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BANKIMCHANDRA AND THE MAKING OF  
NATIONALIST CONSCIOUSNESS

II : THE SELF IRONICAL TRADITION

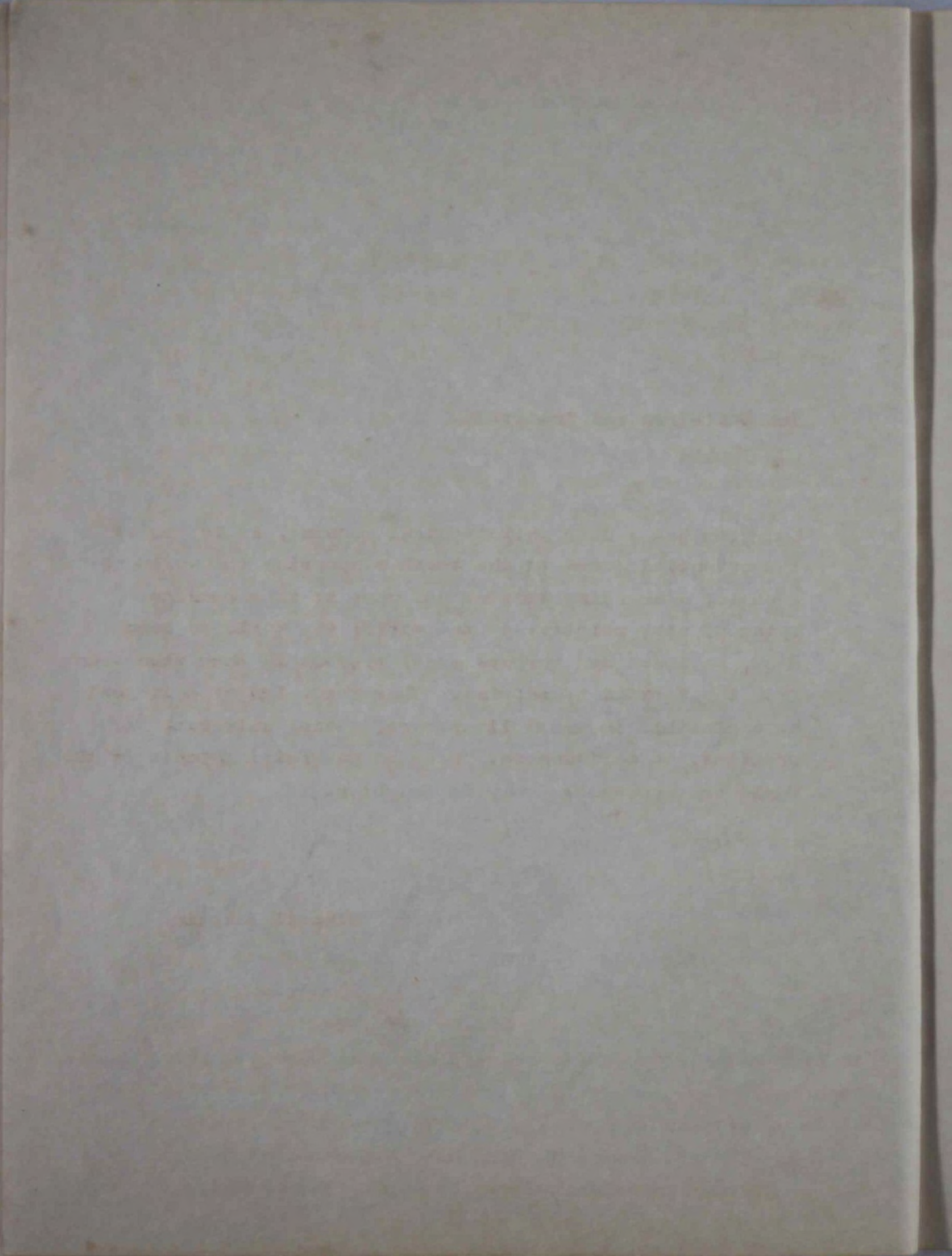
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### The Self-Ironical Tradition.

Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter.

Mikhail Bakhtin

Quietly, imperceptibly, subtly, something of great literary significance happened inside the pages of Kamalakanta and its associated texts. It was to be of incalculable significance for both the history of Bengal society and its literature. Within these pages a whole number of subtle transformations took place, which for their being nonmaterial, were to be culturally, even politically decisive. With Bankim the tradition of irony in literature passed into a tradition of self-irony. There are any number of ways in which this transition can be analysed. In fact, the texts themselves contain significant makers of this change. Irony was by no means new in Bengali literature. Because of its close kinship to late sanskrit literature, Bengali literature had a distinguished tradition of irony. Sanskrit literature, after the high period, seems to suffer from a lack of literary themes worthy of interest. Religious invocations tend to become routine; and lack either the erotic vitality of Jayadeva's daring translation of sexuality into devotion or the spontaneous and limpid emotions of devotional composers of the bhakti tradition.<sup>1</sup> Opportunity for formal innovation and thematic interest came often through uses of irony, turning into a slightly barren and idle pastime of unimaginative versifiers. Technical virtuosity of this sort was taken over from the late and already weakened sanskritic tradition by authors like Bharatchandra,<sup>2</sup> a good example of the transition, because in his work, although he still composes sanskrit verses, the vitality of the Bengali poetry overshadows the formalistic verses in the ancient language. Bharatchandra was already symptomatic of a choice of form, because his work shows the decided preference for experiments with sanskrit metres, and the semantic play of the

