

Revisiting Bankim's Hinduism: Idea of *Dharma* in Colonial India.

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Abstract: Bankimchandra Chatterjee, a profound colonial literary figure, resolutely disregarded emotionality with the conception of religion. As his lucid understanding of religion, he did not count the abstracts over socio-cultural traits in Hinduism. Resultantly, for him, religion is, nonetheless, an amalgamation of the principle of Utilitarianism, positivism, and norms of aestheticism. Moreover, religion, for him, traced the ample evidence of neo-Hinduism in the 19th Century Bengal which he considered, through his socio-cultural intent, as '*revivalist flavour*'. Bankim, further, had a series of arguments with the Orientalists against their propagated conception for Hindu dharma, which he cited as 'intellectual subjectivity of the nation' that was also affected by cultural traits. To break this subjectivity Bankim argued for the morally and intellectually freedom amongst the Indians; to which he refers the Puranic conception of knowledge that alienates itself from the European discourses. Henceforth, in this paper, the central intent is to highlight his notion of re-defining Hinduism that was alienated from the existing theories on Hinduism and Hinduism defined by the Orientalists.

Keywords: literary figure, socio-cultural traits, Neo-Hinduism, aestheticism, revivalist flavour.

Introduction

Bankimchandra Chatterjee, gradually, a man of literary brilliance- was a novelist, writer, social philosopher and had a unique identity among the prophet of the, then, Indian nationalism. Having an in-depth understanding of the concept of dharma, Bankim through his excellence over socio-cultural and other reforms in the nineteenth century had left a bold impression over the minds of, conventionally, Bengal revolutionaries. Apparently, a society (or nation) falls into serious order of disorder and misconception when its moral and spiritual aspects of Dharma cease to enlighten.¹ Notwithstanding, Bankim had a different view on the subject of the nation which is completely based on material or physical strength or cultural aspects. He thinks, contrary to his contemporaries, that "India had lost her political autonomy and freedom", while on the other hand, he also believed that this could be truly restored only when every Indian was morally and intellectually free².

Bankim through his writings in the 19th century works for distinct aspects of human life and society and subsequently prefers to engage with work that relied on rationality, logistics and empirical findings. While discussing the rationality which is based on empirical findings and logistics, there is a

¹ Robert A. McDermott, *The Basic writings of Radhakrishnan*, (Delhi: Jaico Publishing House, 2013),21

² Amiya P. Sen, *BankimChandra Chattopadhyay: An Intellectual Biography*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press (Paperbacks), 2008), 26.

need to revisit his writings that highlighted the tenets of socio-cultural aspects of nationalism. Meanwhile, in his *Dharmatattva*, he further explored the empirical findings which profoundly deal with the interpretation and maxim practice of the term 'dharma' that helps to rejuvenate the essence of Hinduism. It, however, deals with the two-fold message where on the first stage states, 'this was merely the social treatise on how to carry forward the full potentialities that a human may ideally conduct himself in society; whilst on the later stage, for Bankimchandra, bhakti was that which acts as the fulcrum on which even socio-cultural relationships rested.'³

Widely acknowledged, Bankim's writings in the socio-cultural and perhaps in religious life altogether with his thoughts on Hinduism were eventually considered at 'odds' with his contemporary fellows who have written, consecutively, on Hinduism. Meanwhile, for Bankim, the essence of true study on Dharma which has two faces; first the self and later the concern for others beyond self, is mainly concerned with the latter. Altogether that, too, the self cannot be ignored in any manner. Bankim, firmly believed that it is Dharma that ought to practice neither alone for the self nor alone for the others, rather it is an ethical duty which needs to be fulfilled by the individuals in the society.

While appraising Bankim's *Krishnacāritra*, the significant observation was made that 'dharma is not religion; it is the right to be oneself, to express what one most fundamentally is. One cannot do that without defending and preserving the self. If to defend oneself and one's legitimately extended selves are a part of dharma, it could also be part of one's dharma to organize and improve the strength of the nation to which one belongs...Dharma is, but this should not be confused with acquiring formal⁴ education; for a person who is educated is not necessarily knowledgeable, nor is the reverse of this due'. Henceforth, Bankim's notion of dharma, in the socio-cultural dimension, is eventually odd to the contemporaries of the renaissance where he simply overruled the colonial empathy with his in-depth understanding of Hinduism.

