



The Making of the Maker: The Figure of Krishna in Bankimchandra's *Krishnacharitra*

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Abstract

The movement against colonial supremacy in India, from the days of its origin, emphasized self-determination. The earliest of the Indian nationalist leaders—the intelligentsia of colonial India—had to assert an ‘original’ identity while reacting against colonialism. Assertion of the Self was the only way to counter the intellectual, cultural and political threat posed by colonialism. This new Self had to be powerful, confident, assertive, grand and greater than the colonizer. Emphasizing the belief of a glorious and ancient ‘Indian’ civilization was one of the ways in which this challenge was met. The idea of an ancient and once glorious India brought a symbolic value of resilience with it. A primordial Indian civilization became an irresistible fantasy for the early Indian nationalists. They believed that the Indian nation is a given and therefore their nationality is predestined. However, this India that was imagined (at least to an extent) but believed to have been rediscovered was unmistakably a Hindu civilization.

Keywords: Krishna, Bankimchandra, Krishnacharitra, Krishnacharita, Bankim Chandra

Most of the leaders in the forefront of nationalistic articulations during the nineteenth century were Hindus who considered themselves as the ‘natural heirs’ to the Indian cultural legacy. They treated Sanskrit texts as “the main source of information and knowledge in understanding how the subcontinent’s society was/is constituted and thus how it ought to be constituted in the

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future" (Aloysius, 1997, p. 133). The Indian intelligentsia's efforts to recast the Indian nation in religious terms had to revolve around the texts and values which are central to Hinduism such as the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Gita and the *Dharma Sastras*. The works of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-94) such as *Krishnacharitra* (1886/1892), *Dharmatattva* (1888) and *Srimadbhagavadgita* (1901) belong to this phase of nationalism which aimed at redefining the national self with religious overtones. Bankim's project, however, makes use of western and Indian cultural paradigms resulting in a synthesis which is unacknowledged. This synthesis is at the heart of the national discourse of Bankim that emerges from cultural self-assertion which, ironically enough, does not involve a complete rejection of the British. Ambiguities of this sort reveal the internal ambivalence in Bankim: he is uneasy with the very tradition that he wishes to defend and recognizes that the Hindu tradition can be defended only by interrogating it and by cleansing it. The duality of faith and reason in Bankim also is a result of such an ambivalence placing him in a peculiar position and, as noted by Sudipta Kaviraj (1995), allowing him to be flexible even as he is aware of the internal problems his arguments have.

Non-fictional writings of Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-94) produced in the later phase of his literary career show a characteristic ambiguity. All these works share similar discursive patterns even as they differ in their respective aims. The peculiar historical position of Bankim becomes clearer as we study these works as a whole. Thus, *Dharmatattva*, *Srimadbhagavadgita* and *Krishnacharitra* can be considered a trilogy. If the first two works explicate his theory of dharma and other related concepts, the last work attempts to 'demonstrate' this theory through a practical model namely, the life of Krishna¹. It is natural therefore, that there exist similarities between the hermeneutical strategies employed in all the three works. Nevertheless, *Krishnacharitra* has an additional agenda of establishing the historicity of Krishna. This essay attempts to study the process of construction of the figure of historical Krishna in this work.

Krishna, among the very many deities of his 'religion', was the most appealing one for Bankim. As his biographies tell us, 'Radhaballabh' – the deity that was worshiped in his home – was

very dear to Bankim during his childhood days (Raychaudhuri, 1988; Sen, 1993). The deity also enjoyed wide popularity in Bengal in general. However, this popular figure of Krishna that was available through the powerful *Vaisnava* cults was not an appealing one for the later Bankim. This Krishna was way too frivolous. As Sudipta Kaviraj (1995) points out, “a Krishna too familiar, too folkish for his [Bankim’s] liking, too obviously invested, though lovingly, with the frailties of a mundane eroticism” (p. 78). Moreover such a figure of a deity, Bankim thought, would make him and the tradition that worships him vulnerable to the attacks of the European scholars keen to establish the savagery of the Orient.