vyajastuti. In the Bengali tradition of Bankimchandra's time, this form was revived, indeed in a way that is formally strongly reminiscent of Bharatchandra, by Iswarchandra Gupta. His reception showed clearly the signs of change in the babu literary taste. A decisive turn in babu taste was represented by the increasing condemnation of Ishwar Gupta's poetry as trivial and obscene, unfit for public consumption, and particularly ineligible for inclusion into the high canons of literary sensibility of the Victorian babu. To be sure, the babu still retained an enormous curiosity about the prurient and the vulgar; but as in Victorian England, this was supplied by a flourishing underworld of battala literature. Literary discourse was transformed in very significant ways. The Indian literary tradition had always given a place to the materiality of the erotic, and eroticism and sexuality had always been part of high literature from Kalidasa, the Amarusatakam or the Srngārasatakam and Vairagyasatakam of Bhartrhari. It was often, at least in case of high poetry, connected with humour and subtle irony about the pleasures of the flesh. And the requirements of its public appearance and enjoyment imposed some restrictions of obliqueness and suggestiveness in its presentation. Introduction of a Victorian aesthetic broke up this complexity decisively. It bifurcated literary discourse into a prudish and suspiciously saintly high literary style which would go on in a manner which would make its readers conclude that Bengali heroines were gifted with powers of immaculate conception, and the matter of courtship and love was essentially in the field of high speculative philosophy. On the other side, **there was** a really unrestrained traffic of vulgarity in the subliterature of obscene tales. Bankim comments directly on the pretentious

and dishonest character of this divide between the public and private taste in one of his characteristic sketches in Lok Pahasya in which the babu husband, returned from the exertions of the office, has a conversation with his wife on the status of the Bengali language.<sup>3</sup> Quite characteristically, he expresses contempt for serious Bengali fiction (in this case, for good measure, it is Bankim's Visavrksha), but finds one of the less serious books immensely diverting. In any case, irony had fallen on bad days; it was the mark of a certain frivolity, unworthy of any serious aesthetic, let alone any serious historical message.

With Kamalakanta irony makes a triumphant return to literature. But it returns transformed, as self or double irony. From the comparative artificiality of the highly mannered metric forms of poetry, it returns to the seriousness of prose. But more significant was the basic transformation. From a vehicle of frivolous enjoyment of insignificant things in the world, the exploitation of the great resources of punning and slesa on objects like the pineapple or the tapsee fish<sup>4</sup> or babu individuals who for contingent reasons incurred the hostility of Ishwar Gupta, irony in Bankim came to have a serious object, indeed an object beyond which nothing could be more serious. Its object, instead of being trivial things in a world which is not regarded with a historically serious gaze, is now made up of three objects which are not entirely distinct from each other, **each** one of which is imprecated with the world. These objects are the self, the collective of which the self is a part, the babu, and the civilisation of colonial power which is the theatre on which this darkly comic spectacle of colonial enlightenment unfolds. Irony has achieved a new dignity. From the vehicle of nonserious mirth,

it has turned into the vehicle of something that is so serious as to be practically unsayable.

Ordinary banter however technically skilled, does not have a philosophical point. Self or double irony is philosophically interesting. Understanding its implicit philosophic point would, I suggest, help us comprehend some important historical features of the babu consciousness. If we attend to these elements in Bengali literature, we would immediately notice a connection between self-irony and the farcical form. The farce can of course exist in two different forms. Sometimes, a self-ironical discourse tends to assume as it moves along an explicitly farcical form in the literary sense. It is not accidental that the more controlled and structured discourse of the Kamalakanta essays tends to emphasise in various ways the isolation of the voice of the opium eater, and trails off into an explicitly farcical ending in the court scene. But even earlier, there is a change of key when the shift takes place from the impersonal essays of Kamalakanta to the more explicitly dialogical structure of the letters. In the scene of the court this dialogical quality of all that Kamalakanta says becomes more dramatically visible, in fact, actually accented by the author. But we can see the whole in a sense as a teleological structure, a discourse which finds in the indecisive farcical conclusion in the court scene its natural conclusion, a conclusion to which the whole discourse tended in a philosophical sense from the beginning. Or, to put it differently, it is the end which shows the nature of what was going on more fully. But there is often a farcicality of a different sort too, something that we can call a philosophic farcicality. Occasionally, the presentation may not have the explicit formal characteristics

of a farce; but it would be farcical in the sense of an argument that is lost and stupefied at the end. Quite often, there would be a rational build up of an argument, but it would eventually collapse at the point at which the argument was to reach its rational, intellectual conclusion. More characteristic is the collapse at the point where the argument must break into some form of practical act. It is the failure of the practical syllogism which is at the centre of this farce. Rational argument about the world, the studied attempt to stick to the strictly rational and sensible would thus often, or even characteristically, meet a nonsensical denouement. It is not surprising therefore that the literature that portrayed the adventures of the middle class Bengali on the scene of history would be divided between high serious portraits and nonsense. By this argument, it is not difficult to see why, along with his more impressive incarnation which occupies the centre of his own narcissistic literature, the babu is also the inverted hero of Bengali nonsense poetry. And though not cast in a poetic form, and closer in its business to serious social criticism, Kamalakanta undoubtedly founds this self ironical tradition. Without some comments about the history of this tradition an appreciation of Kamalakanta would remain incomplete. This is obviously not the place for a full discussion of Bengali humour. I shall simply show the connections between the portrayal of the babu in Bankim and two other high points in Bengali literature, the early satirical poetry of Tagore,<sup>5</sup> and that incomparable high point of nonsense Aboltābol.<sup>6</sup>



It would be absurd to claim, as I said before, that Bankim was the first humour writer in modern Bengali. There is quite a rich humorous literature before Bankim. But there is a displaced grain of truth in that judgment. He did find something very new and very important; but the criterion of differentiation of that thing is not in terms of literary form, but of a philosophic vision. Two points about earlier humour ought to be noted to see in that way Bankim's humour is new. Earlier humour often took the form of folk or vulgar stories. In such literature, what **Bakhtin** has called the principle of the 'material bodily lower stratum' is present very strongly.<sup>7</sup> It has a critical quality of sorts, for much of this humour shows the vulnerability of the great, the socially eminent to the grossness of common physical needs. One could perhaps with some help of a radical imagination, read into these stories of joyous, if somewhat malodorous abandon, a celebration of the lower physical processes as an instrument of radical equality. It asserts the principle that nature, in this rather insistent form, is no respecter of status, is indeed the great leveller. However, this humour—which is often called bhāndāmi is gross, physical lowd, often sexually explicit. In any case, it is full of explicit references to the body, in which not only uncivil bodily acts but also organs figure with great prominence. Such humour was too raucous to **enjoy** great prestige in a climate of gathering Victorianism; though, one suspects through the unceasing reprinting of Gopāl Bhānd's gross exploits, they enjoyed a certain irresistible popularity. Clearly, this would not suit Bankim's purposes. He introduces a new king of humour from which the lower physical stratum drops out, but the pleasures of the language remain in full measure.

