

# A Hindu Conservative Negotiates Modernity. Chandranath Basu (1844–1910) and Reflections on the Self and Culture in Colonial Bengal

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## **Abstract**

*This is the first study in the English language of the Hindu conservative writer and literary critic, Chandranath Basu. In 1891, Basu invented the term 'Hindutva' but with a very different set of meanings than what is taken to be today. This essay specifically examines his seminal work "Sakuntala Tattwa" (1881) in which Basu attempts to compare select characters from Shakespeare with that of principal character from Kalidas's well known play Shakuntala, in terms of both literary creation and cultural argument. In so doing the author also questions some of the postulates of western modernity such as prioritizing a man centered universe over a cosmic understanding of things. Also significant here is his contesting a temporal view of 'tradition' and 'modernity' whereby tradition is taken to precede modernity in time. In Basu's view, however, they are densely interwoven both in terms of time and typical values that they are capable of generating.*

This paper was inspired by Sudipta Kaviraj's remark that in the inverted world of colonialism, it took greater courage to stand outside the reigning discourse on 'modernity' and reformist change than to be with these (Kaviraj 2010: 287). At a time when the western educated Hindu intelligentsia was actively engaged in evaluating their own tradition in the light of 'reason' and 'utility', heuristic devices they had been repeatedly asked to imbibe and integrate with the emerging 'modern' self, questioning positivist prescriptions for change did certainly amount to swimming against the tide. Such courage or conviction, as I argue in this paper, originated not in a blind rejection of the 'modern' per se but in a deeper self-reflection than had been possible in the first flush of intellectual excitement of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The substance of Chandranath Basu's writings overturn the idea suggested earlier in time that the modern Hindu's hopes lay in suitably imitating the ways of the English (Chattopadhyay in Bagal 2003: 178–179). On the contrary he argued that meaningful change began with the self itself and not with the social or political environment in which it was historically located. This also represents an interesting shift from

theories earlier put forth by deists like Akshay Kumar Dutta (1820–86) who had strongly urged that man abide by ‘Natural Laws’, a theory he had selectively borrowed from George Coombe’s (1788–1858) *The Constitution of Man* (1828).<sup>1</sup> In Dutta’s perception, man’s growth and social advancement lay in comprehending and turning these ‘laws’ to his advantage. Chandranath’s thesis, by comparison, was the conquest of nature by culture, a scheme under which man was required to shift his attention from what lay outside him to that which constituted his very self. In the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by when the racial arrogance of the ruling class had deepened feelings of political subjugation among Indians and the mechanisms of colonialist extraction were progressively reducing the economy and society to a state of depravation, even the colonized mind was forced to look back upon its lost selfhood and bemoan the blighting of hopes as had been once raised by the arrival of a new political and social order. There now grew an alternate indigenist discourse which, for lack of a better word, I have called ‘revivalist’. Contrary to claims made in certain quarters, this discourse, even when revealing a penchant for tradition and the past, spoke in the language of modernist ‘reform’; it repudiated not change per se but the ideological substance of change generated within colonial modernity.<sup>2</sup> This discourse was characterised by a wide array of social and cultural reflexes or attitudes. Excluding the openly reactionary and xenophobic rejection of the West and organized reform, it reveals the growth of two intellectually vibrant trends: first, the subtle yet purposive politicization of elements of indigenous thought and culture and second, the production of new, indigenous social theories.

Of the first, the finest examples come from the writings of the writer and novelist, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–94). In Bankim’s *Krishnacharitra* (The Life of Krishna, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1892), God is made to enter human history with a palpably political purpose. For Bankim, Krishna was both God and man and his assuming human form as an *avatara* was meant to facilitate not so much an understanding of God as of man himself. The declared objective was the fulfilment of the modern man’s social and political destiny guided by God as moral exemplar. In an earlier work, the *Dharmatattwa* (1888), Bankim had recast the traditional paradigm of Dharma, whereby, rather than be defined in terms of contexts or what was contingent, it assumed a form that was de-contextualized

