Cutlets or Fish Curry? : Debating Indian Authenticity in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

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Panel 39

Current discussions on the development of modern literary genres and aesthetic conventions in nineteenth-century colonial Bengal have tended, perhaps because of its relative neglect in the modern day, to ignore the seminal role of poetry in formulating the nationalist imagination. In academic discourse, the coming together of the birth of the novel, the concept of history and the idea of the nation-state under the sign of the modern has led to a collective blindness toward the forceful intervention of poetry and song in imagining the nation. Thus Partha Chatterjee discusses, in the introduction to *The Nation and Its Fragments*, the shaping of critical discourse in colonial Bengal in relation to drama, the novel, and even art, but ignores completely the fiercely contested and controversial processes by which modern Bengali poetry and literary criticism were formulated. 'The desire to construct an aesthetic form that was modern and national', to use his words, 'was shown in its most exaggerated shape' not, it is my contention, in the Bengal school of art in the 1920s as he says, but long before that in the poetry of Rangalal Banerjee, Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, Madhusudan Dutt, and Nabinchandra Sen, and in the literary criticism and controversy surrounding their work.

In a slight book on the Bengali poet Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay in 1911 titled '*Kabi Hemchandra*' [*The Poet Hemchandra*], Akshaychandra Sarkar, an eminent contemporary critic, editor and writer, addressed the troubled issue of the authenticity of Hemchandra's corpus, which he treated in relation to the work of a predecessor, the earlier poet Iswar Gupta.[1] Using Akshaychandra's critique as a gateway to the world of nineteenth-century disagreement and debate on the topic (the book itself generated passionate indignation and controversy)[2], I shall try to indicate, through a detailed discussion of Akshaychandra's objections and pre-dispositions in relation to Hemchandra's work, the ideological predilections and nationalist tropes that were

[1] Akshaychandra Sarkar, *Kabi Hemchandra*,*

[2] Sarkar's book had been commissioned by a society for the preservation of Hemchandra's memory; however, its adverse characterisation of Hemchandra's ethos was violently objected to by many readers, resulting in another biography by Manmatha Ghosh in 1919, whose intention was to set the record straight.*

deployed in literary discourse in an attempt to self-consciously fashion a modern Indian national identity. Tied to this articulation of a modern Indian identity for a newly imagined nation were questions of authenticity. Repeatedly, the question was asked: was Hemchandra's poetry authentic? How did it compare with what was claimed as the more authentic verse of preceding poets like Bharatchandra and especially, Iswar Gupta? Could a poet so deeply immersed in Western literary convention produce authentic Indian poetry?

The essay on Hemchandra's poetic authenticity, '*Hemchandra O Iswar Gupta*', is central to Akshaychandra Sarkar's book, both literally, located as it is in the middle pages, after the biographical details and at the start of the literary discussion, and figuratively, as it articulates an important newly evolving awareness of the constituents of one's own Indianness and a definition of that which is foreign or alien to it. Written originally as an essay for the periodical *Nabajiban* in 1893, which he edited from 1884 to 1889 after the demise of his previous journal, the *Sadharani*, eighteen years before the publication of *Kabi Hemchandra* in 1911, Akshaychandra reprinted the essay in that book with some additions, as he felt that the topic was still relevant: 'The country is filled with hypocrisy; to tell the truth is a great responsibility ['*Bhondami te desh bhoriya uthilo; satya katha bala bisham dae*']. He begins with an unequivocal assertion, that

> … although he is saddened to say it, and hesitant too, yet it is still true that Iswarchandra Gupta was Bengal's last poet. Madhusudan is Bengal's Milton, Hemchandra Pindar, Nabinchandra Byron, and Rabindranath Shelley: well and good, but what then is Iswarchandra Gupta of Bengal? Iswar Gupta – is Bengal's Iswar Gupta. To this fact can be traced criticism of Iswar Gupta, and praise for him to the same fact. His poetic quality is the Bengali's own. Even if that might resemble the poor man's small change, still, it is his own. And because it is his own, it is very dear.
> Is Hemchandra's poetry then not our own, and is it not dear to us?

