

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
*Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.*

## BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAY (CHATTERJEE)

**Born** 1838, Naihati, Bengal Presidency, India  
**Died** 1894, Calcutta, Bengal Presidency, India

### Life

The novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (also known as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and often as simply Bankim) was born in an orthodox Brahmin family in rural Bengal. He was the youngest of three sons born to a father who held a high position (Deputy Collector) in the British colonial state. One of his brothers also went on to become a novelist, although his achievements were dwarfed by Bankim's. Indeed, it is often said, with good authority, that Bankim was the 'father of the Indian novel.' Perhaps even more important, he is remembered as the man who wrote a song, 'Vande Mataram' ('Hail to the Mother [India]), which became the anthem of Indian nationalism.

Hard as it is to believe today, he was married at age 11 to a girl aged five. She died when she was twenty-two, and Bankim married another woman, Rajalakshmi Devi, with whom he had three daughters. He studied at a rural college and in 1857 graduated from Presidency College in Calcutta and received another degree in law in 1869. By that time, however, his first novel (*Rajmohan's Wife*) had been published as a serial in a magazine. Soon, however, he switched to writing in Bengali and published *Durgeshnondini* in 1865. Thereafter, he wrote more than a dozen major novels, most of them hailed by critics and the public alike. In 1872, he began a literary journal in Calcutta, which became a major outlet for the new literature that was appearing in Bengali. Like his father, Bankim went into the colonial civil service and served as Deputy Collector of Jessore and as Deputy Magistrate there until his retirement in 1891. He was made a Companion, Order of the Indian Empire in 1894, the year in which he died in Calcutta.

Bankim's lifespan coincided with the Bengali Renaissance, which was a religious and political movement dedicated to the reform of Hinduism and Indian culture, including literature. Bengal was also the hotbed of revolutionary politics, inspired by movements in Russia and elsewhere, which promoted the violent overthrow of British rule. The opposite school of thought, the collaborationists who aped Western ideas and practices, were also popular in Bengal during his lifetime. Bankim himself sought a middle path. He did not believe that copying the west was healthy, and he certainly did not support the use of violence to achieve political change. Instead, he promoted reform of Hinduism and traditional social practices (such as *sati*, the ban on widow remarriage and other injustices of the caste system). In this respect, he continued the legacy of Bengal's greatest reformer, Ram Mohan Roy. His socio-political aims are reflected in his best novels, in which heroes and heroines challenge the status quo but also find some accommodation with the system.

### Achievements

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee achieved a venerable status in Indian literary history as the first person to write a modern novel both in English (1864) and in an Indian language (Bengali, in 1865). He gained both a BA and a legal degree, and he was awarded a Companion, Order of the Indian Empire in 1894.

### List of novels

*Rajmohan's Wife* (1864)  
*Durgeshnandini* (*The Chieftain's Daughter*, 1865)  
*Kapalkundala* (1866)  
*Mrinalini* (1869)  
*Vishabriksha* (*The Poison Tree*, 1873)  
*Indira* (1873, revised 1893)  
*Jugalanguriya* (*The Two Rings*, 1874)

*Radharani* (1876, enlarged 1893)  
*Chandrasekhar* (1877)  
*Kamalakanter Daptar* (*From the Desk of Kamlakanta*, 1875, rev. 1885)  
*Rajani* (1877)  
*Krishnakanter Uil* (*Krishnakanta's Will*, 1878)  
*Rajsimha* (1882)  
*Anandamath* (*Sacred Brotherhood*, 1882)  
*Devi Chaudhurani* (1884)  
*Kamalakanta* (1885)  
*Sitaram* (1887)