

Article

# Ecce Homo – Behold the Human! Reading Life-Narratives in Times of Colonial Modernity

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**Abstract:** The essay explores Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Krishnacaritra*—published in 1886—the life of a humanised god, as engaged in cross cultural dialogues with John Robert Seeley's *Ecce Homo*, *Natural Religion*, and *The Expansion of England* in particular, and the broader European tendency of naturalising religions in general. It contends that the rise of historicised life writing genres in Europe was organically related to the demythologised, verifiable god-lives writing project. Bankimchandra's *Krishnacarita* is embedded within a dense matrix of nineteenth century Indian secular life writing projects and its projection of Krishna as a cultural icon within an incipient nationalist imagining. The essay while exploring such fraught writing projects in Victorian England and nineteenth century colonial Bengal, concludes that 'secularism' arrives as not as religion's Other but as its camouflaging in ethico-cultural guise. Secularism rides on the backs of such demystified god life narratives to rationalise ethico-culturally informed global empires.

**Keywords:** John Robert Seeley; Bankimchandra Chatterjee; natural religions; hagiography; auto/biography; Victorian Jesus; *carita* as genre; life narratives in colonial Bengal; *Krishnacaritra*; secularism

উপসংহারে বক্তব্য কৃষ্ণ [ ... ] মানুষী শক্তির দ্বারা কর্ম নির্বাহ করেন, কিন্তু তাহার চরিত্র অমানুষ<sup>১</sup> এই প্রকার মানুষী শক্তির দ্বারা অতিমানুষ চরিত্রের বিকাশ হইতে তাহার মনুষ্যত্ব বা ঈশ্বরত্ব অনুমিত করা বিধেয় কিনা তাহা পাঠক আপন বুদ্ধি বিবেচনা অনুসারে স্থির করিবেন<sup>২</sup> (বঙ্কিম চন্দ্র চট্টোপাধ্যায়, “কৃষ্ণচরিত্র”, সপ্তম খণ্ড: দ্বিতীয় পরিচ্ছেদ: উপসংহার; সম্পাদক: শ্রী ব্রজেন্দ্র নাথ বন্দোপাধ্যায়, শ্রী সজনী কান্ত দাস: কলিকাতা: বঙ্গীয়-সাহিত্য-পরিষদ, শ্রাবণ: ১৩৪৮: ৩১৬-১৭)

[The concluding statement is that Krishna [ ... ] uses human powers to perform his works but is nonhuman in nature. Whether or not a human being can draw upon his intellectual powers and thus evolve into a nonhuman, and whether or not it will indicate that person's human quality or divinity, is for readers, using of their particular intelligence, to conclude. (Chattopadhyay 1886, pp. 316–17)]

## 1. Introduction

*Ecce Homo: Behold the Human* is an ideological configuration that provides an interventionist point; it enables rereading Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Krishnacaritra* (Chattopadhyay 1886) as the 'life-narrative' of a humanised, historicised god, Śrī Krishna. It helps explore the text's<sup>1</sup> cross-cultural

<sup>1</sup> *Krishnacaritra* had two versions, one that Bankimchandra began publishing serially in his journal *Prachar* in 1884, and later brought out as book in 1886. It is the 1886 edition of *Krishnacaritra* that I refer to—this is the one that Bankim differentiated from the earlier 1884 version as being distinct as light is from darkness, and the one he authorised as being closest to his ideological stance. All references to *Krishnacaritra* are from the Banerjee and Das edited *Krishnacaritra of Bankim Satabarshiki Sangshkaran* (Bankim Centennial edition).

transactions with contemporary European god ‘lives’, particularly those that narrate the Christ figure<sup>2</sup>. Conceptually, it facilitates a perceiving of *Krishnacaritra*’s dialogic relation with the emergent life narratives—*carit*—genres in modern Indian languages in colonial India.

The essay is entitled *Ecce Homo* following Pontius Pilate’s use of the phrase in the Latin Vulgate translation of the *Bible* in John 19.5, as the Roman governor presents a scourged, lacerated, thorn-crowned Jesus Christ to a hostile crowd minutes before his crucifixion. The King James Version of the *Bible* translates the Latin phrase *Ecce Homo* as “Behold the Man”. A more gender inclusive translation reads as “Behold the Human”. The phrase (and the icon of a bleeding physically lacerated Christ) meant to mock Christ’s claims to divinity in the presence of an angry Judea is transformed into a symbol of profound piety, and a wonderment when faced with the paradox of Passion. *Ecce Homo* encapsulates the mystery and contradiction at the heart of Christian divinity that can participate in human forms and its sufferings while exceeding and glorifying them. It also encapsulates the mystery and glory of the human being, capable of a heroic ethicality that is, for all intents and purposes, divine.

That the German philosopher Fredrich Nietzsche would deploy this phrase to conceptually frame his biography, *Ecce Homo: Wie man wird, was man ist* (Behold the Man: How One Becomes What One Is, 1888), given the complex ideological configuration, is apposite. In this text, which contains his essays and poems, Nietzsche composes a strangely unfitted autobiography to describe his incredible intellectual achievements that render him dauntingly ‘divine’, even while admitting to his imminently decaying body and unhinged mind<sup>3</sup>.

John Robert Seeley’s highly controversial biography of Jesus Christ published in 1866, in Victorian England, demystifies the Christ figure, and celebrates him instead as a man who created a religious order. This conceptual paradox of a man who is regarded as god (or should it be the other way round?) is embraced in the name of Seeley’s book, *Ecce Homo: A Survey of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ*. Seeley’s text was left tantalizingly anonymous by its publisher, Robert Macmillan, as a marketing ploy. However, such a strategy was also intended to shield the author from the calumny that would inevitably issue from his intellectual and familial quarters for a harbouring of such unorthodox, Broad Church-like portrayals of a god<sup>4</sup>.

Bankimchandra’s reception of Seeley is a densely layered one, and its textured ramifications have hardly been addressed by scholars who call out Bankim’s ‘debts’ to Seeley. Bankim’s polemical works, *Krishnacaritra*, *Dharmatwa*, his *Letters to The Statesman* (under the pseudonym of Ram Chandra) debating Reverend Hastie’s attack on Hinduism<sup>5</sup>, his *Letters on Hinduism*, and his late novels, especially *Debi Chaudhurānī* (Chattopadhyay [1884] 1938) and *Sītārām* (Chattopadhyay [1886] 1941), constitute that dense matrix within which his transactions with Seeley, and the Romantic naturalisation of majoritarian religions, would be worked out. While Bankim repeatedly refers to Seeley’s *Natural Religion*—a sequel to *Ecce Homo*—in his *Letters on Hinduism*<sup>6</sup>, and quotes from the same (“The substance of religion is culture”) to underscore his argumentative thrust, he seldom refers to *Ecce Homo* directly. Bankim’s *Letters on Hinduism* abounds in direct quotations but also paraphrases Seeley’s ideas such as the “lofty instinct of Hinduism [ . . . ] is pre-eminently the religion of culture” (Chattopadhyay 1953, p. 246).

