Shakespeare and Colonial Modernity in Bengal

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A couple of years after the Restoration, John Ward, the medical-minded Vicar of Stratford, noted in his diary that Shakespeare died of a fever contracted at a 'merry meeting' with Michael Drayton and Ben Jonson, where it seems they all 'drank too hard'. There are other, less clinically inclined, stories of Shakespeare's drinking exploits, and scholars are none too sure what to make of them, especially since William Beeston told John Aubrey that Shakespeare, who had once been a colleague of Beeston's father, was 'not a company keeper' and 'wouldn't be debauched'. E. K. Chambers is probably right: such stories have no better authority than 'the inventiveness of innkeepers'.

It has proved hard to keep Shakespeare away for too long from the bibulous sublime, and it might surprise some to hear of another merry meeting of Shakespeare and alcohol, this time in nineteenth-century Bengal. It takes place in the seventh chapter of Shibnath Shastri's classic account of the period, *Ramtanu Lahiri* and *tatklalin bangasamaj* [Ramtanu Lahiri and the Bengali Society of His Time]. The chapter, entitled *The Beginnings of English Education* covers the period from 1834 to 1845. Henry Derozio had died three years before the onset of this phase, but his influence was still potent on the students of Hindu College. Shastri writes:

> The boys of Hindu College, around sixteen or seventeen years of age, considered drinking a feat to be proud of. Madhusudan Dutt, the immortal poet of Bengal, Bhudeb Mukhopadhyaya, the renowned Rajnarain Bose, and such illustrious men were then studying at the college. I have heard from people of those times that the boys would sit in Goldighi, eat beef and the kebabs they had bought from the Muslim vendor close to Madhab Dutta's bazaar, and drink liquor in broad daylight. The more reckless one could get, the greater would be one's fame as hero and reformer.

Hard on the heels of this account, we have that of an allied form of excess. This time the intoxicant is English literature, and especially Shakespeare's plays:

> On the one hand, the young students thus defied the conventions of their country, on the other, they heard Shakespeare read by D. L. Richardson in college. No one has been heard to recite Shakespeare like him. He would become almost frenzied in the course of his reading, stirring up his students to a heady state all the time. He was certainly responsible to a large extent for the blossoming of Madhusudan's poetic talent. After hearing him read Shakespeare, the students grew up convinced that there was no poet better than Shakespeare and no literature better than the English. Everything Indian was regarded with contempt. The hatred of their own race grew strong in many boys. These were the most uninhibited in their drinking habits.

The story follows a familiar and recurrent pattern in narratives of 19th-century Bengal. In *She kal aar e kal* [Then and Now] Rajnarain Bose, one of the Goldighi tipplers in Shastri's account, had given a rather more disturbing description of the rebellious excess of the young bunch from Hindu College, who once greeted one of their bolder mates with deafening cheers in English because he had managed, after much hesitation, to step inside a Muslim shop and walk out with a solitary biscuit, held aloft like a trophy from his slaughter of superstition. Only Bose pushes these stirring events a few years back, his questers of the unholy waffle being students of the Indian Derozio rather than the British Richardson.

Such convergence of alien temptations is not rare in the conservative literature of various cultures, especially at times when their traditional limits resist pressures of other races and other places. Those who are familiar with the travel literature of early modern England, for instance, will recall the repeated warnings against the physical and spiritual hazards of Italy and the Near East. In these texts, the perils of strange food, strange drink, strange illnesses and strange women are inalienable from those of alien language, poetry and religious beliefs. It is not surprising that Shibnath Shastri should bring up the issue of religious conversion immediately after this, and say that English poetry and English drink helped prepare the soil for Christian missionaries:

Seeing his moment, the
eloquent Christian preacher
Duff set about his work with
the indefatigable energy of
his middle age. The upheaval
that convulsed the land
since the conversion to
Chrisitianity of Maheshchandra
Ghosh and Krishnamohan
Bandyopadhyaya, disciples
of Derozio and friends of
Ramtanu Lahiri's youth, is yet
to subside fully.