Bankim asks “How do they [believers] accept their god was a butter-stealer as a baby and a womanizer in his youth and as an adult he deceived men like Dronacharya? Critics of Hinduism say that such unscientific approach to religion has only made the followers of Hinduism undependable and dishonest as a race” (as cited in Shome, 2008, p. 19). It was a necessity for Bankim to present a new Krishna who was not indecent or even playful for this meant the supreme ideal of the Hindus is frivolous and licentious. Bankim attempted to recast the figure of Krishna in a new light. The result of such an attempt is *Krishnacharitra*.

In this work, Krishna emerges not only as a plausible form of a deity but also as a historical figure – the ‘real’ Krishna. Krishna in *Krishnacharitra* is no more a folk hero, instead he emerges as a classical figure: “he is transformed from a loveable popular figure of eroticism, excess, transgression, playfulness, a subject of both admiration and admonition, to a classical figure – calm, poised, rational, perfect, irreproachable” (Kaviraj, 1995, p. 91). The Krishna figure that Bankim wanted was more human than divine, devoid of superhuman qualities. He describes Krishna as a “multifaceted but balanced character who lived the life of a normal but a very bright human being. He was down to earth and a man of the world. When duty demanded, he punished the wicked to protect the good” (as cited in Shome, 2008, p. 85). To this he later adds, “I personally call Sri Krishna an ideal human being because in analyzing his character so far I have found him to be knowledgeable, brave, accomplished, hardworking, dutiful, kind, forgiving and one who

sincerely followed Dharma and the laws of the society” (as cited in Shome, 2008, p. 94).

Bankim’s agenda in *Krishnacharitra* was to portray a Krishna figure modelled on reason, logic and a practical approach. Such a portrayal closely followed of “humanistic” ideal that was easily available to him. Bankim, it has been observed, recasts Krishna on the model of John Robert Seeley’s Jesus Christ² (Halbfass, p. 244; Harder, p. 172). Similarly Tapan Raychaudhuri (1988) points out that Buckle and Lecky were two chief mentors of his historical enquiries (p. 140). Thus with a set of seemingly empirical tools, Bankim sets out to segregate the most ‘reliable’ parts of Krishna’s life from the popular, often exaggerated and therefore ‘unreliable’ myths. Somehow Bankim decides that the Mahabharata contains the ‘real’ life of Krishna:

. . . we have reasons to claim that the Mahabharata contains some history. And now, my job is to draw a character sketch of Sri Krishna based on that historical content of the Mahabharata. For this, I will select only those portions of the Mahabharata, which are convincingly historical and from those portions alone will select the biographical material about Krishna. (As cited in Shome, 2008, p. 26).

And for this purpose Bankim divides the great epic into three layers according to his convenience:

The first layer is constructed by a skeletal story, which is more or less a historical document. The second layer is the elaborate version of the skeletal story where actual events are exaggerated for dramatic effects. The third layer consists of completely new stories added to the main theme. (As cited in Shome, 2008, p. 27).

Having divided the Mahabharata into three layers, Bankim goes on to reject everything in it that presents an impediment to his project, as an interpolation. In fact, Bankim towards the end of his work declares, “a critic’s work . . . must be arranged in two divisions: demolishing the age-old myths . . . [and] reconstructing the truth” (as cited in Shome, 2008, p. 170).

The principal casualty of this bowdlerization is the figure of Radha for she was at the centre of eroticism associated with Krishna. Bankim rejects the entire machinery of the Gopis, along with Radha, as an adulteration infiltrated by Vaisnavism to counter the popularity of Tantricism³. He says:

Dissatisfied with the *Vaishnava* theory of *Advaitavada*, many devotees turned to *Tantrika* faith where men and women could mix freely. The Vaishnavas had to do something to compete with the Tantrikas' popularity. What they did was clever. They picked up the substance of *Tantrika* theory and infused it into their own religion. The author of *Brahmavaivārtha Purana* revived or rejuvenated *Vaishnava Dharma* by creating Radha and making her as important as *Prakriti* of the Tantrikas. (As cited in Shome, 2008, p. 46).

Nevertheless, Bankim's own strategy of rejecting the figure of Radha as a later interpolation is strikingly similar to the alleged scheme of the Vaisnavas. Radha is rejected by him so as to counter the perceived threat posed by Christianity and its champions. Moreover, Bankim's project of recasting Krishna borrows historicity from the west and infuses it into a culture whose concept of history is vague and peculiar, if not non-existent. Krishna is created here through a thorough process that varies from strict rejection to subtle reconstruction.