Akshaychandra answers by admitting that yes, indeed, Hemchandra too is our own, and especially dear to us, but there is something that needs to be said:

> Your better half sits by herself and intently embroiders flowers upon some velvet, and so makes a beautiful cap for you. She presents this to you; you smilingly wear it, and, still smiling, show it to ten of your friends outside. That cap is part of your beloved, and part of your self: how dear it is to you! But the wool is all of it English wool; the flowers are English flowers; the English creeper twists around in an English scheme in the design. From within that which is one's own (*nijaswa*), a sort of otherness (*paraswa*) peeps out in every layer.

This is the first among a number of startling and innovative images used repeatedly by Akshaychandra to reinforce his thoughts in this essay. It is immediately followed by a continuation of the imaginary scene he had started with: 'And then you take those ten friends of yours and sit down to a meal.' An elaborate description follows of a domestic setting, where the wife serves the food she has cooked personally to their guests. The smell of the cooking fills the room with its fragrance; the pilau contains both almonds and raisins and other foreign commodities, but that is no more than the '*masala*' necessary for its preparation. It has all been mixed together in a sublime mixture, and the wife, as she sits with her head half-covered with her sari and her gold bangles clinking on her arm, is also part of the whole picture - which includes (and here he makes a list) the commodities, the method by which the food has been prepared, as well as the manner in which it is served – which in its entirety is entirely our 'own' (*nijaswa*). He concludes, therefore, that 'even if there is anything foreign (*paraswa*) about it, that element has sunk without a trace, it has been absorbed in the immensity of that which is *nijaswa*, our own. Iswar Gupta's poetry may not be that fragrant pilau, but it is certainly liquid fish curry. His poetry is our own, it is of our self, it is dear to us, and we love it greatly.'

This stream of associated imagery is brought to a culmination by a last thrust, and Akshaychandra finishes his diatribe in a reasonable tone:

> I do not ask you to throw away the embroidered cap and pilau made by your wife and spend your days having fish *soup*. But when I see cutlets being appreciated more than fish curry, I am truly unhappy. And yet as the days go by, that is exactly what has been happening. The Bengali's authentic Bengali poetry has taken shelter in the margins. English fragrance, English rhythm, its wool is English, its flowers are English, a sort of foreign (*paraswa*) poetry has occupied centre-stage and does business. Do you not feel sad? Maybe you do not. But we do.

In this debate over the authenticity of Hemchandra's poetry, Akshaychandra Sarkar ends his discussion with an additional section written expressly for his book *Kabi Hemchandra*. Here he admits, with a great deal of honesty, that although he had not thought anything of it at the time of writing, ever since Hemchandra's death, he had been struck by moments of remorse (*Hemchandrer mrityur por amader mone kintu kemon ekta khap khapani haitechhe*). What he had said about Iswar Gupta was a hundred percent true, but what he had said of Hemchandra was merely a sort of preface or prologue to the matter, and he needs now to put the record straight:

> Certainly there is an otherness (*paraswa*) about Hemchandra. That is only natural. There are many Persian manners in Bharatchandra, but who tries to catch

> those? And who is disturbed by it? …. In the same way, Hemchandra is, in this matter, even more successful than Bharatchandra…. Hemchandra is truly the goddess Saraswati's godson. With her blessings he has been able to turn what is foreign into what is Hem. And that Hem-ness he had handed down to us. As possessors of it, we think of his gift as our own and are grateful, and we thank him for it.

Colin Graham, in an essay on 'Ireland and the Trope of Authenticity', comments: 'Authenticity may resist definition, but its materiality in textuality is undeniable. In this it shares with imaginings of nationalism an important reliance on its various media: what Benedict Anderson calls 'the technical means for "re-presenting" the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation.'[3] Like nationalism, authenticity also has an ambiguous relationship with 'origins'; it is 'the "genuineness" of "genuine origins" that authenticity highlights rather than the materiality of origins; and "genuineness", in a perfectly circular resistance to theory, is known by its authenticity.' Concluding his discussion of the analogy between nationalism and authenticity, Graham says:

> As with the nation in Benedict Anderson's famous formulation, authenticity wishes to be conceived of as 'moving steadily up (or down) history', and as with the nation, authenticity 'proves' itself through its simultaneous and contradictory textual existence and refusal to be defined.[4]