More than any other literary form, humour is freer and much more individual. Every humour and nonsense writer writes his own individual nonsense. Undoubtedly, Bankim, Tagore and Ray have their own characteristic styles of being nonsensical. It is all the more remarkable that despite such divergence they seem to be sketching the same collective portrait of the babu. Thus, it deserves, despite its formal nonseriousness, some serious critical attention.

For, it could be argued that nothing reveals deep secret belief more than nonsense writing. When we are saying something self consciously rational on a subject as dear to ourselves as ourselves, it is very easy to say delusively **pleasant** things. In nonsense writing deeper structures of self-referring beliefs, the signature of an objective mind as it were, may find expression, precisely because at these times the invigilation of reason is loose.

Let us simply remember the great hymn to the babu in the Lok Rahasya, and compare it **with** another set of portraits from Tagore's earlier poetic works. In a group of poems which are tightly packed in a section of Manasi,<sup>8</sup> Tagore paints short sketches which are very similar to Bankim's, only the form, now changed to flimsily narrative poetry, lacks the vitriolic intensity and exaggeration of Bankim's vyajastuti form. In Duranta Asā,<sup>9</sup> the babus are described in the following terms:

bhadra morā santa bado posmanā e prān  
botāmantā jāmar nīce sātite sayān  
dekhā halei mista ati mukher bhāv sista ati  
alāsdeha klistagati grher prati tāt  
tailadhāla snigdhatanu nidrārāse bhārā  
māthāy choto bahare bado bāngālisantān ;.....

dāsyasukhe hāsyamukh binīta jodkar  
prabhur pade sobāgnade dodulkalebar  
pādukatalo padiyā, luti ghrnāymākhā anna khunti  
byagrahaye bhariyā muthi jotecha phiri ghar  
gharete base garba kara pitrpurusar  
aryatejadarpabhare prthvī tharabar<sup>10</sup>

There is very little that is different here from the essay on the babu, or the reflection of the cooatoo to Kamalakanta at the end of the book.<sup>11</sup> This is **followed** by a poem written the next day,<sup>12</sup> evidently as a continuation of the polemic in what is only formally a different poem (for even the metre is the same as the earlier one), "improvement of the country". The echo of Bankim's famous essay on "improvement of the country"<sup>13</sup> is in fact too strong to be missed. This begins immediately with the resonance of a lecture, but it leads, graphically, immediately, with a failure of practical reason: 'what was it that I ought to have done, but who knows what one really ought to do?',<sup>14</sup> a typically comfortable scepticism which protects the babu through a skein of philosophical puzzles from the imminence of political action. Characteristically, the babu subject has **the** sensitivity of hearing his history: he can hear his country groan, he burns in the secret fire of his country's sorrow, he speaks of this to everyone, and concludes that the defiant act that follows from this is to fix one's signature to a long petition.<sup>15</sup> The course of action is typical: clap your hands in enthusiasm, abuse those who do not regard you as a great nation, fill pieces of paper with writing, learn **fighting** in this manner, and for carrying on this war, always keep handy as weapons paper and ink. Have a nice lunch; go to your office during the day; when the office closes, run to the meeting and light the fire of words. Having

sorrowed/grieved at the tragedy of the nation, get back to your home by evening and engage in humorous conversation with your sister in law.'<sup>16</sup> Obviously, 'Bengalis are extraordinarily clever. For they become great on their own, without any exertion, no suffering at all'.<sup>17</sup> The cultural recipe for such extraordinary intelligence is described in the next poem, written, without interruption of this mood, a couple of days later, 'the hero of Bengal.'<sup>18</sup> It describes a **typical process of acquisition of culture** by young Bengalis: two brothers who are going through the routine but thrilling itinerary of world history, for purposes of passing their examinations.<sup>19</sup> Mercenary objectives like passing examinations are inextricably combined by the Macaulayan curricula with unfailing recipes for moral improvement. Not surprisingly, the two brothers **celebrate** the great deeds of mankind, a list in which the battles of Thermopylae and Marathon, Cromwell's exploits in the English civil war, the battle of Nasby, Washington, Mazzini and Garibaldi hold the pride of place. Clearly, this is a world history in which the luminous events are successful wars of liberation from foreign control and tyranny. His drawing of conclusions IS perfectly rationalistic as well: "who says we are less than the English! To believe we are a lesser people is a great error. The only differences are in physical proportions and manners. For we immediately learn whatever they write; indeed, we translate that into **Bongali** and write commentaries which surpass our masters (gurumārā tīke, a phrase we shall encounter again). .... Look at me: I spread the bed in my room; I ferret the libraries for books on history; I write so much making things up (giving a rein to my imagination), in a language carefully sharpened. As a result, my heart catches fire, and I have to control it by

fanning myself; still I feel giddy with enthusiasm. However, there is some little hope for my country, I feel .... I listen to great things; I say great words: I gather and read great books; a sure way of achieving gradual greatness; who could ever stop us!"<sup>20</sup> Entirely in accord with this education **which thus** extends the mental horizon of the youth, there are some passages which move these historical apprentices to tears and pride. Predictably, **their blood** burns in **their** veins when **they** recount what occurred at Marathon and Thermopylae; **they cannot imagine** what incalculable effects would have followed had **their** countrymen read the biography of Garibaldi **in full**; they feel ashamed at the amazing illiteracy of a country whose people do not know the date of birth of Washington by heart, nor the great endeavors of Mazzini; and conclude "On Cromwell, you are immortal!"<sup>21</sup>. Typically, he is not able to read the account of Cromwell through to the end, because an acquaintance comes in proposing a hand at cards, **and the babu leaves his historical quest in the middle**. Tagore's poems are so important because **they** show the logic of **the** babu's search for belonging. All groups, after all, make their own constructions of humanity, and belongs to a mankind after its heart, in which its preferred characteristics are accentuated, and its others are suitably excluded. The humanity that the 'babu' would like to belong to, the humanity whose history he constructs because he thinks that is his proper theatre of existence, is the humanity of western history. It is this history within which he wishes to sneak into, in which he so desparately, so cravenly wants a place. We shall see later that there is a complementary logic of belonging, which is also hinted at and set in motion in these early critiques of the babu. This is a logic of belongingness to the others, those who have been conquered, disenfranchised and dispossessed.

