

Sankhya Philosophy and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya

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ABSTRACT In his writings in the closing decades of the 19th century, the novelist, nationalist and patriot, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya placed the blame for India's subjugation by foreign powers on what he called the "individualistic, other-worldly" philosophy of Sankhya, a philosophy based on reasoning, reckoning and enumeration.¹ This brief examines Chattopadhyaya's charge and concludes that he was unaware of the power and this-worldliness of Sankhya, in the way it was theorised in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* as *Anvikshiki*, or the philosophy, logic and science of inquiry.

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INTRODUCTION

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya (hereafter, Bankim, 1838-1894) was a Bengali novelist, Sanskritist, philosopher, scholar of natural, physical and social science, humanist, a product of Bengal renaissance, a patriot and a nationalist. A civil servant in Bengal during the British colonial period, Bankim was a “synthetizing genius, ascribing equal importance to both oriental and occidental learning which included philosophy, science, history, social and political science of the West too. He wanted to enrich the treasury of the East with western riches.”² In the public imagination, Bankim is better known as a novelist, and as the composer of the song *Vande Mataram* (‘Mother, I bow to thee’) that became the anthem of India’s freedom struggle. The song was later set to tune by Rabindranath Tagore, and the first two stanzas were adopted as India’s National Song.³

The Hindu philosophy has six schools or traditions, called Darsana, which are based on the Vedas. They are Nyaya, Visvesika, Sankhya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta.⁴ Bankim had written an essay on ‘Sankhya Darsan’. Scholars who have studied this essay observed:

“Bankim had given due weightage to ‘Sankhya- Darsan’. Whosoever wants to know about Hinduism and Hindu society, he must have to study this philosophy. He has discussed in a very lucid manner the most difficult subject quoting from the Vedas, Puranas, and Sankhya.”⁵

Partha Chatterjee, in his book, *National Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (1986) devoted a full chapter to Bankimchandra.⁶ Chatterjee noted that for Bankim, as gleaned in his essay on Sankhya philosophy, the major cultural attribute and “reason for India’s subjection is the Hindu attitude towards power”⁷ and the emphasis of Sankhya philosophy on personal *vairagya* (renunciation) rather than political and social power.

This brief does not aim to discuss the six schools of Indian philosophy, *per se*. Rather it is an attempt to understand why Bankim was critical of Sankhya and failed to take into consideration Kautilya’s *anvikshiki* (comprising of Sankhya, Yoga and Lokayata) and the other schools that were dealing with political philosophy, political science and political realism. Bankim also seemed unaware of Kautilya’s three formulations on the attributes of political power or *shaktis*—that is, the three powers or *shaktis* operate in state with their priorities of *mantrashakti* (power of counsel and diplomacy), *prabhavashakti* (power of army and treasury) and *utsahashakti* (power, *personal energy*).

SANKHYA PHILOSOPHY

Overview

Etymologically speaking, the common understanding of Sankhya has different interpretations, a phenomenon not unusual in Indic traditions. In its original form, Sankhya “could provide our philosophical tradition with the fundamental idea of positive science.”⁸ Sankhya is derived from Sanskrit, which means “reflection”, and this reflection is done

through the accumulation of knowledge.⁹ Sankhya's rationalistic approach is best captured by M. Hiriyanna who writes: "The Samkhya prefers a rationalistic explanation and does not, like some other systems, invoke the aid of revelation in support of its conclusions. The very name of the doctrine, derived from *Samkhya* which means *buddhi*, indicates that it is based on reflection rather than on authority."¹⁰

The Gazetteer of India, Vol 1, Country and People (1965) on page 432 says: "The *Kural* of Tiruvalluvar, dating not later than the 10th century AD is said to be the work of a poet belonging to the depressed classes. It enforces the Sankhya philosophy in 1,330 poetical aphorisms."¹¹ From a study of the verses of the *Kural*, it is very much on reflection rather than any religious authority, and is therefore Sankhya philosophy. Wilhelm Halbfass in his discussion on Kautilya's concept of *anvikhiki* argues that "Kautilya is not interested in discussing the soteriological relevance of *anviksiki*, or its compatibility with the Vedic *atmavidya*. His primary concern with methodology is also illustrated by his list of schools of thought in which he finds *anviksiki* exemplified. The Samkhya school, which he mentions first, has made important contributions to the formalization and systematization of the *pramana* theory (i.e., the doctrine of the 'valid means of knowledge')." ¹²