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<sup>1</sup> Dutta in Basu, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> The debate on the conceptual meanings of ‘revival’ was begun by Tapan Raychaudhuri in 1988 with the argument that something ‘far from dead’ (Hinduism) could not be revived. See his Introduction to *Europe Reconsidered*. 1988. Suffice to say here that it is the dying that could possibly be revived, not the dead. 19<sup>th</sup> century literature is replete with suggestions of a languishing Hinduism.

and normative. This enabled Bankim to transform the concept of selfless action in the world (*nishkam karma*), hitherto a metaphysical concept meant to sink the individual human ego, into a scheme of collective political thought and praxis. Quite tellingly, the *Dharmatattwa* concludes on the note that patriotism was the highest dharma (Bagal 2003: 607). The second trend was what I would broadly call the construction of a Hindu sociology. Here the engagement with the political was more liminal, the focus being on recovering from the archives of the past, righteously ‘Hindu’ ways of re-ordering social and cultural life. Essentially, this agenda was founded on the premise, first argued by the educationist and social theorist, Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay (1827–94), that in the Indian tradition, the community (*samaj*) took precedence over the political nation (*rashtra*). Bhudeb took the social organism to be founded on timeless and immutable principles and hence, an embodiment of the Divine (*devsharira*) (Mukhopadhyay 1968 [1892]: 47). This constituted the substance of a counter-Orientalist discourse in a first rate treatise titled *Samajik Probondho* (Essays on Society, 1892), supported by two shorter treatises, the *Paribarik Probondho* (Essays on the Hindu family, 1882) and *Achar Probondho* (Essays on Hindu rites and customs, 1894), perhaps the best known works of the kind in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal (Mukhopadhyay, 1968 [1892]: 443–536). Modelled on the lines of older *smriti* treatises, these sought to regulate the everyday life of the Hindu in conformity with traditional social prescriptions. For Bhudeb, it was in the everyday running of organized community life that the individual realized his true identity. The Hindu self, regardless of the individuated freedom available in the domain of the spiritual, had to abide by the structure of the collective will in everyday social life. Whereas individual human nature did serve to define the qualities of a particular community, it was the community alone that could secure the moral and social behaviour required to perpetuate itself. However, at a time when the domestic economy of the Hindus, especially in urban Calcutta, had undergone significant changes, producing consumerist habits, new ideological loyalties, the visible restructuring of man-woman relationships and the progressive dismantling of the extended family, such works, but especially the *Paribarik Probondho*, eventually brought more infamy to Bhudeb than public cheer. A modern *Grihya Sutra* such as he tried to put together for the Hindu Bengalis became increasingly unacceptable under conditions that substantively eroded the very concept of a ‘Hindu Home’ (*griha*).

Many of the social issues that constituted the conservative rhetoric in Bhudeb also appear in Chandranath’s writings but with dissimilar results. Both Bhudeb and Chandranath, who considered the former as his mentor, defended social hierarchies based on *varna* and *jati*, discouraged late marriages in wom-

