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Laughter and Subjectivity: The Self-Ironical Tradition in Bengali Literature

SUDIPTA KAVIRAJ

By the grace of the Almighty an extraordinary species of sentient life has been found on earth in the nineteenth century: they are known as modern Bengalis. After careful analysis zoological experts have found that this species displays the external bodily features of homo sapiens. They have five fingers on their hands and feet; they have no tails; and their bones and cranial structures are indeed similar to the human species. However as yet there is no comparable unanimity about their inner nature. Some believe that in their inner nature too they are similar to humans; others think that they are only externally human; in their inner nature they are in fact beasts.
Which side do we support in this controversy? We believe in the theory which asserts the bestiality of Bengalis. We learnt this theory from English newspapers. According to some redbearded savants, just as the creator had taken atoms of beauty from all beautiful things to make Tilottama, in exactly the same way, by taking atoms of bestiality from all animals he has created the extraordinary character of the modern Bengali. Slyness from the fox, sycophancy and supplication from the dog, cowardliness from sheep, imitativeness from the ape and volubility from the ass—by a combination of these qualities He has made the modern Bengali rise in the firmament of history: a presence which illuminates the horizon, the centre of all of India's hopes and future prospects, and the great favourite of the savant Max Mueller.[1]

To be tormented without a clear definition of the self is a distinctly modern affliction. Apparently, human beings lived moderately contented lives for long periods in history with what must appear to us moderns rather perfunctory images of what they were. Presumably, they did not feel such urgent need to form themselves into something they had imagined through reflection, and did not feel anchorless in their existence because they lacked such pretensions. What happens in modern history that makes a picture of the 'self' such an essential part of social and individual being? Do all men living in modernity feel this need? or only those who are not only accidental inhabitants of modernity but also ideologically modern? Do all those who enter a late modernity already soiled by its historical pioneers, become

[1] Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Anukaran', Vividha Prabandha, *Bankim Rachanavali* (Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1968) (hereafter, *BR*), ii, 200–1.

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selves in the same way and to the same extent as their enlightened European predecessors? Or do subtle deflections occur in this assumption of selfhood?

It is a common claim that modernity imposes on individuals and communities an historical requirement of self-reflection.[2] A lyrical form of this idea would look upon the whole of history as the rise of man to self-consciousness and making his historical existence transparent to himself. The claim appears exaggerated if transparency is meant to imply that in modern times human beings, both as individuals and collectivities, understand what they do, have a clear sense of the intentions which go into the making of events, retain control over the acts which constitute them, the consequences obey the purposes, and if they do not, actors can analyse the difference and bring the course of events under control at a subsequent stage. Though it is quite evident that human beings living in modern times achieve nothing resembling such transparency, the idea of self-consciousness is obviously central to the project of modernity.[3] Thus in a more modest and historical form, the idea of self-consciousness, in both its senses, (i) as a gradual reflexive clarification of the nature of the self that already exists, or (ii) the crystallization of an idea of a self which did not exist earlier, must be seen as being central to the history of modernity.

Modernity imposes the necessity of historical self-reflection on people undergoing its unfamiliar transformations; and this imperative of self-reflection is unavoidable because what undergoes transformation is the self, the way people *are* what they are. The historical processes of modernity involve the introduction of a sense of choice, in two ways. People can choose to be what they are, Hindus, Muslims, Bengalis in a new way, make what they are have new consequences; or they choose to be what they were never before, for example, Indians. I have argued in my work on Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay that different societies arrange this process of self-reflection in varying forms.[4] In the West the primary form of this kind of historical

[2] For illuminating analysis of the connection between modernity and identity, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992), and in a different, more sociological direction, Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Polity, Cambridge, 1992).

[3] I have dealt with some aspects of this problem, as it affects marxist thinking in 'Marxism and the Darkness of History', in Jan Nederveen Pieterse (ed.), *Emancipations: Modern and Postmodern* (Sage, London, 1992).

[4] In my *Unhappy Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995).

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reflection was social theory, in which various schools took significant phases of history through a kind of slow replay, and explained what they thought had happened through these happenings. In India, reflection on modernity came primarily through literature.[5] It was through literary texts that Bengalis came to form historical ideas about what had happened to them through colonial processes, and imagined their collective selves—through various suggestions by literary writers about what was central to their self, what was lacking in it, if of course such an instance of cultural perfection as the modern Bengali could be said to lack anything at all. Literary humour in particular discussed how they could acquire what they lacked, and become even more perfect than they were. The Bengali self is thus a deeply historical construct, always unfinished, always under negotiation, formed and unformed at the same time. The literary search for the self turns out to be a dual process, seeking the self at two levels: the individual self, and a more collective identity shared by all, at least all educated, Bengalis. Curiously, contrary to plausibly individualist theories of society, the individual selves are not first discovered, and then put together in a collective, social self.[6] Probably the pressures of living under colonialism, endowed with a new sensibility which taught them to value autonomy, made it inevitable that the search for the collective self would occur first. It is somewhat later, with the coming of Tagore's introspective literary sensibility that they discover that the inner life of the individual, despite his apparent inconsequentiality, is also a universe, and its enormous and unending mysteries could be explored through the psychological novel and lyrical poetry.[7] I wish to suggest that in this historical construction of the Bengali self, a tradition of literary

[5] For excellent discussion on the historical course of such self reflection, see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1986).

[6] There is clear evidence of a search for a collective self, which would qualify to be called by the English word 'nation' in the works of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay; but the fashioning of a language for the interiority of the individual self had to wait till the maturer works of Rabindranath Tagore. I have tried to analyse the shaping of this language in Tagore in 'The Poetry of Interiority', paper for conference on Identity in South Asian History, University of Calcutta, Department of History, 28–30 March 1994.

[7] It is thus not surprising that Tagore returned repeatedly to write poems on 'Ami' (I/Me), and his late poetry is full of reflection on the ambiguity, unconcludedness and, unboundability of his personal self. Many of his celebrated novels and stories do of course explore the nature of the individual self and the mysteries of self-consciousness: eg, *Gora*, *Ghare Baire*, *Jogajog*, *Strir Patra*.

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self-irony played an irreplaceable part.[8] For this irony provided a centre to two types of significant historical processes—the large, visible, spectacular actions through which people sought to reconstruct their political world; and equally, the almost invisible readjustments of behaviour in the everyday—the inescapable world of etiquette, civility, conversation, those unspectacular events which nevertheless fill up most of individual and social lives.

Laughter before Bankim's *Kamalakanta*

Irony was by no means new in Bengali literature. Literary humour came from several sources, classical, folk and the peculiarly derisive wit that the fragile prosperity of colonial Calcutta gave rise to: the humour of a people who were themselves somewhat bemused at their own historical good fortune, a subtle anxiety about the rapidity with which they were elevated, by their association with British rule, to positions of evidently undeserved eminence.[9] This produced a genre of local town humour which consisted not only in lower classes satirizing the more fortunate, but also the *babu*[10] bantering his own breed, a trend luxuriating in witty, often somewhat smutty songs. Colonial opportunity for self-advancement created inexplicable cases of rise to fortune which attracted acerbic comment.