Reforming 'Idolatrous' Hinduism

As drawn from the historiography, Idolatry, presumed as the collective form of India's sense of subjectivities, was apprehended as the 'things' and 'images' by the discourse at the Colonial era which is later on traced under as part of rituals, ceremonies, and practices.⁵ Certainly, God is strictly a religious concept. Widely reported that, if there is a piece of ample evidence to considered philosophy merely the theory of the Universe then where the religion stands? Gradually, the divinity between God and the human world, as pointed by R. G. Collingwood, was "for the religious consciousness in

³ Amiya Sen, *Explorations in Modern Bengal c. 1800-1900: Essays on Religion, History and Culture*, (Delhi: Primus Books, 2010), 10.

⁴ Sudipta Kaviraj, *Myth of Praxis: The Construction of the figure of Krishna in Krishnacāritra*, Number L, Published, Private Circulation, (Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), 1987), 75-76.

⁵ Swagato Ganguly, *Idolatry and the Colonial Idea of India: Visions of Horror, Allegories of Enlightenment*, (London: Routledge, 2017), 193.

its true and complete form, nothing is irrelevant, nothing is without its own unique and individual value”.⁶ In Hinduism, broadly there are two conceptions of God- with and without attributes. This recalls the significant remarks made by Radhakrishnan that read, “human mind finds it difficult to resign itself to absolute silence or negative descriptions, Man is a talking animal. He insists on interpreting the religious mystery in terms of his own experience...human mind craves for something definite and limited and so uses its resources for bringing down the supreme to the religion of the determined. We cannot think of God without using our imagination. The religious seer needs the help of the imagination to express his vision”⁷. Hinduism, for him, does not differentiate amongst the belief of God and its existence, as merely adopting one sort of idea as universalistic notion was not the phenomenon used in Hinduism and Radhakrishnan, himself, said – “Hinduism accepts all religious notions as facts and arranges them in the order of their more or less intrinsic significance”⁸. Meanwhile, in this backdrop, BankimChandra asserts that attaining the highest order of knowledge of God could be possible “from the Hindu Sastra’s, *Upanishads, Darsanā, Puranas, Itihāsa*, and primarily from the Gita”⁹.

In 1882, Bankim, with pseudonym *Ram Chandra*, had an opportunity to counter the ‘*governing race*’¹⁰ where he comes in the heated controversy with the Rev. Hastie, profound missionary and one who led the General Assembly’s institution in Colonial Bengal. He penned down a series of letters condemning ‘*Hindu idolatry*’ and criticized Bengali’s intellectual society for not recognizing Macaulay’s prophecy¹¹. Hastie, further, observed that- “if the Christian Missions have done nothing else, they have at least established the universal spirituality of human nature, by the practical demonstration of raising even the most debased savages in a single generation from the grossest idolatry up to the purist worship as God as “spirit, in spirit, and in truth”¹². From Hastie’s perspective, idolatry in itself was the reflection of intellectual, moral and spiritual error which he remarks as- “...the moral pollution of the system [of Hindu idolatry] cannot be decently referred to on the pages of a modern newspaper. If we take the boasted literature of the holy Shastras, in which the system is mirrored, every pure mind must turn away from it in disgust. The immoralities of the Western idolatry from Homer and Hesiod and Aristophanes and Lucian, to Ovid and Juvenal and Petronius Arbiter, are here a thousand times outdone”¹³. Moreover, Hastie’s series of letters published frequently covering discussed three critical issues, firstly, *questioning the supposed necessity of idolatry*, secondly,

⁶ R. G. Collingwood, *Religion and Philosophy*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1916), 17.

⁷ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu view of Life*, (Delhi: Harper element, HarperCollins, 2012), 12-13

⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

⁹ BankimChandra Chattopadhyay, *Dharamatattva*, Ch. XV.

¹⁰ BankimChandra Chattopadhyay, Letter to S. C. Mookerjee, 14th March 1872, in *Bankimchandra Rachnabali*, edited by J. C. Bagal, Vol. 3, (Delhi: Sahitya Samsad, 1990), 170.

¹¹ Hastie’s letter to *The Statesman*, 14th March 1872, *ibid*, 186-224.

¹² *The Great Sova Bazar Sradh*, Letters in the Hastie Controversy, *The Statesman*, 23rd September 1882, *ibid*.

¹³ Hastie, Letter to *The Statesman*, 26th September 1882, *ibid*, 192.

criticizing against its alleged harmlessness, and lastly, demolishing the ultimate philosophy of Brahmanism¹⁴.