*Letters to Hinduism* is found unfinished in the third volume of Bankim’s works, and the volume’s editor, Jogeshchandra Bagal, situates the author’s unfinished English translation of his

<sup>2</sup> Seeley’s influence on Bankimchandra and especially that of *Ecce Homo* on *Krishnacaritra* has been mentioned by Eschmann (Eschmann 1974), Das (Das 1974), and King (King 2011), but these connections have not been worked out with any degree of detail or complexity.

<sup>3</sup> *Ecce Homo* was produced in 1844 and after which Nietzsche slid into debilitating conditions of paralysis and insanity.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Broad Church’ refers to a more liberal, moderate movement within the Anglican Church, as compared to the high church and low church groups in the nineteenth century. It was also defined as ‘broad’ as it was thought to be above partisan politics. Seeley, along with Thomas Arnold, Benjamin Jowett, S.T. Coleridge were associated with this movement.

<sup>5</sup> October 1886.

<sup>6</sup> *Bankim Rachanavali*, vol. iii, pp. 237–38.

novel, *Debi Chaudhurānī*, after this work. Such an editorial decision is appropriate for the Bankim novel that describes Hindu *anuśilan*, or Hinduism in everyday practice, in an avatar-like figure that assumes the female shape of Prafulla. That *Debi Chaudhurānī* quotes Seeley—“The substance of religion is culture”—epigraphically to frame its novelistic contents, is only apposite. The reason for Bankimchandra never directly referring to *Ecce Homo* was possibly because he would use the conceptual density of Seeley’s frame—*Ecce Homo*: behold the human—to recast the life of a man that was god, Śri Krishna. Neither does Bankim ever refer directly to Seeley’s philosophy of history in support of a proud British Empire—*The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures*, published in 1886 (Seeley 1886)—even though its contents would radically influence his *Krishnacaritra* and his last novel, *Sītārām*.

## 2. Writing God Lives: From Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* to the Victorian Jesus

Germane to a rereading of *Krishnacaritra* (and Bankimchandra admits to the same) is its situatedness within a veritable explosion of historicised ‘life-narratives’ of gods in the nineteenth century, and especially the ‘lives’ of the Victorian Jesus<sup>7</sup>. A ‘naturalised,’ historically verifiable Christ figure proliferates the nineteenth century European print world. The texts range from the highly controversial *Das Leben Jesu, Kritisch Bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 1835)<sup>8</sup> by David Strauss (Strauss 1892), to Ernest Renan’s *Vie de Jesus* (*Life of Jesus*, Renan 1863), John Robert Seeley’s *Ecce Homo: A Survey of the Life and Works of Jesus Christ* (1865), Frederic William Farrar’s *The Life of Christ* (Farrar 1893), and Reverend William Hanna’s *Life of Christ* (Hanna 1876)<sup>9</sup>. All the above-mentioned books were best sellers and attracted public attention in critique or admiration. For example, William Ewart Gladstone admired *Ecce Homo* enough to collate his essays on Seeley’s work, initially published in the journal *Good Words*, into a book entitled *On Ecce Homo* (Gladstone 1868). However, what has been somewhat less discussed is the generic form that these books assumed and the close connections between the rise of historiography as a scientific discipline and the life-writing genres in a Victorian world<sup>10</sup>.

Bankim’s *Krishnacaritra*, the ‘life’ of a man who is godlike, is also informed by the European Enlightenment obsession with the self and the emergence and popularity of auto/biographical genres. The British Romantic tradition of naturalizing religions and the scienticisation of Protestant Christianity is evident in the emergence of a flurry of studies such as William Paley’s *Natural Theology or Evidences of the Essence and Attributes of the Deity* (Paley 1809), George Wilson’s *Religio Chemicæ* (Wilson 1862), and T.B. Gallaudet’s *The Youth’s Book on Natural Theology* (Gallaudet 1883). Such a tradition (scienticising Christianity) coincided with the rise of biographical genres and the historicising of hagiographies. European life narratives, like other generic forms emerging at the juncture of modernity, were not culturally conceived entirely in terms of unprecedented rupture and newness, but in terms of recasting and carrying traces of one of the oldest and most respectable of European cultural forms—the narration of eminent or sacred ‘lives’. The narrators of such ‘lives’ that I could mention at this point are Hesiod, Thucydides and Plutarch. The modern auto/biography retains, even in a secular world, this fascination with heroic worthy lives to a substantial degree, with lives devoted to public service that are exemplary, and therefore near divine. I contend that the auto/biography as a distinct genre evolves in modern Europe at a juncture when older forms of life

<sup>7</sup> Refer to Ian Hesketh’s work entitled *The Victorian Jesus: Religion and the Cultural Significance of Anonymity* (Hesketh 2017), and its racy commentary on Macmillan’s publication strategies of occluding the author’s name (Hesketh 2012), and to Daniel Pals’ “The Reception of *Ecce Homo*” (Pals 1877).

<sup>8</sup> This was translated into English by Marian Evans or George Eliot in 1846 and created an intellectual furor, not unlike what happened after the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*.

<sup>9</sup> Hanna’s work is publicized in a Positivist, historicist fashion as “Written after William Hanna’s own personal visit to Palestine”.

<sup>10</sup> The idea of a seamless, ever expanding Victorian empire is peculiarly Seeley, and his historiographical ideology is informed by the same. Refer to the Duncan Bell edited *Victorian Visions of Global Order*.

narratives imbued with frankly hagiographical/adulatory intent are also being translated, recast, and read with unprecedented vigour. It is a juncture when distinctive national imaginaries are being forged, and life narratives are being founded within the same. This process is best appreciated in tracing the reception history of perhaps the most well-known of European life narratives, Plutarch's *Lives of Noble Greeks and Romans*, also popularly known as *Parallel Lives* because of Plutarch's narrating of eminent Greco-Roman lives in pairs<sup>11</sup>. The European interest in *Lives* from the seventeenth century onwards was predominantly ethical rather than historical as such fascination was predicated upon the book's ability to build character, reinforce a putative national imaginary, and strengthen the ethico-moral fabric of impressionable minds.

John Dryden introduced the word 'biography' for the first time in the English lexicon while lending his name as editor and translator in chief to *Plutarch's Lives: Translated from Greek by Several Hands (Dryden 1683)*<sup>12</sup>. That one as culturally preeminent as John Dryden was lending his name to the translation of *Lives* is indicative of a larger cultural desire to appropriate such genres—and their classical respectability—to inform the English national imaginary. The enormous influence that Plutarch's *Lives* wielded in Europe<sup>13</sup> in times of print modernity is borne out by the fact that the book was severally translated in the nineteenth century at the height of English imperial glory, and by academics as culturally central as Arthur Hugh Clough in 1859 (*Clough 1859*). Clough belonged to a revered circle of high culture gurus such as Benjamin Jowett and Mathew Arnold. English translations of Plutarch's *Lives* was included in reading/pedagogic courses of premier institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Arthur Quiller-Couch testifies that the reading of "a simple translation of a Greek book, Plutarch's *Lives*", swayed European minds and shaped ideologies to such an extent that it "made the French Revolution" possible and that "anyone who cares may assure himself by reading memoirs of that time" (*Quiller-Couch 1922*). The cultural belief that the reading of great lives serves a talismanic function, that such reading practices shape character (national and individual), and humanise (literally) societal beings, is best exemplified in Mary Shelley's narrative *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus (Shelley [1818] 1831)*. The Victor Frankenstein-created creature discovers within "a leathern portmanteau" three books, of which the second is Plutarch's *Lives*<sup>14</sup>. The contemporary reader is offered an acute insight into the influence of Plutarch's life-narratives on the best of European minds, given that Mary Shelley was the child of the finest of European intellectuals, literally and figuratively. A reading of *Frankenstein* offers an equally acute insight into the 'powers' of life-narratives to structure unformed minds, especially those of pre-human creatures, women and children! Victor Frankenstein's creature admits that, "Plutarch taught [him] high thoughts; he elevated [him] above the wretched sphere of [his] own reflections to admire and love heroes of past ages" and that "[he] felt the greatest ardour for virtue rise within [him]; and abhorrence for vice (*Shelley [1818] 1831*).

