The Urban and the Provincial Deliberation in the Works of Bhabanicharan's Literary Flair

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Abstract:

Throughout the course of our study, a captivating series of satirical writings emerged in the local newspapers, offering a sharp critique of contemporary society. These pieces, penned anonymously, vividly illustrated the behaviours and attitudes of the new Babus—an emerging social class in Calcutta during the early 19th century. The writings were not merely mockeries; they juxtaposed humour with pointed criticism, shedding light on the complexities of these individuals' identities and their impact on the fabric of urban life. Central to this conversation is the work of Bhabanicaran Bandyopadhyay, whose insights are crucial for grasping the broader concept of social change and cultural dynamics during this fascinating period in Calcutta's history. Bhabanicaran is primarily recognized today as a contemporary figure and a notable antagonist of the renowned reformer Rammohan Ray. Despite his significance, a lack of thorough evaluation has led to an underappreciation of his pivotal role and contributions to Bengali literature. As a result, his literary achievements and influence remain largely overlooked in the broader discourse surrounding that vibrant literary period.

Keywords: *urban, rural, language, local, Calcutta*

In the year 1823, Bhabanicaran made a significant contribution to Bengali literature with the release of two notable works, both composed in the rich tapestry of Bengali prose. The first, titled *Kalikata Kamalalay*, is an original creation that showcases Bhabanicaran's literary flair and imagination. The second work, *Hitopades*, takes a different approach: it is a Bengali translation of the revered Sanskrit text originally authored by Vishnu Sharma. Due to its translational nature, the *Hitopades* does not fall within the primary focus of this thesis. However, it is important to note that both of these works were published under Bhabanicaran's own name, reflecting his desire for acknowledgement of his contributions (De 1962: 555).

In 1825, Bhabanicaran continued to enrich the literary landscape with the publication of two additional works, *Naba Babubilas* and *Dutibilas*. *Dutibilas,* composed in verse, adhered to a traditional poetic form and was released under his own name. In contrast, *Naba Babubilas* is a hybrid creation, weaving together prose and verse, but it was published under the pseudonym of Pramathanath Sarma, illustrating Bhabanicaran's creative versatility and willingness to experiment with identity in his literary endeavours. The culmination of Bhabanicaran's literary journey came in 1832 with the release of his final work, *Nababibibilas*. This piece, too, harmoniously blended prose and verse, but was published under yet another pseudonym, Gobindacandra Mukhopadhyay. This choice of identity further enabled him to explore different stylistic avenues while adding depth to his

already impressive repertoire. Through these varied works, Bhabanicaran left an indelible mark on Bengali literature, demonstrating both innovation and a profound understanding of the narrative form (De 1962: 555).

In this section, we delve into Bhabanicaran's inaugural prose masterpiece, *Kalikata Kamalalay*, which S.K. De heralds as his most significant contribution to literature. Published in 1823, this work predominantly serves as an insightful exploration of urban life in Calcutta during the early 19th century, specifically the second decade. The narrative unfolds through a series of dialogues between a seasoned city-dweller and a bewildered provincial newcomer. Bhabanicaran crafted this dialogue as a manual of etiquette, tailored for those who venture into Calcutta for the first time, only to find themselves overwhelmed by its peculiar customs, manners, and language (De 1962: 557).

The dialogue framework allows Bhabanicaran to present contrasting perspectives on Hinduism and the adaptable practices permitted within it. At the heart of this exchange lies a discussion between a rural Hindu, steeped in ultra-orthodoxy and resistant to any form of social change, and an urban Hindu who, while still adhering to tradition, shows a willingness to embrace certain adjustments in response to the evolving political, social, and economic landscape of Calcutta at that time.

At the outset of the book, Bhabanicaran elaborates on the thematic essence encapsulated in the title, explaining that Calcutta is akin to an ocean. This analogy serves as the foundation for the title *Kalikata Kamalalay,* where *Kamalalay* translates to 'ocean' and refers to the abode of Kamala Laksmi, the Hindu goddess of Fortune.[1] Reflecting this oceanic metaphor, *Kalikata Kamalalay* was envisioned as a work to be structured in four distinct waves or volumes.[2] However, only the first volume is extant, raising doubts about whether Bhabanicaran ever fulfilled his ambitious plan to complete the book in its entirety as described in his preface. Furthermore, the text includes references to key ideas presented by Bhabanicaran, emphasizing the significance of the oceanic imagery as a parallel to the vibrant and multifaceted essence of Calcutta itself (De 1962: 558).