en, pinned the successful running of the Hindu domestic economy on the skills of the child bride carefully groomed into becoming a competent housewife, expressed great anxiety about the sinister implications of pre-marital or extra-marital romance allegedly entering Hindu homes through the increasingly popular Bengali novel and deeply distrusted European conceptions of history and culture. Interestingly enough, it was not so much Bhudeb that drew the ire of critics on these issues as Chandranath. Whereas the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) had two extended controversies with Chandranath on the subjects of Hindu marriage and the Hindu diet respectively,<sup>3</sup> Bhudeb does not at all figure in his recurring critique of Hindu orthodoxy. It is tempting to explain this with reference to their respective ages; Bhudeb was roughly forty years older than Rabindranath: a status perhaps also accentuated by his Brahmin birth, holding high public office and the reputation that he enjoyed both in European circles and the Indian. On the other hand, neither a Brahmin birth nor a considerable difference in their ages stopped Rabindranath from accusing Bankim, also a highly respected figure, of misreading and misinterpreting Hindu social ethics (Chattopadhyay in Bagal 2003: 837–842). Arguably, Chandranath's writings appeared more provocative for three related reasons. First, unlike Bhudeb, Chandranath quite obtrusively used the public platform to propagate his views; some of his well-known essays on the subject of Hindu domesticity and marriages were first delivered from literary forums and debating clubs. Second, unlike Bhudeb again, Chandranath quite manipulatively employed literary criticism as a medium for articulating his social thought. This, I imagine, agitated both literary circles in Bengal and those concerned with organized social reform. Third, it was consistently Chandranath's effort to situate his ideas within the larger polemic of competing cultures and ways of life. Whereas Bhudeb attempted to produce modern manuals on ideal Hindu social life but without also being polemical or insular; Chandranath almost unfailingly evaluated social ideas and practices in the comparative scale of civilizations and his conclusions, predictably enough, proudly acclaimed the 'superiority' of Hindu life as against the European. In 1892, he was to invent the term 'Hindutva', which he took as constituting the vital and defining qualities of 'Hinduness'. In doing so, he took a long stride towards glossing over highly differentiated perceptions and practices within 'Hinduism'. Such a term had hitherto not been in vogue in Bengal and looks surprising especially in view of the fact that around the same time, a man no less than Bankim, usually identified with the hardening of Hindu attitudes, had the insight and intellectu-

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<sup>3</sup> The controversy on the two issues stretched between 1887 and 1892. Tagore's rejoinder to Basu's views on Hindu marriages is available in English translation in Sen, 2003.

al honesty to admit that Hinduism was but a label conveniently foisted on a wide variety of beliefs and practices (Sen 2011: 41).

Chandranath's early education was in a school run by Christian missionaries but which he quit very soon for fear of being weaned away from his ancestral religion. The cultural label of a 'Hindu' remained important for him, even in sartorial matters, for at one place he tells us of his reluctance to wear glasses for fear of being mistaken for a Brahmo!<sup>4</sup> Chandranath was a diligent student, specially drawn to the study of English language and literature and it is with some pride that he narrates how his English writing had drawn praise from even the *Englishman*. We also gather that he joined the neighbourhood school called Oriental Seminary especially because it offered the services of a teacher who took care of English pronunciation among Hindu students. Chandranath took graduate and post-graduate degrees in history and his earliest writings in English were on Cromwell and the Glorious Revolution. Like Bankim, Chandranath was well read in European philosophy and literature and his Bengali writings too are replete with references to contemporary authors and thinkers from the European continent and America, but especially those dissatisfied with the reigning social and political ideas in the West itself. In this category are included August Comte (1798–1857), for a time also a favourite with Bankim, and William Hanwell Mallock (1849–1923), the author of the satire *The New Republic* (1877). The latter, as we shall presently examine, was particularly important for Chandranath for consistently advocating the need for personal restraint as against natural human impulses.<sup>5</sup> This indeed is an instance of an Indian discourse using the resources of the West to critique the West itself.

Chandranath Basu emerged as an influential Bengali writer and literary critic only in 1881, by when he had all but given up the use of English except in his official correspondence as translator to the Bengal government. His English tracts, of which about 18 have so far been located, address several issues ranging from a critique of Bengali peasant life (in which he anticipates Bankim's well known *Bangadesher Krishak / The Peasantry of Bengal*, 1872) to the promotion of Indian manufactures where again he appears to have been a pioneer.<sup>6</sup> By comparison, his Bengali writings, quite prolific after 1881, were almost exclusively on Hindu society, literature and in a broader sense, the Hindu world view. Chandranath's religious life appears to have followed a trajectory similar

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<sup>4</sup> It is widely rumoured that in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, wearing glasses was a fashion that young men took after the Brahmo leader, Keshab Chandra Sen.

<sup>5</sup> Biographical details on Chandranath have been culled from the following works: Majumdar, 1984; Basu, 1908; Bandopadhyay, 1963.