Bankim's Views

English-language scholarship on criticism of Sankhya by Bankim is highly limited. Even a collection of seminar papers on the contribution of Bankim in various fields of

Indian life and culture, organised in 2000 by the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, did not dwell on Bankim's critique of Sankhya philosophy.¹³ There is mention, though, albeit oblique, of the contradictions in Bankim's thinking in the work of Arabinda Poddar, who writes:

"There exists no material proof of god's existence – that happens to be the reason for Kapilmuni's being an atheist (Kapil is the propounder of Samkhya system of philosophy). The rationalist in Bankim is happy to find that early sanction of rationalism in some systems of Indian thought. But he is bewildered how could Kapil consider the Vedas infallible. This glaring contradiction characterises his own stance also. In 'Dharmatatva' he advises his readers to study the physical and natural sciences of the West, since these are based on objective apprehensions of reality and causation in nature. But paradoxically enough, he recommends the study of Hindu scriptures for realizing God. Similarly, he believed in the divinity of Srikrishna, though of this belief also no tangible proof was available. These contradictions, however, in no way impair the impact of the rationalist – humanist world view, he propagated."¹⁴

On Power

An update on the notion of power: "Bankim's explanation on the subjection of India is not in terms of material or physical strength... It is an explanation in terms of culture... conception of the cultural failure of the Indian people to face up to the realities of power."¹⁵

Therefore, what was power to Bankim? According to the analysis of Partha Chatterjee, Bankim's thinking was very much influenced by European post-Enlightenment thought. Chatterjee wrote:

“Physical strength is not the same thing as force or power. Power, or the lack of it, is a social phenomenon; power results from application on physical strength of four elements: enterprise, solidarity, courage and perseverance. The Bengalis as a people have always lacked these elements, which is why they are powerless people. But these cultural attributes; they could be acquired...The theoretical position implied in Bankim's discussion – and this is a position which recurs in much of his writings involves, then, the following line of reasoning: 1) force or power is the basis of the state; 2) the liberty or subjection of a nation is ultimately a question of force or power; 3) but power is not something that is determined by material (environmental or technological) conditions; and 4) power can be acquired by cultivation of appropriate nationalistic cultural values.”¹⁶

The six systems of Indian philosophy (*sad-darsana*), of which Sankhya is the oldest, accept the authority of the Veda. Indian philosophy was more concerned with ‘direct, immediate and intuitive vision of Reality, the actual perception of Truth’.¹⁷ But for Bankim, his study of Sankhya showed him that it had nothing to offer on power politics. Bankim had his own interpretation and understanding of the concept of ‘power’. According to him,

this concept is missing in the Sankhya philosophy, which was other-worldly and was aimed at *moksha* or emancipation. Thus, “Bankim asserts that Hindus, or in some cases Indians, failed to develop a sense of political nationalism and resistance against foreign invaders, because of their other-worldly asceticism. His positive doctrine, naturally, was to look for a principle of this-worldly asceticism, particularly an asceticism of action”.¹⁸

Bankim found that Sankhya philosophy lacked in an expression of power. Such critique of Sankhya, in turn, has been reviewed by other scholars. Roddam Narasimha, for one, calls attention to how Bankim has “denounced *samkhya* philosophy for emphasizing the value of knowledge for salvation (*mukti*), rather than for power as the West had done.”¹⁹ Narasimha quotes Vinay Lal who says that:

“As Bankim expressed it in a concise formula, ‘Knowledge is power’: that is the slogan of Western civilization. ‘Knowledge is salvation’ is the slogan of Hindu civilization. Bankim attributes Hindus’ presumed other-worldliness and fatalism to Samkhya philosophy, whose goal was liberation [comes] from knowledge (Kaplia’s *Samkhya-sutra* 3.23; +c?), and comparing it with identification of knowledge with power made famous by Francis Bacon in the *Novum Organon*.”²⁰

Bankim probably realised that the quest of any philosophy is “power”, and not liberation, salvation or *moksha*. For Bankim, a disastrous consequence of mutual affiliation between religion and philosophy “was the result of its

uniform display of a tendency to support the authority of the Vedas. God himself could be denied, but not the authority of the Vedas.... The Sankhya denies that the Vedas are the work of a Divine author, for it denies the existence of a God.”²¹

