

# THE BELLES-LETTRES OF BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAY: THE IMAGE OF THE WEST IN THE COUNTER-DISOURSE

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## Abstract

“Laughter and its forms represent...the least scrutinized sphere of the people's creation.” Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Condescension was considered to be the congenital trait of the Colonizers. Even a reference to Calcutta and its filthy ‘environs’ was accompanied by regular scornful snorts. James Hickey in his *Bengal Gazette* wonderfully expressed the situation of early colonial Calcutta through a satirical catechism, where ‘gambling’ was regarded as the most viable form of ‘commerce’ and ‘riches’, the highest ‘cardinal virtue’ of the day. But interestingly condescension did not follow a regular top-bottom model. Colonialism was paid back in its own coin by the colonized population. A series of ‘counter-discourses’ emerged, albeit, in a different form. The foremost among them was definitely Kaliprasanna Sinha’s *Hotoom Pyanchar Naksha*. A whole genre of literary burlesques developed, depending mostly upon scandalous and scatological outbursts. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, emboldened by the ‘benevolence’ of the Western Colonial Education pursued a more subtle path. Slander was replaced by satire in his writings; humour and laughter were purged of the alleged obscenity which characterized the creations of the earlier times. This paper thus attempts to follow from the Bakhtinian notion “Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter” and delves beyond the literary intricacies of the foremost Indian Novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay to unveil the silhouetted times of ‘change’ when the ‘Colonial Time’ and the native ‘Kaliyuga’ were juxtaposed through a study of his unique ‘Belles-Lettres’, cumulatively regarded as the ‘Lokrahashya’ (*Essays on Society*, 1874).

Keywords: Lokrahashya, Colonial-time, Counter-discourse, Calcutta, Colonial-humour.

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## INTRODUCTION

The other side of the world, far away from the enthusiastic and adventurous sea faring nations which produced the likes of Columbus with their insatiable quests for conquest, was infested by people, mostly landlocked and nourished by the bounties of a fertile natural environment. The lands there were agriculturally reaping the best of the gratuities of nature and the superfluity of rivers made the lands one of the highest revenue yielding regions of the times. The marauding powers from the ‘adventurous’ part of the world, attracted by the materials gains scattered in this part of the world thus started intruding there since the

middle of the sixteenth century. Such were the vicissitudes of the land located in the eastern parts of the yet to be formed Indian subcontinent, “Bengal”. Among the large array of ‘foreigners’ making their forays into India, the British succeeded in establishing a position of relative permanence. With the creation of the East India Company in the year 1600, started the longee duree of the 200 year long British Colonial rule in India. The overtly commercial tones of the East India Company gradually gave way to their covert tone of settling an empire and eventually India was transformed into a colony bearing the ‘enormous condescension’ of the Colonial powers.

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The British rule in India was often regarded as one of “the strangest of all political anomalies” without any

precedence and which “resembled no other in history”. Initially the British steeped in the ideas of liberty and equal rights justified their stay in India for uplifting the conditions of their unfortunate brethren, enmeshed in the recurrent cycles of despotic rule, unbearable weather conditions and diurnal struggles for bread. Emboldened by the ‘White man’s burden’ the mighty servants of the British empire were set to malign their hand for the lot of the ‘natives’ (the British would often disparagingly label the indigenous population by this term) amidst the stench and filth coming out of the environs of the native parts of newly forming Calcutta, the Black Town. The geographical parameters of early colonial Calcutta was divided according to the racist notions of the British, the White town inhabited by the British inhabitants and the almost ghetto like structures of the “Black Town” infested by the filthy natives. Initially this civilising mission of transforming the condition of the natives was considered a temporary task and the still aspiring British Empire was not confident enough to deal with the issue of direct governance of such a vast land. With the strengthening of the monetary and financial gains of the British, their confidence grew and they started implementing the reasons for their permanent existence in India through a strange notion of ‘illusion of permanence’. In their way of establishing this illusion of permanence the British developed a proximate-distant relationship with the natives of Bengal. The British started intruding beyond the economic confines of the society. The result was the generation of a somewhat superimposed hybrid culture. Bengal, often rightly considered as the ‘Bengal Bridgehead’ was to experience this hybridism for the first time. The introduction of British induced western education (which was originally introduced to create a class of natives who would be natives in colour but British in taste) acted as a boomerang for the British and a whole lot of scions of respected native families emerged. They started scanning the world through the prism of reason; their own cultural and religious tenets were troubling them now. With their new found ideological and intellectual liberalism they developed a unique worldview which eventually culminated in the immense outpouring of cultural and literary activities, religious and social reforms, questioning and criticising both the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. These incessant