The creature recognizes that with the reading of Plutarch "perhaps [his] first introduction to humanity had been made" (*Shelley [1818] 1831*). The point about a new form of life narratives in enlightenment Europe being recast in terms of older assumptions alongside the retelling of secularised god lives need not be overemphasised. Exemplary secular life narratives are popular as they serve as cultural milestones and mark out the ethico-aesthetic directions of a national imaginary.

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<sup>11</sup> Originally belonging to the second century AD, the first edition came out in 1517 in Florence in Italy. Plutarch's *Lives* was translated in several European vernaculars, including French, German and English, and Thomas North's translation of *Lives* became the basis of many of Shakespeare's plays. The first English edition was printed by Jacob Tonson in 1688.

<sup>12</sup> Refer to Rebecca Nesvet's essay "Parallel Histories: Dryden's Plutarch and Religious Toleration" (*Nesvet 2005*, pp. 424–37) for more on this.

<sup>13</sup> Refer to Simon Goldhill's chapter on the reception of Plutarch in Europe in *Who Needs Greek: Contests in the Cultural History of Hellenism*.

<sup>14</sup> The two other books that Dr. Frankenstein's creature reads, to humanize itself, are Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.



### 3. Life Writing in Nineteenth Century Bengal: The Mutation of the *Carita* Genre

Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee 1993) and Tanika Sarkar (Sarkar 2014) are among some of the historians who seriously explore the emergence of life narrative genres in colonial Bengal. That life stories, variously described as *carit*, *jīban-carit*, *ātmajībani*, were developing into distinctive public genres in the modern Indian languages from about the middle of the nineteenth century in colonial India, and that the depiction of such lives was “obvious material for studying the emergence of the ‘modern’ forms of self-representation” and indicative of “the emergence of a new concept of the ‘individual’ among the educated elite” is something that Partha Chatterjee testifies (“The Woman and the Nation” in *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*). Almost every great personage of this ‘educated elite’ class, wrote their *ātmacarits*, *jīban-carits*, or autobiographies. A few of the *ātmacarits* that one immediately recalls are those composed by Rajnarayan Basu (Basu 1909), Debendranath Tagore (Tagore 1928), Shibnath Shastri (Shastri 1915), Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (Vidyasagar 1891), Nabinchandra Sen (Sen 1902), and Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray<sup>15</sup>. Nabinchandra Sen’s *Āmār Jīban* in five volumes is perhaps the most elaborate of elite Bengali lives, and it is not coincidental that Sen also wrote lives of Buddha (*Amitābha*), Christ (*Khrister Jīban*), and a life of the Egyptian queen *Cleopatra*. Sen’s *Amitābha* published on 29th Ashad (Sen 1895) is particularly fascinating as Amitābha or Buddha’s life is—like Krishna’s *caritra*—examined in verse, as psychologically convincing as well as divinely potent. Some great men such as Madhusudan Dutt and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar also had contemporaries or followers penning their *carit* or life-narratives. Brajendranath Bandopadhyaya and Sajanikanta Das’s collection entitled *Sāhitya Sādhak Caritmālā* (Bandopadhyay and Das 1968) (*A Garland of Lives of Those Devoted to the Cause of Literature in 17 volumes, 1957*)<sup>16</sup> outlining a map of cultural milestones of an imagined *jāti* (nation), served the same cultural-revivalist function that Leslie Stephen’s *Dictionary of National Biographies* (1885–1891) had done for England.

Partha Chatterjee complicates the question of individuality, noting that the new colonial modernity-informed patriarchal structures retained traces of older hagiographical adulation towards the male subject, and this is especially evident in modern Indian language genres such as the *carits* and *gāthās*. It is in the intimate, fallible, hesitant and deferred subjectivity formation, contra structures of Bengali women’s *smritikathās* and *jībans* (recollections and lives), that such subjectivities were achieved. Chatterjee’s finest example is Rassunadari Devi’s *Āmār Jīban* (Devi 1876). It is in this intimate *andar* (inner domestic space) of real women writers and the feminized, indigenized *kathā* forms they assumed that the real differentiation between the older hagiography and the newer biography took place.

I would also direct my readers’ attention to Rabindranath Tagore’s naming of his anthology of exemplary life narratives, *Caritrapūjā* (Tagore 1907). Such a naming collapses the critical distinction between suprahuman deity worship as ‘ritual practice’ (puja) and ‘reading’ of exemplary human lives as ‘worship’. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar is first on Tagore’s list of *carits*, given that Vidyasagar’s life was truly exemplary, but also because he had understood the pedagogic value of the *carit*-reading exercise for an emergent *jāti*, and had recast Robert Chambers’ *Exemplary and Instructive Biography* (Chambers 1836) as *Jīban-carit* (Vidyasagar 1858) as a necessary primer for Bengali children. Vidyasagar’s *Jīban-carit* was incidentally critiqued by the orthodox thinkers such as Amritlal Basu<sup>17</sup> for its inclusion of secular, foreign, and culturally dissonant ‘lives’ such as those of Charles Duval (in imitation of Chambers’ *Eminent Lives*) and its complete occlusion of indigenous ‘lives’. Basu grieved the replacing of *Śisubodh*, an older prescribed primer for Bengali children in *pathshalas* (village

<sup>15</sup> Prafullachandra Ray’s book is named after the great nationalist scientist’s profession, the *Autobiography of an Indian Chemist* (Ray 1958).

<sup>16</sup> Brajendranath Banerjee composed more than 96 lives as part of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishat’s (the Council for/of Bengali Literature) plan of publishing authentic ‘lives’ of litterateurs.

<sup>17</sup> Refer to Basu’s *Purātani Kathā* for more on this.

schools usually not divided into several classrooms or teachers), which had the 'life' of god Vishnu as its constituent, with Vidyasagar's 'godless' and 'strange' *Jībancharit* in Bengali school curriculum.

Incidentally, James Long voiced the general European critique regarding extant indigenous primers noting that "the *Shishubodh*, however, still holds its ground in village schools with its absurdities and obscenities" (Long 1850). I refer to this not quite connected piece of information because it is these same set of accusations of "absurdity and obscenity" that would be levelled against the Vishnu/Krishna figure and which Bankim would be obliged to defend in his *Krishnacaritra*.