What was essentially problematic from Bankim’s viewpoint was what he saw as Indian passivity. Narasingha P. Sil’s work has detailed the thinking of Bankim, and Bankim’s embarrassment of what he made out of the discourse in Indian passivity. Sil writes:

“Bankim... effortlessly (was) ridiculing in his writings the passive and submissive posture of the babus toward their colonial employers. For instance, in one story he presents a dialogue between the opium-addict Kamalakanta Chakravarti and a bumble bee (Bhramar Babaji), in which the latter makes the bold observation: ‘I am telling you the truth, Kamalakanta, I am through with your whining [ghyanghyanani] people. Look at me, a little creature, I just do not buzz all the time, I gather honey also and even sting when necessary. You neither know how to get honey nor how to sting—you only whine. No work, only complaining all the time like a weeping lass. Slow down on speeches and get to work—then you will succeed.’”²²

KAUTILYA’S ARTHASHASTRA

Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* was composed in the 4th century BC. It is the oldest and most exhaustive treatise on statecraft and political science or a ‘science of wealth/power’.

Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* has a highly nuanced and pragmatic understanding of power. In the text, power (*shakti*) is theorised at three integrated levels. First is *mantra shakti* (power of counsel and diplomacy); then *prabhav shakti* (the power of an army and treasury); and third is *utsah shakti* (personal energy and drive).

At the heart of Bankim’s critique of Sankhya is that it is “soft”. Kautilya, for his part, emphasises more on the reflective nature of Sankhya philosophy, and less on its “softness” or its preoccupation with the attainment of *moksha* (salvation).

By the time Bankim was on his literary journey towards the end of the 19th century, scholars were yet to rediscover the final text of Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*. That would take place later. In 1905, the historian, and librarian at Mysore Government Oriental Library, R Shamasastri compiled and consolidated the text of Kautilya,²³ which would take the world of Indology and political science by storm. It was a most fitting response to the preeminent nationalist authors of that time, such as Benoy Kumar Sarkar²⁴ and K P Jayaswal,²⁵ who set out to “prove” especially to the colonial British—who were understandably the main proponents of the specious theory of Indians being “other-worldly”—that India has foundational concepts of power politics.

For this discussion what is important to note is that all the attributes of political science, statecraft, warcraft, diplomacy and government were not part of or the aim of the six schools of Indian philosophy or *Darshan shastra*. During the time of Bankim, to look for

political concepts of power in them may have been due to non-availability of the text such as Kautilya's Arthashastra.²⁶

In Book 1, Chapter 2, Section 1, Kautilya in sutra 1.2.10 foregrounds the importance of *anvikshiki* – the logic of science and debate – and writes that “Sankhya, Yoga and Lokayata – these constitute philosophy.”²⁷ *Anvikshiki* got bifurcated and was treated as two subjects, viz. the soul, and the theory of reason. In his seminal work, *A History of Indian Logic: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern* (1920), Satis Chandra Vidyabhusana observed that Kautilya focused only on *hetu*, or theory of reason, and did not incorporate the soul or *Atma-vidya*, which is now part of Indian philosophy called *Darshan*.²⁸ Surely Kautilya did not have anything to do with soul and emancipation/salvation or *vairagya*, which is the end result of Sankhya in his mind. Kautilya goes a step further and includes Lokayata, which is not other-worldly. The term Lokayata means *lokesu ayata* (prevalent among common people) and is a materialist philosophy.²⁹

It is likely that Bankim was not conversant—as was the rest of India—with Kautilya's powerful text on power and statecraft. Perhaps Bankim was searching for an explanation and reason for the subjugation of India by a foreign power. To be sure, Bankim succeeded in enthusing the people with a spirit of nationalism, principally through his song *Vande Mataram*.

This is why there is a need to revisit the charge made by Bankim against Sankhya—that it is “soft” and to be blamed for India's subjugation by a colonial power.

COMPARING POWER AND NATIONALISTIC CULTURAL VALUES OF KAUTILYA

The normative setting of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is the political unification of a common cultural Indian subcontinent. The aim of *Arthashastra* is twofold. First, it seeks to show how the ruler should protect his territory. This protection (*palana*) refers principally to the administration of the state. Second, it shows how territory should be acquired. The end which the *Arthashastra* has in view is *yogakshema* (protection of what is acquired) and *rakshana* (protection of subjects). The application of power is emphasised across the text by way of its three variations: namely, *mantrashakti* (power of counsel and diplomacy), *prabhavashakti* (power of army and treasury), and *utsahashakti* (power, *personal energy*).