Bengalis took to English language and literature with an eagerness that was deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, there was the dread of the socially exorbitant, of the prodigal lure of poetry and wine; on the other, there was the mundane need of equipping oneself with the ruler's idiom, the promise of prosperity and order latent in English learning and manners. Needless to say, the need for English education was not the same thing as the mastery of English literary texts. Rammohun Roy's 1823 letter to Lord Amherst, a document that invariably figures in any account of the beginning of English studies in Bengal, did not see the English language as anything more dignified than a vehicle for communicating useful knowledge. Roy's objection to Sanskrit was that it was difficult to acquire, and the practical rewards to be derived from mastering it did not match the bother. On the contrary, English, a language that centuries in the service of the sciences had freed from sterile niceties, was relatively easy to learn, and it was by far the best means for acquiring information and skills that were both modern and useful.

But as the improvement of
the native population is the
object of the Government, it
will consequently promote a
more liberal and enlightened
system of instruction,
embracing mathematics,
natural philosophy, chemistry
and anatomy with other
useful sciences which may be
accomplished with the sum
proposed by employing a
few gentlemen of talents and
learning educated in Europe,
and providing a college
furnished with the necessary
books, instruments and
apparatus.

It is obvious that in Roy's 'liberal and enlightened' scheme, poetry or, more generally, creative literature does not have a major place. The conjunction of the adjectives 'liberal' and 'enlightened' conceals an unwitting paradox that was crucial to the history of colonial education in Bengal. In medieval and Renaissance Europe, liberal education invariably meant an education suited to a free man (liber), that is, a man who does not have to work for a living. Machiavelli, in his Discorsi, had given a blunt definition of the Latin liberalis, the closest English equivalent to which is perhaps the word 'gentleman':

those are called gentlemen
who live idly on the proceeds
of their extensive possessions,
without devoting themselves to
agriculture or any other useful
pursuit to gain a living.

Mathematics and physics may not have been deemed unworthy of the gentleman, but one cannot really see chemistry or anatomy featuring in his curriculum which placed a higher price on logic, grammar, rhetoric and music.

The Enlightenment educational ideal, however, shifted the emphasis to the worldly usefulness of the sciences. Francis Bacon's reformist programme is usually taken as inaugurating this shift, and Rammohun Roy's understanding of history in this matter was in accordance with the textbooks. In his letter to Lord Amherst, Roy raises the issue of Bacon's opposition to scholasticism:

> If it had been intended to keep
> the British nation in ignorance
> of real knowledge the Baconian
> philosophy would not have
> been allowed to displace the
> system of the schoolmen,
> which was the best calculated
> to perpetuate ignorance. In
> the same manner the Sangscrit
> systen of education would be
> best calculated to keep this
> country in darkness if such had
> been the policy of the British
> legislature.

The conflict between the schoolmen and the Baconians was, in Roy's view, comparable to that between the Orientalists and the proponents of Western education in colonial Bengal. The parallel, we should be able to see at once, was a piece of fiction. The Italian humanists had begun their dispute with the schoolmen almost three centuries before Bacon, and, more importantly, despite his emphasis on useful knowledge, Bacon could hardly afford to exalt the worldly ends of education. Bacon made a career out of his command of the law: he was Solicitor General and Attorney General in King James's reign. We are familiar with Faustus' contempt for such expertise:

> This study fits a mercenary
> drudge,
> Who aims at nothing but
> external trash,
> Too servile and illiberal for me.

Almost fifteen years after the performance of Marlowe's play, Bacon reassures readers in *The Advancement of Learning* that although he had proposed the integration of thought and action, he is far from guilty of the illiberal offence of equating action with livelihood:

> howbeit, I do not mean, when
> I speak of use and action, that
> end before-mentioned of the
> applying of knowledge to
> lucre and profession; for I am
> not ignorant how much it
> diverteth and interrupteth the
> prosecution and advancement
> of knowledge...