rumblings within the psyche of the newly westernised resulted in a novel awakening often labelled as the Bengal Renaissance. But without getting into the debate regarding the actual origin of the Bengal Renaissance or the plausibility of the concept itself, an attempt should be made to map the plethora of consequences which the phenomenon generated. As has been always said where there is power there ought to be a counter power. Similarly the overarching British rule came to be challenged now and then. A series of counter discourses emerged. But an interesting novelty became visible here. Even in the wee hours of British colonialism also there were various overt and covert protests against the introduction of British law and order, socio-cultural rules and regulations and in a way the British way of life altogether. The most prominent tool at their disposal was humour, sarcasm and satire. A number of instances of ‘Sawngs’ or pantomime performances can be cited here which developed from the streets of early colonial Calcutta infested by migrants from the outskirts of Calcutta in search of better economic prospects. Mostly an entertainment form executed by and for the lower strata of the society, the ‘Sawngs’ were parades of common people dressed in colourful attires accompanied by equally colourful models made of clay. The content of these parades consisted mainly of the mockery of the lifestyles of the elite. To make these mockeries more appealing the ‘Sawngs’ were further sensitized by the particular usage of music, doggerels, dramatic performances and a typical form of music regarded as the ‘Sawnger gaan’. Apart from the ‘Sawngs’ a series of literary burlesques also developed, the pioneer among whom was undoubtedly Kaliprasanna Sinha. These texts or performances represented a plethora of instances of counter discourses. A special form of counter discourse however developed with the writings of the foremost Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay.

### **Humour and Counter-Discourse**

Laughter and its forms represent, writes Mikhail Bakhtin the least scrutinized sphere of the people's creation. But humour is a pervasive feature of human life. ‘We find it everywhere.’ Humour can also be looked upon as laughter generating process, a subtle way of criticising by applying the tools of rhetoric,

mockery, mimicry, irony, that certainly adds a comic element in interpreting the hitherto formal realms/regimes of ephemeral conscience creating a dialectical trajectory that enables 'looking from without' the iambic verses of silence episodically hidden through the lens of humour. The application of humour pervades the regime of normativity into creating what Thomas Hobbes called a feeling of superiority or Hutcheson's idea of incongruity as a source of humour to release pent up emotions/energy or Jean Paul's way of looking into humour as 'Weltanschauung' where the aesthetics of humour lies with the beholder and not the object of ridicule. In the case of Colonial India, Condescension was considered to be the congenital trait of the Colonizers. Even a reference to Calcutta and its filthy 'environs' was accompanied by regular scornful snorts. Thus Rudyard Kipling explains the growth of Calcutta in the following manner.

*"Thus the mid-day halt of Charnock-  
more's the pity!  
Grew a city  
As the fungus sprouts chaotic from its  
bed  
So it spread-  
Chance-directed, chance-erected, laid  
and built  
On the silt-  
Palace, byre, hovel-poverty and pride-  
Side by side;  
And, above the packed and pestilential  
town  
Death looked down.  
Lest the city Charnock pitched on-evil  
day!"*  
-Rudyard Kipling (1891)

James Hickey in his Bengal Gazette wonderfully expressed the situation of early colonial Calcutta through a satirical catechism, where 'gambling' was regarded as the most viable form of 'commerce' and 'riches', the highest 'cardinal virtue' of the day. But interestingly condescension did not follow a regular top-bottom model. A set of counter-discourse

developed by the colonised population albeit, in a different form. A whole genre of literary burlesques developed, depending mostly upon scandalous and scatological outbursts like Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hotoom Pyanchar Naksha*. (*The Observant Owl-Hotoom's vignettes of Nineteenth-century Calcutta*) A picturesque depiction of the Sawngs by Kaliprasanna Sinha illuminates the situation to a considerable extent.

