had lost her independence. The Europeans criticised the weakness of the Hindus. But, at one time, the Hindus had conquered Kabul and the English had been defeated by the Marathas and the Sikhs. So far as the ancient Indians were concerned, it was difficult to know exactly about their military achievements due to the paucity of historical materials. The history of wars in India as found in the Greek and Muslim accounts is biased and exaggerated. In spite of that, the military skill of the Indians could be traced from their accounts. According to Bankinchandra, the stigma brought on the Hindu character could be explained by two facts. Firstly, they had no history. Secondly, as they did not make an aggression against their countries or kingdoms, their military skill was not recognised. Thirdly, their political subjugation was the main cause of the slur on the forehead of the nation. Bankim proved that the Indians could by dint of their military strength expand their political and commercial empire in Southeast Asia. Hindu kingdoms were established in Champa and Kamboja, Java and Bali. In his essay 'Bhāratvarṣer Swādhīnatā O Parādhīnatā' (Bhādra, 1280 BS) drew a comparison between ancient India and modern India to settle the question of independence and subjugation and determine the question whether India had her happiness in ancient or modern period. In modern India, "we are not being educated in the art of administration (rājyarakṣā O rājyapālan) and therefore the nation is not flourishing. Therefore, it is to be admitted that political dependence arrests the progress." On the other hand, under English rule European literature and science spread in India. From that point of view, foreign rule might prove to be beneficial. However, in ancient India daṇḍanīti or political science had made remarkable progress. Bankim referred to the dialogue between Nārada and Yudhiṣṭhira in the Sabhāparvan of the Mahābhārata in which the main principles of daṇḍanīti were enunciated. Incidentally, Bankim made a significant observation in which he equated the status of Chandragupta Maurya as a conqueror and founder of empire with that of Charlemagne, Frederick II and Peter I.

Bankimchandra in his essay 'Baṅge Brāhmaṇādhikāra' (Bhādra, 1280 BS; Aghrāṇ, 1282 BS) definitely made a sincere attempt to trace the social history of Bengal. He assumed that the Brāhmaṇas in Bengal represented the Aryans. According to him, before Aryanisation, Bengal was inhabited by the non-Aryan people like the Kols and Draviḍas. The process of Aryanisation led to an admixture of Aryan and non-Aryan religion and culture. Thus, an explanation of the origin of the Bengali people was given by Bankim. In his view, the distinction between castes in Bengali society was due to the differences in occupations. Bankimchandra's view regarding the position of the Brāhmaṇas vis-à-vis the Aryans has not been accepted by modern historians. Modern researches have dealt a rude shock to the belief that the "Brāhmaṇas and other high castes of Bengal descended from the Aryan invaders who imposed their culture and political rule upon primitive barbarian tribes." In his essay entitled 'Bāṅgālīr Bāhubal' (Śrāvaṇ, 1281 BS) Bankimchandra tried his best to establish that the Bengalis had physical prowess in the past and it was to be revived with an intensity of desire and sincerity of purpose. Bankimchandra observed in this connection:

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Now the Bengalis are charged with a very strong urge for upliftment and are ever busy for promotion. Many do not have any serious hope about the results, as the Bengalis do not have physical prowess. They firmly believe that there can be no betterment without physical strength.

The force of desire leads to initiative. When desire acquires that kind of intensity, shortcomings become painful and then that pain generates great drive to reach for the goal. …

When that desire will be awakened in the hearts of the Bengalis, when that desire will gather momentum in the heart of each and every Bengali, unity will join the initiative.