Bankimchandra's use of the *carit* genre, which had by the mid-nineteenth century become synonymous with psychologically convincing, historicised, life writing of great public figures, was part of a complex cultural process and numerous scholarly studies have enriched our understanding of its complex genealogy.<sup>18</sup> *Carit* as a genre was deployed variously, as narratives about ten princes (as in Dandin's *Daśakūāracarita*), as eulogizing and recording kings' lives (as in Banabhatta's *Harshacarita*), as celebrating saints (Syed Sultan's *Rasoolcarit*, Krishnadas Kaviraj's *Caitanyacaritāmrita*) and praising godly personages (Tulsidas' *Rāmcaritmānas*). Modern Indian languages such as Bengali have often used the *carit* form in a mock-heroic manner, exploiting the critical gap between the gravity of the genre and the inconsequentiality/venality of the subject described. Troilokyanath Mukherjee's *Damarūcarit* (Mukherjee 1923), Jogendrachandra Basu's *Cimibās Caritāmrita* and *Bāngāli carit* (1885–1886) are cases in point.

The relation between life writing and history writing—given that Indians were 'othered' by British colonialism as contra-historically inclined—is acute because history writing in Bengal in its inception often assumed the *carit* form. A reference to Ram Ram Basu's *Rājā Pratāpāditya Caritra* (Basu 1801), Mrityunjay Vidyalkar's *Rajabali*, and Rajiblochan Mukherjee's *Krishnachandra Rayasya Caritram* will suffice. Then of course Rajendralal Mitra (1822–91), one of Bankim's closest ideological partners, and known as the inceptor of proper history writing in India, also contributed two *carits*, *Śivāji Caritra* (Mitra 1860) and *Mewārer Rājeitibritta* (Mitra 1861) as dedicated to the Hindu revivalist cause.

Bankim's recasting of *carit* forms in modern times had the weighted support of a venerable Sanskrit aesthetic tradition, given that great aesthete Bhamaha chose Bana's *Harshacarita* to explicate the difference between the *ākhāyikā* or historicised narrative that is the auto/biography, and the *kathā* or imaginative narratives<sup>19</sup>. It also had the weighted support of endeavours such as Basu's *Rājā Pratāpāditya Caritra*, critically embracing as it did the *carit* genre in its attempts to write one of the earliest histories of Bengal.

Bankim's other *carit* exercise, *Muchirām Gurer Jīban Carit* (Chattopadhyay [1880] 1953), published not too long before *Krishnacaritra*, deploys the *carit* form in a comic-satiric manner to portray the fictitious life of a rogue called Muchirām. Bankim writes under the pseudonym Darpanarayan Putatunda of the Gur (of a 'low caste Koibarta origins) who is also born of a mother Jashodā (a name inevitably associated with god Krishna's foster mother) and has his playful *līlās* (manifestations) in a parodic inversion of Krishna's childhood exploits. This illiterate rogue, Muchirām Gur, is elevated through the mysterious operations of the colonial state, and its essential misunderstanding of the Bengali language, to the state of a titled *Rāibāhādur* (landlord-zamindar), and whose *carit* then becomes worthy of study! I mention this because if negation is the motor of history, then the obverse of any such Muchirām is that great god who assumed a human avatar, Śri Krishna.

<sup>18</sup> Refer to Georg Buhler's English annotation and introduction of Dandin's Sanskrit, *Daśakūāracarita* (Buhler 1873), and pshita Chanda's *Tracing Charit as a Genre* for more on this (Chanda 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Refer to Sushil Kumar De's essay "The Akhyayika and the Katha in Classical Sanskrit" for more on this (De 1924).

#### 4. Seeley's *Ecce Homo* and Its Demythologising Strategies

Seeley's *Ecce Homo* and Bankim's *Krishnacarit* are comparable in the sense that both deploy generic forms of 'lives' and 'carits' respectively. These are forms that can accommodate semiotic slippages, and within which transactional dialogues between god 'life' and human 'life' may be conducted. The authorial intentions of historicising gods, naturalising such divine figures for 'secular times', and authenticating their cultural relevance and iconicity in times of national resurgence is made possible within the specificity of these generic contexts. The mutating life-writing, *carit*-writing narrative forms, along with their evolving-expanding reading-interpretative community in times of subjectivity formation, is vital to the understanding of *Ecce Homo* and *Krishnacaritra*<sup>20</sup>. To these one must add Bankim's special burden as the representative of a subjected, culturally beleaguered people, obliged to repeatedly defend his culture/religion's gods and texts from charges of "absurdity", "obscenity" and cultural irrelevance<sup>21</sup>. The essay addresses these four distinct but interconnected issues in some detail with suitable textual references.

Consider Seeley's use of the biography form in *Ecce Homo* to make true his intent to historicise and demystify the Christ figure;

those who feel dissatisfied with the current conceptions of Christ might be obliged to reconsider the whole subject from the beginning, and placing themselves in imagination at the time when he whom we call Christ bore no such name, but was simply, as St. Luke describes him, a young man of promise, popular with those who knew him and appearing to enjoy the Divine favor, *to trace his biography from point to point*, and accept those conclusions about him, not which church doctors or even apostles have sealed with their authority, but which the facts themselves, critically weighed, appear to warrant (Seeley [1865] 1912, "Preface" 3, *emphases mine*).

The conflation of biography with history and empirical historical tools as intrinsic to biography writing is apparent when Seeley admits that, he "undertook to" write *Ecce Homo* "because, after reading a good many books on Christ" he discovered that "there was no *historical character* whose motives, objects, and feelings remained so incomprehensible to" modern readers like him. Seeley's interpretation of the miracles that Jesus wrought is again worth considering, also because of the generic point that he makes at the end;

Miracles are, in themselves, extremely improbable things, and cannot be admitted unless supported by a great concurrence of evidence. For some of the Evangelical miracles there is a concurrence of evidence which, when fairly considered, is very great indeed; for example, for the Resurrection, for the appearance of Christ to St. Paul, for the general fact that Christ was a miraculous healer of disease. The evidence by which these facts are supported cannot be tolerably accounted for by any hypothesis except that of their being true. And if they are once admitted, the antecedent improbability of many miracles less strongly attested is much diminished. *Nevertheless nothing is more natural than that exaggerations and even inventions should be mixed in our biographies with genuine facts* (Seeley [1865] 1912), Chapter two, 16, *emphases mine*).

Seeley proceeded to express his definitive view of history in *The Expansions of England: Two Courses of Lectures* when he was the Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge, and had established History as an independent discipline and organized its Tripos examination format. Seeley defines connections between England and India as organic-enduring,

<sup>20</sup> The Darwinian analogy is deliberate as both Seeley and Bankim were influenced by Darwinian ideas of evolution.