Modern Bengali literature did not start laughingly. The language awkwardly drawn out of the integuments of Sanskrit by Ram Mohan Roy (1772/4–1833) and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820–91) was sombrely serious. In Ram Mohan, it had the function of disputing theological and philosophic abstractions with missionaries and Hindu conservatives, and had little occasion to laugh, least of all at itself. In Vidyasagar, the new, highly formal Bengali language was slowly extended towards literary texts. Its extension was deeply paradoxical: it was difficult to make out if it was trying to differentiate itself from Sanskrit or merge back into its enormous grandeur. Vidyasagar had little literary imagination, only an urge to devise a language of

[8] I have stated this argument more fully in 'Signs of madness', *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, Special Number on Representations, 1990, and in *Unhappy Consciousness*, chapter 2.

[9] Apart from literary writing, and probably before that, this corrosive banter against the pretensions of the babu, a political and cultural creature of colonial rule, appeared in popular songs.

[10] A term denoting the middle-class educated elite of colonial Bengal.

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great art for Bengali culture. This resulted in an ironic originality. He never invented a story worth the name; indeed, the textbook he devised for Bengali children,[11] which assumed essentially that to be good at Bengali one must be good at Sanskrit, was a massive example of a dramatically limited imagination. His attempt was to show that Bengali could be a high literary language, not because wonderful stories could be dreamed in its medium, but that well-known and well-loved classical tales could be retold in it without diluting the high serious tone of the originals. His Shakuntala and his Sita therefore were somewhat more sombre and mournful than the original heroines of the Sanskrit texts. It would be uncharitable to suggest that Vidyasagar did not appreciate the *rasa* of humour: he did an adaptation of the *Comedy of Errors*.[12] But as Bankim observed in a discussion about Pyarichand Mitra, his narratives were irremediably derivative.[13] Stories always came from the two high traditions early Bengali literary intellectuals regarded with admiration: either from high Sanskrit or from high English, preferably from Kalidas and Shakespeare.[14] Literary imagination came to be unchained in Madhusudan Dutta (1824–73). For although his narratives were still taken from the high classical tradition of the Hindus, his poetic imagination had the daring to invert their messages, partly no doubt through inspiration from English high tradition texts.[15] Madhusudan also wrote two short farces, both concerned with Bengali babus, *Buro Shaliker Ghare Ron* (1860) and *Ekei ki Bale Sabhyata* (1860) making fun of the funloving parasites of colonial Calcutta and asking, despite the flimsiness of the storyline in the second play, a large and inescapable historical question. For the title of the play raised the central problem of colonial culture: is this what should be called civilization?

Bankim created a different kind of laughter. It had undoubted connections with earlier strands of humorous literature, but with

[11] *Varnaparichay* (Vidyasagar's primer for children) contrasts particularly with the artistically imaginative treatment in Tagore's *Sahaj Path* (Tagore's primer, which was based on an entirely different pedagogic theory, and emphasized the fact that children must learn to read the world both literally and artistically), though of late this has offended the anachronistic sensibility of the leftist cultural commissars.

[12] Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, *Bhrantivilas* (1869).

[13] 'Bangala Sahitye Pyarichand Mitra', *BR*, ii, 862–3.

[14] A good example of this idea of exalted canons is the topic of Bankimchandra's famous essay in literary criticism, 'Shakuntala, Miranada evam Desdemona'. *BR*, ii, 204–9.

[15] Madhusudan Dutta's *Meghnadbadh Kavya* (1861) is an excellent example of how creatively writers could exploit the possibilities opened up by the conjunction of

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each of them it instituted a subtle rupture, such that it is misleading to see him as a humorist who continued any single one of these traditions. Before his *Kamalakanta* (1875, enlarged 1885), Kaliprasanna Sinha had produced a forceful ironical portrait of Calcutta society in his *Hutom Penchar Naksha* (1862) which declared, in a typical mixture of acknowledgement of responsibility and renunciation,

> I have not used a single idea that is fanciful or untrue in my sketches. It is true that some people might discover themselves in its pages, but I need hardly add that these are not themselves. All that I can say is that *I have not aimed at anyone, but observed all.* (my emphasis) Indeed, I did not forget to include myself in these sketches.[16]

Apparently, *Kamalakanta* is similar to these writings: the major difference is that although the problematizing of the self is lightheartedly mentioned in Sinha's agenda, it remains unrealized. And the tone of the entire piece is too frivolous to raise serious discussion, beyond acerbic social banter. In Kaliprasanna Sinha's case the phrase 'I have not forgotten to include myself in these sketches' goes beyond the reality. He did not realize yet the gravity, and the tragic taste of turning banter towards the self. Sinha is speaking of an insignificant individual, personal self, which, while included in the collective portrait of the Calcutta babu, must retain a certain distinctiveness from them for his utterance to become philosophically and formally possible. Yet there is an insubstantiality, an insignificance in this banter when compared with the irony of Bankim's *Kamalakanta*. I suggest that this arises for two different reasons. Bankim's irony is informed by a much deeper and intricate understanding of the public fate of his people, a darkly ironic sense of history achieved through reflection upon the benefits and impositions of western modernity. Historical reflection on modernity was not an easy intellectual pastime for writers of his time. Bankim's generation was brought up on a narrative of European modernity which, partly mythically, partly justifiably, described it as a process of attaining autonomy and self-determination.[17] The economic, social, and political achievements of the modern period were primarily the effects of that miraculous

these two high canons. The narrative is taken from the *Ramayana*, but is read through an inverting interpretation which owed much to *Paradise Lost*.

[16] Kaliprasanna Sinha, *Hutom Penchar Naksha*, introduction.

[17] For an interesting discussion on Bankimchandra's view of the West, Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1990). Partha Chatterjee analyses Bankim from a different angle, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*.

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philosophic principle. This made the offer of modernity implicit in their history deeply paradoxical. Reflection on colonial modernity revealed a tragic dichotomy: either autonomy without modernity or modernity with the acceptance of subjection. It was that section of the Bengali intelligentsia which could not answer this question simply, without contradiction and regret, which had recourse to a self-ironical laughter. Those who could make simpler and less tragic choices did not need this form of self-understanding.[18] The sound of this laughter could be heard from Bankim through Tagore's early works down to the most enigmatic product of the Bengali literary enlightenment, Sukumar Ray (1887–1923), the creator of its most admired nonsense verse, a poetry which did not make sense in single sentences or verses but captured some of the most fundamental historical meanings of middle class Bengali mentality when seen as a whole. After his time, this form of self-ironical writing gradually declines, spluttering ineffectually in the works of occasional imitators in later generations.[19] But after the arrival of a leftist sensibility, which was to dominate Bengali intellectualism for nearly half a century and encourage it towards enormous moral simplifications, it disappeared into the untroubled certainties of leftist politics. By becoming entirely serious, one-dimensional, radically self-righteous, Bengali literary reflection slowly lost its taste for the ineradicable contradictoriness of being. Its great tragedies were no longer related to subtle ironies of self-construction or experience, but the winning and losing of municipal and state elections. I shall discuss simply three moments of this tradition, starting briefly with Bankim, followed by two verses from Tagore and Sukumar Ray. In all of them the central figure is of course the babu, the educated middle class Bengali, the image of intellectual perfection.

II. Bankimchandra's *Kamalakanta*

Bankimchandra showed in the formal aspects of his writing, a consummate mastery of traditional *alankaric*[20] aesthetics, and a decided

[18] For example Gandhi.