In a review of a tract on Bengal's history by Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay, 'Bāṅgālār Itihāsa' (Māgh, 1281 BS) Bankimchandra challenged the various versions of Bengal's history that characterised the Bengali people as cowards. He prided in the colonial achievements of the Bengalis in ancient period and also in the westward political expansion of some Bengal-rulers and raised doubt regarding the tale of the capture of Navadwip by seventeen Muslim cavalry soldiers. His doubts regarding the account of Minhaj-ud-din have been confirmed by modern historians. But his assertion in respect of Bengali colonial achievements can hardly be ascertained due to lack of sufficient evidence. In the same article he commented on the Indian character of the Sultanate in Bengal as contrasted with the foreign character of Mughal domination in Bengal. For, while during the Sultanate Bengali culture flourished, under the Mughal rule Bengali culture declined. This comparative study might not be acceptable to modern researchers. Because, behind the decline of Bengal during the Mughal rule there were socio-economic reasons which Bankim was not in a position to ascertain. Next, he wrote 'Bāṅgālār Itihāsa Sambandhe Kayekṭi Kathā' (Aghrāṇ, 1287 BS). In this brilliant essay Bankim said that it was imperative to find out the social scenario during the Mughal rule. He realised that a predominantly Muslim local peasantry could not come from outside. He remarked that the native peasantry had sacrificed their earlier religion and had taken a newer one. Bankim searched for the reasons behind it. He also tried to find out the result of revenue settlement of Todarmal and the circumstances leading to the origin of the Zamindari system. Therefore, to Bankim, the socio-economic enquiry might furnish the clue to Bengal's past. In a nationalistic vein he said:

Bengal must have historical memory. Bengal must have its own history; otherwise the Bengalis could not be able to attain manhood. But this Bengal's history could hardly be expected to be written by foreigners. It has to be written by the Bengalis themselves.

In his 'Bāṇgālīr Utpatti' (Pauṣ, 1287 BS – Jyeṣṭha, 1288 BS) Bankim brought into analysis all the latest tools of historiography – anthropology, philology as well as sociology. He remarked that in Bengal the process of Aryanisation or Sanskritisation had not been an easy process. Because, low castes, the tribals with their own language and culture could not be so easily Aryanised. Thus, in an ethnological study it would be found that Bengal was a plural society comprising mostly the non-Aryans in the lower strata and mostly the Aryans in the upper strata. In his 'Bāṅgālār Itihāser Bhagnāṃśa' (Jyeṣṭha, 1289 BS) Bankim raised some questions to which satisfactorily replies were essential for the reconstruction of the genuine history of Bengal. The questions raised by him covered a very wide area comprising the administrative system, military department, revenue system, bureaucracy, judicial administration, economic condition of the common people, different religious sects, education system, philosophical systems, day-to-day life of the Bengalis, marriage system, fine arts, arts and crafts, maritime history, colonisation in Southeast Asia, nature of import and export in foreign trade of Bengal and the circumstances leading to the conversion of the indigenous people of Bengal to Islam. Most of the enquiries of Bankimchandra are found to be related to ancient Bengal. Because, there was dearth of materials for ancient Bengal at that time, while medieval Bengal had been known through the writings of the Muslim historians written mainly in Persian. Bankim wrote an essay 'Bāṅgālār Kalaṃka' published in the journal Prachār (Śrāvaṇ, 1291 BS). From this essay it is quite clear that the reasons for Bankimchandra's in-depth study of the antiquities of Bengal primarily aimed to free the Bengalis from their traditional shame for lack of history and to inspire the future generations of Bengal to earn new glory. In this context Bankim wrote:

Bengal suffers from the same shame that India also does. Sometimes one hears of the physical prowess of Indians other than the Bengalis. No one has ever praised the physical prowess of the Bengalis. Let the person who says that this is the typical character of the Bengalis, the Bengalis are always weak, cowardly and effeminate; be struck by lightning, for he lies. History does not corroborate the criticism.

Bankim's message was, "there is need for Bengal's history, and otherwise there is no hope for Bengal." From his introduction to Bibidha Prabandha, (1892) it is learnt that Bankimchandra at one time planned to search for historical materials and to write a history of Bengal. But, for various reasons he abandoned this idea. The few articles he wrote in his monthly magazine Baṅgadarśan were meant to inspire others. In Bankim's own words:

To inspire others I wrote a few articles on the history of Bengal in Baṅgadarśan. My work was actually the work of labourers who build roads through forests and mountains so that the generals of the army may lead his men to victory. The result of my humble road building labour is these articles on the history of Bengal. But where are those generals who are supposed to lead? I have not heard of them on this road till now.