Each constituent element of the state needs to be strong. Kautilya conceptualises the state as possessing a set of seven functions/constituent elements or *prakrtis* in priority. These are the *svamin*, king; *amatya*, ministers and structure of administration including bureaucracy; *janapada / rastra*, territory, fertile with agriculture, mines, forest and pastures, water resources and communication system for trade and the people; *durga*, fortifications, cities, urban areas, infrastructure; *kosa*, treasury; *danda or bala*, military and police; and *mitra*, allies.

A close reading of Bankim's work shows that he was unaware of the concepts of power as studied in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. After all, the concepts of “power” in Indic traditions only became known widely when the

nationalistic scholars learned about Kautilya following the rediscovery of his work in 1905.

At the same time, there are certain latent meanings in Kautilya's philosophy that can be discerned in what Bankim had in mind. Bankim was conveying not only a European post-Enlightenment thought or western inspired thought, but an idea that is close to what Kautilya had in his aphorism. Bankim had in mind, what we know today as kinetic impact of power. He "even posited (in an imaginative interpretation of the career and character of Krishna) that physical force (*bahubal*) is superior to the power of intellect, truth, and justice...especially in politics."³⁰ With hindsight reinforced by the contemporary study of Kautilya, clearly this concept of *bahubal* of Bankim has a proximity to Kautilya's *Prabhav Shakti*.

Be that as it may, very few may be aware of the reason why Bankim was heavy-handed in his critique of Sankhya. Today, however, there is greater knowledge of the text of Kautilya's

Arthashastra, with its concepts and vocabulary accessible in the open domain. For Bankim, in the absence of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* text he saw the problem of other-worldliness residing in Sankhya. For Kautilya in 4th century BC, as well as for current scholarship, Sankhya is a tool for reflective and rationalist thinking in the service of statecraft and use of power (*shakti*). On changing old ideas for new ones Bankim famously had written in his introduction to his work *Krishnacharitra*:

"In my life, I have changed my views in various matters – who doesn't? Change of views is the result of advancement in age, expansion of the areas of enquiry and reflection. One who never changes his views is either infallible and gifted with divine knowledge or bereft of both intelligence and knowledge."³¹

It may not be too far-fetched to imagine that if Bankim were to return in this century, he will change his views and accept Sankhya the way it was theorised by Kautilya in *Anvikshiki*.[ORF](#)

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ENDNOTES

1. Without diacritical notations, Sankhya is also spelt as Samkhya. In this paper it will be spelt as Sankhya, except in some quotes where the alternative spelling is used.
2. Durgashankar Mukhopadhyay, "Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya and Sanskrit Literature" in *Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya: His Contribution to Indian Life and Culture*, ed. Ujjal Kumar Majumdar (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, May 2000), 104.
3. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Vande Mataram: The Biography of a Song* (New Delhi: Primus Books, revised edition, 2013).
4. Arpita Mitra, "Darśana, Overview of Six Schools", in *Hinduism and Tribal Religions, Encyclopedia of Indian Religions*, eds. Jain P., Sherma R., Khanna M. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2018) and Dr. Madan Mohan Agrawal, *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Chaukhamba Sanskrit Pratishtan, 2001).
5. Durgashankar Mukhopadhyay, "Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya and Sanskrit Literature" in *Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya: His Contribution to Indian Life and Culture*, ed. Ujjal Kumar Majumdar (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, May 2000), 115-116.
6. Partha Chatterjee, "Chapter 3 The Moment of Departure: Culture and Power in the Thought of Bankimchandra" in *National Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 54-84.
7. Ibid., 56.
8. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Lokayata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1959), 363.
9. M. Hiriyanna, "Sankhya-Yoga" in *Essentials of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995, first published 1948), 106.
10. M. Hiriyanna, "The Samkhya", in *The Philosophies, The Cultural Heritage of India*, ed. Haridas Bhattacharyya, Volume III (Belur Math: Ramakrishna Mission, 2013), 41.
11. "Chapter VIII Religion", *The Gazetteer of India*, Indian Union, Vol One, *Country and People* (Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1965), 432.
12. Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990), 278.
13. Ujjal Kumar Majumdar, ed. *Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya: His Contribution to Indian Life and Culture* (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, May 2000).
14. Arabinda Poddar, "Bankimchandra as Humanist", in *Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya: His Contribution to Indian Life and Culture*, ed. Ujjal Kumar Majumdar (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, May 2000), 95.
15. Partha Chatterjee, "Chapter 3 The Moment of Departure: Culture and Power in the Thought of

Bankimchandra” in *National Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 54-56.