[19] A good example of poetry which is closely imitative of Sukumar Ray, and marked by both technical similarity and utter philosophic difference, is the enjoyable, but altogether less beguiling poetry of Sunirmal Basu.

[20] Most generally, an *alankara* can be termed a literary or stylistic embellishment. But the term also generally means a combination of rhetoric and poetics.

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preference for the *alankara* of *vyajastuti*[21] or counterfeit praise. This, however, does not make his art traditional in the ordinary sense. Bengali humorous writing had long used vyajastuti with great skill. Bharatchandra (*c*1712–1760), the eighteenth-century poet, chose to use vyajastuti to display technical virtuosity in versifying, and more significantly, to show that the metric and semantic complexity of Sanskrit rhymes could be emulated in Bengali verse. But Bharatchandra's objects of humour were solidly traditional, one of his most famous poems was to Shiva, a traditional object of such ironical devotion.[22] In Bankimchandra's time, this form was revived with great success by the poet Ishwarchandra Gupta, whose work, in formal terms, sometimes strongly resembled Bharatchandra's.[23] But by the nineteenth century the literary culture had changed fundamentally, and this was reflected in the controversial reception of Gupta's poetry in babu literary society. Ishwar Gupta attempted a daring combination of form and content: he used traditional alankaric techniques to describe with derision the manners of the Calcutta babu, and mixed with these undoubtedly classical resources a taste for bodily humour commonly found in vulgar literature. Literary reception of Gupta's poetry showed the enormous change in taste. His poetry was increasingly condemned as trivial and obscene, unfit for public consumption, and particularly ineligible for inclusion into the canons of literary sensibility of the new Bengali intelligentsia. Literature was meant to induce cultivation and enlightenment, and not merely to entertain, and although Gupta's undoubted mastery of technique might be diverting, its vulgarity made it unfit for the new reading public, which incidentally included the newly-educated women. To be sure, the babu still retained a great interest in the prurient and the vulgar, but was increasingly unwilling to admit this taste; as in Victorian England, this taste was supplied by a flourishing underworld of *battala*[24] literature, furtively circulated, widely condemned but surprisingly widely consumed.

[21] *Vyajastuti* is the technical form of an *alankara* which consists in wordplay producing counterfeit praise, or praise-abuse.

[22] In his *Annadamangal*, there are some famous stanzas in which Daksha, Sati's father, denounces Shiva in the presence of his guests. This part is prefaced explicitly by the poet by the lines: *Bharat Shiver ninda kemane barnibe/ nindachchale stuti kari Shankar bujhibe*—How can Bharat write abuse of Shiva? I shall praise in the disguise of abuse: Shankara will understand.

[23] For an excellently well judged criticism of Ishwarchadra Gupta's poetic works, see Bankim's 'Ishwar Gupter Jivancharit o Kavitva', *BR*, ii, 835–60.

[24] Literally, under the Banyan tree; but standing for a genre of disreputable, salacious publications.

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The reception of Ishwar Gupta was not a matter of literary success of an individual; it indicated an historic transformation of literary canons and taste. The legitimate objects of laughter in traditional aesthetics were follies of individuals, or idiosyncrasies, any object or act that could be called, in terms of the *Natyashastra, viparita*, other than what is commonly done.[25] A certain form of *hasa*, of a much subtler kind, was often associated with the erotic, the transience of the pleasures of the flesh and the forgivable follies surrounding it.[26] The Indian literary tradition had always given a central place to the materiality of the erotic. But the public appearance and enjoyment of eroticism imposed requirements of obliqueness in the presentation of sexuality. The arrival of a Victorian aesthetic put an end to this complex aesthetic of presentation of the erotic. It bifurcated literary production into two wholly different conventions of literary composition. On the one hand, it produced a prudishly saintly high literary style which made its readers suspect if Bengali heroines were gifted with powers of immaculate conception, and turned matters of courtship and love into exchange of philosophical or aesthetic ideas. On the other side, quite an unrestrained traffic of petty vulgarity went on profitably in a subliterature of obscene tales. Bankim commented directly on the pretentious dishonesty of this divide between the public and private enjoyment in one of his humorous sketches in which a babu, returned from the exertions of his office, has a conversation with his wife on the pleasures offered in the Bengali language. Characteristicially, he expresses contempt for serious Bengali fiction, but finds vulgar stories enormously diverting. In any case, irony had fallen on bad days. It was a mark of frivolity, unworthy of serious aesthetic, let alone a vehicle of serious social reflection.

With Bankim's *Kamalakanta* (1885)[27] irony makes a triumphant return; but it returns transformed, as irony about the self, or double irony.[28] It had achieved a new subject, a new reflexivity. It had learnt the more complex and mature pleasures of self-criticism, asking what the self is, what are its historical and aesthetic possibilities, a distinctly modern anguish, because it is only the modern sensibility which knows how to trouble about the self, at least in this form.

[25] *Natyashastra*, ed. K. S. Ramaswamy Shastri (Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1956), cha. VI, pp. 312–17.

[26] The best example of this is of course the poetry of Kalidasa.

[27] *Kamalakanter Daptar* (1875) was enlarged in 1885 as *Kamalakanta*.

[28] I have discussed the function of this double irony in The *Unhappy Consciousness*, ch. 2.

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Purely formally, 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, exploitation of the infinite resources of punning and *shlesha*[29] on things like the *tapse* fish or babus who for altogether contingent reasons incurred the hostility of Iswar Gupta, 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 unfolds. Irony had achieved a new dignity; from the vehicle of unserious mirth(*upahasa, atihasa*) it had now turned into a vehicle of something so serious as to be nearly unsayable. It is hardly surprising that the elaborate taxonomies of traditional *hasa*, of even the great *Natyashastra*, did not have a name for this new laughter.

The obsessive object of the *Kamalakanta* text is the babu:: he is what is being written about, and he is also the self who does the writing, and the more elusive experiment in escaping from the babu self by and through the act of writing itself. Bankim is trying to teach the Bengali educated person how to write himself out of babuness. He is thus the constant object of Bankim's sparkling humour, in all its varying moods, from the vicious to the gentle to the forgiving. And the babu is not a new theme brought in for a display of this new humorous form in the *Kamalakanta* texts; indeed, he is Bankim's first love. Two of his earliest pieces discovered this abiding object of his sarcasm, the collective self with which Bankim has such a fertile relationship of contradiction. He is undeniably a part of this group, yet he could not accept he was, leading to his founding the tradition of Bengali self-irony.

[29] *Shlesha* is an *alankara* that comes closest to irony in the classical Sanskrit repertoire.