<sup>21</sup> Bankim was also egged on to define and defend Hinduism as a contemporary and viable religion by Reverend Hastie and the epistolary battle between them is recorded in the "Letters to the Editor" section of the newspaper, *The Statesman* from October of 1886, and in the Jogesh Bagal edited, *Bankim Rachanavali* volume 3.

and not as the strained-tenuous to be expected in a relationship between the possessor and possessed. Noting that the Indian empire was as precious, if not more, than the acquisition of a European one, Seeley hints at India “choosing” British rule over Muslim anarchy. Strangely this is the view expressed by Satyananda, the leader of virile Hindu sannyasis of *Ānandamath* at the end of this novel by Bankim. This is also the explanation that the omniscient author of *Debi Chaudhurānī* advances for Bhabani Pathak, the leader of a robust nationalist army of Barendrabhum or North Bengal, for the latter’s willing surrender to the British order at the end of the narrative.

Seeley opines that India might, in the future, evolve into a mature polity, and derive autonomy by retaining an organically symbiotic relation with England. The hints of an emergent, independent Indian/Hindu empire with Krishna’s ideals as its guiding force are apparent in *Krishnacaritra*. The actual operations of a Hindu kingdom (albeit defeated at the end) is to be seen in a less read novel, *Sītārām*. Bankim’s historiographical worldview owes some debts to Seeley’s writings, cleverly calibrating as Seeley does, the ideas of a historicised Christ. The naturalized Christian ideals are now camouflaged as cultural mileposts, and such mileposts serve to direct the expansion of a just ethical (Christian?) empire. The connections between history writing and biography writing, while masking majoritarian religions as ethico-political positions, could not have been better established. A closer examination of the intellectual trajectory of Seeley’s oeuvre, and not just *Ecce Homo*, is vital for a surer understanding of Bankim’s *Krishnacaritra*.

### 5. *Krishnacaritra* as Refuting Indological Allegations against *The Mahābhārata* and the Krishna Figure

*Krishnacaritra* begins as a kind of dialogue, like most of Bankim’s novels, where the reader is imagined as an intelligent, thinking entity who, like the author, is produced by Enlightenment-informed epistemic structures. Bankim proposes an acceptable methodology regarding the inscription of such an empirically verifiable *carita* (historical narrative) of a god;

[ ... ] *Āmār nijēr jāhā biswās, pāthak kē tāhā grahan karitē boli nā, ēbang Krishnēr iswaratwa sangsthāpan karāō āmār uddēsya nahē. Ēi granthē āmi kēbal mānab caritrēri samālōconā kariba. Tabē ēkhan Hindu dharmēr āndōlan kichu prabalatā lābh kariāchē. Dharmāndōlonēr prabalatār ēi samaye Krishna caritrēr sabistārē samālōconā prayōjonō.*

[It is not my intention to make my readers accept my beliefs, and nor do I intend to establish the godliness (divine essence) of Krishna. I will only explore some human characteristics in this book. However, of late, the Hindu codes of behavior has gathered considerable strength. There is a need to narrate Krishna’s life in the utmost detail, in times of such revivalist movements (Chattopadhyay 1886, Part one, “Chapter One”, p. 10).

Like the Romantic propagators of ‘natural religion’, Bankim debunks the miraculous dimensions of a Jarāsandha *vadha*, a Śisūpāla *vadha* or the creating of *māyā* darkness to assist Ārjunā’s killing of Jayadratha at the appointed hour in *Mahābhārata*. He translates each of these acts of Krishna as strategies of a highly skilled general of an armed force deployed to win a war. Bankim also quotes from John Muir’s retelling of Lassen’s *Indian Antiquities* in support of his position, “these heroes [Ram and Krishna] are for the most part exhibited in no other light than other highly gifted men [ ... ]”. (Muir 1868, in Chattopadhyay 1892)<sup>22</sup>. Bankim defines miracles in a Deist fashion, as happenings within a world which the creator has made according to certain rules and which will run independent of his presence or intervention. Events often do not appear so miraculous once their causes have been discovered (Chattopadhyay 1886).

<sup>22</sup> The reference is to John Muir’s *Original Sanskrit texts on the Origin and History of the People of India* in which he translates Lassen’s German *Indische Altertumskuunde* into English, as *Indian Antiquities*. Parts of Lassen’s *Indian Antiquities* is to be found anthologised in the 4th volume of Muir’s book.



Bankim scientificises the incarnation of Krishna by deploying Darwinian evolutionary logic to explain *avatāra tatva*, tracing progression from the lower forms of life to its godly perfection, from Matsya, Kurma, Varāha, Vāmana, Nrisingha, Paraśurām, Rām, Balarām to the ultimate manifestation of evolutionary splendour—Krishna. *Avatārvād* is of course the most popular Hindu way of explaining gods who assume a natural form, but Bankim’s melding of such ideologies with Darwinian theories of evolutionary progression, as well as with Indological theories of racial evolution, is significant<sup>23</sup>.

Bankim must, however, wield generic *gāndīva* (Arjuna’s weapon) far more adroitly than Seeley ever had to do when the latter wrote a ‘biography’ of Christ, the moment he proceeds to establish Krishna’s historical authenticity and primacy:

*Krishnacaritrē maulikātā ki? Krishna nāmē kōnō byakti prithibi tē kakhanō ki bidyamān chilēn tāhār pramān ki? Jādī chilēn, tabē tāhār caritra jathārtha ki prakār chilo, tāhā jānibār kōnō upāye āche ki?* [What is the authenticity of a Krishna figure? What is the proof that there ever existed an actual person named Krishna in this world? And if he did exist, then what are the means by which, one could determine his true nature?] (Chattopadhyay 1886, Part one, Chapter two, p. 11).

Bankim cites his sources, of which the most historically authentic, he claims, is the *Mahābhārata*. He also mentions *Harivansha*, and nine out of a total of eighteen extant *Purānas*. However, if the *Mahābhārata* is defined as an epic poem or a *kāvya*, it cannot be, by generic definition, called a historical document. Establishing the human authenticity of a figure called Krishna is fraught with risks, not because he, Bankim, will be condemned by the orthodox (as in the case of Seeley’s life of Christ) but because the very European scholars, Christian Lassen, Albrecht Weber, Theodor Goldstuecker, and a host of Indologists that Bankim refers to in his Preface to *Krishnacaritra*, had also used the generic weapon of *kāvya* or imaginative writing to dehistoricise the *Mahābhārata* in its present state.