Graham also invokes Jacob Golomb's *In Search of Authenticity* (1995) as a text that constitutes a major attempt to read authenticity as an integral part of Western philosophical, humanistic traditions. Authenticity, Golomb noted, is bound to notions of authority: 'One is historically authentic when one creates one's own history by utilizing and recreating one's past and the past of one's people, projecting them with anticipatory resoluteness towards one's future…. [Authenticity] is the loyalty of one's own self to its own past, heritage and ethos.'[5] This project of creating one's own history was indubitably one of the earliest preoccupations of the colonized in British India: not only in historiographical, but also in literary and cultural terms and contexts.

The juxtaposition, in the essay entitled '*Hemchandra O Iswar Gupta*', of the figures of the poets Iswar Gupta and Hemchandra to highlight the contrast between the two implies a continuum, as if the one immediately precedes or follows the other. There is however, a critical gap in the picture, for in between these two major Bengali poets of the nineteenth century comes the formative figure of Rangalal Banerjee, who, if one

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[3] Colin Graham, 'Blame It On Maureen O'Hara: Ireland and the Trope of Authenticity,' *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 15: 1 (Jan 2001), 60-61.
[4] Ibid., 63
[5] Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity* (London: Routledge, 1995)117.

discounts Iswar Gupta as a poet essentially of the old school, was arguably the first modern Bengali poet. Rangalal is crucial because he was instrumental in ushering in, quite self-consciously, a new sort of poetry to Bengal, a poetry born of the colonial encounter, and composed to conform to what Rangalal considered the purer and loftier standards of taste contained in English poetic conventions. Akshaychandra's harking back to Iswar Gupta, then, is actually an act of reclamation and reconstruction. He composes his tirade against Hemchandra here almost as if he does not know of the existence of Rangalal; was this because Rangalal was senior to him, and in his deeply hierarchical and tradition-bound Hindu consciousness, this created some sort of irrational impediment in Akshaychandra against including Rangalal as a target for his invective? More relevantly, by eliding Rangalal from the scene so effectively, Akshaychandra achieves the impossible: he manages to establish the antecedents of modern Bengali verse in the traditional and what he perceives as the non-Western, and thereby tries to determine what future course it should take. That this struggle was entirely ineffective for the time being, encountering as it did, apart from Hemchandra, the combined efforts of Madhusudan, who admired Milton and Virgil and Kalidas, and Nabinchandra, whose *Palasir Yuddha* [*The Battle of Plassey*] (1875) was modelled on the historical scenes of Byron's *Childe Harold*, and even written in a metre new to Bengali poetry which was a variation on *Childe Harold*'s Spenserian stanza, is now history.

Certainly Akshaychandra would have been fully aware of the fact that Rangalal was guilty of preaching the very sins that he thinks mar Hemchandra's work, and Rangalal did so almost with a crusader's zeal. Rangalal's literary manifesto in the preface he wrote to *Padmini Upakhyan* in1858, almost the first literary manifesto in the history of Indian writing, is an invaluable record of the manner in which English influences are perceived to be transformative and regenerative for the educated Bengali middle classes by a member of that class. (I say almost because Kasiprasad Ghosh, writing a book of English verse in 1830, could be considered the very first poet to have declared his literary intentions when he had said, in the preface to *The Shair*, that he had written a section of his poems because he had realised 'the importance and utility of writing something by way of national poetry.')[6] The origins of the nationalist impulse that powered Rangalal's pioneering mission to reform Bengali poetry lie in an anecdote of a meeting of the Bethune Society in the summer of 1852, where some members had proceeded to

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[6] Kasiprasad Ghosh, *The Shair and Other Poems* (Calcutta, 1830), ii.

demonstrate the inferiority of Bengali poetry. A certain Bengali gentleman had also had the courage to say, reports Rangalal, that Bengalis were incapable of producing a genuine poet because they have been enslaved and a subject race for a long time. Since mental well-being is not to be found in societies that do not experience the pleasure of freedom, a true poet can never exist among the ranks of an oppressed and subject race. This incident, then, is the provocation behind Rangalal's endeavour in the composition of *Padmini Upakhyan*.[7]