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The early *Ingrajstotra*[30] (Hymn to the Englishman) with the helpful subtitle, 'translated from the *Mahabharata*', at once establishes both the form and the content of this humour. The *stotra* (a rhymed incantation) form would undergo unending experiments at Bankim's hands, running the whole gamut of sentiments from the ridiculous to the sentimentally uplifting. He was to reshape this fundamental form of invocation in the Hindu tradition to startlingly novel purposes. To be a stotra, however, a composition must conform to some purely formal properties of style. Incomparability of the deity to whom the stotra is offered is conveyed by the mannerisms of descriptive excess. Stotras also exhibit an usually circular, repetitive movement, coming back, after each cycle of excessive praise, to the signature phrase describing the essential attributes of the object of worship. In Bankim's early travesties of the stotra style there is a certain deliberate debasing of this form which can come only from a shrewd familiarity of its formal precepts, just as a successful cartoonist would generate laughter by exaggerating the credible features of a face. Early parodies like the *Ingrajstotra* are therefore pieces of convex satire which pour sarcasm directly on the babu, the reciter whose discourse it encapsulates, indirectly on the Englishman the object of worship, but also subtly on the doctrine of excess of the stotra form. Stylistically, it immediately applies Bankim's favourite ironic means, the alankara of vyajastuti; and its content is a double description: of the Englishman, the object, but in terms which throw more light on the character of the subject, a self-description of an ascending or intensifying servility.

O one who can divine what is going on inside our minds! whatever I do is meant to win your heart. [Though the Bengali verb *bhulaibar janya* is more double-edged and can mean equally, to deceive you; so the correct rendering of the meaning of the sentence would be 'to win your heart by deception']. I donate to charities because you may call me an altruist. I study so that you may call me learned. . . .

If you so wish (or because you wish it) I shall establish dispensaries; for your applause I shall set up schools: according to your demands I shall give subscriptions. I shall do whatever you consider proper. I shall wear boots and trousers; put spectacles on my nose, eat with knife and fork, dine at a table. Please keep me in your favour.

[30] *BR*, ii, 9–10.

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I shall renounce my mother tongue to speak your language; abjure my ancestral religion and adopt the Brahmo faith; instead of writing babu use Mr as a prefix to my name, be pleased with me.

I have given up meals of rice, and taken up eating bread: I do not feel properly fed until I have partaken of some forbidden meat [beef]; I make it a point to take chicken for snacks; therefore, O Englishman, please keep me at your feet.

Please grant me wealth, honour, fame, fulfil all my desires. Appoint me to high office, a raja, maharaja, raybahadur, or a member of the Council. If you cannot grant these, invite me at least to your at homes and dinners; nominate me to a high committee or the senate; make me a justice or an honorary magistrate. Please take notice of my speeches, read my essays, encourage me; then, I would not take heed of the denunciation of the entire Hindu society.

Clearly, there are two levels of meaning in this false hymn. At the first level, there is a caricature of both the collaborating babu and the British who confer honours on him. Characteristically, Bankim goes straight to the heart of the matter, cutting through the pretences. Only in appearance is colonial society a realm where career is open to talent; in fact, colonial administration does nothing to encourage merit. The Englishman can give anything he likes literally to anyone: it is the arbitrariness of his conferments that is emphasized, which makes the babu's supplicatory self abasement its entirely proper complement. High honour in colonial Bengal is hardly recognition for desert, public service or ability, but of competitive servility. Colonialism endows the ordinary British official with mystical powers of nomination: he can name anything into existence; and the essential point is to be so named by the right authority. The English can rename all social and moral descriptions.[31] In all this, the babu's adoption of reform and rationalism is shown for what it is. He is a rationalist out of opportunism, and entirely unclear about how a rationalist argument is to be grounded. He would do all the right things—accept modernity, break tradition, adopt altruism—always for the wrong reason—not because he can show or believe that these are the right course of action but because the British consider them praiseworthy. The babu's adoption of western rationalism is fundamentally marked and tainted by this heteronomy. Two types of acts

[31] Bankim wrote an immortal satire on this process of the rise of a Bengali to eminence in the colonial world in his *Muchiram Guder Jibancharit.* (1880), *BR*, ii, 113–28.

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can be behaviourally indistinguishable: but whether it is an act of altruism or servility can be decided only by looking into its rational grounding. The upside down, travestic character of colonial modernity is etched in briefly and powerfully through this supplicatory refrain: 'I shall do everything you ask for', turning the right actions into wrong ones. Acts of apparent subjectivity are really ones of the deepest heteronomy. That is why colonial society is such an appropriate field for sarcastic demystification. Even seemingly highminded action must be probed by this sarcastic mistrust, until true motives are revealed. It is the unapparent, indistinct intention which can tell an act of kindness from one of imitative servility, verbal posing from genuine intellectual convictions.

This was an early piece from Bankim's satire, and compared to his more mature irony this is somewhat unrefined. Its significance lies more in the fact that it sets a pattern, a structure, and it is curious how little this structure of babu-ness was to change in Bankim's mind. This is followed by a piece of such sustained satirical excellence, it is doubtful if even Bankim surpassed it.[32] Like the hymn, this too is purportedly taken from *Mahabharata*, turning its claim to all-seeingness, using and travestying it at the same time. Vaishampayana, the sage who recited the *Mahabharata* at Janmejaya's court, is caught in the early part of his performance, and the king, with a great curiosity about the historical future, requests him to recite the *guna* (qualities) of those who would be known as the babus and adorn the earth in the nineteenth century.

Not in vain were the author and reciter of the epic called *sarvadarshi*, all-seeing. He compresses the historical features of the babu into an unsurpassable portrait. An approximate idea of Vaishampayana's characterization can be found from some of the passages, though translation would miss the insistence of the series of adjectives in Bankim's writing:

> Babus are invincible in speech, they are proficient in foreign language, and hate their own; indeed, there would appear some babus of such amazing intellect that they would be altogether incapable of conversing in their mother tongue.... The babus are those who would save without purpose, earn in order to save, study in order to earn, and steal question papers to do well at examinations. Indeed, the word babu would be many-splendoured in its meaning: those who would rule India in the *kali* age and be known as Englishmen would understand by that term a common clerk or superintendent of provisions; to the poor it would mean those wealthier than them-

[32] *Babu*, *BR*, ii, 10–12.

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selves, to servants their master. I am however celebrating the qualities of some people whose only aim in life would be to spend a fittingly babu existence. If anyone takes it in any other sense his hearing of the *Mahabharata* would be fruitless; in a subsequent birth he would be born as a cow and constitute a part of the babu's dinner. . . . Anyone devoid of understanding about poetry, with an execrable musical taste, whose only knowledge is confined to textbooks crammed in childhood, and who regards himself as omniscient is a babu. . . . Like Vishnu, the babus would incarnate in ten forms: clerk, teacher, Brahmo, broker, doctor, lawyer, judge, landlord, newspaper editor and idler. Like Vishnu, in every incarnation, they would destroy fearsome demons. In his incarnation as a teacher he would destroy the student, as station master the ticketless traveller, as Brahmo the small priest, as broker the English merchant, as doctor his patient, as lawyer his client, as judge the litigant, as editor the ordinary gentleman, as idler the fish in the pond . . . Any person who has one word inside his mind which becomes ten when he speaks, hundred when he writes and thousands when he quarrels is a babu. One whose strength is one time in his hands, ten times in his mouth, hundred times in his back and absent at the time of action is a babu . . . He whose household deity is the Englishman, preceptor is the Brahmo preacher, scriptures are newspapers, and place of pilgrimage is the National Theatre is a babu. One who gives himself out as a Christian to the missionaries, as a Brahmo to Keshabchandra, a Hindu to his father and an atheist to the Brahmin beggar is a babu. One who drinks water at home, alcohol at his friends', receives abuse at the prostitute's and kicks at his employer's is a babu. . . . O king, the people whose virtues I have recited to you would persuade themselves that by chewing *pan*, being prone on the pillow, having bilingual conversation and smoking tobacco they will regenerate their country.