"On either side of the image [of the goddess] there were the Sawngs-first the 'religious hypocrite' and second, the 'pigmy nawab' -both exquisitely done. The religious hypocrite's body was roly-polly like a cobbler's dog-his belly round like a tomato-the pig-tail on his shaven head tied in a tuft- a garland and a few golden amulets like tiny drums hanging around his neck-amulets tied round his arms-his hair and moustache dyed in black-dressed in a black bordered dhoti and a vest...giving sidelong glances at the housewives and whirling round his fingers the pouch of his rosary beads... The pigmy nawab-looks quite handsome-his skin as fair as milk with drop of lac-dye in it-his hair parted in the albert-style-like a Chinese pig-short-necked- carrying a red handkerchief and a stick- wearing a fine, transparent dhoti made in Simle [Simulia in north Calcutta], tucked firmly behind."

Kaliprasanna Sinha's literary burlesque is also replete with remarkable accounts of such billingsgate of his times: 'In the Shobhabazar market of the Rajas, which was about to put up the shutters, the fisherwomen with lamps in their hands were selling rotten fish and left-overs, inviting the customer with endearing calls- "Hey, you over there with the towel on your shoulders, want a good piece of fish?", "You with your broomstick moustache! Shell out four annas." Regarding the specific usage of 'billingsgate' Mikhail Bakhtin says: 'It is characteristic for the familiar speech of the marketplace to use abusive language, insulting words or expressions, some of them quite lengthy and complex. The abuse is grammatically and semantically isolated from context and is regarded as a compulsive unit, something like a proverb. This is why we can speak of abusive language as a special genre of billingsgate' (Rabelais and his times).

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, emboldened by the 'benevolence' of the Western Colonial Education pursued a more subtle path. Slander was replaced by satire in his writings; humour and laughter were purged of the alleged obscenity which characterized the creations of the earlier times. Here Bankim's satirical essays follow the pattern of Bakhtinian notion that 'Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter'. Bankim himself acknowledges the utility of laughter or *rasikatha* having a popular appeal in displaying the perplexity of the modernism and used humor as *alankara* or stylistic embellishment in the form of 'counterfeit praise'. 'Lokrahashya' (a series of satirical essays published in the periodical 'Bangadarshan' in 1878) used humour not only to depict the anachronistic image of the Bengali middle class through their unquestioned imitation of the 'West' but also meted out a discursive treatment of the imperialist apothecary through the eyes of the occidental natives' culture. These essays therefore, often, took a conversational pattern where Bankim himself took upon the role of speaking in defense of the unrespectable natives not in exalting the superiority or fame of the ancient culture of Hindutva or Bharatbharsa of the mythical texts but through a heuristic analysis of the requirements in the formation of the ideologies of the nation and nationalism that could counter the West but not essentially contradictory to the utilitarian-rational-liberal West. Here the voice of the author is both audible and visible as Bankim indulges in the mimetic pattern of storytelling rather than a conceptual representation of society and culture and offers the reader a transmutable character in evoking the experience of the 'other' without depending much on the aestheticisation of the theories of subjugation, colonialism, imperialism but through the systematic representation of the causal relation of such subjugation defined in humour, without distorting the essential knowledge of representing the 'unrepresented' by means of conceptual resources of language which is limited/specific in both space and time with a contemporary appeal without being individualistic, but which forces the individual reader to be self-reflexive. An example from a passage on the 'Illbert Bill Controversy' conforms to this particular pattern.

*Magistrate- What do you mean, Babu, by convicting a European British subject?*

*Deputy- What European British subject, Sir?*

*Magistrate- ...I am going to report you to the Government for this piece of folly...*

*Deputy- Yes Sir, but this man was not a European British subject.*

*Magistrate- How do you know that?*

*Deputy- He was very dark.*

*Magistrate- Do you find it laid down in the Law that a fair skin is the only evidence by which a man shall be adjudged to be a European subject?*

*Deputy- No Sir.*

*Magistrate- Well, what other evidence did you take?*

*Deputy- I do not presume to discuss the matter with you, Sir. I see I was wrong, and I am very sorry for it.*

*Magistrate- Very sorry for what?*

*Deputy- Because it is very wrong for a native to convict a European British subject.*

