CHAPTER II

PREDECESSORS

The first Bengali prose narrative to be attempted in the form of a novel, was Fababu Viläs, by Bhawani Charan Bandopadhyay, published in 1825. Thereafter quite a number of writers entered the field and their output was by no means small. But for long forty years until the emergence of Bankim Chandra, Bengali fiction remained in swaddling clothes. It was lisping and babbling all the while; it failed to develop an organic form. Little progress was made in its technique and design.

The English novel had attained maturity by this time through the steady evolution of a century. Some of our writers claimed to have followed the English model, but their achievement was hardly commensurate with the professed objective. Against this background of trials and experiments, Durgeshendri appeared in the year 1865. The predecessors at once paled into insignificance. The preliminary chapter in our fictional literature came to an end.

It is not difficult to trace the cause of this long period of barrenness. The time in Bengal around 1800 was
sadly out of joint. Towards the close of the Muslim rule decadence had set in in our social and cultural life. The ascendency of the East India Company made things worse. A new type of civilization sprang up. Commercialism was the soul of this civilization, under the influence of which the process of national decay was accelerated. Society was brought to the verge of disintegration. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, national degeneration was complete. Stagnation was in evidence everywhere. The then Governor-General, Lord Minto, noted in 1811:

'It is common remark that Science and Literature are in a progressive state of decay among the natives of India. The number of the learned is not only diminished, but the circle of learning even amongst those who still devote themselves to it, appears to be considerably counteracted.'

No original thinking and creative activity could possibly be expected in this unfavourable milieu. But fortunately enough, the "state of decay among the natives of India" did not progress further. Even when Lord Minto was writing his report, the torpor of half a century was being broken by constructive activity in many fields of life. Two events — the establishment of the Fort William College in 1800 and the Hindu College in 1817 — might be taken as marking the end of that age of intellectual barrenness. Literary movements on new lines originated from these centres of learning, and we are directly concerned with
the former. The college at Fort William was the first to develop a sort of indigenous prose that paved the way for the rise of the novel.

Morality was at a low ebb. The immediate need of the time was to castigate erring people or to teach them moral lessons. The new prose, still in its amorphous state, served as a handy weapon. It was utilized for writing satiric sketches in a rough and ready manner, and thus the stage was set for story-telling in prose. A start was made for the development of the novel in Bengal.

A survey of the works of the forerunners of Bankim Chandra reveals some measure of similarity in their technique. It appears they had not a clear grasp of the design and craft of fiction. Most of them were scarcely free from the Pauranic tradition of telling stories in verse; they were satisfied if they could narrate a purposeful story with some passion. Allegorical and moralistic tendencies tempted them to stray away from the path of art.

The five representative novelists selected in this chapter, generally used the form of the novel almost with the same object. Three of them, Bhawani Charan, Peary Chand, and Kali Prasanna, wrote veiled satires to enforce a moral. The fourth one, Mrs Mullens, a Christian missionary, utilized this form to establish the superiority of her religion over that of the heathens. Bhabad Chandra, the fifth, borrowed a romantic design from foreign sources, also for ethical considerations.

One typical work of each will show the nature of formal progress in fiction before 1865. As stated in the Introduction, it has been found convenient to look to the evolution of design and place Nabababu Vilas (1825), Hutum Fhachar Naka (1862),
and Álól Churcrl Gharer (1856) in this order. Phulmä 0
Kevra (1852) and Miihimśik. Unspaya (1856) have a
different pattern; they would be taken up after the first three.

The one-action narrative of Nababnul Vilas by
Shawani Charan Bandyopadhyay was published under the nom de plume of
Pramatha Nath Sarma. Its historical aspect is more important
than the technical. In 1855 Rev James Long rightly observed:
"One of the oldest satires on the Calcutta Babu as he was 30 years
ago." The quarterly "Friend of India" in a comment in Octo.
1925 touched also on its form:

"its episodes are occasionally dull and
languid, and its poetry often inharmonious
as well as posing, but with all its defects,
it is a valuable document; it illustrates
the habits and economy of rich native fami­
lies, and affords us a glimpse behind the
scenes."