<sup>6</sup> Basu, 1869; Basu, 1871; Basu, 1874; Majumdar, 1984: 98.

to that of Bhudeb, beginning with deep scepticism towards Hindu deities but progressively moving towards a defensive attachment to the Hindu tradition. Unlike Bhudeb though, he admits to have been initially attracted by the religious discourses of the Brahmo theologian, Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–84), albeit only briefly, since he found Sen's profuse borrowing from Reed, Hamilton and other philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment to be insufferably dull and unintelligible (Majumdar 1984: 65). What might have also irked him was Keshub's deep attachment to Christ and Christianity, which many Hindus and Brahmos of the time found culturally alienating. The turning point in his life came when (some time in 1884) at the Calcutta residence of Bankimchandra, he happened to meet the orthodox Hindu writer and publicist, Pandit Sasadhar Tarkachudamani (1851–1928), a man who reportedly had taken the city by storm with his unique and culturally aggressive pseudo-scientific theories on Hindu religion and philosophy. Recollecting his memories of this meeting, Chandranath tells us how he was greatly impressed upon hearing Pandit Sashadhar define Dharma as something that supported and held together every element of human life, effectively linking man to the cosmos. To Chandranath this appeared a better way of understanding man's place within creation rather than to simply rely on dualistic theories speaking of a Creator and His creation. For one, such ontic theories as he had heard Christian evangelists propagate did not bring to light the cosmic view of man (Basu 1892: 2–15). Not surprisingly, in his magnum opus, *Hindutva. Hindur Prakrita Itihas /Hindutva, the Authentic History of the Hindus* (1892), Chandranath leaned strongly on the side of monistic Vedanta which, reportedly, presented all phenomena in a seamless unity. Significantly though, despite being impressed with the theories of Pandit Sashadhar, Chandranath distanced himself from both a ritualistic and mythology ridden religion as was the Pandit's forte as also the active and aggressive Hindu missionary propaganda that had been successfully launched by the 1880s by some of his co-workers. Also extraordinary are his attempts to re-establish Tantra as a religious discourse and praxis, given the revulsion expressed by the genteel society of Calcutta against the alleged 'moral horrors' in esoteric tantric practices. For Chandranath, however, the revival of Tantra was the panacea for restoring the strength, daring and manliness in the Hindu Bengali. It was only the bold, subversive and extraordinary methods of Tantra he believed that would prepare the Hindu to more effectively fight his subjection and conquer the onset of effeminacy (Basu 1908: 22–23). Such thoughts clearly set him apart from his friend Bankimchandra, who was closer to the neo-Vaishnava revival in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. Implicitly, Chandranath may have shared with many fellow Bengalis, the sense of revulsion and disquiet about the

licentious pastoral god, Krishna, the visible loosening of man-woman relations, disregard for *jati* hierarchies within popular Vaishnava communities and the highly emotionally charged character of Bengal Vaishnavism. For him, the preference lay in reading Sakti (Power) both as a metaphysical category and the political.

Chandranath's disapproval of modernity was centred on a sharp critique of European man-woman relationships that allegedly had penetrated Hindu homes and was utterly ruining the Hindu domestic economy. Following Bhudeb, he produced two short, albeit little known manuals on Hindu domestic life<sup>7</sup> but his most powerful and popular arguments on this question came from a somewhat tendentious re-reading of older Indian classics in the light of modern predicaments. Of these the best known are his re-telling of two stories that first appeared in the *Mahabharata*: those of Sakuntala and Savitri and which he named *Shakuntala Tattwa* (1881) and *Savitri Tattwa* (1900) respectively. In the case of the former, Chandranath chose to comment not on the epic version of the story but on its well-known adaptation by the poet-dramatist, Kalidas (c. 5<sup>th</sup> CE), the *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*. It is to the study of this commentary that the rest of this paper is devoted (Basu 1881).