Apparently an astute observer of men and their manners, Janmejaya, had formed a clear idea of what sort of beings the babus would be, and requested the sage to turn to some other theme.

III. The Self-Ironical Tradition in Tagore

Every humorist writes his individual nonsense; and Bankim, Tagore and Ray had their own individual styles of being nonsensical. But it is all the more remarkable that despite such difference they seem to be sketching the same collective portrait of the babu. It could be argued that nothing would reveal deep secret beliefs more than nonsense writing. When people are saying something on a subject as dear to ourselves as ourselves it is easy to slip into pleasantly delusive things. In nonsense writing deeper structures of self-referring beliefs, the signature of an objective mind as it were, may find expression, precisely because the invigilation of reason is loose at the time.

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Let us compare the hymns of the *Lok Rahasya* with another set of portraits of the babu from Tagore's early satirical poems. In a group of poems in the *Manasi* (1890), Tagore sketches a very similar picture, with the difference that the condensation of adjectives of the vyajastuti form has disappeared. In *Duranta Asha*[33] he writes

> we are very civil, intensely peaceable, our souls thoroughly tamed;
> always prone in contentment under our buttoned clothes;
> the model of civility when we meet others,
> our faces composed in an unperturbable sweetness,
> idle bodies heaving with the effort of motion,
> perpetually gravitating towards our homes,
> short in height, generous in breadth, the children of Bengal.
>
> we smile with the pleasure of servility
> with hands folded in obeisance;
> wagging their bodies with the proud delight
> of being at the feet of their masters;
> you lie under their shoes,
> pick the rice mixed with contempt in eager fistfuls,
> and return home to express pride
> in your Aryan ancestors
> whose very name sent shivers down the spine of the whole wide world.

Little has changed apparently from Bankim's picture of the babu except the noticeable addition of an impressive ancestry to his name. Since Bankim's time, the babu has evidently compiled a history for himself of sufficiently uplifting character.

The education prescribed solicitously by Macaulay's Anglicist reform gave the babu an opportunity of knowing about the history of the wide world, as opposed to the narrow parochialism which made his ancestors worship their own past. It also teaches the babu the great principle of choice. The educated Bengali now *chooses* the history he wishes to revere, and through that, more subtly, selects his own intellectual ancestry. He has an option, in this expansive age of colonial reason, to choose between Indian or European history as his own past. And there is hardly any doubt or indecision about the babu's decisive choice. In another poem in *Manasi*, two studious brothers celebrate the great deeds of mankind: a list in which the battles of Marathon and Thermopylae, Cromwell's exploits in the English civil war, the battle of Nasby, lives of Washington, Mazzini, and Garibaldi hold pride of place. Clearly, this is a narrative of world

[33] Rabindranath Thakur, *Manasi* (Visvabharati, Calcutta, 1967), 126–30.

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history in which the luminous events, forever recurring for remembrance, are successful wars of liberation from foreign oppression and tyranny. The conclusions they draw from their reading of history are perfectly rationalistic:

> Who can say we are a lesser people than the English? The only differences lie in physical proportion and manners. For we learn whatever they write: indeed, we translate them into Bengali and write commentaries which surpass our masters [*gurumara tike*,[34] a phrase we must note, because we shall encounter it again] ... Look at me: I spread my bed in my room; I roam the libraries for books on history; I write volumes making things up (giving a free rein to my imagination), in a carefully sharpened language. As a result, my heart catches fire; I have to control it by fanning myself; I still feel giddy with enthusiasm. There is still some hope for my country, I feel.... I listen to great things; I speak great words, I gather and read great books, a sure way of achieving gradual greatness. Who could ever stop us?

Entirely in accord with this education that extends the mental horizon of Bengali youth, there are some particular passages of history which move these citizens of the republic of letters to tears of joy. Predictably, the blood runs faster in their veins when they recount what occurred at Marathon and Thermopylae. They cannot imagine what incalculable effects would have followed 'had their countrymen really read Garibaldi's biography in full'. They feel ashamed at the amazing illiteracy of a country whose people do not know by heart Washington's date of birth, and conclude 'Oh Cromwell, you indeed are immortal'. It is typical that the erudite adolescent is unable to read the account of Cromwell's exploits to the end; because an acquaintance comes in proposing a hand at cards, and the youthful babu abandons his historical quest unfinished.

Tagore's poems are important because they show the logic of the babu's quest for historical belonging. Each group after all makes its own construction of human history, and belongs to a mankind after its own heart, in which its preferred characteristics are accentuated and what it dislikes suffers narrative exclusion. The humanity that the babu would like to belong to, the humanity whose history he assiduously constructs, because he believes that that forms his proper theatre of existence, is the humanity shaped by western history. It is this history which he wishes to sneak into, in which he so desperately, cravenly, wishes to have a place. He is an illegal immigrant of narrat-

[34] Gurumara literally means murdering the teacher; tike is a commentary. Gurumara is standardly used to describe a student, gurumara chela. Here this clearly means commentaries which exceed/ destroy the texts. 'Bangavi', *Manasi*, 140–5.

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ives. We shall see later that there is also a complementary logic of belonging which is set in motion in these critiques of the babu. This would be a logic of belonging to the 'others' to those who have been conquered, disenfranchised, dispossessed.

Let us compare another story from Tagore's next work, *Sonar Tari* (1893).[35] This poem, too, is fundamentally similar to Bankim's original travestic writing in two respects: it is a nonsense story and its subject is the babu. The ruler of a mythical kingdom was once troubled by incomprehensible dreams. Along with his ministers and subjects, he lives in a meaningful, not a causal world. Dreams therefore must be taken seriously, not laughed off as illusions. They must also be uncoded correctly. In the king's dreams three monkeys pick lice lovingly from the royal hair, but they slapped him if he stirred. At intervals the nit pickers uttered a mysterious slogan: 'hing ting chhat'. In his bewilderment, the king, like modern governments, turned to scholarly consultants. Savants from several countries and continents are called in, including several from Europe. They try in their different ways, but fail, and some of them are given punishments that must appear somewhat disproportional to what was after all an intellectual failure. A humorous Frenchman was left to be devoured alive by dogs for suggesting that the complex of sounds was devoid of meaning but not of a certain aural melody.

The riddle, as one can expect, remains unsolved until a scholar arrives from Gaud, trained by Europeans, but already surpassing his masters, *jaban panditder gurumara chela*.[36] The relevant sequence then follows:

> At this hour arrived the scholar from Gaud,
> trained by foreign masters, only to surpass them.
> Bareheaded, shabbily dressed to the point of being shameless
> his clothes threatened to slip off him at times.
> So thin he was that people could doubt his existence
> which were of course decisively dispelled
> as soon as the words began to emerge.
> Indeed, the world wondered at how so much of sound
> could be produced by so slight a machine.
>
> Arrogantly he asked:
> what is the subject of dispute?
> I could say a few words on the subject

[35] Hing Ting Chhat. *Sonar Tari, Sanchayita* (Visvabharati, Calcutta, 1972), 118.
[36] The phrase literally means a pupil of foreign scholars who has destroyed (i.e. surpassed) his instructors.