Eventually Krishna is made to emerge as a better ideal than Christ or even Buddha. This process of reconstruction of Krishna therefore was of great significance and indeed was a reconstruction of what we today call Hinduism. For Bankim, such process of reconstruction, or to use a word that Bankim himself may have used—renewal, of a religion was quite natural. As it has been pointed out by Amiya Sen (2008), Bankim rejected the idea of an unchanging religion, frozen in time (p. 79). The idea of 'natural' evolution of religions was so crucial for Bankim that, under his custody, it even becomes one of the "natural functions" of the Almighty: "apart from creation, preservation, maintenance and destruction there is another *natural* function⁴ in the world—improvement" (as cited in Kaviraj, 1995, p. 86, italics added).

Thereby Bankim naturalizes and humanizes god. A 'reformed' deity with reformed obligations and qualities—a dynamic Being!

Bankim held a dynamic notion of religion. A strong religion, he thought, is the one that accommodates modifications according to the intellectual and cultural evolution of a society. Bankim saw his time as a period that demanded much more than a renewal of the religious ideas. It required a new model capable of reconfiguring the religious system to accommodate the binary of reason and faith. His Krishna was just the Ideal Man, resolutely rooted in tradition and history. He was a symbol of what a modern Hindu should aspire to be. The paradox of the entire project, which Bankim was probably aware of, is that an ideal, which by definition is unattainable, turns out to be a personal god. Thus Bankim recommends *bhakti* to his fellow Hindus as the right means to approach this new avatar of the familiar deity.

The actual project of Bankim, therefore, is to create a new form of 'religion' which lays emphasis on *bhakti* and whose most important deity—Krishna—would be a human figure with supreme wisdom and a personification of the nineteenth century rationalism. Harder (2001) maintains, "the formulation of bhakti-oriented theism—which Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay calls 'neo Puranism'⁵—with Krishna as the personal god is the main purpose of *Dharmmatattva* and *Krsnacaritra*" (p. 199). Through *Krishnacharitra*, Bankim tries to provide us with a practical demonstration of sorts of the dharma that he expounds in *Dharmmatattva* and *Shrimadbhagavadgita* making it "a logical conclusion" to the project that began with the latter works (Sen, 2008, p. 87). All that is achieved by *Krishnacharitra* could have done only after providing a strong historical underpinning for Krishna, for history is one of the principal ways of creating and recreating the self.

Amiya Sen (2008) draws our attention to an interesting fact that Bankim, even as he tries to liberate Krishna from the labyrinth of Puranic narratives, remains within the arena of the Puranas: "*Krishna Charitra* may justly be regarded as a neo-Puranic work inasmuch as it seeks to relocate within a new interpretative framework, a figure widely celebrated in the medieval Puranas. The concept of an avatar and of *lila*, categories which Bankim employs, albeit guardedly, are again Puranic in their origin and

character" (p. 91). The painstaking process of constructing a new Krishna is riddled with similar incoherencies which reveal to us an author who is terribly uneasy with the very tradition he wishes to defend.

The uneasiness of Bankim originates from the fact that the Hindu traditions do not bother itself with relative truth. Truth here is more or less a flexible concept. It is multifaceted and is never one-dimensional. The emphasis on *the* truth by the Europeans served them well in their mission of colonialism. 'Facts' about civilizations could create a hierarchy of values. Creation of such exploitable 'facts' was at the heart of several colonial narratives. It is in this context that Bankim attempts to establish the historicity of Krishna. He first removes Krishna from the complex web of different traditions of Hinduism and their versions of the deity. Bankim then locates him on the 'firm' ground of historicity which is informed by western approaches to truth and reason. This deterministic approach converts the popular Krishna into a universal figure—an ideal human being who serves as a model of righteousness. He is now a figure who could serve as a model for the entire humankind of all periods and cultures. For this purpose Bankim uses empiricism and rationality. However, he becomes very inconsistent with himself by his almost puritanical spirit. To establish the historicity of the Krishna figure, the mystical aspect of the Gopis has been discarded. This pruning is almost a ruthless act for the Vaishnavism of Bankim's Bengal considered the machinery of Gopis an inseparable part of Krishna's life and a symbol of mystical beauty associated with the lord's early life. Krishna under Bankim's supervision changes unrecognizably. Thus at the heart of Bankim's project there is apprehension. The Hindu tradition can be defended only by refuting it, by cleansing it. Bankim's *Krishnacharitra* is an apology. It exhibits simultaneously guilt and confidence that is bordering on arrogance⁶. It is a defense filled with remorse reflecting the anxiety within.

