

Jatiyo Itihaas vis-à-vis Manab Itihaas: Tagore the Historiographer

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Abstract

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay wrote *Krishnacaritra* (1858) with an aim to counter the bias of the western scholars in the history of India recorded by them. But Rabindranath Tagore's review article of *Krishnacaritra* is even more interesting, for it provides us with fascinating insights into Tagore's views on history and historiography. These views are not only more modern and rational than those of Bankim, but they also appear to anticipate the takes of many sociologists, historians and novelists of today. This article attempts to analyse some of Tagore's review articles as well as some of his essays to examine this alternative method of historiography proposed by him.

[**Keywords:** history, historiography, humanity]

I

When Hegel unambiguously declares in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1975) that the world, much like the sun, 'travels from east to west: for Europe is the absolute end of history, just as Asia is the beginning' (Hegel 197), he tries to capture the entire history of the world in the relationship of master and slave. Closely related to this is Ranajit Guha's apposite remark regarding the effect of knowledge produced by History. Education in History, Guha remarks, is actually 'a servant's education—an education to conform undeviatingly to the master's gaze in regarding the past.' (Guha 21) It is an established fact that the coloniser's early attempt to historicise the Indian past was no more than a strategy, a powerful tool in the hand of the British colonizer (the master) to confirm the civilisational supremacy of Europe over the native *Kaala aadmi* (the slave). The curriculum of the first colonial schools, for example, invited (or lured) the young Babu aspirants to interpret the event of subjugation under the British rule as a virtue – as a 'privilege' which gave them the much needed exposure to the European Enlightenment. It is hardly surprising then, that one of the nationalist agendas taking shape in the second half of the nineteenth century was the demand for an 'Indian historiography of India'. The basic aim and agenda of this historiography, as Partha Chatterjee observes, was "self-representation, for setting out to claim for the nation a past *that was not distorted by foreign interpreters.*" (NF 16, emphasis added). This demand which found a voice in Bankim Chattopadhyay's famous call to the nation – "We have no history, we must have a history" (Chattopadhyay 558)—gained gradual momentum with the nationalists preparing to launch their struggle for power against the country's colonial usurper. They realized that undistorted knowledge

about one's past is one of the most necessary preconditions of one's struggle for power.

On this assumption of the inseparable complicity between knowledge and power, Bankimchandra aimed to document the history of India¹ in a history written by 'ourselves'. Not that there was absolutely no history written about Bengal as Bankim claims in exasperation, but his basic allegation against all this history was that these books (mostly English) do not give us the true history of Bengal and anyone 'who uncritically accepts as history the testimony of these lying, Hindu-hating Musalman Zealots is not a Bengali' (Chattopadhyay 558). Hence his repeated exhortation to the people of India for urgent efforts to 'discover' their true history. With an aim to correct this terrible wrong, Bankim set himself to the task of writing his essays on the history of Bengal in 1880.² Consequently, in *Krishnacaritra* (1856) which Bankim wrote out of a moral compulsion to install an historical ideal in front of the hapless, frustrated *Bangalee jati* and link it to a rich heritage of the past, his foremost aim was to establish the historicity of the Puranic character, Srikrishna. With this aim he engaged himself in the task of recovering the historic Krishna from the cogmire of innumerable additions and abridgements, and to deliver the historical truth from the throes of legends, fables and imaginations.

Yet, it is not Bankim's *Krishnacaritra*, but Tagore's review article (published in *Bangadarshana*, March 1895) written in its response that I would like to focus on in this article, for this article gives us fascinating insights into Tagore's views on historiography, which are arguably more modern and rational than those of Bankimchandra. Mainly in this essay and another one where he reviews Bankim's historical novel *Rajsingha* (1882), Tagore gives us his definitive views on history and historiography as a whole. These were not his stray thoughts. Tagore had all along been a keen observer and analyst of the Indian nation and its human life and history. Over the years, he had assembled his analytical observations in various essays like *Bharatbarsher Itihaas* (1904), *Bharatbarshey Itihaaser Dhara* (1913) and *Bharat Itihaas Carca* (1920) – all of which were published in *Bangadarshana*, noted literary journal of his times. I propose to begin with the review article on *Krishnacaritra* because in it, we find Tagore applying his views in reading a significant attempt by his senior contemporary at writing Indian history and thus the article helps us to see how Tagore's take on these issues mark a great advancement in the allied fields of history and historiography.