In their reading of the *Mahābhārata*, German Indologists, who were also primarily philologists by training, had begun positing a critical distinction between the original *Mahābhārata* as ‘authentic history’ and *Mahābhārata* in its present state as a corrupted ‘epic poem.’ Central to this generic distinction is Christian Lassen, the formidable Indological scholar and author of *Indidische Amarkunde* (Indian Antiquities). Lassen affirms that the *Mahābhārata* tale is valuable as a historical document, as it represents the historical conflict between the lighter-skinned Aryan races and the darker-skin Dravidian races. It is “unavoidable” in its present (corrupted?) state however, that the *Mahābhārata* can be regarded as anything but “as a collection of old epic poems.”<sup>24</sup> The problem with such typological labelling of *Mahābhārata* as an epic poem or collection of epic poems is that the text as found in its present form is a clear case of generic takeover. Nothing of the original heroic poem (*heldensage, heldengedichte*)—matters of an undivided Indo European *ur epos* that the *Iliad* and the *Nibelungenlied* had shared with the original *Mahābhārata*—now remains in the *Mahābhārata*’s present and corrupted form. The present *Mahābhārata* “in the course of oral transmission unconsciously fused other legends into itself”. The entire *Ādīparvan* matter is described by Lassen as an accretion from a later period. He, and Adolf Holtzmann Jr. who enriches this idea, accuses the “priestly class” or the Brahmins of taking over of a heroic epic and deliberately corrupting and reducing its *ur epos* matter. The *heldensage* that “actually constitute the literature of the *ksatrija*” is now overlaid with didactic, philosophy, theosophy laden, pseudo epical matter.<sup>25</sup> The *Mahābhārata* in its present form is thus “not a collection of the historical songs in the genuine sense.” In other words, the *Mahābhārata* in its present state, though

<sup>23</sup> Refer to Adluri and Bagchee’s *The Nay Science* for more on relations between Indological studies and theories of Aryan evolution into a superrace.

<sup>24</sup> Cited from the English translation by Adluri and Joydeep (2014) of Lassen’s essay “Beitrage zur kunde des Indichen Alterthums aus dem Mahābhārata I, from *Zeitschrift fur die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, I, 1837, in *The Nay Science* p. 61.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in “The Search for an Urepos” in *The Nay Science* and is Adluri and Bagchee’s English translation of Lassen’s essay “Beitrage zur kunde des Indichen Alterthums aus dem Mahābhārata I, in *Zeitschrift fur die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, I, 1837, p. 85.

having many commendable qualities, fails both the generic tests, that of being either authentic ‘history’ or a pure heroic ‘epic’.

Bankim’s *Krishnacaritra*, then, must fight a pitched battle to establish the very existence of Krishna in the original narrative. It must debunk the theory of the Krishna figure as a *prakshēp*, an interpolation into the original historical matter at the behest of a cunning priestly class. The task of Bankim’s *Krishnacaritra* is thus multifarious—to reinstitute the Indologically-informed ‘absent or minor Krishna’ to a position of ethical centrality, to re-establish Krishna within an ‘original recounting of a historic conflict’, and within an ‘ur-record of astounding heroism by warrior- raconteurs like Sanjaya’. Such a *caritra* or life narrative must contest the imputation of *Mahābhārata* as having degenerated, at the behest of the Indian priestly classes, into a dull, theologico-philosophical discussion laden, low grade epic poem. The Krishna of Bankim’s biography—the heroic leader of men, the sage administrator, and an icon of a triumphant Hindu empire—answers every such imputation and more.

*Krishnacaritra* must also prove that the Krishna figure is neither obscene nor absurd; he is a historically authenticated top class military mind, a general who leads the virtuous, and is not the cunning ally of the undeserving, interloping, and thieving tribal group from the hills called the Pāndavas<sup>26</sup> to their legitimate victory.

Even if such nineteenth century German Indological interpretations have little purchase today, Lassen’s ‘genealogical reading’<sup>27</sup> gained considerable support among later generations of Indologists such as Albrecht Weber, Theodore Goldstuecker, and especially Adolf Hortmann junior who developed Lassen’s suggestions ideas into a full-fledged theory of Krishna’s venal and cunning essence. Great Indian scholars of the *Mahābhārata* such as Romesh Chandra Dutt (Dutt 1898), and V.B. Sukthankar were left to repeat these charges and reconstitute the Krishna figure, even when they continued to agree with many of the readings of Lassen<sup>28</sup>. Rabindranath Tagore’s charge of Krishna as lacking in ethics, is often construed as having been conceived to debate Bankim’s argument in *Krishnacaritra*, but is more like an eager reception and repetition of the Indological position.

It is this generic interpretation of *Mahābhārata* as a corrupted epic poem and the debunking of Krishna as cunning and unheroic that leads Bankim to constitute his defence in generic terms. *Mahābhārata* had to be defined as *itihāsa*, or more specifically a *purānāitihāsa*, or a culturally specific, untranslatable in European languages kind of ‘history’ that was both empirically verifiable, as well as central to a culture’s belief system. It is here that a reiteration of Bhamaha’s description of *Harshacarita* as an example of the *ākhyāikā*, or truthful record, as a constituent of the *carita* genre might be useful.

As Bankim notes in his *Letter to the Editor of The Statesman* entitled “European Versions of Hindoo doctrines,” “[y]ou can translate a word by a word, but behind that word is an idea you cannot translate, if it does not exist among people in whose languages you are translating” (Chattopadhyay [1882] 1953). He must then create new generic categories that have the weight of Sanskrit aesthetics as well as a distinct semiotic contemporaneity to engage with European scholars.

Bankimchandra posits in *Krishnacarita* a vital distinction between the genres of what he calls ‘*upanyās*’ and ‘*itihāsa*.’ *Upanyās* for him would be closer to *kathā*, as it is an imagined narrative, and therefore somewhat different from the *itihāsa*. Significantly, Bankim’s last novel, *Sītārām*, ends with a generic discussion as well, what with the commoners Ramachand and Shyamachand speculating about the vanished *Sītārām* figure, and describing such speculations as *upanyās*-like, unfounded fabrication (*Sītārām* “Parishista”, p. 154). In the “Preface” to *Sītārām*, the editors Banerjee and Das, also note that Bankim considered *Ānandamath*, *Debi Chaudhurānī* and *Sītārām* as a trio that were meant to function as *itihāsa* or histories, rather than as *upanyās* or imaginative works.

<sup>26</sup> I draw this description of the Pāndavas from the claims of the Indologists.

<sup>27</sup> While ‘genre studies’ has emerged as a more popular definition, ‘genealogy’ was originally used in Europe to indicate study of literary types.

<sup>28</sup> V.S. Sukthankar’s *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, acknowledges Lassen’s work but defends the Pandavas as virtuous, heroic and Krishna as godlike as late as (Sukthankar 1957).

Bankim's description of *Mahābhārata* as *itihāsa*, in the European sense of an empirically verified series of facts, and not the original Sanskrit sense of 'what-has-happened', or 'thus-it-is', is not born out of Bankim's ignorance of Sanskrit aesthetics but out of necessity. Bankim must create new generic categories that are peculiarly Indic but whose semiotic charge may be evident to Indological scholars. He calls such a category as a *purāneitihāsa*. This category is ancient, as the word *purāna* indicates what is ancient but true, as it is *itihāsa* or that which is recorded. This is utterly unlike what the Europeans (imbued by ecriorial cultures) had imagined the *purānas* to be, namely, unreliable simply because they were orally composed and orally handed over by many personages. Bankim notes;

*Āmār jata dur sādhyā, āmi purāneitihās ēr ālōconā kariāchi. Tāhār phal ēi pāiāchi jē, Krishna sambandhia jē sakal pāpokhyān janasamājē prachalita āche, tāhā sakali [10] amulak baliā jānitē pāriāchi, ēbang upanyaskarkrita. Krishna sambandhiya upanyassakal bād dilē jāhā bāki thake, tāha ati bisuddha, parampabitra, atishoye mahat, ihao jānitē pāriāchi.*

[I have, to the best of my ability, attempted to read ancient texts as history. As a result of such an attempt, I have been able to identify all the sinful tales (*upakhyan*) associated with Krishna in the popular consciousness as false, fabricated and novelistic (*upanyaskrita*). What remains, after we have discarded all that is novelised about Krishna, is unadulterated, pure, and absolutely noble] ([Chattopadhyay 1886](#), Chapter one, p. 10).