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if I knew what it was.
In fact, I can turn things upside down by elucidation.
Everyone shouted: hing ting chhat.

On being told of the matter
the Gaudiya master made a somewhat solemn face
and took about an hour to explain what it meant.
The meaning is in fact quite simple, he said,
indeed in one sense quite clear;
it is an ancient idea newly discovered:
the three eyed god had three eyes, three times and three qualities;
different forces lead to individual differentiation
redoubled in contrary cases.
Forces like attraction, repulsion, propulsion
are usually opposed to the forces of good;
in the kaleidoscope of life the three forces
are revealed in three forms.[37]
To put all this quite succinctly,
one could say hing ting chhat.

The court thundered to applause:
it is clear, absolutely lucid, said everyone ...
whatever was incomprehensible was dissolved
and made absolutely limpid
like the empty sky.[38]

We discern some changes in the scene now. The babu is no longer the interested and imitative pupil of European learning, but a *guru-mara chela*: he has decisively excelled his preceptors. The poem makes clear in what ways exactly the babu has taken rationalism beyond the point where Europeans had left it.[39] Tagore emphasizes the intellectual presumption of the babu, a feature not shared by Europeans, not at least in equal measure. There is another decisive change. His

[37] It is impossible to convey the combination of lucidity and nonsensicality of the combination of phrases the gaudiya scholar uses in his elucidation. Most of the individual concepts are meaningful terms used in Indian philosophy or theology. It is also true that sometimes explanations of phenomena in terms of traditional theological or astrological scholarship would sound very similar to this to lay ears, although they might be perfectly legitimate according to their internal systems of references and conceptual coherence. But this particular amalgam is of course wholly nonsensical. What should be noted is the mixing of concepts from traditional thought, like *tryamvaka*, *trinayana*, *trikala*, *prapancha* etc. with modern scientific terminology, *akarshan*, *vikarshan* etc.

[38] Hing Ting Chhat, 118–19.

[39] This pointedly satirises trends in contemporary Bengalis which sought to defend traditional metaphysical ideas by illegitimate and specious uses of modern science. For an interesting and detailed analysis of such trends see, Gyan Prakash, 'Science between the Lines' (unpublished paper) 1993.

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critics have disappeared; the literary world is now populated only with his admirers. The babu's others—women, the subaltern, all those who could make fun of him in an earlier age, have disappeared, historically transformed into moulds of subalternity fashioned by his own hands. He now seems to have gained the unopposed right that belongs to dominant groups in rare periods of uncontested glory of making fun of others, without reply. In the structure of the joking relationships common in Bengali bhadralok society, some of the historical transformations of that period were enduringly inscribed. Earlier the babu was often the object of ridicule, as Bankim's world showed; now the world is the object of his banter. Unfortunately, little systematic work has been done on such matters, but common babu jokes gradually turned outwards and showed the confident disdain of the Bengali middle class for the whole non-babu world. It included not merely non-Bengalis, but also Bengalis from other classes. Unlike jokes about Sikhs which are often charmingly and generously self-referring, babu jokes of middle class Bengal display a strong parochial aggressiveness. Although he considers himself an inheritor of the classifactory fastidiousness of Western rationalism, he does not have the patience to catalogue the surrounding world minutely, or with any degree of precision. Anyone coming from the west of the hallowed land is a *khotta*, from the general vicinity of Rajasthan a *medo*(slang for Marwari) and from the general direction of the South a *madraji*.[40] The chauvinistic Bengali is quite content to live with this indistinct map of nationalities of those he now considers his natural inferiors. Nothing is so revealing of the babu mind as the astounding geography of his contempt. Remarkably, the babu replicates in the world he dominates the inattentive and perfunctory classification of others so characteristic of European cultures. It blurs the other, the unfamiliar, just as the Europeans treated people as Slavs, Africans, far easterners and in such other broad, misleading, confidently ignorant nomenclatures. Common jokes of the babus are directed against the people middle class Bengalis lived with and depended on, those whose labour formed the things he used parasitically, a typically uncharitable recompense for their work at his service. The culture of the Calcutta Bengali is replete with jokes about the *uḍe*,[41] *meḍo, khotta*, and closer home, the *bangal*.[42]

[40] Literally, a resident of Madras.

[41] Pejorative form for Oriya.

[42] *Bangal* was used to refer pejoratively to residents of east Bengal; but this insult was heartily returned. West Bengal people were similarly called *ghati*.

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Tagore's poem on the Bengali intellect offers a list of its own ennobling effects on its audience.[43]

> 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 led to take the true as true.
> He would realize in a moment that the true is false.
> Come, then, yawn and lie on your back
> in this uncertain world the only certain truth
> is that everything in the world is
> made of delusions, except the dreams themselves
> which are the only things one can call really true.

The structure of this travesty is exactly the same as *Kamalakanta*. Its tone is one of the same intense self-irony; it uses the same logic of inversion. In Tagore's own artistic evolution this tone was rather shortlived; he would diverge from this self-ironical tradition in which the babu constantly searched for the limits of his being.[44] Bengali literature becomes more sombre and sanctimonious, until in modern times, it loses all taste for this cleansing, purifying laughter. But in Tagore's early writings, the babu displays the same features, mentally and physically. His physical scantiness is dramatized: the world could doubt his existence until he burst into speech. What still constitutes his identity is the irrepressible, vacuous verbalism. This fatal gift is not an ability to produce arguments, or sense, but sounds (*shabda hai*). We are left in no doubt that we are dealing with a direct descendant of the animal whose special gift was the multiplication of words.

Lapse of time has done nothing to improve his arrogant incivility, though his skill lies in a derivative, unproductive art. He is adept not at producing ideas but at the parasitic function of interpreting; he is confident before he knows what it is about that he can improve on what is being said. What impresses his audience is stilted

[43] Again, in a perfectly traditional style. Religious texts were not content with describing the extraordinary events of their divine and mortal protagonists. Usually, they recited the this and otherwordly benefits to be gained by hearing the narratives—an entirely understandable move in a culture with such a teeming and competitive market for ennobling stories. Tagore's poem accordingly spoofs this declaration at the end of Hing Ting Chhat, 120.

[44] Though that does not mean that he abandoned the project of criticizing the pretensions of middle class Bengali culture. His novel, *Gora*, for instance, is a complex extension of this critique; but the literary, *formal*, mode had changed: he would make much less use of ironical banter.

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nonsense, but interestingly, the elements in that great colligation of senseless concepts are all individually significant ideas of classical Indian philosophy. Put together properly, it could produce a sensible, if uncompelling argument, but by the depraving touch of the babu it degenerates into unmitigated drivel. The babu does not achieve the coherence of either traditional Indian discourse or the scientific reliability of modern rationalist ideas. In this tradition of self-irony thus the babu reflected on the contingency of his own historical emergence, with a mixture of admiration and secret anxiety.