This half-burlesque, half-satirical sketch of some fifty
pages is cast in the Pauranic mould. As the earliest of our
novels in embryo, it has still the vestiges of indigenous verse
fablia. The text is preceded by an invocation in mediocre
pawer and two pages (pp. 3-4) of introduction. Half of this
introduction is pure Kadambari Sanskrit, the other half in
Tatasankari translated vernacular.
The invocation and the preparatory remarks have no relevant connexion with the main structure. Bankim had nothing to do with the first. He made a dramatic use of the second, with wonderful technical appropriateness, in Ḍhāmanda Math and Badi-Chandamani. 

Its four parts have allegorical sub-titles in the Pauranic style: Anlur Khanda, Pallav Khanda, Puspa Khanda, Phala Khanda. Chapters do not occur, but stretches of narrative under the parts, intermixed with rhyming doggerel, serve the purpose of chapters. Bankim's use of allegorical sub-titles in Chandrasekhar and Sitarām have a real connotative force; they become significant by the sweep of the story and the grandeur of the design. In Pramatha Math, they are just outmoded appendages.

The action follows a perpendicular course, with no complication, and, therefore, no climax and resolution. A straight narrative describes the amusements of the modern Babu; it is all in summary, or what is called in French, récit. Craft as such does not appear anywhere in the plot. Smaller Bankim tales like Yugafāngurīva and Bādhārānī are interesting studies in contrast.

Bankim Chandra correctly noted its "rubbish" of matter, but its form has some importance. Nebababu Vilās is an improvement upon the tiny portrait of a Babu published earlier in the "Samachar Darpan," dated 24th Feb. and 9th June, 1821. The theme is treated on realistic lines and the movement is towards continuity of the story. The step-down from the mystery and folk-lore patterns is to be appreciated. It has no design, but it is fiction in the making and far-off completion.

From Peary Chand to 'Hutom' there is a natural transition. One technical improvement is clear: the story branches into many
directions and gain in its volume is thus attained by the diversification of the subjects narrated.

Kali Prasanna Singh published a fragment of Hutaṃ Pāchār Nākṣā in 1861 under the pen-name of Hutaṃ Pāchā. The next year (1862), the entire Part One was out. Its bilingual title-page read:

Sketches by Houtam/iIlustrative of/Every Day Life and Every Day/People ... 1862

This was followed by a parody of invocation in six lines of blank verse. The front page of the first fragment of sixteen pages was more suggestive of its ideas and form:

It was decorated with two line-engravings: one of it pictured Hutaṃ as seated on the crest of the earth and floating sketches in the air.

Some after a supplementary Part Two was finished. The two were published in one volume in 1864 (pp. 180 + 54). Hutaṃ is not a unified narrative. It is a collection of Addisonian sketches, lighter in content, nearer to French tentes. The writer might have been influenced by the form of "The Spectator" of Addison and Steele; Ram Gopal Ghosh introduced a tradition of it in Bengal with his "Bengal Spectator" towards the middle of the century. Senkin's reference to "the manner of Dickens' sketches by Bos," is rather vague; Hutaṃ's pattern is perhaps Dickensian, the technique Addisonian. Each Naksā should be better taken just as a loose sally of the mind.

Of the twenty-eight essays in Hutaṃ, Part I, Charak, Bām Yātī, Rathat Avatar, Sām Nākrā are long-shorts. The
It is one thing to admire "the racy vigorous language" of Hutom or its faithfulness of the pictures. But it is pure academic convention to consider its contribution to the development of fictional art. A string of disconnected sketches on popular topics round the character of the author-speaker, would not give the book even a semblance of plot. Nababahu has a more rightful claim in the history of our novels; its diminutive replica in the "Samachar Darpan" has a relevant position as a predecessor. Hutom comes in purely by the ingenuity of critics. The author's objective was not to tell a story or attempt characterisation; he indicated his province in the Preface to the second edition:

Freedom from prevailing allegory is a merit of its craft. But any sort of structure for a novel was outside the plan of Hutom, from his aerial heights he made a random survey of people and incidents. The manners of the age tickled his imagination. Story-telling in flexible, working prose is to be reckoned with at this stage of our progress. But for that benefit not Bankim but Bankim the familiar essayist is more indebted.