The origins of authenticity as a cultural necessity may be seen thus indeed to lie in what David Lloyd sees as the labelling of colonized cultures as "inauthentic" by the colonizer. 'On the side of the colonizer, it is the inauthenticity of the colonized culture, its falling short of the concept of the human, that legitimates the colonial project.'[8] Here, in later nineteenth-century Calcutta, this perceived 'inauthenticity of the colonized culture' was packaged all-pervasively for the educated classes not only in the ascendance of what Robert Young calls 'racialism - that is, theories of race offered as a form of scientific knowledge about mankind', whose explicit theorisation began 'in the late eighteenth century, [and] were increasingly scientificized in the nineteenth (Young 1995: 91-92).' The idea of the superiority of the white race was also present in Western theories of the culture of science and the concept of history, both of which had to be acquired by Indians desirous of progress. Its effective internalisation gave rise to a vicious self-denigration among reactive cultural nationalists in the latter half of the century, as evidenced here in this belief, for instance, that being a subject race, Bengalis could not produce a genuine poet. There occurred simultaneously, as a corollary effect in response to this damaged self-esteem of the colonised, a concerted effort among prominent Bengalis to create, from among their own, categories of excellence conforming to Western standards and design, an enterprise envisaged as 'tools of survival under the colonial political economy' by Ashis Nandy, and as 'an indigenous nationalist project for counter-appropriation' by Ranajit Guha.[9] So, long before Bankimchandra issued his famous ultimatum that Hindus would remain a subject race so long as they did not write their own history, early Indian modernists like the Derozian Krishna Mohun Banerjea, once again invoking the foundational trope of authenticity, had felt that if Europe had transcended its past by

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[7] Rangalal Banerjee, *Padmini Upakhyan**
[8] David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1993).
[9] Nandy, 'World Historians and Their Critics,' *History and Theory* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University) Theme Issue 34, p.58; Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.3.

acquiring a historical consciousness, India, which showed a 'lamentable want of authentic records in … literature,' could do so too.[10]

Interestingly, it was prominent members of the landed moneyed classes who took the lead in matters relating to literature, commissioning professional middle-class writers to fashion a new drama and a new poetry for Bengal. Rangalal mentions his indebtedness to two powerful patrons: the zamindar of Kundi, Babu Kalichandra Raichaudhuri, who had encouraged and stimulated him in his endeavour, and Raja Satyacharan Ghoshal, who, pained at the popularity of vulgar and profane poetry among children, the elderly, and the women, had requested him again and again to compose poetry using more cultivated parameters. (The untranslatable term that encapsulates Rangalal's objectives here, and used repeatedly by him, is poetry that employed a *bisuddha pranali*, literally meaning 'a purer system'.) At exactly the same time, Madhusudan Dutt was asked to produce an English translation of Harsha Deva's *Ratnavali* (Rangalal's poem was published in the Bengali month of *Ashad*, 1858, which roughly corresponds from the middle of June to the middle of July; while *Ratnavali* was first performed in July 1858). The latter had been commissioned by the Rajahs of Belgachia for the eminent Europeans invited in their audience; and for this Madhusudan had been thanked in a note from the Raja's manager, S.R. Chatterjea, who had sent him, 'by the bearer Bank of Bengal', 'Notes for Rupees five hundred' in appreciation of 'the skill you have displayed in investing our Rutnavally with an English garb'. Moreover, the note continues with the hope that 'you may live long and continue to show the nations of Europe what inestimable gems we have in our ancient language.'[11]

This endeavour to showcase the heritage of India for the West began, of course, with William Jones and his team at the Asiatic Society from the last years of the eighteenth century onward. By the time the nineteenth century had entered its second half, earlier styles of adaptation to Western colonial rule had given way, according to Ashis Nandy, to an 'odd form of reactive Westernisation which wore the garb of cultural nationalism':

> Riding the growing political participation and exposure to new forms of communication, both of which had been effectively deployed for social reform in the earlier generation, cultural nationalists soon became a significant presence in Indian public life. They were the first Orientalists that the Orient itself produced in defence of the Orient. They depended mainly upon the knowledge that

[10] Nandy, 65.
[11] *Rachanabali*, Preface, p.75.