The title *Kalikata Kamalalay*, while suggesting a comprehensive examination of the entirety of Calcutta's society, is somewhat misleading in its implications. Bhabanicaran's focus seems primarily centred on the Hindu community, signalling a deliberate choice to explore their cultural and social dynamics. Consequently, the experiences and perspectives

[1]Text: *Kalikatar sagarer sahit sadrsya ache tatprayukta*

kalikata kamalalay nam sthir haila. kamala laksmi tahar

alay ei artha-dvara kamalalay sabde yeman samudrer upasthiti haiteche teman kalikatar upasthitio haite pare…

(Bandyopadhyay 1936: 3)

[2] Text: *Ei granthe cari taranga haibek* (Bandyopadhyay 1936: 2).

of Muslims and other religious groups within Calcutta are noticeably absent from this analysis, leaving an incomplete picture of the city's societal landscape.

In 1822, Calcutta boasted a diverse population totalling 179,917 residents, as documented in the population returns for its four divisions. This figure is highlighted in Walter Hamilton's work, *The East India Gazetteer*, published in 1828. A subsequent account from J.H. Stocqueler in 1844 presents an even higher population estimate of 229,714 people. When discussing the inhabitants of Calcutta, the writer Bhabanicaran focuses exclusively on the Bengali Hindu community. However, it is important to note that, as previously mentioned, Calcutta was a melting pot of various ethnicities and religions during that era. In the same year of 1822, when the influential *Kalikata Kamalalay* had yet to be released, the Muslim population in the city was recorded at 48,162, while the Hindu population was significantly higher, at 118,203, according to Hamilton's account. This demographic data makes it clear that Bhabanicaran's references to the urban society of Calcutta predominantly pertain to the Bengali Hindus, neglecting the rich tapestry of other communities that contributed to the city's vibrant social fabric (Hamilton 1828: 320; Stocqueler 1844: 260).

In his exploration of Calcutta Bengali Hindu society, Bhabanicaran undertakes a profound inquiry, posing an essential question: to what extent could social changes be embraced without compelling Hindus to abandon their deeply rooted beliefs and practices? The significance of Bhabanicaran's inquiry, especially around the year 1823 when he published *Kalikata Kamalalay* cannot be overstated; it reflects a palpable sense of unease within him regarding the emerging disparities already taking shape among Bengali Hindus. It can be inferred that he perceived a troubling trend in which Bengali Hindu society was becoming increasingly polarized, essentially splitting into two distinct camps, one representing the rural traditions and the other reflecting the urban modernity of Calcutta. Within the city, this division manifested itself through the rise of various opposing factions, introducing an element of disunity that had not been seen before. In response to this fragmentation, it seems that Bhabanicaran felt compelled to illustrate not only the necessity of fostering unity within Bengali Hindu society but also the potential for such solidarity to thrive in both rural and urban settings. He aimed to cultivate an atmosphere of mutual understanding, bridging the gap between the ultra-orthodox and those adhering to more moderate orthodox practices.

Throughout *Kalikata Kamalalay*, while he acknowledges the economic and professional distinctions that have emerged among urban Bengali Hindus, Bhabanicaran emphasizes the intrinsic similarities that unite them. He highlights the shared patterns of daily life, deeply rooted in traditional Hindu practices, and illustrates how the various socio-economic classes within the community are interwoven. These classes, despite their differences, come together during communal social functions organized by their respective faction leaders, showcasing a collective spirit that transcends their divisions. By seizing upon the device of a dialogue, Bhabanicaran displayed subtlety, for it permitted him to attach the

unorthodox, whilst at the same time maintaining a central position, orthodox yet enlightened. S.K. De speaks of Bhabanicaran keeping in this work 'a fairly open and balanced mind' (De 1962: 561).

In the narrative of *Kalikata Kamalalay*, two distinct voices emerge: one representing the conservative perspectives of the provincial Hindu, and the other embodying the more cosmopolitan outlook of the urban Calcutta resident. As the urban Hindu engages with the conservative allegations, they do so with a sense of empathy, recognizing the underlying concerns of the provincial viewpoint. This connection allows Bhabanicaran to artfully convey that, despite superficial differences, there exists no fundamental discord between the traditional beliefs held by rural Hindus and the more adaptable, modern ideologies championed by their urban counterparts.