The project of creating the 'universal' Ideal involves the means of 'universal' western rationality. In Bankim's understanding, only the procedure based on universally acceptable principles can construct universally acceptable Ideal figure. It is hardly surprising that Bankim's Krishna acts according to the ethical patterns

extracted from Positivism, Utilitarianism and so on, since they are considered to be universal by his maker – the poet.

Nevertheless, this is not a one-way process. Bankim situates himself between two cultural systems and engages with each of them in a confrontation where the parameters of one system are applied to the other in an effort to mediate between the two. In other words, Bankim de-contextualizes each set of parameters so as to arrive at a mutually acceptable cultural system with synthesized ethics. Naturally, this confrontation makes it impossible for him to belong completely to any of these systems.

Ironically, these very attempts situate Bankim in a territory which is a blend of the two cultural systems. As a historical coincidence, owing to the failure of Brahma Samaj in assuming an indigenous look, an “intellectual vacuum” had been created in Bengal. To quote Amiya Sen (1993), “the Brahma Samaj was open to twin charges of spiritual defection and denationalization and an intellectual vacuum had thus been created for those who were willing to separate the essence of Hinduism from mere ritual or superstition . . .” (p. 85). This is what enables Bankim to attribute novel meanings to contemporary Hinduism and then call it *the* Hinduism. By virtue of his upbringing in a high caste Hindu family and the western education he received, he was probably placed in a rare and peculiar position where he could hope to transcend, at least hermeneutically, the boundary between the binary of insider-outsider⁷.

One could say this minimal space of transgression was the only space that truly belonged to Bankim. One wonders if Bankim saw himself neither as a complete insider nor an outsider to either of these traditions. This ambivalence shaped his creative genius – inspiring a synthesizer in him and also compelling him to make inevitable but attractive mistakes. This liminality is clearly reflected in his role of a critic. Neither in *Srimadbhagavadgita* nor in *Krishnacharitra* does Bankim assume completely the role of a traditional critic – the *vyakyanakara*, nor is he a critic in the western tradition. This critic is a breed apart, quite literally. Negotiations of this sort are ample in Bankim’s works.

Many such negotiations are often violent and yield results that are not entirely convincing. The hermeneutical methodologies of Bankim are inconsistent with the concluding results. His choice of emphasizing reason in *Krishnacharitra* itself presents a few logical inaccuracies. The whole project of establishing Krishna on a rational ground is profoundly inconsistent with his own emphasis on *bhakti*. In *Dharmatattva*, for instance, he says “a dharma without *bhakti* is an incomplete and inferior dharma⁸—so when there is no *bhakti* in Vedic dharma, then Vedic dharma is inferior” (as cited in Harder, 2001, p. 199). Similarly a traditional simpleminded devotee is considered superior to a western educated Indian (Harder, 2001, p. 49 & p. 60). *Bhakti*, for Bankim, was a crucial element in worship as it is a mark of one’s belief in the divinity of Krishna even as he remains firmly as a historical deity. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that Bankim considered reason to be an indispensable part in the intellectual make up of a society. Yet faith—which is placed beyond the territory of reason and which defies reason—is at the core of the theism that Bankim approves of. Inadequacies of this sort reveal a duality of reason and faith in Bankim. Amiya Sen (1988) shows how this duality was reflected in his life and views on general issues:

As a creative writer and a thinking man, he appears to have been constantly at odds with the mildly conservative to right of the centre social values he consciously accepted. At the same time he never quite lived down his cultural conditioning as a Bengali Hindu. His gut reactions on questions such as the remarriage of the widows were hence often out of tune with his rationalist perceptions. The conflicts in his thoughts and personality were at many levels and had multiple facets.” (p. 132).