Ramaprasad Chanda in his Presidential Address [6] in the History section of Baṅkim Sāhitya Sammelan (Āṣāḍh 2, 1330 BS) said with reference to the statement of Bankim quoted above, that for the last fifteen to twenty years much efforts were made for the collection of soldiers, materials and arms. Ramaprasad felt that those two prerequisites – mainly collection and interpretation of facts for the reconstruction of history were satisfactorily fulfilled by the foundation of Varendra Research Society. Ramaprasad himself referred to Bankim as his guru. Within a few months after the death of Bankimchandra, Akshaykumar Maitreya began to publish serially in Sādhanā [7] his work entitled Sirajuddaullah. It would not be unreasonable to assume that Akshaykumar undertook the work at the inspiration of Bankim himself. In this connection our attention is drawn to a reasonable observation made by Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay that Bankim's sarcastic remark about the battle of Plassey that was in his view nothing but a farce might have stimulated Akshaykumar to take up a vow of obliterating stigma on the life and achievement of Sirajuddaullah imposed by

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the foreign historians [8]. Prabodhchandra Sen is of opinion that Akshaykumar's poem Vaṅgavijay was also inspired by Bankim's view about the conquest of Nadia by seventeen cavalry soldiers[9]. Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay himself had great doubt about the exaggerated account of Minhaj-ud-din regarding the conquest of Nadia by Bakhtiyar Khilji accompanied by seventeen cavalry soldiers. In his article published in Baṅgadarśan[10] Rakhaldas explained how much labour he had put in to bring out the historical truth lying hidden in Minhaj-ud-din's account. This he did no doubt in response to the urge previously shown by Bankimchandra. Besides, Rakhaldas made it clear in his article published in the Nārāyaṇ [11] that he wrote the second chapter of the first volume of Bāṅgālār Itihāsa by following the method already indicated previously by Bankimchandra himself. The second chapter of Bāṅgālār Itihāsa is named 'Baṅger Ādim Adhibāsī O Āryavijay'.

It may, therefore, reasonably be held that Bankimchandra's mission did never fail. His mission was to introduce the writing of the history of Bengal by the Bengalis in Bengali language. It was fulfilled by the historians like Haraprasad Sastri, Akshaykumar Maitreya, Ramaprasad Chanda and Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay. Secondly, it was desired by Bankim that the writers of history should deeply probe into the original sources, verify their authenticity, analyse them properly and then derive the facts of history. This methodology was faithfully followed by the historians who followed him. Thirdly, Bankimchandra gave a caution to the future historians that the interpretation of the facts as given by foreign writers should be strictly scrutinised and tested so that an unjustified stigma of disgrace either of India or of Bengal could be avoided. The nineteenth and twentieth century historians of Bengal followed the coursew.

Bankim's critics have charged him with Hindu chauvinism and Bengali bias [12]. To Bankim, each and every Indian was a Hindu. Because, 'Hindu' is another name of India. If any scholar insists upon Bankimchandra's bias for the Hindu sect, it would be reasonable to probe into Bankim's essay 'Baṅgadeśer Kṛṣak' where no distinction has been made between Hasim Sheikh and Rāmā Kaivartta. So far as Bengali bias is concerned, Bankim's intention was to show the proper path of reconstruction of the history of the whole of India [13]. According to him, the history of India as a whole could not be written fruitfully, if the history of its parts was not written beforehand. Bankim's mission was to set an example before the future historians of India.

Bankimchandra may reasonably be considered as the propounder of a new agenda of the Nationalist Historiography, not only for Bengal but, of the whole of India. While Mrityunjay Vidyalankar represented the pre-colonial nationalist historiography, Bankimchandra upheld the cause of nationalist historiography in the colonial period after having adapted European methodology of historical writing. The adaptation of Western methodology lay in the logic of history.

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