> nineteenth-century Europe produced about India, and on their revaluation of the country's martial past.[12]

Nandy identifies this typical response of the late nineteenth century with the figure of its most towering representative, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, among others, in an attached footnote on the 'Kiplingesque antipathy' of this era towards 'Anglicised, city-bred, effeminate babus'. Hemchandra himself was certainly one of these new creatures, being both anglicised and city-bred, and he himself was nervous and apologetic about his own affiliations. In the advertisement that accompanied his most accomplished work, Brittasanghar (1875), he is regretful about the fact that 'since my childhood I have studied the English language, and the Sanskrit language is unknown to me, so it will not be surprising if this book is marked in many places by faults caused by my inexperience in Sanskrit and my allegiance to the sentiments of English writers.'

The difference a few years made in this context is worth remarking upon. Hemchandra wrote this abject plea in 1875; preceding him, in 1858, Rangalal had proudly proclaimed, in the preface to his *Padmini Upakhyan*:

> Over and above all else, I have given careful consideration to English poetry (*Englandio kavita*), and writing poetry along the more cultivated parameters (*bisuddha pranalite*) of that poetry is an old practice of mine…. My verses here are influenced by English poetry in many places, and seeing this many might conclude I am a plagiarist. But I have intentionally borrowed many pleasing sentiments and tried to express these in my own language for two reasons. One: many of my countrymen who do not know the English language think that there is no good poetry in that language; I wish to rid them of this delusion. Two: as more and more Bengali poetry is composed along the cultivated parameters (*bisuddha pranalite*) of English, so the immodest and contemptible poetry of today shall retreat, and along with its exit, its gangs of followers shall proportionately decrease in numbers.

The 'immodest and contemptible poetry of today' that Rangalal was trying so strenuously to disassociate himself from over here would have been, apart from the songs of the *kavial*, whose bawdy, performative character was reminiscent of the English music-hall tradition, predominantly the doggerel of Iswar Gupta.

The passage of time, however, was not kind to such allegiances to English poetic convention. This is evident from the fact that when Kasiprasad, who described himself as the first Hindu gentleman to write English verse, published his poems in 1830, that act had been hailed universally, and had been imbued in nationalist sentiments along the

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[12] Ashis Nandy, 'Contending Stories in the Culture of Indian Politics,' *Time Warps: The Insistent Politics of Silent and Evasive Pasts* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001) 18.

lines of 'what you can do, I can also do', a sentiment that animated many initial colonial responses, from historiography to poetry. Invited to record the impulses that led to his endeavour, he had written: 'I have always found it easier to express my sentiments in [the English] language than in Bengali, but whether it is because I prefer the associations, sentiments, and thoughts which are to be found in English poems to those that are met with in Bengali poetry, I cannot decide. I can only say that I have bestowed more time and attention upon English books than any others.'[13] From poetry in the English language in Kasiprasad, to Bengali poetry written according to English poetic convention in Rangalal, to Hemchandra's apology for not knowing enough Sanskrit and knowing too much English, the trajectory of linguistic chauvinism along nationalist lines that was to convulse political and literary life in both pre- and post-independence India was proceeding apace, until, in a few more years, it became morally indefensible to either write in or be influenced by the language of the coloniser.[14]

In Hemchandra's time, however, a new poetry was being self-consciously forged by a new race of men in an idiom new to indigenous literature. Hemchandra gave his entrance examination in the same year that the University of Calcutta was established, 1857, and was among the three students who passed their B.A. in the first division in 1859. Bankimchandra had preceded him the year before, in the first batch of B.A. examinees in 1858, showing how literally men who went to the same English college and studied the same English texts were among those who were occupied in creating a new literature for Bengal.[15] The influence of English studies upon Hemchandra ranged from epigraphs that quoted from Byron or Spenser, Goethe or Longfellow, a common practice borrowed from English poetic convention at the time, to publications such as *Chhayamoyi* (1880), in which, in his own words, he had 'attempted to capture a slight aura of the famous European poet Dante's unrivalled poem the 'Divina Comedia' in this small book.' In his translations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet (Romeo-Juliet, 1895)*

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[13] Rev. James Long, 'Autobiography of Kasiprasad Ghosh,' Hand-Book of Bengal Missions, Appendix D (London, 1848) 510.