The ultimate aim of this will to knowledge is the spread of empire – in this respect at least, there is unity of purpose between the academic ideals of Faustus and Bacon.

Roy's anxiety to conflate the histories of the European Renaissance and the European Enlightenment, his hurry to clear the abyss separating us from modernity in one jump, becomes explicable if we see that the ambiguous response towards the aims of liberal education that marks late feudal culture in Europe was scarcely possible in colonial Bengal. English language and the education imparted through it were part of the colonizer's imperial capital; its value could not be isolated from the question of the livelihood of the colonized. The point was eloquently made by Ramendrasundar Tribedi in an address entitled *Aranye rodan* [Crying in the Wilderness], delivered at the Chaitanya Library in 1902:

> I have said that the highest
> aim of liberal education

was an even and all-round
development of the human
faculties. But it is nothing
but mockery when such long
and high-sounding words are
directed at a race whose good
and ill are in alien hands, who
are tied in chains hand and
foot and neck. On the other
hand, technical or specialized
and partial training is suited to
the development of individual
abilities, but, again, it is useless
to apply the axiom to an
enslaved race. It is pointless
broaching these principles of
education with those who
have desires but not the means
of achieving them, tastes but
not the resources of satisfying
them, individual talents but
not the space or time of trying
them out. We have to devise
an educational policy suited
to our infirm, ignoble and
inorganic lives and forget those
rolling periods, those long
compounds, those sonorous
adjectives, and those learned
theories ... The students of our
country hanker for neither
literature nor philosophy; all
they want is food to fill their
stomachs. It does not matter
to them whether the earth is
a sphere or a triangle, whether
it is still or spinning, whether
the moon is a lump of clay or a
pot of honey, whether *Macbeth*
was written by Shakespeare

or Napoleon Bonaparte,
whether the victor at the
battle of Plassey was Clive or
the secretary of the Chaitanya
Library ...

Tribedi gets the irony of liberal education in the colony right. But he was speaking almost half-a-century after the founding of Calcutta University; the first generation of students who went to Hindu College did not worry too much about food to fill their stomachs: they could afford kebabs and claret.

It is usually believed that those who argued in favour of English education for the natives won a decisive victory in 1835, the year in which Lord Macaulay wrote his celebrated minute on Indian education. English had by then gained some ground among those whom Shibnath Shastri calls 'middle-class householders'. "It is spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of Government," writes Macaulay. "What is more significant, it was poised to become the language of commerce throughout the seas of the East." The respectable Bengali of the city was already learning to have his cake of liberal education and eat the material rewards of such enlightenment.

Whatever other difference the 'higher class of natives' may have had with the liberal set in Britain, that they were socially fit for Western liberal education was a point that the progressive proponents of English education in Bengal were eager to prove. On 8 March 1855 Lalbehari De delivered a lecture on the theme at a meeting of the Bethune Society. At the end of the lecture, the chairperson W. N. Lees, said that he was convinced that the Bengali aristocracy needed English education. He went on to explain that this was true in spite of the difference in the hierarchical ordering of English and Indian societies:

In England society is divided
into several classes. We have

> our nobility, gentry, middle and lower classes – all forming large bodies. Now here, though the same distinction exists, the communities of all are not at present sufficiently large ... In viewing the Native Indian Community then, with reference to their educational wants I would divide them for the present simply into two classes, viz., the higher and the lower.

He went on to remind the assembly that they were members of the 'higher' classes and that for them the reward of education was 'the greatest and the most certain development of the intellectual faculties of their mind'.