Through this delicate reconciliation, albeit somewhat fragile, Bhabanicaran articulates a nuanced understanding of Bengali society, identifying two prominent schools of thought: the orthodox and the radical reformers. He skilfully acknowledges that the divergent emphases within the orthodox tradition can be comprehensively explained. This strategic positioning enables Bhabanicaran to express his opposition to the radical teachings, which notably include those of the influential reformer Rammohan Ray. By navigating these complexities, Bhabanicaran carves out a space for dialogue between contrasting beliefs, highlighting the richness of thought within Bengali Hinduism (The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy 1906: 471-4).

During this stage of the debate, the provincial brought up the contentious issue of language. He contended that urban Hindus had drifted away from traditional Hindu ceremonies and practices, suggesting that they had abandoned the study of both Sanskrit and Bengali. In response, the urban Hindu vehemently refuted these claims, highlighting what he believed were misconceptions rooted in ignorance. He passionately asserted that Bengali literature was indeed being actively studied in Calcutta, with a significant number of Bengali books being purchased and read. Furthermore, he emphasized that the Sanskrit language was held in high regard, just as it always had been, reflecting its enduring significance within the culture.

The next point to be considered by the disputants was the economic situation in Calcutta. Bhabanicaran divided the Bengali Hindu society of Calcutta into two broad economic sections, namely the leisured class (*asadharan bhagyaban lok*) and the working class (*bisayj bhadralok*). The people who lived off inherited fortunes belonged to the first category. They led an indolent life.

> "They usually stayed at home to perform necessary religious rites before having lunch and take a siesta in the afternoon. Waking 4 or 6 p.m., some of them look after business while listening to the readings of the Puran".[3]

[3] Text: *Tahara pray apan alaye thakiya purbokta rityanusare*

Bhabanicaran's explanation of the origin of these people is simple. They had come into a fortune, the author observes, through the blessings of God (*bhagabaner kripate*) But he seems to know that their money had come either from the annual interest of their invested patrimony or from the revenue of their zamindari property.[4] The 'working class,' according to Bhabanicaran, was subdivided into three distinct sections, vis. Upper, middle, and lower class. They consisted nevertheless, to use his own expression, of people who were 'poor yet gentlemen' (*daridraathaca bhadralok*). People belonging to the upper section

> 'rise, in the morning, wash their faces, gossip with people of various denominations then go for a bath anointing their bodies with such oil as bring them comfort. Then they perform their daily prayers and other religious rites (*puja hom, dan, bali, baisva*). After lunch, they rest for a while and then getting dressed in excellent clothes they go to their places of work either in a palanquin or in a beautiful carriage. Their office hours, which are determined by themselves according to the nature of work, being over they come home, change, wash, touch the Ganges water to purify themselves, perform evening prayers, and have some refreshments after which they hold a session of gossip. These sessions are usually well-attended. Some of those present are there for a particular purpose; others are merely paying a social call. Sometimes the *Babu* himself goes out to visit someone etc.'

The only difference between these people and those of the leisured classes seems to be that these did a little work. People belonging to the middle section of the working class 'do almost the same except for the fact that they spend and gossip less, and work harder.'[5] Many people in the lower section also follow the same way of life, except that they spend and eat much less and work much harder, for each day they have a long way to walk. Every

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Sandhyabandanadipurbak madhyahna Kale bhojan kariya pray anekei nidra yan cari ba chay danda bela satve apan bisay dristi Karen kehaba puranadi sraban kariya thaken. (Bandyopadhyay 1936:10).

[4] In other words, they belonged to the landed aristocracy which emerged in Bengal consequent upon the introduction of the Permanent Settlement in 1793 by Lord Cornwallis. Bengali traders, who had already earned big fortunes by trading with the East India Company, turned their attention to zamindari interests with a view to acquiring aristocratic status. It is interesting to note that almost all the rich native families of Calcutta, Rammohan Ray and Dvarakanath Thakur not excepted, finally abandoned trade and bought zamindaries. Though their financial interests lay in the villages, these rich zamindars however, had their permanent place of residence in Calcutta. It is probably about them that Hamilton wrote in 1828 that some of the native traders have made or inherited large fortunes and the public apartments of a few are furnished after the European fashions, with elegant chandeliers, pier glasses coaches, chests of drawers, writing desks, and two or three hundred chairs. (See, Hamilton 1828: 324).