Alâer Gharar Dulâl comes next in the logical course of the development of design. The lean body of Nababahu has become comparatively corpulent; there is integration of the varied portraits of Hutom. Dulâl has made some distinct
advance in spite of its adherence to the old craft. The writer, Peary Chand Mitra, published the book in 1868 under the pen-name of Tek Chand Thackoor. He stated his purpose in a bilingual preface which practice was perhaps imitated by Hutom.

"The above original novel in Bengali being the first work of the kind, is now submitted to the public with considerable diffidence. It chiefly treats of the pernicious effects of allowing children to be improperly brought up, with remarks on the existing system of education, on self-formations and religious culture, and is illustrative of the condition of Hindu society, manners, customs, etc."

The preface in Bengali states the same thing in brief. The Nabababu theme of sin and repentance is treated more deftly on a wider canvas. A shade of complexity has been given to the plot by the addition of a sub-action; but the story is cast in the customary allegorical mould and it ends in the redemption of the sinner. The running headlines at the top of chapters, are in the medieval Kavya technique:

Forethought is marked in the arrangement of plot which is necessarily set on rigid outlines. The preface is the guiding principle; its overmastering influence has tended to squeeze life and freedom from the dramatic personae. They could be easily placed in two opposite camps of good and evil. A sort of abstract contrast exists between the sub-action of Barada Babu and Shyamlal, and the main-action of Baburam Babu and Matilal.
Complication in an allegorical pattern takes a stale unsavoury course. In the last analysis, the story of *Alab* boils down to the one-way plain narrative of *Nabababu*. Yet there is some improvement in the design and that is due to a better use of craft.

*Alab* had the distinction of being celebrated in a fairly long vernacular essay of Bankim Chandra. Reference is again made to the book in the same tone in the English article, "Bengali Literature," from which an extract has been quoted. It is to be noted that Bankim was vocal about the homely subject and "vigorous and natural" style of the book, but he said nothing about its fictional character. Perhaps he saw nothing of it in *Alab* in comparison with the western design of the novel that might have captured his imagination by that time. Yet apart from the beauty of its matter, its form deserves some praise.

It is evident Tek Chand was aware of the type of literature called the novel. His hold on craft was tolerable. The second strand, even in its allegorical strain, is an acquisition for the plot. Barada Babu, as the ideal of a religious man, enters the plot in chap. 6, and becomes a part of it from chap. 12. This is some compensation for the absence of a dramatic complication. The volume of the story increases to some extent. He made a modest effort, within the limits of his own conception, to broaden the scope of a one-action narrative. He also logically divided his book into sections that correspond to chapters. It gives a full-length story extending over some two hundred pages. But the real pattern is yet to come.

*Phulmani o Karunār Bibaran* by Mrs Hannah Catherine Mullens marks a clear advance in fictional technique. Three thousand copies were published in its first edition in 1852.
Chandra in his palm days could never reach this figure; his biographer Sachis Chandra recorded two thousand in respect of the most popular ones like Durgeśwārini (6th ed.), Kamaśāntar Pānter (1st ed.), Ananda Math (4th ed.), and Dharmaśāntvā. In addition to the Bengali version of Mrs Mullens, there was an English rendering the next year. "The Friend of India" reported on 28th Nov., 1869 that it was also "translated from its exquisite Bengali into every vernacular of India."

Phulanī 0 Karuna has some uncommon features. Mrs Mullens was the only pre-Bankim novelist who ventured a first person narrative. An accurate use of the technique is hit upon by her; it would have led to wonderful results but for her aggressive religious doctrinaire. Her plan was to throw light upon the objects of her observation by herself remaining in the background. She was to become a medium, appropriately dim, like Srikanta of Sarat Chandra, or David Copperfield of Dickens. In other words, she was just to become an observer and let things happen round her. But she did the opposite: she caused things to happen according to her desire. Objectivity, that one thing needful in this technique, had been impaired by her outright acceptance of the role of a missionary.

"It is a book specially intended for Native Christian Women. I have endeavoured to show in it the practical influence of Christianity on the various details of domestic life, such as the forming of marriage connections, behaviour to husbands, moral training of children . . . .

The above subjects are worked into the little story, fictitious on the whole, but founded upon facts . . . .

( Preface )

The author obtruded into the scene with enthusiasm from the start. There occurs in the novel a mixture of two
art forms of the first person narrative, the objective and
the subjective patterns, so excellently differentiated by
Percy Lubbock. The plan of Mrs Mullens should have been not
to have unfolded herself. The design must not have been
coloured by her subjective feelings. But she failed to maintain
detachment; the artistic finesse which she undoubtedly possessed,
was marred by her pre-planned obtrusive character.