*Magistrate- Why very wrong?*

*Deputy- Because a European subject cannot commit a crime and a native cannot judge honestly.*

*Magistrate- Do you admit that?*

*Deputy- I do not see why I should not. I try to do my duty to the best of my ability, but I speak of my countrymen generally.*

*Magistrate- You don't think your countrymen ought to try Europeans?*

*Deputy- Most certainly they should not. The glorious British Empire will come to an end if they do.*

*Magistrate- Well, Babu, I am glad to see you are so sensible. I wish all your countrymen were equally so; at least that all native magistrates were like you.*

*Deputy- Oh Sir! How can you expect it; when there are men at the top of your service who think differently?*

*Magistrate- Are you not yourself near the top? You must have served long.*

*Deputy- Unfortunately my claims to promotion have always been overlooked. I thought of speaking to you, Sir, on the subject.*

*Magistrate- You certainly deserve promotion. I will write to the Commissioner and see what can be done for you."*

The satirical alliteration of Lokrahashya, with a tone of moralistic fabulism, thus creates an imagery of juxtaposition of both the colonial-time and the conspicuous native-time/*Kaliyuga* moving on the same continuum of a literary canvas leading to a composite image of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. Benedict Anderson writes about nations as communities that are imagined into existence. Bankim analyses this cultural roots of imagined communities into forming of a nation.

Another interesting feature of Essays on Society was the frequent use of animistic nationalism/rationalism in summarizing the role of civilization of the West and its articulate modulation on the modern educated Bengali vis-à-vis the West, as in Baghracharya Brihalangul (The Great Tiger), Gordhob ( donkey), Hanumadbabusambad (Monkey-Gentleman Conversation) where in a subtle variant the narrator often compares the situational variant with an animal highlighting its biological similarities with the bengali babus in understating and overstating of the West. The dilemma of the east encountering the west – civilization vs. uncivilised- The comic/satiric pieces, as well as dialogue spoken by women and people from the lower social strata, all have been showed by his virtuosity with the spoken informal style.

#### **“Hanumadbabusamvad**

Babu- It seems most barbarous gibberish-that precious lingo of his; but I suppose I must put up with it. My dear Mr Monkey, I am ashamed to confess that I am not quite familiar with your beautiful vernacular. I dare say

it is a very polished language. I presume you can talk a little English.”

Bahgracharaya Brihalangul exemplifies his experiences of living a protected life in the captivity which he calls the circus and the passer-by were amused to see a majestic tiger in a captivity living on the caress of his masters rather than following his biological carnivalesque instincts, until one day he fled away by killing the his guards. It is here that Bankim tries to awaken the conscience of the Bengal by applying slesh as an alter ego through the continuously using terms like bishoykormo, bongshomondop etc like the Freudian technique of in analysing the mental state through dreams. According to Sudipta Kaviraj, Bankim Chandra’s uses of irony makes a transition from the highly mannered and restrictive metric forms of verse to the free seriousness of prose. Earlier, verbal playfulness was associated mainly with verse. Bankim demonstrated that many of the delectations of verse writing could be captured in imaginative prose. But prose could offer other pleasures which verse, at least of the traditional sort, could not. Most significant among these new enjoyments was the attitude of reflection prose expressed. From a vehicle of frivolous enjoyment of insignificant objects in the world . . . irony came in Bankim to have a serious object, indeed an object beyond which nothing could be more serious to the modern consciousness. Instead of trivial things in a world which is not fixed in a historically serious gaze, it now reflected on three objects not entirely distinct from each other, all implicated with the historical world. These are the self, the collective of which the self is a part, and the civilization of colonial India which formed the theatre in which this darkly comic spectacle of the search for the self unfold.”

The futility of the newly imposed judicial system of the British also found a classic expression in Bankim’s depiction of the Matrimonial penal code-

#### **“The Matrimonial Penal Code**

##### **Chapter I**

##### *Introduction*

Whereas it is expedient to provide a special Penal Code for the coercion of refractory husbands and others who

dispute the supreme authority of Woman, it is hereby enacted as follows:

This Act shall be entitled the “Matrimonial Penal Code” and shall take effect on all natives of India in the married state.