[5] Text: *Tahadiger pray ai riti kabal dau baithaki ataper alpata ar parisramer bahulya*. *Kalikata kamalalay*, (Bandyopadhyay 1936: 9).

evening, they are obliged to report to their master, the deoyan, and flatter him if they wish to keep body and soul together.

Thus, the provincial divided contemporary Bengali Hindu society into two sections, conservative and reformist, but he regarded the Calcutta Bengalis as belonging to the latter. The urban did not accept the provincial's allegation and argued that the orthodox section of Calcutta society to which he regarded himself as belonging performed its religious duties (*karma-kanda*) with due propriety. He stated that the charges made by the provincial were warranted in the case of the radical section of Calcutta society. And he agreed that the manners of these people were not 'the manners of a gentleman.'[6]

By the year 1823, Calcutta had emerged as a thriving metropolis, bustling with a diverse and substantial population. This vibrant city became a focal point where Europeans and local inhabitants engaged closely with one another, primarily through the bustling arenas of trade and commerce. Interactions between these two distinct cultures were not limited to commercial transactions; there was also a degree of social exchange that began to take shape.

During this transformative period, several significant institutions were established, such as the renowned Hindu College, the Calcutta School Book Society, and the Calcutta School Society. Each of these organizations represented a fusion of European and native perspectives, reflecting a growing understanding between the two communities. However, Bhabanicaran, a notable observer of this dynamic, voiced his concerns about the implications of these developments. He noted that a segment of the affluent Hindu population, alongside their children educated at the Hindu College, appeared to be veering towards a European lifestyle, influenced by the new values introduced through English education.[7]

Bhabanicaran's apprehension about the potential decline of Hinduism in Bengal is evident. He believed that the increasing Western influence could lead to a loss of traditional values. This anxiety is underscored by the intent behind the establishment of *Kalikata Kamalalay*, which aimed to showcase the time-honoured values of Hindu culture in their most esteemed form. At the same time, this initiative sought to critique the behaviours of the emerging generation, who were increasingly drawn to Western ideals and ways of life, raising concerns for the preservation of their cultural heritage (Bandyopadhyay 1936: 45-46).

It would be unfair to suggest that Bhabanicaran dismissed all changes brought about by English rule and education without consideration. The dialogues that follow reveal a

[6] Text: *Bhadraloker mata byabahar nahe*. (Bandyopadhyay 1936: 12).

[7] The effect of such intercourse was not always commendable. In 1828, Hamilton wrote that "whenever, in the behaviour of the natives, insolence, ill-nature, coarseness, brutality, drunkenness (qualities hostile to their national character) are observed, the change may be invariably traced to their intercourse with low Europeans" (Hamilton 1828: 324).

fascinating exchange between the provincial and the urban dwellers regarding their use of language.

The provincial raised a pointed critique, claiming that city-dwellers lacked the ability to read and write in Bengali. He observed, "They often blend in foreign words when they speak Bengali. Words like *kam* (a little), *kabul* (agreement), and *kambes* (more or less) pepper their speech. Clearly, they haven't studied Sanskrit or engaged with the pundits, or they wouldn't use such terms".

In response, the urban countered with confidence, stating, "Many children from distinguished families first learn the refined, Sanskritized form of Bengali and then take on English and Persian, as both are valuable for earning a living. Acquiring such knowledge is essential and supported by the Sastras. After all, how can we govern our country without understanding the language of those who rule over us? There's no harm in this!"

The urban dweller deftly addressed the criticism of their mixed language by posing an intriguing question to the provincial: "What do you suggest we do about words that lack a Bengali translation or have no equivalent in Sanskrit or related languages?" He further elaborated, saying, "Using a mixed language can actually be quite practical. While it may not be appropriate in prayers or religious ceremonies, in everyday conversations or during official duties, it really poses no issue. In fact, speaking only in a pure, Sanskritized Bengali might make communication difficult for many."