II

Tagore starts the review on an appreciative note, lauding Bankim's logical bent of mind with which he has engaged himself in the task of restoring the 'great history of India' by focusing on the character of SriKrishna. He appreciates Bankim's aim. He also appreciates Bankim's object of putting the *shastra* under the scanner of rationality to find elements of historical truth in the otherwise

mythified life of Srikrishna. But at the same moment, Tagore realizes the faults in Bankim's method of historiography. Notably, in *Krishnacaritra*, Bankim's mode of reasoning is an attempt to 'objectify': the project is to achieve positive knowledge. To this end, he was following the path shown by Auguste Comte, John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer, and this was surely a Post-Enlightenment phenomenon that influenced not only Bankim but many of his contemporary colleagues who took it as a matter of great pride to bask in the glory of the European Enlightenment. Perhaps the most important characteristic of this influence on the contemporary intelligentsia was to celebrate the principle of historicity as the essential procedure for acquiring this objective knowledge. Bankim's sincere and urgent effort to 'discover' the 'true history' through a 'scientific method,' was an outcome of this influence. Bankim's scientific method consists, therefore, as he himself declares at the beginning of the essay, in reviewing the *Shashtra* 'rationally', to segregate 'historical truth' from the otherwise mythified life of Krishna.

Tagore's modern views on historiography come very clear to us in this context. In the first place, Tagore refuses to agree with Bankim that history is the source of infallible, absolute, objective knowledge, for he finds huge gaps within the sources of this much highlighted knowledge. Documented history constantly bothered him with the question whose history was being documented, after all. Secondly, Tagore finds lapses in Bankim's methods of historical research as well:

To distinguish historical elements from unhistorical is often a painstaking job involving much patience and prudence. In my consideration, Bankim has almost completed the task of segregating the unhistorical elements but has hardly found time in collating the real historical elements (Rev. KC 247). [*This and all other extracts quoted from Rabindranath have been translated by me.*]

So Tagore proposes an alternative method of historiography. Objecting to Bankim's method of determining authentic history by using the yardstick of language used (Bankim summarily rejects the portions written in relatively prosaic language as interpolations), Tagore has warned us against any such fallacious generalisation. Tagore opines:

History does not depend on poetic craftsmanship. There had been different oral versions of the description of the war between the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas* in ancient India...To this might have been woven a number of some other versions by lesser poets over the years. In that case, it is possible that these interpolations may provide us with more dependable historical materials (Rev. KC 248).

Tagore has categorically stated that it is rather foolish to try to find history without taking into serious account the apparently unimportant oral narratives, superstitions or myths which are often dismissed by the historians as unauthentic. Tagore discusses at length the common erroneous attempts at defining authenticity in history in his essay *Oitihāsik Yatkinchit*.

It is quite difficult to be sure of authenticity in history. Words (stories) are like living things – they change with the age. Man has often shaped it subjectively, which accounts for its different versions. So even by comparing these different versions, or by judging the varied reflections of these stories on it, one may get clues of the evolving human nature by judging the varied reflections of these stories on it. (OY 121)

In his article on *Krishnacaritra*, he continues in the same vein:

There are always innumerable stories about every great figure or event, innumerable hearsays gain currency in different ways with Time. Individual poets work on these hearsays in different ways to pick and choose materials for their literary works. Some construct Srikrishna as a godman. Some others foreground the shrewd literary figure in him. While neither of these pictures is complete in itself, they definitely complement each other as elements of Truth. It is therefore wrong to mark one as more historic than the other. (Rev. KC 249)

Tagore's take on historiography is further contained in his article "*Oitihāsik Citra*" published in the *Bharati* in 1900. Here too, as in "*Krishnacaritra*", Tagore appreciates all indigenous attempts to record India's history, and celebrates the freedom achieved thereby from the prison of history written by the colonizers. But at the same time, he has reminded the scholars engaged in this project of the importance of attaching equal value to even the most unimportant tidbits of available document:

(I hope) all stories, oral and written, petty and serious, real and fictions – would be recorded for even in all that is distorted and exaggerated, all that is only locally believed to be true, historical truth remains embedded. History is not merely the history of facts, history is equally that of human mind, human faith. (OC 148)

So, Tagore concludes—"...Historical Truth is nothing but an invariable result of the amalgamation of the real incident and its assimilated version in the contemporary human psyche" (OY 122). It is in relating this common man to history and emphasising on the importance of recording his version of history that Tagore finds his place among the most modern of the historiographers. This is where Bankim fails in *Krishnacaritra*. By drawing our attention to the possible alternative histories much before the postcolonial writers like Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh have done so, Tagore can rightly claim to be one of the founding fathers of the modern school of historiography that constantly alerts us to the presence of multiple voices in history. For example, when Amitav Ghosh, in his essay "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi" stresses the 'need to recognize the urgency of remembering the stories we have not written,' (Ghosh 62) or when Salman Rushdie, in his essay "Satyajit Ray" in *Imaginary Homelands*, puts Satyajit's attempt to record the 'intimate story' of ordinary men and women ahead of the epical grandnarratives of history, the echoes of Tagore can be unmistakably recognized.