The novel of an angular and professional preacher
is likely to develop an organic defect. Only a creative artist
can handle a thematic novel with success. In the hands of a
Bankim Chandra, the thing became a trumpet. The range and
sweep of his narrative, his faculty of investing the design
with grandeur, tended to obliterate any purpose that he had.
In the hands of lesser writers, it was the purpose that controlied
the plot and the characters. It is apparent the design of
Phulmani O Karunā is made to plan. The characters are either
rigid or made gradually ripe for repentance and redemption.
This is the technique of Pramatha Nath or Tek Chand changed
not in kind but in degree. It is a moment's business to
draw the men and women of Mrs Mullens under two broad heads of
good and evil. Forster's indictment, "All that is prearranged,
is false," seems to be generally true of all the plots discussed
in this chapter.

Almost all the characters either quote extensively
from the Bible or speak in the biblical tone. There are
frequent passages of delicate, picturesque narratives, but the
language is generally not indigenous. Common people of the
villages use an artificial Anglicised vernacular that has the
accent of the Srirampur Mission. The author's power of minute
description of our everyday life, loses much of its edge when
this language becomes the medium of expression. The intrusive.
personality of the novelist impairs dramatic verisimilitude

This is rather an extreme case of the author speaking through a young girl of seven years only. But it well illustrates her confusion of the two techniques: her light is reflected on the passage when she should have remained invisible. It is difficult to identify a Bengal village where such girls existed. Not much difference is observed in the speech of the village Ayah:
The imperfection of design and diction of Phulmani or Karuna diminishes the potency of some of its strong points. Mrs Mullens brought in a semblance of complexity in the plot. The one-action narrative of Alal appears thin by the side of its wider pattern composed of the two strands of Phulmani and Karuna. The two side-stories of Sundari and Peary are harmonised in the design. Mrs Mullens knew the art of interweaving and of giving due emphasis to every episode. Ten clear chapters divide the book, although she had nothing of complication of actions or interaction of characters. A very delicate sensibility seems to have cast its spell upon the tender and tranquil mood of the novelist. If she had not been obsessed with her religion, she might become really successful.

Aitihāsik Upanyāsa (1856) of Bhudev Chandra Mukhopadhyay, Madhusudan Dutta's class-mate at Hindu College, is taken up last in this chapter as its design is completely different from that of the other four. In place of the prevailing realism, sometimes tender, often crude and undisguised, this author introduced romance gathered from the flight of time.

He enjoyed reputation as the originator of the historical novel in Bengal. But he just referred to an English model in the preface to his Pusphānali, published in 1876:

"भद्रदेव भद्रदेव प्रसिद्धि तत्र दीर्घ 
अनुभवान अश्वमनि नामायि भक्तिर यथा।"

Tek Chand declared that his Alal was "the first work of the kind" in Bengali. Bhudev was perhaps the first man to claim that he was writing a novel in Bengali after the English pattern.
The title, *Althasik Upanyasa*, is a bit misleading. No book goes by that name; it is a blanket term to indicate the character of the two stories included in it, *Sanhal Swarna* and *Angriva Vinimay*. *Romance of History* is the source of the whole story of the first and part of the second. The author acknowledges his debt to it:

To call at least the first of the two a novel, is to make a very extended application of the term. *Sanhal Swarna* is a romantic tale of sixteen pages, divided into three chapters. It narrates how a poor but mettlesome young man rises to power and opulence by sheer luck. It is all yarn let off in the white heat of fancy:

Then the author dilates, in the same style, on his blood-curdling adventures and hair-breadth escapes, his dream
of future prosperity, and finally the fulfilment of that dream:

It is a story told straightway, with no pretension to craft. Plot is inconsequential; the narrative in stilted language hops, trots, and comes to an end by the will of the writer. Critics have taken great pains to discover a shadow of Saphal Swamna upon Durgesandini, especially in the opening lines. It would be lost labour to examine the point.