The problems in the hermeneutical framework that Bankim uses make *Krishnacharitra* a failure for some, but it is a spectacular failure nevertheless. As Amiya Sen (1993) observes, “it was Bankim’s eagerness to create simultaneously God in a dual framework of reason and faith, science and supra-consciousness that ultimately led to seek the impossible—to prove that Krishna was God transformed into man and also to prove alongside that he

was a historical figure” (p. 114). In spite of inconsistencies in this ambitious project, it is hard to dismiss it as a complete failure. It must have indeed been very challenging for Bankim to reconcile two warring aspects of his personality namely rationality and faith. Most of his non-fictional works attempt to arrive at some kind of a compromise between the two. As Amiya Sen (1993) maintains *Krishnacharitra* was as far as Bankim could go in finding a solution to his own deep seated problems: “. . . *Krishnacharitra* also represents the flowering of his religious life, the summit of his lifelong spiritual quest” (p. 118).

At the heart of Bankim’s intellectual burden is this dichotomy of reason and faith. Even his best shot at resolving this dichotomy – *Krishnacharitra* – ends up revealing the complexity of the whole ordeal and never really offers an uncluttered answer free of intellectual compromises. The nature of these compromises become very clear even with a simple (consciously reductive) comparison between his two works *Krishnacharitra* and *Srimadbhagavadgita*. Bankim regards the Gita, says Harder (2001), “as a divine utterance, but only on a level of subtextual content; as a text, by contrast, it belongs entirely to the human sphere” (p. 172). In Bankim’s view both *Srimadbhagavadgita* and popular myths, as texts, contain interpolations, inconsistencies and incoherencies. Yet their message is divine and therefore ultimate, whereas their medium is not. Bankim decides that the ‘essential’ aspects of these texts are not for serious scrutiny but for explanation (read expansion) and reinterpretation. On the other hand, the medium – the text itself – is for thorough scrutiny and, when convenient, for rejection. However, it is the ‘blindness’ of *bhakti* that decides which aspects of a text are for explanation and expansion, and rationality plays its part in deciding which aspects should be scrutinized and sometimes discarded. In the case of *Srimadbhagavadgita*, whose concepts are elaborated and expanded, faith plays a significant role; whereas in *Krishnacharitra*, whose principal aspect is the establishment of historicity, reason becomes predominant.

The fact that Bankim employs such hermeneutical strategies even when they lead to anomalies indicates his desperation in creating a new field of indigenous theology which would not be vulnerable any more. Calling *Krishnacharitra* a “master narrative”, Sudipta

Kaviraj (1995) says, “theology was actually a political field and was the subtle point and preparation of a great theatre of imaginary praxis” (p. 102). Bankim situates himself within a tradition that allows multiple authors and grants a certain degree of legitimacy to his project. Bankim’s awareness of the fact that he is a part of a much larger discourse gives his project a greater force and purpose. The hidden agenda of the project of ‘reclaiming’ the supposedly authentic Krishna of Hinduism is to convert him into a political icon. As Amiya Sen (2008) has put it succinctly “the idea of a God guiding the destinies of a nation and producing a bonding of hearts by His omnipresence is tacitly suggested in *Krishna Charitra*” 9 (p. 117).

Bankim’s emphasis on historicity also comes from a similar awareness that history was the ground on which political battles were fought. The nineteenth century Bengal woke up suddenly to a frenzy of historical studies, a “hunger for history”¹⁰. Even fiction writers, of whom Bankim was the most prominent, started writing historical novels¹¹. Serious historians like Romesh Chandra Dutt, the author of *Economic History of India*, also tried their hands at historical novels¹².

History was a way of talking about the collective self and creating one’s identity. Especially Bankim, as noticed by Sudipta Kaviraj (1995), was a pioneer in seeing history-writing as a narrativizing act (p. 184). The history of Krishna was a narrative of what the self would like to see in itself. The historical Krishna was a way of creating a convenient past in the present. It is his life history that makes him an ideal—an imaginary ideal for the collective self. *Krishnacharitra* acquired history. As Kaviraj (1995) puts it, history was a “right to the narrative” (p. 109). The historicity of Krishna meant that Hinduism indeed was a rational religion much before the west could even conceive the idea of reason. However, defeating Christianity or Buddhism was not the only objective. Bankim went beyond such confrontation. This was also an attempt to change the way Hindus thought about their own culture—“a self-presentation of Hindu civilization, what Hinduism has thought of itself” (Kaviraj, 1995, p. 80). As Halbfass (1990) argues, the Krishna of *Krishnacharitra* becomes “the very epitome of Hindu self-awareness” (p. 244). The construction of Krishna was also a