In his next observation in his review of *Krishnacaritra*, Tagore strikes at the root of the complacency of the historian in having presented an infallible source of authentic historical knowledge. By citing examples of Macauley, Carlyle and La Martin, Bankim concludes that the *Mahabharata* is a poetic history, and hence, flawed. Tagore differs and proposes to describe it as a historical literature, and critically questions the traditional definition of history: “History can never claim to be the ultimate. Everybody knows that in a given site of incident, none can either assimilate or narrate the whole incident in its entirety.” (Rev. *KC* 251) Tagore has rather emphasized the importance of ‘construction’ of a holistic history from all the different available versions, and therefore, to him, even related folktales and age-old beliefs are potentially rich data to work on. And Tagore puts all his trust only on a poet in this work of research. Only a poet, he thinks, is adept at this task of assimilation of all available sources and can fill in the gaps with his poetic insights. So Tagore concludes: “A poet’s guess may aspire to reach truth more readily than conjectures of a historian.” (Rev. *KC* 251) Thus Tagore establishes the superiority of a poet over a historian. He cites the example of *Strafford* (1837), a drama written by Browning, which Tagore finds to be more authentic (and hence, nearer the Truth) than the factual biography of *Strafford* written by Foster. Tagore’s distinction between fact and Truth is worth considering in this context. According to him:

Truth is essentially far more extensive than facts. Truth can be discovered from heaps of facts through imagination as well as rationality. One may feel defeated by loads of facts in historical texts, but it needs a poet’s imagination to distill truth out of it (Rev. *KC* 252).³

So, for Tagore, it is ultimately the poet who is the greatest historian. One may be reminded of Amitav Ghosh’s similar remarks on the issue:

I think the difference between the history historians write and the history fiction writers write is that fiction writers write about the human history. It’s about finding the human predicament; it’s about finding what happens to individuals, characters. I mean that’s what fiction is ... exploring both dimensions, whereas history, the kind of history exploring causes, causality, is of no interest to me. (Ghosh 18)

Ghosh here is only reiterating what Tagore had said a century back.

In fact, the glaring mistake that Bankim commits in his *Krishnacaritra* is that, in his desperate bid to create a character sketch of the ideal SriKrishna that would inspire the crestfallen, frustrated Hindu *jati*, he ruthlessly eliminated everything in the character of SriKrishna that fell short of the expected ideals. This, Bankim forgot, might result into another distortion of history, not very different from those done by the European historians Bankim seeks to reject. Tagore warns the historians again and again of this possible error. He reminds them that an ideal historian’s ultimate aim should be to document human history and to that end, human follies and foibles are as important as human virtues – this would take us more readily to truth. That is why, Tagore finds Bankim

committing the same mistakes as his European counterparts who explored the historical archives to pick and choose materials subjectively and construct on their basis, a subjective version of history, which would satisfactorily illustrate an ideal these historians wanted to establish and propagate. In stead of letting history follow its own course, all these historians force history in the moulds they would like, rejecting every other thing that would not fit in this scheme. The inevitable result is a deep chasm in the discourse, turning it merely to a 'his story' and leaving out the immensely rich 'their stories'. Tagore, the humanist, has repeatedly sensitised us about the necessity of bringing up their story, a task which he thinks, can successfully completed only by a poet.