The rhetoric may have been lofty, but the worldly ends of liberal education on the colonies was not always lost sight of. Lord Auckland had proposed almost two decades earlier that English education should be confined to those 'possessing leisure and natural influence'. When in 1845, the Council of Education proposed the founding of a university in Calcutta, their declared purpose was to confer a mark of distinction that would enabled students to be known 'as persons of liberal education, capable of holding high offices under the Government' and it was added without any sense of irony that they should be allowed to take 'the rank in society accorded in Europe to all members and graduates of the Universities'. In the same year Lord Hardinge made it clear that in order to encourage the study of English literature and the sciences the students had to be assured 'that learning and integrity would lead to useful, profitable, and honourable employment in the service of the state'.

Indians may have been aspiring for jobs, but the rulers did not lose sight of the other end of the liberal paradox. They needed to employ cheap public servants, but they knew very well that the required training would work best for those who did not need jobs that badly. In fact, an editorial in *The Statesman* remarked that the Bengali landed class was better placed to study literature than the English gentleman:

> The Hindus of Bengal have one great advantage in literature over almost every other nation. They contain among them a very large class of men who have not to work for their living, and have, therefore, leisure to cultivate their own minds ... The Brahmins, and Kyasts who possess fractional shares in their small estates have as much as their fathers and live in their native villages without doing any work. Their traditions are favourable to literary pursuits and they have none of the taste for field sports and social pleasure which distract English country gentlemen for study ...

The leaders of the native society were equally keen to argue that these liberal and material ends were not irreconcilable. In 1860 the *Hindoo Patriot* complained, within the strict confines of liberalis decorum, that educated Indians were being debarred from the higher posts in the administration:

> We do not say that the chief advantage to be looked for by those who benefit by the superior education imparted by our schools and colleges is government employment

> in the higher grades of the service, or that the only aim of government in giving them that education should be rear up [a] cheap class of well-educated public servants. But we must say that the two questions of public education and public employment cannot be wholly separated one from the other ... Now that improvement in English literature and science among the natives is progressing at an increased pace ... proportionally freer scope should be given to their worldly ambition.

To be fair to Macaulay, he clearly foresaw that English education in India must promise both intellectual and material rewards. Consider this passage in his minute:

> Whether we look at the intrinsic value of our literature, or the particular situation of this country, we shall see the strongest reason to think that, of all foreign tongues, the English tongue is that which would be most useful to our native subjects.

The difference between the intrinsic and use value of liberal learning that Bacon was so concerned to stress becomes irrelevant for a colonized people: the cultural worth of the conqueror's literature merely reflects the exchange-value of the conqueror's language.

Macaulay's critics such as Horace Wilson and Brian Hodgson warned that English education would rear a privileged class of natives and perpetuate what Hodgson called the ancient curse of 'exclusive learning' in India, that it would widen the gulf between them and the rest of their countrymen, that it would snap the vital link between native learning and native forms of life. It is an error to think that the neglect of mass education and the faith in the filtration theory impressed all framers of imperial education policy: we hear echoes of these objections in Wood's 1854 *Despatch on Education*, in deposition after deposition before the Indian Education Commission of 1882, and in the 1917 *Report of the Sadler Commission*, set up to review the affairs of Calcutta University. That the trouble lay less with the English language than with the contradiction between the class character demanded by the ideals of liberal education and the class interests of its beneficiaries in the colony was clearly grasped, for instance, by Lord Mayo when he wrote to W. W. Hunter:

> I dislike this 'filtration' theory ... We have done nothing towards extending knowledge to the million[s]. The Babus will never do it. The more education you give them, the more they will keep it to themselves and make their increased knowledge [a] means of tyranny.

There was a further problem whose roots lay in the peculiar process involved in the reading of what used to be called 'imaginative literature'. Rammohun Roy and the Anglicists believed, quite reasonably, that English was indispensable for inculcating the rational discipline of the sciences. But that discipline was founded on the functional and applied dimensions of the language. Meaning, in this scheme of things, was as clear and distinct as Cartesian ideas. In fact, one of the charges against Oriental literature was that its language was fuzzy, that its meaning was obscured by a pre-scientific lack

of rigour which encouraged uncritical faith. One recalls Macaulay's jibe that the Orientalists were sure that the British Parliament had sanctioned an annual sum of one hundred thousand rupees not for those Indians who wanted to study Milton's poems, Locke's metaphysics and Newtonian physics, but to recognize the erudition of those who were versed in the sacred mysteries of the kusha grass and knew all about merging with the supreme self.