[14] This also had something to do with bi-lingualism. Writers like Derozio, who had no other language but English, remained on their pedestal, but Indians who had a choice were expected to exercise it in favour of their mother-tongue. Recent writers in English, both poets and novelists, have therefore spent a lot of time justifying their choice of English in essays and interviews. See *

[15] The creative interrelationship between writers in India and an education in English has been commented upon by Amit Chaudhuri, who shows how many of 'the most influential writers in the regional or vernacular literatures of modern India' mirror the trajectory of Madhusudan Dutt's career (and indeed of Bankimchandra and Hemchandra as well), encompassing writers of as diverse backgrounds as Qurratulain Hyder (Urdu), O.V. Vijayan (Malayalam), U.R. Ananthamurthy (Kannada), Mahasweta Devi (Bengali), and Ambai (Tamil), to name only a few living examples, who 'have all been students, even teachers, of English literature'. Amit Chaudhuri, 'Poles of Recovery,' *Interventions* Vol.4, No.1 (2002), p. 97.

and *The Tempest (Nalini-Basanta Natak, 1868)*, he makes the same apologetic gesture, calling them mere shadows of the originals rather than translations, due to the inestimable differences between the two languages.

It was not uncommon to find translations of Western poetry within even the most nationalist of verses at this time; thus Rangalal's most famous lines in *Padmini Upakhyan*: 'Who wants to live without freedom, who wants to live? (*Shadhinata-hinatay ke bachite chay re, ke bachite chay*)' were a 'shadow', to use Hemchandra's useful little term, of Thomas Moore's Irish melody: 'From life without freedom / Oh! who would not fly.'[16] Meanwhile, Hemchandra's epigraph to *Birabahu Kavya* pointedly quoted from Byron: 'Italia! Oh Italia! …. Oh God! that thou wert in thy nakedness, / Less lovely or more powerful and coulds't claim / Thy right, and drive the robbers back, who press / To shed thy blood, and drink the tears of thy distress.' Bengali nationalism, thus, was openly and unabashedly using the coloniser's language to pillory his rule; the Bengali language and English literary conventions having come together in a common purpose in a manner unacceptable not only to later linguistic chauvinists but also, for different reasons, to contemporary purists such as Akshaychandra Sarkar.

During the progression of this discourse on authenticity, Akshaychandra, at one point, quotes from Bankimchandra Chatterjee's introduction to a compilation of Iswar Gupta's poetry in his support, in which Bankim had said:

> Looking at the novel, progressive, and beautified poetry of contemporary Bengali literature, I often feel: it might be beautiful, but perhaps it is not exactly our own. I cannot find genuine Bengali (*khati Bangali*) sentiments expressed in a genuinely Bengali manner in it. That is why I have taken recourse to the poetry of Iswar Gupta. Here everything is genuinely Bengali. Madhusudan, Hemchandra, Nabinchandra, Rabindranath, these are the poets for cultivated Bengalis. Genuine Bengali poets are not born anymore. But it will not do to totally forsake the authentic; it will not do for the whole country to be converted into the third edition of the Joneses and the Gomeses.

Akshaychandra himself, in a section on 'Hemchandra and Madhusudan' had also reiterated: 'The educated Bengali has five important poets. Madhusudan, Hemchandra, Nabinchandra, Rabindranath, and Girishchandra.' The inclusion of Rabindranath in these lists would surprise many Bengalis today; perhaps because all Bengalis think of themselves as cultivated Bengalis nowadays, and wouldn't realise that that was, in any way, different from being a 'genuine' Bengali. This sentiment, however, is later echoed

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[16]Cited in H.M. Dasgupta, *Western Influences on Nineteenth-Century Bengali Poetry* (Calcutta: Chuckervutty, 1935), xxx.