Closely related to this are observations that Tagore makes in his review article (1894) on Bankim's *Rajsingha*. Tagore enjoys reading *Rajsingha* and for that matter, all historical novels, only because he discerns here, to his utter satisfaction, the successful discharge of the poet of the duty of a historian. The hitherto missing 'their stories' that supplement in this novel the official, recorded history, gives him considerable satisfaction, because he notes that here, at least, history has not hegemonised the common man and attempted to silence its polyphonic voice. Tagore who has always followed keenly the struggle between the 'grand national history' (*brihat jatiyo itihaas*) and the 'intense human history' (*tibro manab itihaas*) gives full marks to *Rajsingha*, only because, in this novel, this flow of human history has all along been kept vibrantly alive and protected from the hegemonic tendency of the official history of the nation. The character sketch of Jebunnisa is the example that strikes him. Tagore feels he cannot praise Bankim enough for he has been able to save Jebunnisa from being lost in the maze of 'important' historical events. Rather, Bankim has always been meticulously careful to record this ordinary, helpless woman's pain and tears in conjunction with his narration of the great events of the Mughal history. Tagore locates the success of a poet precisely here – in his ability to see beyond an ordinary historian, and incorporate what the historian fails to do. So, it is Bankim, the novelist (who successfully records the rich *manab itihaas*), and not Bankim, the historian (who aspires to record the *jatiyo itihaas*), to whom Tagore likes to go back again and again.

The basic aim with which a group of historians engaged itself in the Nineteen Eighties (Ranjit Guha *et al*) in the task of writing the hitherto neglected subaltern history has not been different, then, from what Tagore had stressed much earlier. The essence of Tagore's humanism lies in its empathetic bond with the commonest of the commoners. In the present times, when we are repeatedly emphasizing on the importance of salvaging the unrecorded history of the marginalized others of our nation, we are, in a sense, actually following up Tagore's ideas.

This treatise may remain awfully incomplete if we do not take a quick look at how Tagore the historiographer, himself looks at the history of India, for Tagore's analysis of Indian history has been a sure illustration of his life-long interest in this *manab itihaas*. This prompts him to interpret the history of India as a social history, and not a political one. Again, this is where, Tagore thinks, that the group of European historians has gone wrong in their interpretation of the Indian history. When they (and many of their Indian counterparts, including Bankim!) complain of the absence of any organized history of India, they seem to make an issue only of India's poorly documented political history. By pointing to the erroneous basic premise of their research, Tagore rescued India, as it were, from its 'historylessness'. He points out:

One must immediately do away with the superstition that all nations will have similar history. Many feel hopeless about the history of India only because the national archives fail to supply them with official papers on the genealogy and exploits of the dynasties that ruled the nation. Dearth of political history leads them to promptly conclude that Indian history is almost non-existent. One can only pity these people like those keen on reaping a rich harvest of eggplants in a paddy field. (*BI* 8)

For Tagore, Indian history is essentially a social history, and hence an unending history of the multitude. And this history has remained uninterrupted by innumerable incidents of political turmoil that have rocked the country time and again, or the innumerable divides that have been drawn to separate the rich and the poor, the Brahmin and the Dalit, the privileged and the underprivileged. Rather, on the social level, there has always been a positive attempt at the social level, to unite all the disparate elements that constituted the rich fabric of the Indian society:

I find that India has all along, tried to achieve unity in diversity, mould all the diverse paths to this one goal, India has always tried to consolidate within the unity among all the disparate elements, even while leaving the external diversity undisturbed (*BI* 10).

This untiring attempt to achieve unity has been continuing even from the age of Puranas. Analysing the history of the interface between the Aryans and the non-Aryans, Tagore finds that the history is not of coercion but of union. He finds these interfaces as missions to achieve unity, where great figures like Janaka, Viswamitra and Ramchandra—all took part. In *Bharatbarser Itihaaser Dhara*, Tagore interprets the narrative of Ramchandra's expeditions in the *Dandakaaranya* and his marriage with Sita as illustrations of this union forged between the Kshatriya and the Brahmana, theoretical knowledge of the academics and the applied knowledge of the farmers. In all cases, the union has been between the centre and the margin, between the powerful and the powerless. That is why, Tagore foregrounds Rama not as a successful warrior, but an emissary of unity, who could engage himself in meaningful bonds with members of even the marginalised sections of the society—Chandaal, Bibhishana

and Sugriba, all being examples of marginalized 'others'—and turn the society to a healthy platform of union. This interpretation of Tagore is an inseparable part of Tagore's looking back at History from an anthropologist's point of view.

Finally, taking a cue from the history of India, Tagore puts his faith in this spirit to unite and assimilate as the hope of India's future. Tagore traces the reason behind the successful advancement of India's history in its constant, meaningful interaction between the local and the global to achieve a transnational unity. He unambiguously states –

Human life in India has constantly been pulled between its indigenous characteristics and its aspiration to be a part of the universal. Unless we feel and analyse this pull as the basic constituent force behind Indian history, we will not be able to recognize the true India (*BID* 35).