### **Sakuntala: The Two Versions**

In the *Mahabharata*, the story of Sakuntala and Dushyanta appears in the Adi Parvan chapters, 68–74. This is a simple story but with dramatic turns and morally instructive lessons. King Dushyanta of the Puru dynasty, once out on a royal hunt, is led into deep forest in which is situated the (*ashrama*) hermitage of the sage Kanva. The hermitage represents nature in its pristine beauty where all forms of life are in harmony with one another. Having entered the hermitage, Dushyanta meets Sakuntala, a woman of bewitching beauty, made all the more beautiful by her simplicity and innocence. Strongly attracted by her beauty and innocence, Dushyanta declares his love for Sakuntala which, she then returns, albeit in more subtle and suppressed forms. Despite her initial reluctance, Dushyanta prevails upon her to agree to Gandharva marriage, a marriage that is essentially the passionate union of lovers, consummated with our without the consent of the community or the immediate family. Hereafter, Dushyanta travels back to his palace, assuring Sakuntala that he would arrange for her to join him at an appropriate time. The story now takes a dramatic turn with Dushyanta making no effort to claim Sakuntala as his wife and eventually, the anxious sage Kanva and other inmates of the *ashrama* decide to send Sa-

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<sup>7</sup> These are the *Garhyastha Path* and the *Garhyastha Vidhi*, published successively in 1886 and 1887.

kuntala to her husband, more so since a son had been born to her in the meantime. When Sakuntala presents herself before Dushyanta, the king refuses to acknowledge her as his wife or for that matter, even the son. On the contrary, he accuses her of deceit and untruthfulness, which, at some point, develops into a general indictment of the frailty and the lack of moral integrity in women. What follows is perhaps the most spectacular part of the story with Sakuntala reprimanding her husband in the strongest terms, her anger and indignation reportedly assuming the properties of a flame that threatens to burn and reduce the offending husband to ashes. Here, Sakuntala is not just the wronged woman claiming her social and legal rights but also the author of a sophisticated moral and metaphysical discourse which, among other things, suggests that 'Truth' need not always be protected by material witnesses since the human soul was always a witness (*sakshin*) to righteous and unrighteous acts in the world. At this point there appears a message from the gods (*daivavani*) upholding Sakuntala's claims and beseeching Dushyanta to accept her as his wife and their son. Upon this, Dushyanta performs a volte face, explaining to his ministers and courtiers, how he had known Sakuntala's identity all along but nevertheless subjected her to a public ordeal only so that society would not mistake him for a man who had fallen prey to lust.<sup>8</sup>

The *Abhigyanam Sakuntalam* of Kalidas introduces certain changes to this plot of which the most dramatic and consequential is the curse inflicted on Sakuntala by the sage, Durvasa. The play describes how Sakuntala, lost in the thoughts of her husband, from whom she is separated, neglects to extend hospitality to Durvasa, a visitor to the *ashrama* upon which the sage curses her saying that he (the husband) of whom she had been thinking to the neglect of her social duty, would one day fail to recognize her. Upon persistent pleading by the companions of Sakuntala, the sage relents a little by suggesting that the only way to restore Dushyanta's memory would be to show him the royal insignia (a ring) which the King had once lovingly gifted to Sakuntala. However, when at the royal court, Sakuntala fails to produce the ring since she had unwittingly lost it in the river while bathing. The ring, swallowed by a fish is ultimately recovered through a fisherman who discovers the ring in the belly of the fish and upon seeing the ring, the memory of Sakuntala and of their relationship is fully restored to Dushyanta. In the meantime, spurned by the king, Sakuntala retires to another hermitage where she gives birth to her son and spends her days in austere separation. Dushyanta is now full of remorse and anxious to be re-united with Sakuntala. He is providentially rescued from this

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<sup>8</sup> Summary of the Mahabharata version as it appears in Kalipasanna Singha's Bengali translation. See Singha, 1987, Chapter 68 to 74.

state of mind when, in the course of his many kingly duties and adventures, he happens to arrive at the ashram where Sakuntala and their son are located. The play ends in a happy re-union of Dushyanta and Sakuntala with their son eventually becoming a mighty emperor after whom India takes the name Bharata.<sup>9</sup>