## Chapter II

### *Definitions*

A husband is a piece of moving and moveable property at the absolute disposal of a woman.

### *Illustrations*

- A trunk or a work-box is not a husband, as it is not moving, though a moveable piece of property.
- Cattle are not husbands, for though capable of locomotion, they cannot be at the absolute disposal of any woman, as they often display a will of their own.
- Men in the married state, having no will of their own, are husbands.
- A wife is a woman having the right of property in a husband.

### *Explanations*

The right of property includes the right of flagellation.

“The married state” is a state of penance into which men voluntarily enter for sins committed in a previous life.”

The irony of social mobilization under the sceptre of western liberalism also includes allegorical reference to the material objects in elucidating the continuous process of adjusting to the colonial culture. Bankim was not against the implementation of western education but the complete refusal of vernacular mode of instruction and filtration theory in educating the masses that create a class of men Indian in blood and colour but with the thought process of the west that result in creating a *babu* culture that dwelled on the superiority of the imperial gaze. The series of essays highlights the subjugation of the masculinity of Bengal’s chauvinism

and transforming into a more effeminate colonial bureaucracy. Inherent is the pejorative judgement of the conquered. Bankim harps on the fact that it is the bounty of the mother nature in Bengal and easy availability of resources that attracted colonialism leading to the drain of wealth which became the crux of resisting colonialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> & early 20<sup>th</sup> cent Indian nationalism.

The prosaic sagacity of Lokrahashya lies in the highlighting the negative culture of babus as a way of unfurling the critique of the west by tying the ends in a causal relation. The Essays offer not only an innate study of colonialism but also gives a picturesque description of outwardly being ‘modern’ through imitation i.e. not only thinking modern or speaking modern but also eating modern and dressing modern like a British, thus modernity being consummated in its entirety. The role of divinity in interpreting popular mind-set about colonialism also becomes evident from the “Ingraj-Stotra” (Hymn in praise of the English):

*Oh Englishman! I'm bowing in  
obeisance to you. ... You are the  
incarnation of Krishna in the modern  
age. The plume on the head of the  
cowherd prince has become your hat;  
his waistband is your trousers, and his  
flute your whip. I therefore bow in  
obeisance to you... Oh the great  
benefactor! Grant me a boon. I'll put  
on a cap and follow wherever you go,  
but give me a job... award me the title of  
Raja, rai Bahadur, make me a member  
of the Council..."*

Lokrahashya thus, is a literature in the historical periphery where metaphors have been used for imaging ideas of nationalist selfhood and for locating the Bengali middle class in the imperial project by highlighting their anxieties, in a pyramidal structure of working relation of colonialism with certain prescribed categorizations where ‘babu’ is viewed as a social class aspiring for a status in an esteemed society of the ‘bhadraloks’ or ‘intellectual class’, creating civil society and seeking distinguished status and can be easily distinguished from the manual labours.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion it can be said that Bankim upheld a particular time and space through the essays in Lokrahashya using humour and satire to depict the ills of Colonialism and Modernity and the views proclaimed by him can be best understood in his own language-

### “An Announcement

In this book several essays quoted from the first and second volumes of Bangadarshan are reprinted. In this regard the uttering of only a word is necessary, which is that the common readers of Bengal have such a belief that humour means nothing but abuse, and there is no joke sans abuse. And so they consider that whatever ridicule all these essays contain serves merely to abuse an individual being. To such a class of readers it is a humble statement that this book has not been written for them, and if only they kindly refrain from going through it, I shall be gratified.

The humorous writer has the absolute right to deal with matters of social ills but does not have any in matters of individual lapses; only rarely in specific circumstances he gains such power, as for instance humour is appreciable in cases of erroneous activities of royal persons or stupid writers. This book does have no such purpose; nor is there any hint towards individual beings barring particular classes of or common people”

The sarcastic innuendos of Lokrahashya can be looked upon as an ironic parody of the Raj and its collaborators –the *babus*. It is a complex amalgam of history, culture, colonialism and nationalism where the power relation between the signifier (British rule) and the signified (the colonised natives) achieves the formalization of fictive foundation through a caricaturistic distortion of the innate realities by creating dystopic imageries of the West in the Orient.