Let us turn now to compare another story, from his next book, Sonar Tari.<sup>22</sup> It is fundamentally similar to Bankim's original paradigm in two respects: it is a nonsense story, and its subject under a thin subterfuge is the babu again. A king in a particular kingdom has been recently troubled by incomprehensible dreams. But obviously, he along with his ministers and subjects lives in a meaningful, not a causal world. Dream therefore must be taken seriously, and not laughed off as illusion. They must also be uncoded correctly. In the dream **the king saw** three monkeys pick lice lovingly from the royal hair; but they slapped him on the cheeks if he stirred. At intervals, the nitpickers uttered a mysterious slogan: hing ting chat. The king, like modern governments, turn to scholarly consultants, process unmistakably like **setting up** a thinktank. Scholars from several countries and continents are consulted, including several from Europe. They try in their different ways but fail; and some of them are given sentences which must appear somewhat excessive for what was after all an intellectual failure. A humorous Frenchman for instance was **devoured** alive by dogs for suggesting that the complex of sounds was devoid of meaning but not of a certain melodious quality.

The riddle, as one can expect, remained unsolved until a scholar arrives from Gaud, trained by Europeans but already surpassing his masters: jahn pandit der gurumāra colā.

"the scholar from Gaud arrived at this hour who was trained by foreign masters only to surpass them. Bareheaded, shabbily dressed to the point of being shameless, his clothes were in danger of falling off very often. So thin that one could **have** doubts as to his existence which disappeared as soon as the words began to emerge from him.

Indeed, the world wondered at how so much of sound could be produced by so slight a machine. Arrogantly, he asks: if I am told what the subject of disputation is, I am sure I can add a few words, in fact, I can turn things upside down by elucidation. Every one shouted: hing ting chat".<sup>23</sup>

On being told of the contents of the dream, the Bengali scholar, unlike others before him, was not at all ruffled. He declared:

"On being told of the dream, the Gaudiya master made a solemn face and **expounded for about** an hour: the meaning in fact is fairly simple, indeed in a sense quite clear, it is an ancient idea but newly discovered. The three-eyed God has three eyes, three times and three qualities: different forces lead to individual differentiation, redoubled in opposite cases. Various forces like attraction, repulsion, propulsion, the forces of life and the forces of good are usually opposed. In the flow of life the three forces are active and discernible in three forms: to say all this in a very summary form, one could say hing ting chat. The court thundered applause: it is clear, very clear, said everyone... whatever was incomprehensible was dissolved and made extremely limpid just like the empty sky".<sup>24</sup>

We discern some changes in the scene now. The babu is no longer an interested and imitative pupil of European learning, but a gurumārā colā, he has decisively excelled his preceptor. The poem makes clear in what ways the babu has taken rationalism beyond the point where Europeans left it. Although the story is set in a timeless ness of folklore, it is easy to identify the babu in this thin disguise. Tagore too emphasises the presumption of the babu, a feature not shared by the Europeans. But his critics have disappeared; the literary world is populated now

only by his admirers. The others of the babu - the women and all those who could make fun of him have disappeared historically, transformed into styles and moulds of subalternity fashioned by his own hands. Indeed, he now seems to have gained the uncontested right, which belongs only to dominant groups in periods of their rare uncontested glory, of making fun of others without reply. Indeed, in the structure of the joking relationship, some of the great transformations of the period have been inscribed. Earlier, the babu was the object of ridicule; now the world is the object of his banter. Unfortunately, there is little work done on such matters, but babu jokes gradually turned outwards and showed **their** confident contempt of all the nonbabu world. Unlike jokes about the sikhs which are often charmingly and generously self-referring, babu jokes display a strong parochial aggressiveness. Although he is an inheritor of rationalism, he does not have the patience even to catalogue the world minutely; anyone coming from the west of the hallowed land is a khottā, from the general vicinity of Rajasthan a medo (slang for Marwari), and from the south a mādrājī. In fact, the chauvinist Bengali is quite content to live with this indistinct map of nationalities of his natural inferiors. Nothing is so revealing of the babu mind as this astounding geography of his contempt. It is remarkable how the babu, within the world he dominates, replicates exactly the same inattentive and perfunctory classification of others. It blurs the other, the unfamiliar, just like Europeans treating people as slaves, africans, far easterners, and such other broad, misleading, confidently ignorant nomenclatures. His jokes are typically directed against the people the Bengali middle class lived with and depended on, those whose labour formed the things he used



parasitically - a typically uncharitable recompense for their labour at his service. The culture of the Bengali middle class is replete with jokes about the ude,<sup>25</sup> medo, khottā, and closer home, the bāngāl.<sup>26</sup>

The poem - a true travesty offers a list of its own ennobling effects on its audience.<sup>27</sup>

whoever listens to this hallowed story of dream would be rid of all errors and delusions. he would never be deceived into believing that this world is indeed this world; he would never be deceived into believing the true to be true, in a moment he would realise that the true is false. Come along, then, yawn and life on your back in this uncertain world the only certain truth is that everything in this world are dreams, all made up of delusions, except dreams which are the only things one can call truly real.<sup>28</sup>

The structure of this travesty is exactly the same as Kamalakanta's. Its tone is the same self-irony, it uses obviously the same logic of inversion. In Tagore's own evolution this tone was **to be** shortlived; he would soon diverge from this central self ironical tradition in which the babu constantly searches for the limits of his being. Bengali literature becomes in this sense more sombre and sanctimonious, until in modern literature it loses all aspiration towards this cleansing, purifying laughter at himself.

In Mānasī and Sonār Tarī, Tagore's thinking is still quite close to Bankim's paradigm of self ironical laughter.