### Old Texts and Modern Readings

While the epic version of the story had been in circulation for a long time, this appears to have been clearly overtaken by the popularity of Kalidas's play. Judging by the information available to us the popularity of the *Abhigyan Sakuntalam* was indeed enormous: when the Orientalist Sir William Jones asked his pandits which Sanskrit play deserved to be translated most, the answer was clearly in favour of Kalidas (Jones in Thapar 2010: 220). In modern Bengal, the original play was edited and first published (in Bengali script) by the Indologist Premchandra Tarkavagish (1805–1867) in 1839, followed by an edition (including a *tika*) from the Sanskrit College, Calcutta, by the educationist Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891) in 1871. We also know of three contemporary translations into Bengali: by Vidyasagar himself (in 1854), Nanda Kumar Ray (in 1855) and by Jyotirindranath Tagore (around 1900). The nationalist figure Bipin Chandra Pal tells us that for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the English educated Bengali Hindu took little interest in Sanskrit literature. While classics like *Bhattikavya*, *Sakuntala*, *Kadambari* and *Uttaramcharita* had been included in the University syllabi, very few students were known to develop a literary or aesthetic taste for these works. In Pal's view, it was Bankim who first initiated a serious literary interest in comparative literature, first, with his review of Bhavabhuti's *Uttaramcharita* and subsequently, by an attempt to critically compare Kalidas and Shakespeare as poets and dramatists.<sup>10</sup>

Bankim's essay, titled "Sakuntala, Miranda O Desdemona" (1876), compares Sakuntala of the play with two female characters from Shakespeare (Miranda from *Tempest* and Desdemona from *Othello*) and makes interesting reading in the ways it anticipates in good measure, the neo-conservative view on ideal man-woman relationships that was to emerge in his own time. Miranda and Sakuntala, as children of nature, Bankim argues, have none of the compulsive traits of women brought up in society. They are not anxious to seek men who will be enamoured of their beauty or find suitors who profess their love. A natural simplicity and innocence are the distinguishing features of their charac-

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<sup>9</sup> Summary of Vidyasagar's translation of *Abhigyan Sakuntalam* (1854). In Rachanabali, 2006, pp. 353–394.

<sup>10</sup> Pal, B. (n.d.) Bankim Sahitya. 2 Vols. combined. In Mukhopadhyay 2000, pp. 228. Bankim's essays are reprinted in Bagal, 2003, pp. 141–162 and 179–183 respectively.

ter. On the other hand, the error that they both allegedly committed was in surrendering themselves to a heroic male figure without the consent of elders and the larger community (Chattopadhyay 1876a: 181). The critique of Gandarbha marriage, based on mutual love and passion that was to assume far greater intensity in later writings as in Tagore (Tagore 1902b: 729) is already foretold in Bankim's critique. However, for all her shortcomings, Sakuntala did appear to Bankim as the ideal wife. While the contemporary housewife forgot her husband when fondling her pet, Sakuntala had risked the devastating curse of Durvasa by focusing all her thoughts on Dushyanta (Chattopadhyay 1876a: 181). In Bankim's perception, however, Sakuntala's virtuous chastity was eroded by the way she reprimanded Dushyanta, "like a venomous serpent with a raised hood" and at this point, Bankim takes care to remind his readers how Desdemona had the strength and self-control to overcome all her anger or remorse even upon being spurned by Othello. Evidently, Bankim's critique of Sakuntala as mentioned above was based on the epic version, not that of Kalidas, where she is but a demure woman who unprotestingly suffers her fate. In his re-telling of the story, Chandranath was to come to Sakuntala's rescue by drawing attention to the way she allowed respect for the husband (*patisambhram*) to brush aside all cause for unhappiness (Basu 1881: 98). Chandranath's focus was exclusively on the play; the indignant Sakuntala of the *Mahabharata* does not figure in his discourse at all.