He condemns European commentators for marking out *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana* as 'epics' and *kāvya* and not *purāna* or *itihāsa*:

*Bilati bidyar ekta lakshan ei je, tahara swadeshe jaha dekhen, mone karen bideshe thik tai ache. Tahara Moor bhinna kono a-gaurabarna kono jati janiten na., ejannya edeshe asiya Hindu dig eke "Moor" balite lagilen.*

*Sei rup swadeshe Epic kāvya bhinna padye rachita akhyangrantha dekhen nai, sutarang Europio panditera Mahabharat o Ramayanar sandhyān paiyai oi dui grantha ke Epic kāvya baliya siddhanta karilen. Jadi kāvya tabē uhār aitihāsikata kichu rahilō na, sab ek kathae bhāshiā gelō. [ ... ] Greek dēr madhye Thucydides ēr granthē ēbang onayanyō itihās granthe kāvyēr moto saundarya āche] Mānabcaritra i kāvyēr shrestha upadan; ititihāsbettāo manushyacaritrer barnana karēn; bhālo kariā tini jadi āpanār kārya sādhan karitē pārēn, tabē kājēi tāhār itihāsē kāvyēr soundaraya āshiyā upasthita hoibe.*

[One sure sign of European learning is that they see everything in foreign lands as mirror images of things in their country. They had never seen any non-white race except the Moors, and so when they saw Hindus in this land, they began calling Hindus, Moors. Similarly, European scholars, unexposed to any narrative poem other than the epic in their own cultures, were quick to designate the *Mahābhārata* and the *Ramayana* as 'epics' as soon as they located these texts. And if they were *kāvya* s then it could not have any *aitihāsik* (historical) authenticity. So every other logic is washed away by this method of definition [ ... ]

Among the Greeks, the writings of Thucydides, and other historical writings, possess great poetic beauty. Human nature is the chief ingredient of *kāvya*-literature, the historian also describes human beings, and if the historian succeeds in his task, he may achieve the beauty of literature-kāvya in his work] ([Chattopadhyay 1886](#), Part One, Chapter four, p. 12).

Bankim's pointing to the overlapping of generic categories is not postmodern but symptomatic of the tragic inbetweeness that the colonised subject must suffer, having to use the European language to connote Indic aesthetic categories. Bankim also militates against the facile translation of *The Mahābhārata* as an 'epic', and an equally facile translation of the epic genre by Europeans as *mahākāvya*. Firstly, in the Sanskrit aesthetic order a *mahākāvya* indicates an epyllion, or a longish poem, and

the *Mahābhārata* is defined as *itihāsa* in the sense of something far more profound, something that will remain forever. Bankim rues the European scholars' lack of sensitivity when they translate ideas that are essentially untranslatable. He has to find the culture specific generic label, a conflation of the *purānas* or ancient, orally transmitted texts, and *itihāsa* in the sense of a verifiable history. Defining *Mahābhārata* as *purānaitihāsa* is Bankim's way of establishing the historicity as well as aesthetic essence of the *Mahābhārata* in its present state.

Bankim collapses the ideas of historical authenticity and empirically verifiable biography—*carita*—while distinguishing between ordinary, mundane, and ahistorical lives of mere 'wolves and dogs', and record worthy lives of the great or god like lives:

*Mahābhārātēr aitiḥāsikata kichu āchē ki? Mahābhārata kē itihāsa bolē, kintu itihās balilēi ki History bujhāilō? Itihās kāhākē bolē? Ekhan kār dinē śrīgāl kukkurēr galpo likhiāō lōkē tāhākē 'itihās' nām diā thākē. Kintu bastuta jāhātē pūrābritta, arthāt pūrbē jāhā ghatiāchē tāhār ābbriti āchē, tāhā bhinnō ār kichui itihās bolā jāitē pārē nā. [ ... ] Ekhan, Bhāratbarshēr prāchīn granthēr madhyē kēbal Mahābhārata i athabā kēbal Mahābhārata o Rāmāyana itihās nām prāpto hoiāchē* [Does *Mahābhārata* have anything like historicity? Now does defining the *Mahābhārata* as *itihāsa* mean that it connotes history in the European sense? What is *itihāsa*? These days, people also define the narratives about dogs and wolves as *itihāsa*. However, in reality, nothing apart from that is a record of ancient happenings, that has happened in the past, can be called *itihāsa*. [ ... ] Now, among the ancient texts of Bhāratbarsha only the *Mahābhārata* or only the *Mahābhārata* and the *Ramayana* have deserved the definition of *itihāsa*. (Chattopadhyay 1886, Part One, Chapter three, pp. 14–15).

He also has to, by the same coin, prove Krishna's exceptionality as an *ādarśa* (ideal) for a new India to follow. Bankim's debt's to Seeley's *Expansions of the Empire: Two Courses of Lectures* (1886) lies in the former's projection of *Krishnacaritra* as the text for a future Hindu empire where Hindu ideals would no longer be demeaned as primitive, absurd, and obscene, but be naturalized into cultural and ethical codes of a Bhāratbarsha. The preeminent figure that would preside over such a place would be both god and human<sup>29</sup>.

Bankim's distinct and contemporary use of the *carit* genre is central to this argument as it conceptually coalesces god 'life' writing forms with historically verifiable life writings. The *carit* allows Bankim this interpretative latitude. The evolution and growing popularity of the genre in the modern languages of nineteenth century India provides that fertile interpretative community where his *Krishncharitra* may be read.

## 6. Secularism and Rise of Global Empires

Let me end this essay by pointing towards the contradictions embedded in Seeley's and Bankim's greater projects. Seeley argued that such a demystified Christ's life "should provide the foundation of a new science of politics and for a Christian state governed by a universal positive morality" and that would "embrace the blessed light of science, a light [ ... ] dispersing every day some noxious superstition, some cowardice of the human spirit" (Seeley [1865] 1912). The conflation of science, Christianity, and universal values is quite complete!

The very word 'secular' has a peculiar etymological history and Talal Asad in the *Formations of the Secular* (Asad 2003) deconstructs Charles Taylor's positing the 'secular' as 'religion's' obverse in Anglophone cultures (Taylor 2007). Asad restores the original connotation of the term 'secular' as a critical position within Christianity; "[t]he term 'secularism' and 'secularist' were introduced into English by freethinkers in the middle of the nineteenth century in order to avoid the charge

<sup>29</sup> Pitching Nabinchandra Sen's three-part verse-epic recounting stages of Krishna's life *Raibatak*, *Kurukshetra* and *Prabhas* besides *Krishnacaritra* is useful, as Sen too conjures up a lost Hindu-Indian empire that could be revived at Shri Krishna's behest.



of their being ‘atheists’ and ‘infidels,’ terms that carried suggestions of immorality in a still largely Christian society [ . . . ]”. In endnote number six of the same page (23), Asad quotes an encyclopaedia of secularism; “the word ‘secularism’ was coined by George Jacob Holyoake in 1851 and intended to differentiate Holyoake’s anti-theistic position from Bradlaugh’s atheistic pronouncements” (Asad 2003). By deploying the word secular to mean a-religious, when it connotes the ‘Christian,’ the majoritarian religion spirits itself away into an invisible a-religious cultural-ethico category, and identifies minority faiths by the same logic as pre-modern, non-secular, and ‘religious!’