Hastie's prime intent to counter the Hindu theology was to cite the Orientalists' verdict to prove the rituals, beliefs, and mysticism merely as unreasonable. He cited as "the crystal battlements have been scaled by daring scholars of the West, and their keen eyes have searched through every nook and corner of the beatific abode...and once fairly upon this highest and last retreat... it will not be so difficult to shew... that the whole of the Brahmanic theology never really solved a single problem of human life and thought"¹⁵. Further, Hastie argued that, after relying over the Orientalists assertion on idolatrous Hinduism, "[Hindu] idolatry is the only cause of all demoralisation and degradation of India", and later concluded, he points out, that "Hindu self-image of the idolatry which had, perhaps no relations with the foreign conquerors, been the curse for his own history"¹⁶.

In order to counter Hastie's verdict on Hinduism idolatry, Bankim remarked the superiority of Indigenous knowledge- "in the case of every country and every people, the natives must, as a necessary consequence of their being natives, understand their own language and their literature better than any foreign student. Mr. Hastie would probably have no hesitation in admitting this if the question were between one European people and another"¹⁷. Bankim also counters Hastie's Sanskrit knowledge and suggests him to approach Sanskrit literature with the help of "a Hindoo, with one who believes in them"¹⁸. He underscored the significance of approaching Sanskrit scriptures, as he points out- "if Mr. Hastie thinks that he can comprehend the vastly complicated labyrinth of Hindu religious belief without studying it in the original sources of knowledge, and in a spirit of patient, earnest, and reverential search after truth, he will meet with bitter disappointment. He will fail in arriving at a correct comprehension of Hinduism, as- I say it most emphatically- like every other European who has made the attempt has failed"¹⁹. In *Devatattva O Hindudharma* (Theories on the Gods and Hindu Religion), he scorned Muller's statements for unable to interpret the Hindu's theology and what he examined Muller's thought which itself concluded with idolatrous experiences. In this account, Bankim explained his perspective as – "Western Pundit Max Muller- on being unable to grasp the principle- couldn't figure out how to classify what seemed to him a grotesque monstrosity, it worried him sick! When compared to Western religions it was neither *theism* nor *polytheism* nor *atheism*, none of these 'isms' fit! Pondering such matters, the eminent pundit opened a Greek lexicon and came up

¹⁴ Hastie, Letter to The Statesman, 29th September 1882, *ibid*, 198, Letter to The Statesman, 23rd September 1882, 190, and Letter to The Statesman, 29th September, *ibid*, Introduction.

¹⁵ Hastie, Letter to The Statesman, 29th September 1882, *ibid.*, 196.

¹⁶ Hastie, Letter to The Statesman, 26th September 1882, *ibid.*, 192-3. See also, Imma Ramos, *Contesting the Colonial Gaze: Image Worship Debates in Nineteenth-Century Bengal*, (London: Taylor and Francis Online, 2015)<https://doi.org/10.1080/02666030.2015.1094208>

¹⁷ Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Letter to The Statesman, 28th October 1882, *ibid*, 210.

¹⁸ Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Letter to The Statesman, 6th October 1882, *ibid.*, 200

¹⁹ Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Letter to The Statesman, 16th October 1882, *ibid.*, 205.

with some double-barrelled names- *Kakenotheism* or *Henotheism*. That such knowledge is perused, studied, esteemed and translated in this country is a matter of no small regret²⁰.

Lastly, Bankim criticized Hastie's views on *Radha-Krishna* to call them merely as "the apotheosis of sensual desire and the idolatry of merely finite life"²¹. Finally, to conclude Bankim's public controversy with Hastie, it is remarkable to note what he reflects on the principle of rational reformulation of religion under which he points out that the Hindus under the Oriental modernity treats their God as the part of the mythological legend. The Puranic concept reclarifies these legends as particularly "belong to Hinduism but do not constitute Hinduism".²² Further, as Ursula King aptly noted, based on the Puranic conception, the Hindu's are least interested in the material conception of the European model.²³

The resurgence of 'Scientific' Consciousness: a dharmic blend

In this section, the central premise is to highlight some facts about Bankim's explanation of dharma with the resurgence of scientific consciousness. As discussed by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in his notable work discussing the empiricism of thought or *darsana*, Indian Philosophy, noted that "next category of reality, that of dharma is the most important concept in Indian thought"²⁴. In the same outline, Bankim, for instance, interprets dharma and highlights the (mis) interpretation between God and indeterminate form of God. He, thus, explains, through his writings, that there is no need to be baffled between an idol and fetish. He made a distinction between idols and fetishes which he further explained as- "I make the distinction a fetish and an idol to be this that while an idol is only an image or a symbol of a supernatural being who has an existence independent of the image or symbol, a fetish is itself an object embodying a supernatural being who has no existence apart from the object"²⁵. For him, Hinduism was not subject to fetishism and thus he favours idolatry. In his *Letter of Hinduism*, he observed that- "religion would be a thing of infinitely less value than I conceive it to be if its development had nothing higher to disclose than the weakness of the human intellect. The highest excellence which human faculties are capable of recognizing is moral excellence.... The most exalted worship is personal God in order that we may worship the highest form of excellence- that our

²⁰ Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Devatattva O Hindudharma*, Vol. 2, *ibid.*, 816.