But Macaulay gains rhetorical ground here at the cost of philosophical probity. Locke would not have been too happy to find his metaphysics or Newton's physics sharing the same cogntive status as Milton's poetry. He had little patience with wit, that poetic mode of perception which saw one object or idea in terms of another. It is only judgement that could lead to knowledge by resisiting similitude and distinguishing between objects and ideas. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke says quite sternly:

> all the artificial and figurative
> application of words eloquence
> hath invented, are for nothing
> else but to insinuate wrong
> ideas, move the passions, and
> thereby mislead the judgement;
> and so indeed are perfect
> cheats...

Poetry violates the protocols of Enlightenment epistemology by undermining the functional dimension of speech. Its language is opaque yet unstable, refusing to submit to the limiting discipline of tidy paraphrase and unambiguous interpretation, and hence its primary appeal is to the disorder of passion. Even while making some cognitive room for poetry, Leibnitz and his disciple Baumgarten had to concede that the experience of the beautiful gives us not clear and distinct ideas, but clear and sensuous, or rather, confused ideas. One could say of poetic expression what Derrida said of the exorbitance of Rousseau's language: the poet 'inscribes textuality in the text'.

In this respect at least, Rammohun Roy was more honest than Macaulay. It is not surprising to find him ignoring poetry in his letter to Lord Amherst, considering that the utilitarian philosopher he admired, Jeremy Bentham, was convinced that poetry was not only useless, but also helped in obscuring truth. A bit of footwork easily moves the argument to the ethical plane, and the difference between poetry and falsehood disappears. An article published in the Asiatic Journal in 1825 hence describes poetry as the 'art of perverting words from their primitive meaning'. The article, entitled *Evils of Poetry* goes on to make the unoriginal point that equivocation is merely hypostasis or aposiopesis in a poet, 'but ... a most dishonorable act in any other person'.

Poetic language is treacherous, the poet is a beguiling cheat, and the reader is an enthralled victim. The exorbitance of desire and dream is inevitably drawn towards the excess of poetic speech, making philosophers uneasy. The instability of poetic language hence becomes indistinguishable from moral inconstancy, the dissipation of meaning becomes one with the prodigal excess of desire. The metonymic chain linking the British teacher's ecstatic reading of Shakespeare in Hindu College, and the students' intemperate love of drink and wild defiance of social taboos begins at last to make sense.

In a sonnet on *Romeo and Juliet* published in 1827, Henry Derozio had called their love 'passion's essence', and it is this romantic reading of Shakespeare that the first generation of students in Hindu College were introduced to. The association seems to have stuck and to have become a mark of the early stirrings of the so-called Renaissance in Bengal. Recalling the 1870s, Rabindranath Tagore wrote in his memoirs (1912):

> Looking back on the times I
> speak of, I remember that we
> got more inebrients than food
> from English literature. In those

> days the gods of our literary pantheon were Shakespeare, Milton and Byron. The element in their writings that really stirred us was the strength of passion... The peculiar trait of this sort of literature is to take passion to excess and destroy it in a huge conflagration. That wild excitement was what we at least accepted as the essence of English literature. When our literary instructor Akshay Chaudhuri was lost in reciting English poetry, there was in it an air of intense intoxication. The amorous ecstasy of *Romeo and Juliet*, the raging protestations of Lear's impotent remorse, the wild prairie-fire of Othello's jealousy – the strong excess in all this stirred their [the readers'] minds.