In India, the *Queen’s Proclamation* (a post Mutiny manifestation) represents the culmination of developments related to the Europe’s ‘secularisation’ project<sup>30</sup>. The *Proclamation* indicates Europe’s coping with her increasing contact with other societies and religions within an expanding world. The ‘secularisation project’ is an extension of broader efforts to diffuse religious conflicts within Christianity in Europe and locating Christianity within this-worldly activities. The affirming the operations of Protestant Christianity as the ‘laws of nature’ was central to such a secularizing project. The English context of ‘naturalising’ religion, of ‘humanising’ Christ, and finding scientific bases for religious truths is particularly relevant for Seeley and Bankim life writings of godly figures<sup>31</sup>.

The *Queen’s Proclamation* (and Seeley refers to it severally in his *The Expansion* lecture) could be read as a companion piece to Seeley’s *Natural Religion* and *The Expansion of England* for its outright condemnation of religion’s hierarchisation and forcible conversions, or for any coercion in matters of religious belief.<sup>32</sup> The *Proclamation’s* acceptance of religions’ multiplicity and their equal valence renders it as a watershed document in history of religious toleration. However, as Peter van der Veer notes, “the recognition of a multiplicity of religions, [ . . . ] in no way prevents the identification of the essence of religion with Christianity (emphases mine)” (Van der Veer 2001). Modern Hinduism like Protestant Christianity “is full of attempts to identify [the majoritarian religion] as the highest form or the essence of religion”. Outright attacks on other religions are now replaced by “more subtle attempts at conversion by recognizing elements in them that resemble [the majoritarian religion]” (Van der Veer 2001). As in modern Europe where attempts to convert, say Catholics to Protestantism diminished, attempts to convert—say, marginal sects, such as *dalits* in India—become irrelevant, and all religions in the emergent nation of Bhāratbarsha were now seen as forms of Hinduism<sup>33</sup>. The choice of a religious figure and his transformation into a politico cultural epicentre in a projected empire is what *Krishnacaritra* attempts.

<sup>30</sup> Refer to *The Proclamation by the Queen in Council to the Princes, Chiefs, and People of India* (Victoria 1858) (Published by the Governor-General at Allahabad, 1 November 1858) and para 6 where it notes that “[ . . . ] We disclaim alike the Right and Desire to Impose our Convictions on any of Our Subjects” and that all British authority shall be enjoined “on the pain of Our highest Displeasure” to practice such tolerance and absolutely “abstain from interference with Religious Belief of any of Our Subjects [ . . . ]”.

<sup>31</sup> Rabindranath like most Indian nineteenth-century intellectuals, was responsive to the British-Romantic tradition of naturalizing religions, thus rendering them scientific, and ‘modern’. For more on this refer to my work on Tagore’s *Gora* (Bhattacharya 2015) Robert Seeley’s *Natural Religion* (Seeley 1882) that suggests the implicatedness of Positivist science and Protestant Christianity- is something that Rabindranath translates (partially) and deploys to strengthen his argument in the essay “Hindu Bibaha” (Tagore [1887] 1988, p. 654).

<sup>32</sup> Seeley’s *The Expansion* is almost comic in its repeated rejection of ‘coercion’ as a principle of governance, and in its insistence that the Indians ‘chose to be ruled by the British’, impressed by latter’s superior governance abilities, and repulsed by the chaotic ruling style of Mughals and Pathans.

<sup>33</sup> Refer to Rabindranath’s essay *Atmaparichaya* (Our Identity) that is translated as Appendix I to *Rabindranath Tagore’s Gora: New Critical Interpretations*, 2015) for the definition of ‘Hindu’ as *jati* (nation); as inclusive of all other faiths; and as the very equivalent of ‘India’. Rabindranath’s posing and answering a question is telling: “Can you then remain a Hindu, even though you have joined the Musalman or Christian sects? But of course! There can be no question regarding this”. Citing examples of Gyanendramohan Tagore, and Krishnamohan Bandopadhaya (both of whom converted to Christianity), Rabindranath declares that they are “Hindu by *jati* (nationality) and Christian by religion. Christian happens to be their colour but Hindu is their essence”. (“*Atmaparichaya*”, Tagore 1912, RR vol 9, tr. mine, p. 597).



## 7. Conclusions

Within a wider Indian context, it would be quite useful to situate Bankim's *Krishnacaritra* in relation to the entire tradition of Krishna *carit* writing in the Assamese tradition, from Śankaradeva and his much admired *Rukmīni haran kāvya* and *Rukmīni haran nat*. Padmanath Gohain Baruah (1871–1946) departs from this *bhakti* tradition in his *Śri Krishna* and depicts an adult, pragmatic Krishna, who is a diplomat, often tired and dejected and very human. It is not entirely coincidental that P. Gohain Baruah was also the writer of the first Assamese novel, *Bhanumoti* published in 1890 and *Lahori*, published the following year, and the editor of *Jivani Sangraha*. His investment in realism as an ideology naturally helped him to depict a historically accessible Krishna figure. Barua's stay in Kolkata in an imagined cosmopolis of the *mess bāri*<sup>34</sup>, also helped him to formulate a distinct Assamese identity. This cultural identity was produced in dialogue with Bengali, in dialogue with domesticity, and with regionalism. Such regionalism was paradoxically produced within a cosmopolitan public space and public field of action. The *sabhās* and *samitīs*<sup>35</sup> that Gohain Baruah created became metonymic of those cosmopolitan spaces and where a degree of secular literature could be produced by straddling worlds of *bhakti* and human culpability.

Some of the significant ways in which Indian modernity in the nineteenth century came to be constituted was not through an uncomplicated internalization of a desacralized, reason-sanctioned worldview or its outright rejection, an equally simple partitioning off of the sacred and the secular, or even a wholesale conversion to the colonial masters' religion, but through a renewed focus on Indic creedal faiths that were powerful and majoritarian. It would perhaps not be too far from the truth to assert that the colonial intervention produced Hinduism and Islam as we see them today in contemporary South Asia. In turn, the 'secular' nationalist politics—that included notions of science, technology, pedagogy—and all that is considered modern was produced by such majoritarian religions. It is these religions that are now assuming avatar(s) of 'contesting' national cultures in the Indian subcontinent. *Krishnacaritra's* relevance lies in looking towards such possibilities.

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<sup>34</sup> Shared apartment, usually hostel-like and occupied by professionals and students.

<sup>35</sup> Broadly speaking, meetings and groups.

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