Tagore finds this pull enacted by the Brahmins on the one hand and the Kshatriyas on the other. He sees these two prominent castes, as the main carriers of these two forces – the Brahmins assiduously upholding the tradition while the Kshatriyas opening up to assimilate the new and the diverse elements. Instead of seeing them as counter forces vying with each other for supremacy, Tagore finds them complimentary to each other and responsible for maintaining the balance that has kept the history of India alive and on-going – a balance achieved not through resistance and coercion, but through acceptance and assimilation. But then, how to document the actual records of this on-going history, which has assimilated all sorts of diverse elements? Tagore finds Vyasdeva the most eminent Indian historian suited to this task. Vyasdeva started collecting painstakingly all the historical elements contained in the oral narratives, beliefs and fables and collate them in the *Mahabharata*, turning it not a gigantic history of a royal family, but an extensive, intense history of a race over the centuries. And ultimately, Tagore finds this intense human history of India uniting with the whole world, through meaningful bonds established between the local and the global, and incorporating all the rich elements lying outside it, instead of resisting them. Tagore has always insisted on the necessity of this positive communication between the global and the local. When sociologists today emphasise on the necessity of establishing a meaningful bond between the global and the local⁴, they are only following Tagore, who decades back, foretold this as the only future of India's success:

Surely, Truth will ultimately evolve from the juxtaposition of these two forces and we will realize that Indianness can be realized through internationalism and the vice-versa. We will then understand that to reject one's own identity to hanker after some other's, is a futile job of a beggar, but to cocoon oneself within one's limited identity by rejecting everything foreign is indicative of even worse state of poverty (*BID* 59).

Herein lies Tagore's contemporaneity as a historiographer. Like in many other fields, here too, Tagore stands out as a pathfinder.

Notes

1. In his celebrated book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A derivative Discourse?* Partha Chatterjee summarises four points that comprise Bankim's line of reasoning and define his theoretical position – i) force or power is the basis of the state; ii) the liberty or subjection of a nation is ultimately a question of force or power; iii) but power is not something that is determined by material (environmental or technological) conditions; iv) power can be acquired by the cultivation of appropriate national cultural values. (NT 57-58) While he laments that Hindoos are effeminate, Bankim falls back on the spiritual (as opposed to material) source of power to reinstate the Hindoos in the glory of power. His attempt at historiography is part of this quest.
2. It would be wrong to assume, though, that Bankim was the first historiographer of India, and equally erroneous to study his attempts in isolation. In fact, there have been innumerable attempts to record the history of India from the early years of the nineteenth century, under the aegis of Fort William College in Calcutta. But they were mainly written to cater to the needs of the Company Officials. *Rajabali* (1808) by Mrityunjoy Vidyalankar is the first such attempt that has come down to us in Bengali. In this book and many others that followed till the sixties, the loyalty of the 'enlightened' Indian scholars towards their European colonial masters remained unquestioned. The focus changed only in the late 1850s with scholars like Krishnachandra Roy (*Bharatbarser Itihaas, Imrejdiger Adhikarkaal*, 1859) and Kshirodchandra Roychoudhuri (*Samagra Bharater Samksipta Itihaas*, 1876) who took up the responsibility of repairing the raptures left in the early histories.

Though Bankim made little attempt to write the 'history' of India as such, his essays on historiography are commonly regarded as a growth of modern historical research and writing in Bengal. A. R. Mallick in "Modern Historical Writing in Bengal," for example, describes these essays as the great force that transformed history writing in Bengal.

3. Tagore has distinguished Truth from fact in detail in his essay "*Tathya O Satya*". Here, he describes fact as fragmented and hence, incomplete. Only when enriched with imagination, it can aspire to become Truth.
4. Bill Ashcroft, for example in his essay "Postcolonial Transformation and Global Culture" stresses the contemporary necessity of horizontality as a precondition of the trans-border and transcultural interaction. Horizontality, according to Ashcroft, is a strategy that assumes profound importance in today's postcolonial studies, because it is a strategy to heal the pain of all disruption, dislocation and displacement, by achieving a unity among the disparate elements of the world. According to Ashcroft, "...it is in horizontality that the true force of transformation becomes realized, for whereas the boundary is about constriction, history, the regulation of imperial space, the horizon is about extension, possibility, fulfillment, the imagining of post-colonial place." Importantly, according to Ashcroft, "Horizontality is not the abandonment of the local, of the cultural, but its reconception, its reinscription. Place, like subjectivity, is not subsumed, but located more clearly in the horizon. In that horizon every subject is luminal, every subject is global" (Ashcroft 13).

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