Tagore explains that this passionate excess was the sign of two revolutionary moments in European history when human feelings broke free of age-old curbs. Shakespeare's plays and Byron's poems grew out of the Renaissance and the French Revolution when, according to Tagore, the spontaneous and extreme expression of powerful feelings overrode considerations of good and evil, or of the beautiful and the ugly. Tagore feels that the process was organic, while its mimicry in Bengal was not quite in measure:

> The roar of the storm was heard because a real storm had risen there. In our society, a mild breeze rose, its true pitch refused to rise above a murmur – but that did not satisfy us, so we tried to imitate the raging of the storm and were forcing ourselves into overstatement. I can't say that we have got over the tendency. It won't go easily. That is because English literature is yet to learn the restraint of literary art; even now it tends at all times to overstate things and express itself too intensely.

I shall be returning to Tagore in a moment, but let me remark on the curious irony in the fact that Shakespeare should have become a metonym of passionate excess in colonial Bengal. The Charter Act of 1813 made the government responsible for native education and relaxed restriction on missionary activity apparently to discipline the roaring boys of the Company, and this exercise in moral control was later sought to be extended to Indian students. The Company was hesitant to impose religious instruction on natives, and at the same time they were apprehensive of the effects of Western education without the restraining influence of moral precepts. According to Gauri Viswanathan, English literature filled this gap in the curriculum, resolvng the tension 'between increasing involvement in Indian education and enforced non-interference in religion'. The Rev. William Keane observed sometime in the early 1850s that

> Shakespeare, though by no means a good standard, is full of religion; it is full of the common sense principles which none but Christian men can recognize. Sound Protestant Bible principles, though not actually told in words, are there

> set out to advantage, and the
> opposite often condemned.

Even secular, humanistically inclined policy-makers such as Macaulay and Charles Trevelyan were busy discovering the 'diffusive benevolence of Christianity' in literary texts, and Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* was included in the syllabus to ensure that literature was read as a prophylactic against an overdose of so-called free trade and individual freedom.

However, Shakespeare seems to have beaten the best-laid plans of the policy-makers, and the colonial administration and the conservative leadership of native society were never at ease with the moral and political leanings of the literary tribe. Derozio and Richardson were charged with moral offences, and Young Bengal, besides being 'intolerably offensive' and guilty of affecting a manner that was, according to a 1859 article in *Friend of India*, 'a cross between that of a *petit maitre* and a boor', were repeatedly charged with dissipation and denationalised aloofness. Those Bengali boys who ran alongside the palanquins of Hare or Duff to get a place in their schools did not all end up in the same place. That section which drank a bit too deep of the Shakespearean poison reached the convivial assemblies in Goldighi or the Muslim stall near what is now Calcutta University. The roots of the divided attitude of the authorities to literary studies lie partly in the difference between this tribe and their more conformist contemporaries. It seems that this ambiguous stance will be imperfectly explained if post-colonial criticism confounds these groups within a broad and undifferentiated social class and ignores the peculiar agency of literature and the forms of desire it stimulated.

Shakespeare and English poetry may have stoked prodigal longings, but the rebellion of Young Bengal was always circumscribed within the peculiar contradiction of its colonial subjection. Such rebellion did not take the form of an unmixed hatred of one's own race or of the foreign rulers (witness the staunch loyalty of the English educated Bengalis during the uprising of 1857). Thwarted by its class origins and colonial destiny, the rebellion was displaced onto the selfish and unimaginative seekers of Western learning, and was distorted into the familiar snobbery and discontent of the colonial bastard of liberal education. The most memorable instance of the sentiment is, of course, the wastrel hero of the satirical play *Sadhabar ekadashi* [The Fast of the Married Woman], who spouts Shakespeare quicker than he empties his glass. It should come as no surprise that the character should have been conceived by Dinabandhu Mitra, a playwright whose own deeply divided response to the colonial presence illustrates many of the points we are making, and who was the first to attempt to create a Bengali Falstaff (Jaladhar in Nabin tapaswini).