16. Ibid.,57-58.
17. Chandradhar Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 13 as quoted in Arpita Mitra, “Darśana, Overview of Six Schools”, in *Hinduism and Tribal Religions, Encyclopedia of Indian Religions*, eds. Jain P., Sherma R., Khanna M. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2018).
18. Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalistic Discourse in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995),153.
19. Roddam Narasimha, “The Chequered Histories of Epistemology and Science” (Bangalore: Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research and National Institute of Advanced Studies, nd),4. Narasimha has based this observation on Vinay Lal’s *The History of History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 43,72 who attributes it to Partha Chatterjee, *National Thought and the Colonial World*,56-57.
20. Roddam Narasimha, “The Chequered Histories of Epistemology and Science” at endnote 15. This is based on Vinay Lal, *The History of History*, ibid.
21. *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay*, “Buddhism and the Sankhya philosophy”, *Calcutta Review*, 53 (1871), 106:191-203.
22. Narasingha P. Sil, “Bande Mataram: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s nationalist thought revisited”, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, XXV, 1 (2002):127. Sil quotes from *Bankim Rachanabali* [Collected Works of Bankim], ed. Jogesh C. Bagal, 3 vols., Vol II:85.
23. R. Shamasastri, *Kautilya’s Arthashastra* (Mysore: Mysore Printing and Publishing House, Eighth Edition, 1967).
24. See B.K. Sarkar, “ The German Translation of the Kautilyan *Arthashastra*: Meyer’s Humanism”, in P. Mittal and Geeta Dua compiled, *Kautilya Arthashastra: Collection of Articles from the Indian Historical Quarterly, Indian Antiquary, Indian Culture, and Calcutta Review*, in Two Volumes (Delhi: Originals, 2010); Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *The Positive Background of Hindu Sociology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985, first published 1937); Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *The Political Institutions and Theories of the Hindus : A Study of Comparative Politics* (Calcutta: Chuckerverty, Chatterjee & Co Ltd, 1939); Benoy Kumar Sarkar “ Some Basic Ideas of Political Thinking in Ancient India” in *The Cultural Heritage of India, Volume II – Itihasa, Puranas, Dharma and Other Sastras*(Belur Math: Ramakrishna Mission, 2013) 509-529; Benoy Kumar Sarkar, “Hindu Theory of International Relations”, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol.13, No.3(August 1919): 400-414; and Benoy Kumar Sarkar, “ The Hindu Theory of the State”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol 36, No. 1 (March 1921): 79-90.
25. See Kashi Prasad Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity: A Constitutional History of India in Hindu Times, (Parts I and II)* (Bangalore: Bangalore Printing and Publishing Company Limited, second edition, 1943, first published 1936).

26. Now a critical, updated and authoritative text with commentary by RP Kangle of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is widely available. See R.P. Kangle, *The Kautiliya Arthashastra, Part 1: Sanskrit Text with a Glossary, Part 2: Translation with Critical and Explanatory Notes, Part 3: A Study* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, Second Edition, Bombay University, 7th Reprint, 2010). Another recent addition is Patrick Olivelle, King, *Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kautilya's Arthashastra, A New Annotated Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
27. R.P. Kangle, *The Kautiliya Arthashastra, Part 2: Translation with Critical and Explanatory Notes* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, Second Edition, Bombay University, 7th Reprint, 2010),6.
28. Satis Chandra Vidyabhusana, *A History of Indian Logic: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Schools* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, first Indian edition, 1920, reprint 2010), 5-7.
29. Mrinal Kanti Gangopadhyay, "The Lokayata School", in *Lokayata Philosophy: A Fresh Appraisal*, ed. Subuddhi Charan Goswami (Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, March 2010),1.
30. Narasingha P. Sil, "Bande Mataram: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's nationalist thought revisited", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, XXV, 1 (2002): 128. Sil quotes from *Bankim Rachanabali* [Collected Works of Bankim], ed. Jogesh C. Bagal, 3 vols., Vol II: 493, 503.
31. As quoted by Arun Kumar Basu, "Bankimchandra and Contemporary Western Thinkers" in *Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya: His Contribution to Indian Life and Culture*, ed. Ujjal Kumar Majumdar (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, May 2000),23.



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