construction of the Hindu self and the Hindu nation. Bankim says, “. . . we find that instead of reformation, his [Krishna’s] aim was socio-political regeneration. He preached righteousness and tried to establish a political system based on righteousness” (as cited in Shome, p. 79). Amiya Sen (1993) observes, “Bankim wrote in exasperation clearly realizing that a nation had to be created at the level of consciousness before it became an empirical reality” (p. 123). This profoundly significant process of constructing a narrative of the self had several logical flaws reflecting the ambivalence of its author. Bankim is ambivalent precisely because of the profound significance of such a process.

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Endnotes

- ¹However, chronologically *Krishnacharitra* (1886) precedes *Dharmatattva* (1888) and *Srimadbhagavadgita* (1886-8/1901).
- ² John Robert Seeley's *Ecce Homo: A Survey of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ* tries to look at Jesus Christ as a historical person and subjects his life, including the Holy Bible, to rational scrutiny. This work made a deep impression on Bankim.
- ³ The rejection of the machinery of Gopis as an interpolation has its justification for the Mahabharata does not mention the Gopis: "the epic ... does not say a word about the gopis, though it refers to Krishna's early upbringing among the cowherds. The incidental references to the godhood of Krishna in the epic have also to be regarded as interpolations in the main narrative" (Chaudhuri, 1979, p. 260 & p. 273). I am indebted to one of the reviewers of this paper for pointing this out to me.
- ⁴ Sudipta Kaviraj (1995) points out that the words "natural" and "function" are evolutionist (p. 180).
- ⁵ See Asit Kumar Banndyopadhyay's essay "Bankimchandra and Neo-Puranism" in *Bankimchandra Chatterjee Essays in Perspective*. Bhabatosh, C. (Ed.). (1994). New Delhi: Sahitya Academy.
- ⁶ The work is flooded with spiteful remarks on the European scholars. Such jibes only reflect bad temperament which makes the work, whose objectives include showing the magnanimity of the lord Krishna, slightly frivolous adding to the long list of internal contradictions. This was one of the criticisms leveled against the work. To quote Tagore's eloquent words:
 Unfortunately, Bankim also engages in many unnecessary confrontations while writing the book. We are deeply saddened by these quarrels. Bankim has written this book with a noble purpose in mind. To honour that purpose, he should have used ideas and words inspired by nobleness. Petty arguments and small-minded criticisms were bound

to disturb the steady and calm state of mind that his work demanded. Many of the arguments are made for magazines and periodicals. They are not suitable for a memorable work of paramount importance.

The author has used words like, 'foreign idiots', and has belittled western scholars in many passages. Firstly, what he has done is wrong in its basic principle. Secondly, it is absolutely unsuitable for a valuable book. Unnecessarily ill-treating someone in the presence of a great dignitary amounts to lowering that dignitary's position Bankim has done just that by getting agitated over his differences of opinion with the Europeans. (As cited in Shome, 2008, p. 195).

⁷ This position of Bankim is rare and peculiar historically, a position he shared with almost all Indian intellectuals of his time.

⁸ In fact, Bankim in *Srimadbhagavadgita* suggests that the Gita emphasizes the path of *bhakti* (*bhaktimarga*) and recommends it over the paths of wisdom (*jnana*) and action (*karma*).

⁹ In fact, Amiya Sen (2008) goes as far as to draw a parallel between the Krishna of Bankim and the divine visions witnessed by Sri Aurobindo in Alipore jail, arguing that the political icon – Krishna – acquires a "more evocative form" in Sri Aurobindo and even Bipin Chandra Pal (p. 117).

¹⁰ Sudipta Kaviraj's translation of Tagore's term "*itihسابubhuksa*" (Kaviraj, 1995, p. 120).

¹¹ In fact, the first Bengali novel of Bankim – *Durgesnandini* (1865) – is a historical novel.

¹² *Rajaput Jivan Sandhya* and *Maharashtra Jivan Prabhat* were written by Romesh Chandra Dutt.