²¹ Hastie, Letter to The Statesman, 23rd September 1882, *ibid.*, 187.

²² Ursula King, True and Perfect Religion: Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's reinterpretation of Hinduism, Vol. 7, Issue 2(London: Religion, Taylor and Francis Online, 1977), 138[https://doi.org/10.1016/0048-721X\(77\)90020-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0048-721X(77)90020-3)

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 52.

²⁵ M. K. Haldar, *Foundations of Nationalism in India: A study of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee*, (Calcutta: Ajanta Publications, 1989),132.

worship may not be barren and crushing worship of power and pitilessness, but one of love and hope, and exalting influence leading man to the highest ideal of life”²⁶.

After making a subtle distinction between ethics and social imperatives, Bankim, in his *Dharamatattva*, argued that there are certain activities that are deemed as duties and duly performed for the sake of the duty...he adopts “*Anusilan* as a dynamic paradigm that intended to bring out the human personality in its fullness”²⁷. Based on his dharmic consciousness, Bankim, in his *Devatatwa O Hindu Dharma*, explored that “dharma which makes for the highest development of man... a development that is at once physical, mental and social ... that constitutes religion”²⁸. Therefore, his dharmic consciousness while in the process of re-defining Hinduism, he firmly believes that “dharma is the cause of progress. Since science is the cause of progress so it is also a part of dharma. When the scientist claims the glory of science and we utter the name of *Hari* (Lord Visnu) both of us speak the same thing”²⁹.

Ignorant it would be to disregard Bankim’s viewpoint on Hinduism without his sense of scientific quotient. Undoubtedly, Science critically played a significant role in the process of re-defining religion in the colonial Bengal of 19th century and later on, like *dharma*, played a dynamic role in the fervent of nationalism. Bankim, like his contemporaries, focused on the logistic paradigms of explaining and hence explored the dharma which was highly (mis)guided by the Orientalists. In this light, in his *Krsnacharitra*, he considered *Krsna* not merely as God who has almighty powers with divinity rather, he cited “*Krsna* as an ideal human being who appeared to be the complete and with a perfect embodiment of the pursuit of dharma. There is not a single human faculty which is not present in *Krsna* hence this made him *Purushottama* (superior human being)”³⁰. Meanwhile, he sums up the life and teachings of *Krsna* with regard to dharma, that, firstly, that which is consistent along with dharma is truth, that which is not is untruth, secondly, that which promotes the welfare of the people is dharma, thirdly, that which lies in the interests of human welfare is the truth, and that opposed to it is untruth, and lastly, truth so defined may be applied in all cases’³¹.

Gradually, Bankim’s scientific consciousness came into existence from the reflection of Krishna Charitra which further assists him in order to explore his notion of dharma. In his popular essay, *On the Origin of Hindu Festivals* (1869), he criticized many rituals that according to him are performed in absolutely wrong manner. In his explanations, it was highly misinterpreted sense which was celebrated for decades to understand the dharma. In another sense, he “upholds and defends the

²⁶ Ibid.,132-33.

²⁷ Sen, Explorations in Modern Bengal, 7.

²⁸ J. C. Bagal (ed.), BankimChandra Rachnabali, Vol. 2, (Delhi: Sahitya Samsad, 1989), 778.

²⁹ BankimChandra Chatterjee, *Dharamatattva*, ibid., 585.

³⁰ Haldar, Foundations, 147-50.

³¹ Amiya Sen, Bankim’s Hinduism: An Anthology of writings by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011), 167.

traditional Indian culture and religion, his own aesthetic practice is shaped not to be of Sanskrit frame, but his modernity is not based on a rejection of tradition but on a sort of selective retention of it”³². Widely noted, Bankim’s resurgence of scientific consciousness was highly inspired by Auguste Comte’s positivism. Based on Comte’s positivism, Subarata Dasgupta asserts, Bankim explored it as “religion is not merely a belief of God- or even in many Gods- unless such a belief affords a basis for the conduct of the individual, towards himself as well as others. Only if that belief serves to establish a common ground for conduct which will afford a standard against which human existence as individuals and as a society can be regulated can one hope to possess a religion...religion is philosophy of life, for him, and in practice, it is a rule of life”³³.