Physically and mentally, the babu demonstrates virtually the same features. His physical scantiness is emphasised dramatically; the world could doubt if he existed at all until he began to **break** into speech. What still constitutes his identity is this extraordinary, irrepressible, vacuous verbalism, for the world to marvel at how such a slight contraption produced such impressive sound. This fatal verbalism is not an ability to produce arguments, or sense; but sounds (sabda hai). We are left in no doubt that we are encountering a descendant of the verbalising animal whose recent ancestor was described as a species who had a wondrous capacity to multiply words: whose words are one in the mind, ten when he spoke, hundred when he wrote and thousands when he quarrelled. Against the scepticism of the world about his ability, his proof was this gift of insignificant speech.

Lapse of time has done nothing to improve his arrogant incivility (nā jāne **abbibādan**, nā puche kusal; pitrnām sudhāile udyatemusal). He has not **lost** any of his intellectual arrogance, though his skill is in a derivative and an essentially unproductive art. He is not skilled at producing basic ideas, but in the parasitic function of interpreting. Arrongently, he enquires what the question under discussion is, and is confident before he knows what it is about that he can improve on what is being said. He can indeed turn things upside down by explanation. What he eventually produces is of course stilted nonsense; but, interestingly, the elements in that great colligation of senseless utterance are all individually significant ideas of classical Indian philosophy. Put together in a proper manner, these could produce a sensible if

uncompelling argument, but by the depraving touch of the babu it turns into unmitigated drivel.

In Tagore's parable of the Bengali intellect we do not find the bitter relentlessness of Bankim's attack, but despite the gentler tone, the elements of description are still the same. The babu is still an extraordinary amalgam of hollowness, pretension, posing, verbalism, ineffectuality, idleness, self-delusion. Some small changes can be observed: from a mere imitator of western ideas, he has become a gurumārā celā; instead of the aggressive westernism of his predecessor he now displays a hollow chauvinism. Essentially, these poems show a continuance of the genre, and consequently, emphasises a cultural need for a self-critique. In this form, the babu reflected on his own emergence, and looked upon himself as a contingent historical product with a mixture of admiration and secret anxiety.

Curiously, the last point where we find this form, **but where it is already** becoming too light is in Sukumar Ray's explicit nonsense verse, Aboltabol. This is a highly idiosyncratic work, and its quality of literary nonsense is so high, and accordingly its pleasure in defying expectations so intense that it is difficult to believe that we would find any social comment inside its pages. Yet miraculously, the figure who recurs in its pages, and often in an identical form, is the babu. There is of course the poem directly called babu.<sup>29</sup> He has now turned into a butt of general criticism, and it is interesting to note that his babu too meets a denouement of sorts at the hands of an uncomprehending lady. But the most direct description of the babu comes in the famous poem, tānsgaru,<sup>30</sup> the westernised cow. Here the babu appears even in the animal

world, the logic of babuness has spread so far, and naturally with appropriately startling transformations. Hybridisation with a low imitative westernism, and the surrender of cultural identity proceeds relentlessly after Bankim's time. It captures the Bengali social world, altering, redefining everything from speech to habits of food. It spreads from idle adults whom Bankim derided to schoolgoing adolescents in Rabindranath's Mānasī. The babu, in Tagore, strives to enter into the same definition of humanity within which the European resides. By the time of Sukumar Ray, through his particularly vivid inverting imagination this logic has extended from the social world of Bengali middle class to the world of neighbouring animals. Animals too can be ~~as~~ decisively and dedicatedly westernised. Accordingly, Ray speaks of a cultured cow who must be a pioneer of westernisation within his species. And the poem obviously implies that although there is something appropriate in our wonder at its behaviour, there is also something inappropriate and unjust. For, after all, the tānsgeru (the untranslatable name for the westernised cow) merely reenacts what every babu does everyday without causing surprise. Therefore, from the cow's point of view, we see his behaviour as ridiculous because of **an inexcusable ethnocentrism**, our failure to treat all animals equally, our tendency to discriminate between human and animal babus, **infringing the principles of equal treatment.**

All of Bankim's characteristics reappear in him. Like human babus, the tānsgeru is a victim of misrecognition of identity: he is not a cow, but actually a species of birds. But the world denies him this title, just as the babu is unjustly classified by people as a mere Indian on purely

racial grounds, though in terms of his ideas, he has everything in common with the European rationalist. His residence, like the babu's, is a sign of his identity, and with obvious and unmistakable symbolism he has made an office, not a stable, his residence. Like babus in Bankim and Tagore his obvious preference in positions is for lying down. Even his physical characteristics are middle class - he sports a neat parting in his dark and immaculate hair (fitfāt kālo cul, terikātā costā), evidently an attempt to imitate the common officegoers' toilet. His behaviour is inconstant, but what is really decisive about his identity is the symbolism of food:

he does not eat fodder, grass, leaves or hay;  
nor gram, flour, or sweetmeats made of them;  
he is indifferent to delicacies of meat or payes;  
he lives, as a rule, on candles and a soapy soup.

Quite clearly, this list of rejected food contains a hierarchy of sorts. He abjures the list of food that unwesternised cows would presumably enjoy - a standard menu of grass, hay and corn. He rejects even the usual food of indigenous human beings, but here again there is a small sign: for cholā and chātu are edibles of lower orders of people from the west. The list then rises through ordinary flour and sweets to the real high points of Bengali cuisine, preparations of fish and meat and pāyes, the ultimate in Bengali desserts. Only a western regimen or soup made of soap and candles - both of western provenance - appeal to his cultivated taste. Quite obviously, to the tānsгарu, as to a whole tribe of westernised Bengali babus, the point of eating is not gastronomic but cultural. We are led to suspect that he chose his food on

grounds of rationalism. As this is a farce, this is immediately taken to a higher key of exaggeration: he is not only used to western food, but wholly unadapted to Indian cuisine, just as in Vaisampāyana's recitation some babus would 'become so clever as to be incapable of conversation in their mother tongue'. Once under circumstances that remain unclear, he tried an ordinary piece of **bovine** food, a piece of rag. The consequences were disastrous: he was laid up in bed for three months at a stretch, the most acute case of cultural indigestion on record.