The careers of many of the leaders of our Renaissance is cast in the mould of that of the prodigal son of the parable. Following the linked temptations of poetry, liquor and strange beliefs in their youth, they are eventually reclaimed by their race and by what Partha Chatterjee calls a project of nationalizing modern knowledges. I am reminded of a remark made by Richard Helgerson in his book *The Elizabethan Prodigals* in which he identifies humanist learning and romance literature as two poles of this paradigm of prodigality:

> I see humanism and romance as opposed members of a single consciousness, as the superego and id of Elizabethan literature, competitors in a struggle to control and define the self. Humanism represented paternal expectation, and romance, rebellious desire.

One is tempted to draw a parallel here with the contradictory pulls of the rigour of Western science and the imagined freedom of English literature in 19th-century Bengal. We might

illustrate Shakespeare's role in this by citing an essay entitled *Miranda o Shakuntala* by Srishchandra Majumdar published in Bangadarshan in 1880. Majumdar praises both heroines as incarnations of an innocence that is untouched by society. Only a few years back, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya had remarked in his essay *Sakuntala, Miranda ebang Desdemona* that Sakuntala's difference from Miranda lay in that she had the inhibitions of someone brought up in society, while Miranda was free of all such conventions. In 1878, Haraprasad Shastri had written an essay called 'Kalidas o Shakespeare' in which Miranda and Desdemona's innocence had been likened to Sakuntala's, although Shastri's contention was that Shakespeare could create living and whole human characters, while Kalidas could merely portray that which was beautiful.

Majumdar takes up the more difficult task of defending a modern Bengali romance in the light of *The Tempest*. He is understandably anxious to prove that such a romance is far from being inimical to society and social discipline:

> The fear of society is the
> root of social discipline, but
> the principle of the one not
> exposed to society is absolute
> – there is nothing relative in
> it. Therefore, for instructing
> universal humankind it was
> necessary to create a character
> such as Kapalkundala.

The following year, Majumdar defended Madhusudan Dutt's *Meghnadbadh kabya* along similar lines, recognizing in Pramila the expression of Young Bengal's suppressed erotic desire, but also placing Dutt alongside John Stuart Mill as the proponent of the equality of women. One would forgive Majumdar such readings as seem to be inspired by Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* if one looks at, for instance, the attack on *Bankimchandra* by Chandranath Basu a few months back. Basu's contention was that the genre of romance, a Western import, has turned inimical to the Hindu social order by placing individual desire over social regulation. It was not as if Shakespeare was not claimed by the conservative advocate of indigenous values. Between 1887 and 1889, Akshay Chandra Sarkar wrote a series of articles in his journal *Nabajiban* on *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. It is a most instructive document, a mix of learning and unnerving moral exultation. What interests us, however, is its concluding statement:

> The evil magic of European
> philosophy may be to
> some extent exorcised by
> the profound teachings of
> European poetry and drama.
> The reader has perhaps
> understood by now that we are
> using the plays of Shakespeare
> as a sort of English shaman
> to save us from the clutches
> of an English sorcery. If we
> remember the Shakespearean
> mantra we might be
> saved somewhat from the
> bloodsucking witchcraft of
> European philosophy.

A few years after this tirade, in 1895, Ramendrasundar Tribedi would compare Bankimchandra's novel *Krisnakanter will* [The Last Testament of Krisnakanta] to *Macbeth*. But this time he would yield nothing to the likes of Basu and Sarkar, insisiting that both writers teach us something more valuable than moral censure, they teach us not to be too harsh on the damned, a principle that the moralist would never dare to acknowledge.