To bolster his point, the urban man provided an extensive list of Persian-Arabic and English loanwords that had no direct synonyms in Bengali or Sanskrit. Here are just a few he mentioned:

> '*nansut* (non suit), *saman* (summon), *kamanla* (common 1aw), *kompani* (company), *kort* (court) *tacment* (attachment), *dabal* (double), *dikri* (decree), *dismis* (dismiss), *diu* (due) *primiyam* (premium), *sarip* (sheriff), *kalektar* (collector), *kaptan* (captain), *jaj* (judge), *sapina* (subpoena), *oyarin* (warrant), *ejent* (agent), *trejari* (treasury), *bil* (bill), *sarjan* (surgeon), *diskaunt* (discount) etc (Bandyopadhyay 1936: 24).

This exchange reveals the complexities of language as a bridge and barrier, highlighting how different perspectives on education and communication shape social interactions.

The debate surrounding the evolution of the Bengali language is particularly captivating as it highlights the emerging conflict between Sanskritized Bengali and a more diverse variant that embraced Perso-Arabic and English loanwords (Mannan 1966: 196). Within this discourse, ultra-conservative Hindu figures vehemently opposed the integration of words not originating from Sanskrit, perceiving their inclusion as an affront to the sanctity of Hinduism. This tension marked the early stages of a movement aimed at the establishment of *sadhu bhasa*, or purified Bengali. This initiative sought to eliminate foreign influences by systematically replacing borrowed terms with words derived from Sanskrit, thereby fostering a linguistic identity that aligned closely with traditional Hindu values (Yates 1847: 121).

The debate surrounding the ownership and readership of Bengali literature unfolded dramatically, with urban critics questioning the validity of a popular assertion. They argued that it was predominantly the residents of Calcutta who actively sought out Bengali books published by local printing presses. Even more striking was the realization that more than two decades after the establishment of Bengal's first printing press, individuals in various other regions of India remained blissfully unaware of what a printing press even entailed. This disparity highlighted the crucial role played by urban patrons in ensuring the survival and flourishing of these presses. The definition of 'misconduct' was rigidly set, encompassing any actions that deviated from orthodox Hindu practices. Once ousted, the individual would find themselves utterly isolated, as even the closest friends and family would shun them, fearing repercussions for any association. The social ramifications were dire; being cut off from even a simple drop of water or a visit could lead to complete ostracism. Thus, the fear of expulsion loomed large, ensuring that members adhered to the dictates of their factions. As a result, individuals conformed to social expectations, eating and behaving in ways deemed acceptable, all to uphold the sanctity of their faith.[8]

From this contention, one can discern a complex socio-cultural landscape within the Calcutta Bengali community. While a segment of the population appeared to shy away from Bengali literary works, there existed an alternative faction, perhaps the more traditionalists, who ardently supported and cherished these texts. Interestingly, there were also wealthy individuals among them who, despite their prosperity, remained illiterate and held a deep disdain for all forms of literature, not limiting their disregard to Bengali works alone. This juxtaposition of attitudes towards reading and literature paints a vivid picture of the diverse perspectives that shaped the literary scene in Bengal during this period.

In the intricate tapestry of Calcutta society, a distinct feature emerges: the existence of numerous opposing factions among the orthodox Hindus. Individuals were compelled to align themselves with a specific group, as their identities were closely tied to these factions. This division, while seemingly paradoxical, played a crucial role in maintaining social stability and order within the urban landscape.

During the early years of the 19th century, these factions focused their energies primarily on social and religious matters, steering clear of political issues. Each group was anchored by a leader, whose authoritative perspectives wielded substantial influence over the faction's members. The members adhered to the leader's viewpoints, which became the cornerstone of their collective identity. Within this environment, the practice of Karma-Kanda dominated the lives of orthodox Hindus, constraining individual freedom to a significant extent. Personal autonomy was nearly non-existent; invitations were not extended nor accepted based on personal preference. Instead, the direction of one's social interactions was dictated by the faction leader. The consequences of straying from the

[8] Text: *Ihate sankanvita haiya lok ahar byabahar Karen tahate dharma raksa pay*. (Bandyopadhyay 1936: 31).

prescribed norms were severe: anyone perceived to engage in 'misconduct' faced the risk of expulsion from their faction.

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