In comparison with Saphal Swamna, Anguriva Vinimay is better managed. The story centres round the historical incident of the love affair between the Maratha chieftain Sivaji and Aurangzeb's daughter, Rosinara. Bhudev relegated history into the background; he dwelt on the pathos of that love. The conspicuous want is, again, of a design. Plot as such is absent. A one-action romantic story is narrated in summary form in ninety pages divided into twelve chapters.

The story does not flower in the lean, static plot. There was scope for interaction of characters, which was unexploited; the author instead pursued only a romantic anecdote through the by-ways of history. The emotional content of the Jagat Singh-Ayesha sub-action in Durgesandini stands in luminous contrast to the matter-of-fact narrative of Bhudev. It is an academic trifle to speak of influences. Bankim's sense of craft was different, his design was of another kind altogether.

Anguriva Vinimay has the tenor of a historical essay; it has not been endowed with the technique of the novel. Bhudev's
genius lay in the line of the essayist, which was best displayed in the famous Education Gazette. He wanted Bankim’s creative imagination that infused life into the dry materials of history. The emphasis on the love element in the Sivaji-Rosinara episode is like that of a novelist; the treatment of it is like that of the essayist. At his best, he comes nearer to Ramesh Chandra.

What is to be appreciated in Bhudev, is his insight into the structure of the novel, not its design. His plot has a Bankim-like Randas Swami. The story is touched up by him;
he exhorts Sivaji to accept Rosinara’s memento:

Such extracts have dramatic fire, but they come at long intervals. Like the other novelists of the period, Bhudev was tied to the wheel of didacticism. He stated in the preface:

The design of the novel was yet to acquire a supreme importance. That was why Bhudev did not know the secret of the art of kindling fire, although he could gather the details that made up the romantic mise en scène.

The credit side of the account of these predecessors is rather poor. They discarded the path of versifiers and tract-writers of the age and hit upon the pattern of a running
narrative in prose. The innovation of non-verse, non-fable sketches, was an achievement. But a new machinery in itself remains inert unless used with skill and intelligence. The artist must be able to utilise its potentialities to the fullest extent. It appears that these writers did not possess that power. They were novelists of description, rather than of plot construction. Of the two lasting qualities of this branch of literature, style and artistic presentation of matter, they had little. Their importance was mainly historical. Measured by the standards of eternal time, their performances were rather insignificant.

The real maker of modern Bengali fiction was Bankim Chandra. Only experimental work was done in this line during the first half of the nineteenth century; creative effort had to wait until a substantial change had occurred in society. Bankim appeared when the old order was yielding place to new, towards the middle of the century. The ferment and excitement, caused by the first impact of western civilization, died down. Evenborn rebels were diverting their energies into constructive channels; they started producing works of noble note. Drama and poetry, in the hands of Dinabandhu and Madhusudan, made striking progress on new lines. Fiction was languishing in an amorphous state, it could not attain maturity without a proper technique and a design. Practically it was left to Bankim to recreate this literary form by importing its design from the treasure-house of the West. The pattern that existed, was changed altogether.

The predecessors of Richardson, the first English novelist, did more solid work towards the development of fictional technique. Pamela, the first real novel in England,
came out in 1740, greatly helped by the normal process of evolution. But Bankim had no such heritage from the field of Bengali fiction as could make the work easy for him. He had to reconstruct its very design and infuse life and fire into it. His precursors did no more than just blazing a trail for him. As the originator of a type of literature hitherto unknown, he may rather be compared with Wordsworth than with Richardson. This English poet, like the Bengali novelist, had to strike out for himself a new line of approach. Durgeshendini, like the Lyrical Ballads, has been rightly considered as a new creation.

Notes and References.


2 Chatterjee, Bankim Chandra, Bengali Literature, 1871, quoted from English Writings of Bankim Chandra, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Calcutta, 1940, p. 23: "There is scarcely any readable work belonging to that age - the age of Nata Babu Vilas and Probodh Chandrika; as for literary filth, there never was a more copious supply. Happily, the whole mass of rubbish has vanished from public recollection."

3 Ibid, p. 32: "...Baton Francha, a collection of sketches of city-life, something after the manner of Dickens' Sketches by Boz, in which the follies and peculiarities of all classes, and not seldom of men actually living, are described in racy vigorous language; not seldom disfigured by obscenity."

4 Lubbock, Percy, the Craft of Fiction, Jonathan Cape, London 1957, chap. IX