What appears as hints and tangential suggestions in Bankim's writings develops into a fuller theory in Chandranath. For one, he extends the comparison between Kalidas and Shakespeare by also examining other plays like *Romeo and Juliet*, if only to demonstrate how, in one case, unbridled love and passion subjected men and women to tortuous ordeals whereas in the other, self-restraint, arising in a sense of *dharmic* knowledge, helped to overcome or at least to considerably mitigate, the ill effects of such ordeals. In this view, the daring and 'indiscrete' passion of Romeo and Juliet typifies the first, the innate wisdom of Dushyanta, the second (Basu 1881: 28). Chandranath's arguments, as mentioned above, drew not on Indian thinking alone but also contemporary European thought. For his critique of European gender relations he relies on at least three sources. His views on Shakespeare are drawn partly from the study by the German literary scholar Hermann Ulrici (1806–1884), supported by the writings of Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), a gifted writer who translated the works of Comte and W.H. Mallock's "A Dialogue on Human Happiness" (1879) (Basu 1881: 52, 65, 98). Chandranath takes some delight in the fact that Sakuntala bears no comparison with Portia, Rosalind or Isabella. Thankfully, she had neither the rationality nor the learning of these ladies and the genius of Kalidas

justly and befittingly chose to portray her as the 'ideal' woman whose mind and heart were anchored in the family and domesticity (Basu 1881: 65). Chandranath also uses Kalidas's play to draw attention to the innate vulnerability of man towards feminine charm for, even such a wise and heroic man as Dushyanta succumbed to it. Hence, while the personal tragedy of Romeo and Juliet could evoke sympathy in us, the tale of Dushyanta raised anxieties for all humanity (Basu 1881: 110).

Ironically, the conservative rhetoric on man-woman relations that had begun with Bankim and Chandranath finds its exaltation in Tagore. I find this ironic especially given the fact that Tagore and Chandranath had otherwise differed so sharply and consistently on issues vitally determining the Hindu way of life. In 1902, Tagore wrote two successive essays, the first on the plays *Kumarasambhava* and *Abhigyan Sakuntala* by Kalidas taken together, and the second, on the *Sakuntala* alone.<sup>11</sup>

The first of these essays begins with the claim that Kalidas was a poet not of aesthetic excellence alone but of abstinence and renunciation and though acknowledging the overwhelming power of love, he never surrendered before it. For Tagore, the moment Sakuntala became oblivious of her social obligations to a guest (Durvasa) the tender and benign qualities of love deserted her. The curse inflicted on the couple and that which constituted the most dramatic element in the play, was but an allegory, the real cause being the clandestine union. Durvasa's curse therefore represented just punishment for the breach of accepted social conventions, not the irascible temperament of an unpleasant man (Tagore 1902a: 719). Tagore's conservatism in the second essay exceeds the first. Here, as the argument goes, the trauma perpetrated by Durvasa's curse is already foretold in the inherent weaknesses of Dushyanta's character, notwithstanding all his self-restraint. Hence, had Dushyanta promptly accepted Sakuntala as his wife without subjecting her to the test of character, Sakuntala might well have ended up as only one of the King's several concubines (Tagore 1902b: 731).

The substance of what Bankim, Chandranath and Rabindranath argue reveals didacticism and an underlying social intent that, significantly enough, cuts across reformist and orthodox camps. This may well be put down to the advancement of Hindu nationalism which palpably weakened the urge for social reform and brought the defence of traditional ways of life as the foundation on which to rest the political. If, allegedly, Gandarbha marriage was social-

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<sup>11</sup> Tagore, R. 1902. *Kumarambhava O Sakuntala*. In Rachanabali, 2004, pp. 717–723, hereafter Tagore, 1902a; *Sakuntala*. In Tagore, 2004, pp. 723–733, hereafter Tagore, 1902,b.