in a letter by a Bengali man quoted in Edward Thompson's book on Tagore: 'His [Tagore's] mode of thinking is so essentially English that I appreciate his English translation of the *Gitanjali* far better than the original Bengali…. Among us those only who have lost all touch with the life of the people, reading only European books, are his admirers…. Bengal has not given Rabindranath to Europe – rather Europe has given him to the Bengalis…. I would feel more proud if our own poets had received such fame in foreign countries.[17] The author of that letter, of course, as E.P. Thompson revealed in *Alien Homage*, was none other than the famous literary historian Dinesh Chandra Sen, and Dipesh Chakravarty, in his discussion on Rabindranath in *Provincializing Europe*, further quotes from Buddhadev Bose and Sudhindranath Datta, poets of the post-1930s, who also felt, in Bose's words, that 'Rabindranath's works are European literature written in Bengali language and they are the first of its kind.'[18] Obviously Bose had not had Hemchandra on his mind when he says that these are 'the first of its kind', for the figure of Hemchandra would have receded very far into the interstices of literary history for a generation that sought its inspiration, away from Rabindranath, in Baudelaire, Eliot, Pound, and Hopkins, all poets who helped them to speak of 'our kitchens, our tea stalls, our streets crowded with trams and buses and motor cars…'[19]

The phrase in Bengali that Bankimchandra unleashed in his criticism of the new poets of the nineteenth century is a term that Akshaychandra too will deploy repeatedly: '*shikkhito Bangali*' meaning 'the cultivated or educated Bengali'. Such critiques had begun long before Akshaychandra made these charges against Hemchandra, and are to be found, for instance, in the accusations levelled at Derozio and Young Bengal in the 1830s, when these intellectuals were criticised for being 'denationalised' and 'hyper-westernised' while denying the validity of their entire cultural heritage.[20] 'What sort of an animal is the educated Bengali?' asks Akshaychandra here, almost echoing Bankim's celebrated diatribe on the Bengali babu in his *Confessions of a 'Young Bengal'*, answering:

> The educated Bengali is an 'agnostic', a follower of the incomprehensible, without belief in the straightforward word. The educated Bengali does not believe in religion (dharma), does not believe in action (karma), does not believe

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[17] Cited in Dipesh Chakravarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 158.
[18] Ibid.
[19] ibid., 60.
[20] Works defending the character and nationalism of Young Bengal appeared simultaneously, *Vide* Shoshee Chunder Dutt, "Young Bengal or The Hopes of India," *Essays on Miscellaneous Subjects* (Calcutta, 1848); Kristodas Pal, *The Young Bengal Vindicated* (Calcutta, 1856).

> in the *shastras*, does not believe in society; has no belief in the teacher, nor in the student.
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> The educated Bengali disbelieves everything, and has reposed his faith in sorrow. Hemchandra is the poet for this Bengali, and he has fulfilled his life's promise singing songs of this sorrow.

The phenomenon of the educated Bengali that Akshaychandra is defining himself against - and it could not be more emphatically underlined that his entire polemic here is essentially a reactionary one – was engendered in the Bengal renaissance, which was overwhelmingly under the influence of a powerful section of reformist and rationalist Hindus dominating the social and political landscape in Bengal at the time. An English education was what almost all the leaders of the movement for change had in common, and it was drawing them away from their roots, said the traditionalists. The series of innovative images that Akshaychandra had employed at the beginning of his essay on Hemchandra's authenticity of an embroidered cap, fragrant pilau, and cutlets, thus leads to discussions on the nature and meaning of a national character, which he tries to construct in contrast to Hemchandra's cosmopolitan, liberal, English-speaking values . In the penultimate paragraph of his study, he returns, once again, to a valorization of the poet Iswar Gupta, who had said in a couplet that he would rather worship dogs that were native than gods who were foreign. This hatred of the foreign was an undisguised exclusion not only of the Western but also of the Muslim, which was defined in oppositional terms to the native and the Hindu. Akshaychandra's scathing conclusion that that sort of love for one's own people, that strength of love of one's country was absent from Hemchandra turns around in our time almost a hundred years later into a vindication of the sort of tolerant egalitarian middle-class ethos that Hemchandra stood for, values Akshaychandra was campaigning to abolish in the national Indian character and that has come to fruition in the ugly triumph of saffron that predominates our national life today.