At first sight, the behaviour of this cow might seem strange; but to Kamalakanta, it would not. He admitted in his encounter with the socialist cat that human beings discriminated against animals in matters of political theory;<sup>31</sup> they found objectionable in animals what they took for granted in their own species. The cow has simply become westernised; he was not doing anything intrinsically unreasonable. To turn this around, if we have to laugh at him, we must for the sake of consistency laugh at a surprisingly large number of our acquaintances. The only thing that was wrong with this cow was that he had learnt to imitate his superiors. He had simply become a babu. The babu at the same time has reached a sort of natural limit. The tansgaru is a limiting case of the babu's historical career; it shows both its extent and its limits, the irresistibility and the ironical consequences of the babu's conquest of society and history.

#### An Other Self for the Babu

But the discussion about this tradition of self ironical literature would not be complete if we do not look

quickly at another set of signs, markers towards a very different move in the consciousness of the middle class Bengali. In a later chapter I shall argue that Bankim is also the founder of this less pessimistic and nonironical move, also a move about the historical self. For the discourse of both Kamalakanta and the early poems of Tagore that I have quoted show a duality of thought processes which are united by a deep connection. The primary discourse in both the essays and the poems is powerfully ironical; but, on occasion, another kind of discourse of a different tone, temper, colour crosses it, and resounds through it, a discourse or a voice which is the natural end of this ironical lament, a point that connects it very intimately to concerns with history. Even the individual self is not beyond correction. The collective self is even more eligible for such reconstruction. And the tone of lament, the ironical recitation of this absence, this lack in this people naturally leads to fantasies about another self, the self that could be, the self which is very different from what it is. I shall argue later, in greater detail, that this process was a double one: it not only changed the description of the identity, though that is what they thought; actually, at bottom, it was to alter this identity itself. This process, in other words, began from an attempt to give a better account of this we; but in this search, this we became decisively different.

-- of one voice crossing into another --

Such breaks -- of one voice crossing into another -- are very common in Kamalakanta's essays. Often, while in the midst of his ironical discourses, there is a sudden change into a language of inspiration and dreaming. The best example is perhaps the section in the essay "Āmār Durgotsav", which

after a characteristic beginning suddenly becomes full of a high language of nationalistic enthusiasm, and describes the iconic significance of the mother.<sup>32</sup> What is remarkable is that this passage, part of Kamalakanta, could be simply lifted from its ironic scaffolding and set inside the charged atmosphere of the temple scene in Anandamath, practically, without any linguistic change.<sup>33</sup> The other discourse of optimism is present, already fully grown, within the ironic frame.

Tagore's poems are interesting because they graphically show another crucial move of such proto-nationalism. Obviously, this ironical babu is out to invent a different self. He wishes to be, dreams that he is, another. I shall try to show how this invention of a more ~~adequate~~ self involves the bābu in stealing or appropriating the history of others, of the Rajputs, the Marathas and other peoples not known for their skills in rationalistic analysis.<sup>35</sup> But in Tagore's poem, in his search for ingredients to make his new self the babu has even included the bedouine from the Arab deserts.<sup>36</sup>

After recounting the ordinary Bengali's enjoyment of the pleasures of colonial subjection, the poem comes to an immediate counterpoint, which is in fact the regular structure of that poem. Of course, the description is a slander on Bengalis in general; it could be a portrait of all Bengalis only if all Bengalis were babus. But it was typical of the babu to ignore such small errors of computation. This is counterpointed immediately by the life in the desert of the alleged bedouines (in point of fact, alas, equally colonised by British imperialism). But facts can hardly stand in the



way of such rushes of feeling.

Would I were much rather an Arab bedouine  
with the great desert under my feet  
stretching to the horizon, on the  
galloping horse, in the storm of dust,  
pouring my life on to the sky, with a  
fire burning in my soul moving and moving  
day and night - with a spear in hand and  
hope in my heart always on the move, just  
as a desert storm, irresistible moves  
across all hurdles.<sup>37</sup>

An analysis of this poem would, I believe, help us understand  
**the curious** affiliation of these two apparently irreconcilable  
moods. The poem is called Duranta Āśā, an irrepressible wish,  
something that is intensely desired and also known to be  
unattainable. This is precisely what gives rise to humour, as  
I argued earlier, because all the different aspects of this  
mentality cannot be captured in any other mode of discourse.  
A movement towards a cancellation of humour is contained  
within that humour itself. Tagore's speaker sets out the  
problem with admirable clarity at the start of the poem: when  
you are being ripped apart by desire (obsessive or drunken  
desire, literally), or by an irrepressible wish, when you lose  
yourself in anger at the encumbrances that fate has placed  
around you, then, even then, you have to acquiesce, because  
Bengalis are professional mammals unfit for more strenuous  
exertion. (annopāyī bangabāsī stanyapāyī jīb)<sup>38</sup> The following  
depiction follows Bankim's list of adjectives meticulously:  
bhadra, sānta, civilised and peaceable, with a domesticated  
soul (posmānā o prān), lying prone peacefully under his buttoned

shirt, decorous in conversation, his face always composed, an idle body, a slow walk, responding to the gravitation of his home, smoothly oiled body, well groomed, filled with the juices of sleep, short in intelligence (or length), large in width. Notice that even the style is close to Bankim's, it is the same sort of stream of attributes.

To be other than what he is, the Bengali then must have the opposite attributes. His great for such qualities goes much further now - to the bedouins of the desert. He would like to live a life of heroic action as opposed to the routines of his office - 'chutche ghodā, udche bāli, jībansrot ākāse dhāli, hrdaytale bahni jwāli calechi nisidin'. He is no longer enclosed in his familiar space: like the storm of the desert which does not brook any bonds; and barsā hāte bharsā prāne - with spear in hand and hope in his heart. The entire imagery of this poem develops a countertype to what the Bengali is. It has transcended the Bengali heroes of earlier more martial times, even the Rajputs - their unattainable heroic selves, the permanent inhabitants of his dreams - reaching the even more exotic. It is not arbitrary, because it follows the same generative principles. The familiar geography of the mango grove and the enclosed space of the middle class home is contrasted to the unfamiliar geography of the endless desert. The central contrast of course is between the verbality of the Bengali and the imagined activity of the Arab. Barsā hāte, bharsā prāne is I think the crucial trope, part dream, part suggestion, part argument of the ascending of activity to militancy, and of militancy into arms. These are typically the dreams which suffuse Bankim's novels and his alternative history of India. This again turns on the crucial lines which indicate the fail

of defiance, the impossibility of the babu's feeling rebellious **against** the indignity of political servitude :

atyācāro mattapārā kabhu ki hae ātmahārā  
tapta havo raktadhārā phute ki dehamājho ?  
aharniši helār hāsi, tīvra apamān  
marmatal biddha kari baḡrasama bāje ?<sup>39</sup>

It is the failure to see the constantly renewed indignities of colonial **life** that distinguishes the babu. It is his ability to rationalise subjection by the delusive idea that **he** wins the respect of the British by **his** collaboration which makes the babu so contemptible. Unlike others, the babu does not simply submit to foreign rule; he justifies and rationalises it: 'the prisoner boasts of the length of his chain'.