IV. The Meaning of Nonsense: Sukumar Ray's *Aboltabol*

The last point where I wish to analyse this tradition, where it is already becoming too light, is in Sukumar Ray's *Aboltabol*(1923).[45] This is a highly idiosyncratic work and its nonsense is so pure, its pleasure at defying expectations of normalcy so intense that it is odd to expect social comment in its delightful pages. Yet, miraculously, the figure which recurs in its verses, often in an identical form, is the babu. Ray has a poem directly titled, the Babu.[46] He has now turned into a butt of general criticism, and it is worthy of note that Ray's babu, in his brief life within this short verse too, meets his denouement at the hands of an uncomprehending lady. But the most direct description of the babu comes, I think, in the famous poem, *Tansgaru*, 'the Westernised Cow'. Here the babu makes his appearance even in the animal world, the logic of babu-ness has spread so far, naturally with appropriately startling consequences. Hybridization with a low imitative westernism and the surrender of cultural identity proceeds relentlessly after Bankim's time. It captures the Bengali social world, redefining everything from styles of speech to habits of food. It spread from idle adults whom Bankim derided to college-going adolescents in Tagore. In Ray, particularly through his vivid, inverting imagination, this logic of westernization has spread from the social world to the world of neighbouring animals. After all, they could not live under colonialism for so long and remain entirely unaffected. Animals too can become decisively and dedic-

[45] *Aboltabol* was translated twice, once by Satyajit Ray, and more recently by Sukanta Choudhury, cf 'The Blighty Cow', *Selected Nonsense of Sukumar Ray* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1987), 41.

[46] *Babu*, in Sukumar Ray, *Khai Khai. Sukumar Rachanavali* (Patra's Publication, Calcutta, 1985), 33.

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atedly westernized. In this poem, accordingly, Ray speaks of a cultured cow, a pioneer of westernization among its species. And the poem clearly implies that although there is something seemingly appropriate in our wonder at his general demeanor, there is also something deeply inappropriate and unjust. For, after all, the tansgaru merely re-enacts what every babu does everyday without causing the slightest surprise. From the cow's point of view, we see his ways as ridiculous only because of our inexcusable anthropocentrism, our failure to treat all beings equally, our tendency groundlessly to discriminate between human and animal babus. If cows had a theoretical apparatus comparable to that of modern cultural critics, they would undoubtedly have produced something compelling about the invidious ideology of humanism.

All the charcateristics Bankim had detected earlier reappear in the enlightened cow, who, notably, is a male. Like human babus, he is a victim of misrecognized identity: in fact, he is not a cow but belongs to a species of bird. But the world, with characteristic injustice denies him that title, just as the Bengali 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. The cow's residence, like the babu's is a sign of his identity: with unmistakable symbolism, he has an office, the space of colonial reason, not a stable, as his residence. Like babus in Bankim and Tagore, his obvious preference in positions is for lying down, symbolically renouncing action, as befits all animals of unusual intellect. Even his physical characteristics are middle class—he sports a neat parting in his dark and immaculate hair (*phitphat kalo chul, terikata chosta*), evidently an attempt to imitate the common Bengali officegoer's toilet. Inconstancy is the special mark of his character, but what decisively marks his identity is his choice of food:

> He does not eat fodder, grass, leaves or hay;
> nor gram, flour, or sweets made of these;
> he is indifferent to the delicacies of meat and *payes*
> he lives, as rule, on candles and soapy soup.

Clearly, this list of rejected food contains a subtle hierarchy. The enlightened cow finds unacceptable the list of food that unwesternised and indigenist cows would presumably enjoy, the standard menu of grass, hay and corn. He rejects even the usual food of indigenous human beings: but here we must not ignore the sharp culin-

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ary slope. *Chhola* and *chhatu* are edibles of lower orders of people from North India, especially migrant labourers from neighbouring Bihar. The list then rises through ordinary flour and sweets to the great high points of Bengali cuisine, preparations of fish and meat (*amish*) and *payes*, the ultimate in Bengali desserts. But such sub-rational food fails to tempt him. Only a Western regimen of soup made of soap and candles—both of Western provenance—appeals to his cultivated taste. Evidently, to the Tansgaru, the point of eating is not gastronomic, but ideological. We are led to suspect that he chose his food on grounds of rationalism. As in the case of Vaishampayana's babus, who could not converse in Bengali, once he tried a piece of ordinary bovine food, a piece of rag, and was laid up in bed with indigestion for three months.

At first sight the behaviour of this cow might seem strange; but to Bankim's *Kamalakanta*, it would not. He admitted in his famous conversation with the socialist cat that human beings systematically discriminate against animals in matters of political theory, and found objectionable in animals what they took for granted in their own species.[47] The only thing wrong with this cow was that he had learnt to imitate his superiors: he had simply, driven by the spirit of the age, become a babu. Meanwhile, the babu had reached a sort of natural limit in his historical career. The Tansgaru showed the extent, the limits and the ironical consequences of the babu's conquest of society and history.

V. Dreams of An Other Self

But this discussion of the ironical tradition will not be complete if we do not look at another set of signs, markers of a very different move in the consciousness of the Bengali middle class. Bankim is the founder of this very different line of thought about the historical self. The discourse of both the *Kamalakanta* pieces in Bankim and the early poems of Tagore show a duality of thinking in this reflection about the Bengali self. The primary discourse in both is powerfully ironical; but, on occasion, another type of belief—of a very different tone and temper—crosses it, resounds through it. This is a voice which is a natural end of this ironic lament, but is very different from it in tone. Even the individual self, despite our conceits, is not

[47] Biḍal, *BR*, ii, 85–8.

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beyond correction. The collective self appears even more eligible for such correction. The tone of lament, the recitation of qualities that are absent in the character of the modern Bengali can lead to fantasies about another self, a self that could be, a self that is very different from what it is. In *Kamalakanta* often in the midst of ironical discourse there is a sudden change into a language of inspiration and dreaming.[48]

Tagore's poems reveal with graphic clarity another crucial move of early patriotism. The ironical babu is out to invent a different self. He wishes to be and dreams that he is another. I have shown elsewhere that this process of making a new self involves the Bengali intellectual in appropriating the history of others, of Rajputs, Marathas, and others not equally renowned for their command of European rationalism.[49] But in Tagore's youthful poems in his search for ingredients to make his new self he goes even to the Bedouins in the Arab deserts.

After recounting the ordinary Bengali's enjoyment of the pleasures of colonial servility, one poem comes to an immediate counterpoint. Of course the earlier description is slander on Bengalis in general; what was described there would constitute 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 free life in the desert of the alleged Bedouins (in point of fact, alas, equally vulnerable to the forces of British imperialism). But facts can hardly stand in way of such a rush of feelings.

> Would I were an Arab Bedouin
> with the great desert under my feet
> stretching to the horizon,
> on a galloping horse, in a cloud of dust
> pouring my life on to the sky, with a fire kindled in my soul,
> moving endlessly day and night,
> a spear in hand and hope in my heart,
> never lying still, just as a desert storm
> irresistible, moves through all that comes in its way.

This poem can help us understand the curious connection between the two apparently irreconcilable moods. The poem is called *Duranta Asha*, an irrepressible wish, something that is intensely desired and yet known to be unattainable. This is precisely what gives rise to

[48] The best example of this is the essay *Amar Durgotsav*, *BR*, ii, 79–81.
[49] In *Unhappy Consciousness*.