Tagore's unflattering assessment of Shakespeare in *Prachin sahitya* [Ancient Literature] in 1907 might appear conservative, even reactionary after this. However, it is in Tagore that we can best locate a discursive trajectory which could take Western literature out of the impasse created by the narrative of the

prodigal's return from the modern to the universal, from the Western to the national. In this model, the relationship between English and a resurgent Bengali is neither one of conflict nor of assimilation, but one of synergy. It appears that a secret compact is reached between the exorbitant potencies of the two languages to defy the tidy distinctions drawn by colonial rule. Writing in 1880, Haraprasad Shastri was willing to include other languages and literatures in this plot as he compares Bengal's renaissance to Europe's, and says that Young Bengal is more favourably placed because it has now access not only to classical texts, but to English, French, German and Italian literatures, and those of the ancient Hindus and Buddhists. And since English is our bread-winning language – no need now for Nimchand's snobbery about learning English for a living – the possibilites of improving our national literature seem endless.

This national project is different from others that it does not withdraw into an imaginary national past and heritage, nor does it seek merely to nationalize the modern. It promises simultaneous release from a revanchist national project and servile mimicry of the West. Tagore once wrote:

> ... it is not as though English education has spread through the English language. Its real support is now Bengali literature. Bengalis had once helped establish English rule in India; in today's India, Bengali literature is the principal help in furthering the dominion of English ideas and knowledge. It was when English ideas found easy passage through Bengali literature, at home and outside, that we consciously began to seek freedom from a blind servility to English culture.

Partha Chatterjee reminds us that since the history of our modernity was inalienable from that of colonialism, it was difficult for the cultural leaders of 19th-century Bengal to believe in the chimera of 'universal modernity', and this led to the emergence of, "institutions for the 'nationalization' of modern knowledges, located in a space somewhat set apart from the field of universal discourse, where discourse could be modern, and yet 'national'." Tagore's model of synergy was a way out of this impasse, refusing to succumb to the blandishments of either the modern/universal or the traditional/national. A model of synergy has its resistive dynamics different from that of a model of simple conflict, as Tagore seems to suggest when he says that by assisting in the domestication of Western ideas, Bengali literature has freed us from blind servility to English culture.

I would like to end by inviting you to reflect on the imagery on the 39th poem of *Balaka*, Tagore's 1916 verse tribute to Shakespeare. The poem compares Shakespeare to the sun, which, when it was first glimpsed, was claimed by England, held in the jealous clasp of her sylvan boughs. But the sky remains undivided, and as the sun climbed, its light came to be greeted by the coconut groves on the distant Indian shores.

The sun is an old image of the limited relevance of terrestrial borders, as also of the transcultural appeal of poetry. Tagore, especially in his late phase, was not blind to the danger latent in the conceit of culture's transcendence. He was at ease rather with the idea of a shared earth than with that of a shared sky. When he took a KLM flight to Iran in 1932, the view of a blurred stretch of earth below filled him with dread:

> The higher the plane rose, the ties that join our five senses to the earth started to wither, leaving only one sense, that of sight, as the last link, and that too a tenuous one. The earth that from a combination of sensuous evidence I had known

> as so various and certain melted below me; that which had been a reality of three dimensions turned into a flat picture. Creation assumes its distinct forms within particular and coherent structures of space and time. It dwindles away the more the distinctions are blurred. The earth could be seen amid such dissolution: its being was in a haze, the claims of its existence on our minds grew feeble. I thought how heartless and terrible men could be when they flew up to hurl slaughter from the air; no sense of the measure of their victims' offence would restrain their hands, because such a score would no longer be visible. The natural sympathy we feel for reality dies when the very basis of that feeling grows obscure. The precepts propagated in the *Gita* were such an air-borne ship: it swept Arjuna's compassionate mind up to a far-off world from where the killer looked one with the killed, the kinsman with the alien. The human arsenal contains many such reality-obscuring airships made of theory, and these regulate empires, societies and religions.

In the poem on Shakespeare, on the other hand, Tagore was speaking of the possibility of translation and of traffic between cultures, of the equal joy in light the sylvan boughs and the coconut fronds were born to share. Our faith in this equal destiny has not remained the same. Whether that has been unmixed gain is something I wish to discuss another time.