There is another interesting feature the poem shares with Kamalakanta. It wavers constantly, and I think significantly, between two verb forms. Part of it is in the first person, part in the third person plural, capturing the tension of a self which is implicated in a larger collectivity, which it does not own, but can neither disown. It wavers between the self and others, or captures linguistically the tension between the individual and the collective self. This is particularly apt, because the self which speaks here, exactly like Kamalakanta, includes itself unselfdelusively within the larger collectivity it criticises. The inappropriateness of holding this important line between the natural and the collective self, of one who criticises, and those who are the objects of his criticism, makes for the tone of self directed humour. Like Kamalakanta this creates a laughter in which, tragically, the self is the victim.

There is of course within all this a great silence. In search of this other and possible and different self, the babu, armed with his mastery of world history, ranges far and wide, from his own early annals, to the folklores of Rajasthan, to the imaginary defiance of the bedouines in the faraway desert for a model of nonverbal defiance. Ironically, he could have found closer home, had the babu really looked hard, examples of **people** who felt maddened by collective insults; some who literally thought as long as the spear was in the hand, there was hope, closer in terms of time and space. The events of 1857 were not even thirty years past, but they never come in for even the most oblique mention - a vast silence at the heart of this eloquent discourse on the collective melancholy of servitude. Neither Tagore, nor even Bankim, referred to that event even with metaphorical indirectness.<sup>40</sup> These dreams were therefore irrevocably of the nature of dreams; if they threatened to become reality, the babu tended to recoil.

I do not wish this point to be misunderstood or extended too far. This is not an intended comparison of Bankim's art with Tagore's. I have simply picked up examples from Tagore to show the existence of a structure in the literary self-representation of the Bengali middle class. Tagore touches on this structure, or passes through it momentarily, but it is not an important feature of his artistic consciousness. For Bankim it certainly is. In terms of artistic biographies, Tagore's development diverged sharply from Bankim's on this point. I shall try to show later that this irony leads to the asking, the gradual forming and radicalising of a question for Bankimchandra. To this, his

later historical novels were an answer. Evidently, these ironical poems do not have such enormous significance for Tagore's artistic biography; they do not indicate a high point, or a crisis, or a departure. On the contrary, this manner of irony would gradually pass away in Tagore. In his autobiographical fragment he would deplore this as "warming ourselves in the comfortable fire of excitement" and dismiss it as less than serious.<sup>41</sup> His art, accordingly, would enter (and indeed flourish inside) 'the enclosed space'. Of course, this is not true of Tagore alone, but shows a general historic turn in Bengali literature. This ironical alternative which hints at militancy is given up as fanciful, unrealistic, and Bengali fiction returns from the desert to the mango grove, from the smoke of the battlefields in which the signs of a lost war can be hazily seen to the security of the domestic space, from the joys and sufferings of collective action to those of personal heartbreaks. Its sense of historical tragedy shrinks and retreats. The literature of the babu - in successive periods of its development - has moved from the world to the home to the bed, his ultimate theatre and stage.

#### ✓ The End of Irony

Kamalakanta ends characteristically. I deliberately say characteristically, because it displays the almost casual nature of the ending common to much of Bankim's nonfictional writing. It is an end that hangs loose in terms of from an end that lacks of finality of a denouement, an ending after which the narrative can never go on. Fictions and nonfictional pieces have very different conclusions in Bankim's work, including his rare stories. Engings in his humorous writings

show a certain nondeliberate quality. Surely, both the humorous essays and THE serious fiction are commentaries upon the world, but in very different ways. Novels, through their deliberate form, make philosophic statements about the nature of the world and the destiny of men. Humour comments on the irrationalities of the everyday, in a manner which also has a bit of everyday in it; it has the everydayness of form in its relative lack of boundaries. It can be dropped for the time, and can be resumed in a manner that is less theatrical. Yet I feel this formlessness carries a symbolic effect that is hardly less powerful than the gothic endings of his better novels. Probably satire is left like that because they provide a commentary on his life, his society, the entire ongoing business of his world; and perhaps there is an untheorised adequacy between the unconcluded nature of the humorous comment and the unconcluded nature of this world. The colonial everyday experience, the sound and fury of the Calcutta babu's intellectual life, the inconsequentiality of his existence was a comedy that was still going on, and therefore it would perhaps be inappropriate if its humorous accompaniment gave a final conclusion to itself. The next of Kamalakanta thus shows a peculiar recursiveness: it ends after the daptar, then he adds on the letters, then again the deposition, and finally, the appendix. It ends several times, without actually ending. Always Bankim finds some excuse some peculiar continuatory form, to justify a reopening of his hostility with this world.

Despite its provisionality, Kamalakanta, alas, has an end. In this last scene, his interlocutor is an imaginary cocatoo. Its ideas are rather similar to the ideology

constructed and repeated by colonial administrator and his ally, the rationalist intellectual; but this is offset by his pleasingly disconcerting habit of declaring platitudes, as a sort of authoritative commentary on his own discourse. There is no way of knowing whether this is said about what others say, or what he says himself, or whether this enunciates a deeper and more fundamental theory of discourse under colonialism: i.e. it is only platitudes which have a title to be stated ceremonially.