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humour because all the contradictory aspects of this mentality cannot be captured in any other mode of discourse. But this humour is not an end in itself, or the end or destination of this humorous discourse. A movement towards a cancellation of humour is contained within the humour itself. Tagore's poetic utterer sets out the theme 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. The depiction of the Bengali that follows replicates Bankim's list of adjectives meticulously: civil(*bhadra*), peaceable(*shanta*), with a domesticated soul(*poshamana e pran*), lying prone contented under his buttoned shirt, decorous in manner, his face always composed, an idle body, a slow walk, responding to the gravitation of his home, well groomed, his body filled with the juices of sleep, short in intelligence, large in width. Notice that even the style is similar, deploying the same stream of adjectives of contempt.

To be other than what he is, the Bengali must have the opposite attributes. The transformed babu would like to live a life of heroic action as opposed to the routines of his office—'on the horseback', 'in a cloud of dust', 'with fire in his heart'. He is no longer enclosed in the familiar space: 'like the storm of the desert that does not brook any bonds', and 'with a spear in his hand and hope in his heart'. Obviously the entire imagery of the poem develops a countertype to what the Bengali is. This search has now transcended the Bengali heroes of earlier, more martial times, even the Rajputs—their unattainable heroic selves, the permanent inhabitants of his dreams, reaching a figure even more exotic. This is not arbitrary, because it follows the same generative principle. The familiar geography of the mango grove and the enclosed space of the middle class home is now contrasted to the unfamiliar geography of the endless burning desert. It accentuates the central contrast of the verbalizing inefficacy of the Bengali and the imagined decisiveness of the Arab. 'With a spear in hand and hope in my heart' is I think the crucial trope, part dream, part suggestion, part argument for the ascending of passive resentment into militancy, and militancy into arms. These are typically dreams that suffuse Bankim's novels and his alternative history of India. Opposite to this dream are the crucial lines which indicate the failure of defiance, the impossibility

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of the babu's feeling rebellious at the indignity of political servitude.

> Can you ever feel beside yourself with rage?
> are you ever maddened by insults?
> does the blood boil in your veins?
> does the perpetual smile of contempt, the sharp point of insult
> pierce your heart like lightning?[50]

It is his ability to rationalize subjection through the delusive idea that he wins the respect of the British by his collaboration that makes the babu so contemptible. Unlike others, the Bengali does not merely submit to foreign rule; he justifies and rationalizes it: 'the prisoner boasts of the length of his chain'.

The poem, *Duranta Asha*, shares another feature with Bankim's *Kamalakanta*. It wavers constantly, and I think significantly, between two verb forms. Part of it is in the first person singular, part in third person plural, capturing with great sensitivity the tensions of an individual self implicated in a large collective which it can neither own nor disown. It wavers between the single, critical rebellious self and others composing the community of Bengali middle class, contented in their enjoyment of colonial rule. Technically, this captures the tension between the individual and the collective self. This is particularly apt, because the self that speaks here, exactly like *Kamalakanta*, includes itself without self-delusion in the larger collectivity it criticizes. Like *Kamalakanta*, this creates a laughter in which, tragically, the self is the victim.

Within all this irony, there is of course a great silence. In search of this other and possible self, the babu, armed with his mastery of world history, ranges far and wide, from his own early Bengali annals, to the folklore of Rajasthan, to the imaginary defiance of the Bedouins for a model of non-verbal defiance. Ironically, he could have found nearer home, had he looked hard, examples of people, not so long ago, who 'had felt maddened by insults', some who thought as long as the spear was in hand there was hope. The events of 1857 were not even thirty years past, but they never come in for even the most oblique mention—they are wrapped in a strange forgetfulness, a vast silence at the heart of all this eloquence about the melancholy of servitude. Neither Tagore, nor even Bankim, usually refer to that event even with a metaphorical indirectness. These dreams were irrevocably of the nature of dreams; if they threatened to become

[50] *Duranta Asha*.

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reality, in the history that immediately surrounded him, the babu tended to recoil, and erase it from his long and eloquent memory.

Yet in spite of this, Bankim's feeling of indignity yields a sentiment that is truly and deeply political. It permeates his entire creative life, while Tagore passes through this in a moment of his artistic development. In Bankim, this irony simply shapes a question to which his later novels try to provide an answer. Evidently, these ironic poems do not have such significance in Tagore's intellectual biography: they do not indicate a high point, or crisis or a new departure. On the contrary, this manner of irony would gradually decline in his poetic work. In his autobiographical fragment he would treat these sentiments as 'warming ourselves in the comfortable fire of excitement'[51] and dismiss them as less than serious. His art, accordingly, would enter, and indeed flourish inside, the 'enclosed space' of upper middle class life. Of course this is not true of Tagore alone, but represents a general historic turn in Bengali literature. The ironical alternative that hints at political militancy is given up as fanciful, unrealistic. Bengali fiction returns from the desert to the mango grove, from the smoke of the battlefields, in which signs of a lost and bitter war can be hazily seen, to the security of the domestic space, from the joys and sufferings of collective action to 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.[52] Irony was also to change form, and assume a more tortured, melancholy direction. *Kamalakanta*'s irony, despite its sense of indignity ineradicably mixed with the historical present, had not lost its touch entirely with laughter in the ordinary sense. The predominant type of irony in Bengali literature after the forties would appear in the deliberate contradiction between the utterance and the form, like the famous poem by Sukanta Bhattacharyya announcing in poetry the end of poetry, the birth of a world of utter disillusionment, where all enchantment is torn to shreds. In a world of hunger, the only language, he said with an irony dripping with a very different anger, was prose, and in a wonderful rhetorical desecration, the full moon, in an inverted metaphor, becomes a half burnt piece of

[51] Rabindranath Thakur, *Jivansmriti* (Visva Bharati, Calcutta, 1968) pp. 78–9.

[52] The last stage reached in more recent novels imitative of European existentialist literature.

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bread.[53] This is also irony; but emerging from a very different order of disenchantment.

In my longer study of Bankimchandra I have attributed this self-ironical laughter to a peculiar, almost miraculous, configuration of artistic and political circumstances in Bengali history.[54] It created a sense that two different ways of being in the world, coming from two civilizations, were available to the cultivated Bengali, and a person of real refinement found it hard to make a wholly one-sided choice. The two civilizations had been brought into contact by history, each providing entirely sensible grounds for criticizing the other. European culture offered arguments undermining superstitions of traditional Indian social norms. But Indian culture, equally, offered reasonable grounds for being sceptical about the immodest claims of western, especially, colonial rationalism. This kept the 'Bengali' character, his collective personality, in a state of tension, of unfinishedness and search. By the 1940s, the Bengali babu, along with political groups all over India, had overcome their historical anxiety, and found an answer to the uncertainty about the collective self. Consequently, there is a decline in this form of humour and self-irony; but with that they renounced a great principle of intellectual creativity. Eventually they would allow their intellectualism to sink to a level where even the most obvious decline in Bengali society and culture would not be described, for fear of betraying cultural uncertainty. By turning a communist, the babu has not overcome his historical imperfections, but simply given them a left-wing form. His verbalizing excesses, as anyone conversant with Bengali politics would know, had not diminished. Left politics has provided him with a more appropriate theatre for kindling more fearsome verbal fires. But he had lost the rare ability to turn the humour against himself, and get rid of his pretensions.

[53] Sukanta Bhattacharyya, 'He Mahajivan', *Chhadpatra* (Saraswat Library, Calcutta, 1382 Bengali) p. 87.

[54] Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness*, ch. 2.

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