ly irresponsible and constituted a fall from the ideal, this was also a comment on the undesirability of love freely expressed between two individuals, perhaps more so given the man's 'demonstrated' vulnerability towards female sexuality. As a popular novelist, Bankim was to propagate this with telling effect; no male character in his novels which went outside marital love and conjugality is spared a depressingly traumatic fate.<sup>12</sup> Chandranath himself gave a metaphysical twist to the argument with the warning that whereas Man (*Purusa*) represented quiescent spirituality, in worldly life it was the Woman (*Prakriti*) who ruled (Basu 1881: 115). Second, all three writers approvingly mention how Sakuntala of the play had not a single unpleasant thought for her husband; rather than reprimand Dushyanta she chose to chide her own fate. Bankim, as one might recall, took care to praise Desdemona for precisely such qualities as he found absent in the epic Sakuntala. In a deeply insightful analysis of the two versions of the Sakuntala story, the historian Romila Thapar rightly brings out the perceptible loss of woman's empowerment over time (Thapar 2010). It is my feeling though that she somewhat exaggerates the difference in the discursive intent behind the two with the argument that notions of chastity and the woman's self-denial would have been known to Kalidas, not to the author of the epic version (Thapar 2010: 238). Prima facie, this is problematic since the *Mahabharata* also includes the tale of Savitri<sup>13</sup> whose exemplary chastity succeeded in bringing back a dead husband to life. In the epic, both Sakuntala and Savitri are persuasive women who courageously stand their ground, perhaps more so in the case of the latter as she manages to win over even Yama, the Lord of Death. Thapar's thesis, therefore, survives only on the premise that the two tales were made a part of the epic text under palpably different social and historical settings, reflecting significant shifts within the brahmanical social and cultural discourse. While this is not improbable, one ought also to acknowledge an underlying commonness in concerns or themes of which attaining motherhood was certainly an important one.<sup>14</sup> It also appears to me that in both versions, the use of the supernatural imparts to the work the dramatic quality. In Kalidas's version, the lost ring and its recovery was certainly critical to the story but so was the *daivavani* in the epic. In the *Mahabharata* version, this is the catalyst that changes Dushyanta's behaviour towards Sakuntala, perhaps no less dramatically than what the lifting of Durvasa's curse

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<sup>12</sup> See in particular the treatment of male characters in his novels, *Bishbriksha* and *Krishnakanter Will*. The two novels were reviewed by Chandranath Basu under the title Duiti Hindu Patni (Two Hindu Wives). In Basu, 1891.

<sup>13</sup> *Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, chapters 293–299.

<sup>14</sup> For typical examples, Basu, 1900, p. 190.

does to the play. The question to ask here is whether even without this heavenly intervention, Dushyanta would have still come around to accept Sakuntala's rightful claims.

Chandranath used his modern reading of the Sakuntala story to also comment on the qualities of European literary theory as against the Indian, in the process also drawing upon his comparative assessment of the two civilizations. The European, he alleged, was far too preoccupied with the world outside him, the Hindu with the inner self. Both these represented extremes that inhibited human progress. The Hindu, by blindly conforming to his inherited tradition and not creatively employing his personal judgement, only brought society to a standstill. The European, on the contrary, excessively exercised his individual judgement to the point of unleashing a state of perpetual revolution (Basu 1881: 37). The European was obsessed with the empirical habits of mind, ignoring the spontaneous outpourings of the soul. He viewed man in isolation, not in his larger relationship with the cosmos. For Chandranath, this explained the European's obsession with biographies. Whereas anything worth remembering about a man always remained as part of public memory, the egoistic celebration of human agency in modern biographies took away from both his social moorings and larger ties with the cosmos (Basu 1891: 92; Basu 1900: 214–215). What was required therefore was a synthesis, between the self and not self, between social conformity and personal judgement. In the *Abhigyanam Sakuntalam*, the personality of Dushyanta clearly overshadowed that of Sakuntala (Chattopadhyay 1876a: 38) for it was he who embodied this creative synthesis and thereby rose above any other character available in world literature (Basu 1881: 38).

It occurs to me that the life and work of Chandranath Basu attempted to contest and controvert three related assumptions in European modernity. First, it rejected the man centred universe that was driving out alternate conceptions of time and society. Second, it critiqued the three major components of the modern self: reason, certitude and cognition. But perhaps most importantly, it denied the temporal view of tradition which created a sharp discontinuity between the past and the present, between modernity and tradition. For Chandranath, tradition was a precious resource which was inherent in the modern and intuitively helped man to lessen the perpetual conflict between the self and that which lay outside the self.

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