At the end of the piece, Kamalakanta sees a crowd of small creatures who in his blurred vision resembled ants. But the bird explains: "True, these creatures are very small like ants; they look like ants too, but they are not ants really. They are called Bengalis. Look, a small drop of milk just trickled down from my perch; and the Bengalis fell over it and started fighting with each other for a share.<sup>42</sup> They do indeed live on stray drops of milk dripping from my perch occasionally; and still you have the nerve to say that I am not a benefactor to them?"<sup>43</sup> When Kamalakanta undergoes an awakening, he finds himself face to face with Prasanna, his foil, witness to his secret helplessness. Kamalakanta finds a heap of ants on the ground. His delusion, the overlap between literal and metaphorical reality, his second sight which enables him to see as no one else can, has not quite left him. He still prophetically confuses between the ants and the Bengalis and asks Prasanna to take a broom and "sweep these Bengalis away" (oi jhāntāgachtā diā bangajagulāke jhantaiyā pheliā dāo to)<sup>44</sup>. And the woman does exactly that (goālinī māgī tāhai karila). This is the last symbolic gesture on which Kamalakanta's dream ends, or you may say, begins. Prasanna, the repository of the qualities of the people, untutored, unspoilt,

undegraded, like his other women, becomes the figure of history. She does in the final line of the text what the author and the dreamer had been trying to do all through his humour: this great act cancellation, denying the reality of the life of the Bengalis. She simply negates, cancels, refutes them. She sweeps them away. It is only on this condition, within this negated, cleansed, new space that a new country, a new people -- his native land -- can begin.

The self ironical discourse in Kamalankanta had reached a kind of internal limit. After that, to move forward, Bankim has to invent a different people by inventing a different history for them. This account must be different from what actually happened, a terrain of imaginary history. Kamalakanta thus represents a break in Bankim's structure of thought. After this, the discourse of the ironising self would not be enough. It would be necessary to invent another self which would be able to break out of the prison of history not in humour, but in truth.



### FOOTNOTES

1. Bhakti poetry has this rare limpidity of emotion, whether these use vernacular languages, or like Tulasidas' sanskrit stotras use a simple sanskrit.
2. Interestingly, Shāratcandra himself composed both Sanskrit slokas and poems in Bengali verse, but not surprisingly his attempts in sanskrit are ~~are~~ less remarkable.
3. 'Bangala Sahityer Adar' (Appreciation of Bengali Literature), ER, ii, 44.
4. Two of the most famous satirical poems of Iswar Gupta were in fact on the pineapple, and the tapse fish.
5. Unfortunately, for non-Bengali readers access to this aspect of Tagore's poetry is difficult. This was a rather transient moment in Tagore's poetic development. In his mature period he moves away from such occasional satirical performances. There is therefore a kind of natural overlaying of such poems by more serious ones; and one cannot crib against selections which find no room for this genre. The recent selection of Tagore's poetry by William Radice similarly does not include any of these poems. Selected Poems of Rabindranath Tagore (translated by William Radice), Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1987.
6. For excellent translations of the major part of Āboltābol, Sukanta Chaudhuri, Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1987.
7. Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World.
8. Manasi, originally published in 1890, ten years after KD, and the year when the larger version of Kamalakanta is published.
9. Duranta Asa (An Irrepressible Wish), Manasi.
10. IBID.

11. Kākatuā (The Coccoatoo), H., ii, 108-12.  
12. Deśer Unnati (The improvement of the country).  
13. Deśer Srīvrddhi (The improvement of the country),  
ER, II, 287.

14. 'ki jena karā ucit chila/ki kari ke tā jāne ?/

15. "andhakāre oi je son  
bhāratmāta karen groan  
e hena kāle Hāisma Dron  
gelen konkhāne !

deśer dukhe satata dahi  
maner byāthā sabāre kahi  
oso to kari nāmtā sahi  
lambā pitisāne.

I burn constantly in the  
country's sorrow  
I speak to everybody I meet  
of my secret pain  
Come let us add our names  
To this long petition).

Obviously, Tagore's diagnosis is exactly similar to  
Bankim's: the more intense the agony the greater the  
wordiness, spoken or written.

16. Ibid: utsāhote jwaliyā uthi duhāte dāo tāli/  
'amrā bado' e je nā bale tāhāre dāo gāli/  
kāgaj bhare lekho re lekho omni kare juddha śel  
hāter kāche rekho re rekho kalam ār kāli/  
cārti kare anna kheyo / dupur belā apis jeyo/  
tāhār pare sabhāy dhoyō bākyanal jwali/  
kāndiyā laye deśer dukhe/sandhebelā bāsāy dhuk  
syālīr sāthe hāsyamukhe/kariyō caturali/

17. Ibid: bāngāli bado catur tāi/āpani bado haiyā jāi/  
athaca kono kasta nāi/cestā nāi tār.

18. Bangabir, Manasi.

19. We are immediately reminded of the sentence about the babu in Bankim's stotia: those who learn things in order to pass examinations (questions put to them by representatives of another culture) are indeed babu.
20. Bangabir.
21. Ibid.
22. Hing Ting Chat, Sonār Tarī (The Golden Boat).
23. Hing Ting Chat.
24. Hing Ting Chat. If we look a little closely at the address of the Bengali savant, a difference between Bankim and Tagore stands out clearly. Unlike the babus of Bankim who were primarily westernists, this pandit gives an equally loquacious exposition from an indigenist point of view. There is however a similarity in terms of the loquacity, and the meaninglessness of the speech. Evidently, the babu had decided to go indigenous, but the remarkable thing is not his indigenism but the babu insignificance of his speech. He can reduce both Indian and western philosophy to insignificance by his mere touch.
25. Derogatory term for oriya.
26. Derogatory term for a resident of East Bengal.
27. It was part of the form of religious poetry, that it would list the moral or religious advantages that would accrue out of a listening or reading (a later addition) of the text. Vaisampayana, similarly, adds at the end of the piece in LR, that anyone who would misinterpret his words would not derive any benefit from his recitation of the Mahābhārata.
28. Hing Ting Chat.
29. 'Babu', Sukumār Racanāvalī, Patra's publication, Calcutta, 1985, 69; but the poem, Tejiān (The Spirited Man) in Kaāi Khāi, and 'Bāburam Sāpude' in Abeltābol speak generally about the same type.