Hinduism, Bankim elaborates, is not just restrained to the metaphysical entity rather it has ethical intent for the act of self-realization³⁴. Hinduism, however, is a complete religion and leaves no part of the human life out of its purview³⁵. Bankim’s perception of Hinduism is symmetrical to the principle of Utilitarianism and deals with the intent of welfare for all. Bankim’s ideas and thoughts, concepts and modes of logical reasoning are of post-enlightenment scientific thought. However, there’s an adequate amount of truth and facts to prove his “scientific quotient while elaborating the sense of dharma, logistically and rationally”³⁶. As a matter of fact, Science, gradually, has an enigmatic power which is cause for the inner spiritual power amongst the world³⁷. Logistically, Bankim supersedes the belief of dharma for self-preservation rather than for others³⁸. Resultantly, in order to prove God’s existence, Bankim made his disagreement on Mill’s arguments on empiricism of science. Later, to prove his disagreements he aptly remarks in his essay *Trideb Somboondhe Vigyan Kee Bole?* (What Science used to say on Trinity?) that “one who created defeats his own purpose by creating more than he can possibly protect, it could be suggested that the forces of creation and conservatism are always offset by the powers of destruction”³⁹.

Sum Up

³² Makarand Paranjape, *Making India: Colonialism, National culture and the afterlife of Indian English Authority*, (London: Springer,2013), 88.

³³ Subrata Dasgupta, *The Bengal Renaissance: Identity and Creativity from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore*, (Ranikhet: Permanent Black,2007), 116.

³⁴ On an explanatory note, Comte who believed that humanity is the final substitute for God whilst on the other hand, for Bankim humanity is a manifestation of God, and love of humanity, a means of realising him. For more detail, S. K. Bose, *Builders of Modern India: Bankim Chandra Chatterjee* (reprint), (Delhi: Publications Division,2015), 119.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁶ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, (London: Zed Books, 1993), 66.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

³⁸ Bankim, textually and contextually, prefers the significance and use of dharma for the self-preservation rather than to use it for others against which he made a supportive explanation from Spencer’s philosophical perspective after rejecting all the materialist intent. For more detail, Haldar, *Foundations*, 135.

³⁹ Sen, *Bankim’s Hinduism*, 110.

Whilst in the process of redefining Hinduism, Bankim explained the religious content beyond the elements of morality and spirituality. However, the logistical paradigm and factual interpretation of dharma finally prove his intent far more significant to the idea of the nation in the colonial period. Bankim criticized the “Orientalists and their frequent interpretation of ancient Sanskrit scriptures which, according to him, were causes of misery and the devastation of dharma”⁴⁰. Unlike his predecessors and contemporaries, he delved deeper into many public controversies that are highly significant for revisiting the idea of India through religiosity i.e. dharmic content with scientific resurgence. Moreover, for making this more relevant, Bankim through his writings enlightened the misconstrued theories and norms of the society which are subject to the nation and society devastation. Bankim while elaborating the dharma, along with the resurgence of [popular] science, had shown great significance for the welfare for all. Meanwhile, in this process he made great distress against the Europeans but he also adopts the few beneficiaries from the Englishmen and admires them for rejuvenating the lost pride of the nation which he tried to regain through the dharma. Lastly, unlike Tagore, Bankim’s *Hindoo* centered dharma had not sufficiently reached beyond the colonial time. Subsequently, like other Bengal revolutionaries, he made significant contribution to the movement that helped the nationalists, militants and revolutionaries against the British Rule in which fervency of patriotism gets elevated into the form of religion and later on its elevated religion to heights of the supreme duty i.e. nationalism which was covered under the ‘*revivalist flavour*’ of the socio-cultural intent.

⁴⁰ Here, the significant part is to note that Bankim shown his great distress against the Orientalists interpretation of Sanskrit literature, as he also made a suggestion to Rev. Hastie to learn Sanskrit. For more detail, see also Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Letter to The Statesman, ‘The Modern St. Paul, 6th October 1882. Moreover, Sisir Kumar Das, *The Artist in Chains* (1984:159), also points out that ‘there can be no controversy on a subject when one of the controversialities is in utter ignorance on the subject matter of the controversy’.