Bankimchandra died a year after the publication of the rewritten version of *Rajsingha* in 1893. It first came out in 1882 as a *Kshudra Kathā* or a little anecdote, a *nouvelle* of 83 pages in 19 chapters.¹ Eleven years after was published a reconstructed and enlarged novel of more than a hundred thousand words in 434 pages. Divided into 8 parts, broken into 61 chapters and a concluding one, it turned out to be the author's *magnum opus.* In weight and massiveness, in the grandeur of its design and execution, this great novel is a nonpareil.

The book has some theoretical likeness to the scheme of some others that made an attempt at illustrating the glory of heroic Bengal. Hindu military prowess in the broader perimeter of India is now the theme. With the establishment of the British empire, it suffered an eclipse; the Hindus of India before that time had a tradition of their own in the field of battle. The author wants to exemplify his thesis with reference to the story of the Rajput prince, Rajsingha.²

Bankim has endeavoured to suspend disbelief in his viewpoint by building up a historical narrative with materials drawn from recorded documents. But he is conscious all the while
that he is no historian, but a novelist. The real craftsman of fictional literature must needs recreate history; colouring of imagination within limits, is a part of his technical equipment. This instinct worked as the basis of his revision work. He was led on to the most effective method of refashioning some principal characters which he incorporated, even as he added embellishments by introducing the most stirring incidents of war in the mountain passes of Rajputna. His point of view that a novel need not be fettered by strict adherence to historical principles, is not altogether unjustified.\(^3\)

This is evident in his treatment of the old story as well as in the new version itself. It is surprising how boldly he developed the nucleus of an anecdote into a subtly woven web of many fabrics. In the first edition, the structure was simply monolithic: the plot was a one-action account of the Rajput princess Chanchal Kumari and her chivalrous deliverer Rajsingha. The entire Delhi-story was out of the picture. But Bankim was aware of the inherent potentialities of the germinal plot. Like a great architect, he added to it structures of bigger dimensions and higher altitudes, which took on the appearance of a gigantic tree with overhanging branches. In place of the one story, there were two others added to the central action; all these three again were deftly interlocked with one another in a triangular form. The quantitative increased the qualitative difference in proportion. A more adventurous experiment in fictional literature is rare to find.

This three pronged drive to substantiate his point of view, seems to evolve naturally. In the very first chapters, the central episode of Rajsingha and Chanchal Kumari si flashed forth. The princess is enraptured by a picture of the Rajput chieftain who is thus naturally drawn in into the plot. At the same time the imprudent princess indirectly entangles herself with
Aurangzeb, the Emperor of Hindusthan, by her childlike dalliance with his picture. It is the first triangle of a three-sided narrative. The novelist complicates the texture further by drawing the old king towards Chanchal’s confidante, Nirmal. She carries a missive to the capital where the Emperor detects and detains her, and then succumbs to her sprightliness and charm. But she is already a bride to Maniklal, a faithful follower of Rajsingha. This is what may be called a triangle upon triangle, already used in a masterly way in Vishavriksha, Chandrasekhar, and Raieni.

The third episode has a kindred shape. Mobarak, a mansabdar of the imperial army, becomes a meeting point, a most pathetic one, for two hapless women in the novel. Zebunnessa, the rot of a Moghul princess, spreads her voluptuous influence upon him, and he has to decry Daria, his lawful wife, as a lunatic. But she haunts the pair relentlessly like Fate through court and field wherever they are driven by the impact of circumstances. The third episode is dovetailed with the first two through Mobarak and Aurangzeb as they proceed to Udaipur. The complex pattern of the plot is finally resolved there in a historical war.

All these diverse stories are united in the melting pot of history. Chanchal Kumari serves as a link between Rajsingha who has become her hero and Aurangzeb who wants to teach her and her hero a lesson for having been slighted by both of them. Action is carried on not by the author who seems to stand aloof; shifting human and political forces draw the characters together towards a focal point. It was one of the worst of times in the history of India. The sombre spirit of the time casts its shadow upon the wide canvas and it seems to take the scene of action beyond the range of space and time. Bankim emphasises elemental forces.
as the most important factor in the fusing of characters. In those days, men and women were hurled into headlong collision as if by the waving of a magician's wand. The thoughtless act of a teen-aged girl made the mighty monarch of India spread his giant hands towards Rajputana, hundreds of miles away from the imperial capital. It is the historical spirit that threads the scattered episodes through a series of most spectacular panorama of scenes.

The knitting of actions is done simultaneously with the joining of the two centres of the plot, Delhi and Udaipur. It is, of course, not the province of the novelist of action to stress spatial contents; he flies on the wings of time, his characters may be carried along by the momentum caused by incidents and thus may transcend the limitations of space. In Bankim space becomes a concrete reality as well. The two places of activity are made vocal and audible through the interplay of human characters, the wide geographical extent becomes one stretch of a vast unit by their interaction. We become conscious of latitude and longitude as the novelist's pen rolls in a fine frenzy from Rajputana to Delhi. An axis is formed. His imagination bodies forth a systematised pattern of events round the thesis. The challenge comes from the Rajput principality, which is at once met by a punitive expedition from the Moghul capital. Forging of harmony in the plot structure is never a problem with Bankim. History does it here; elsewhere the story does it.

He has rolled action and atmosphere into a compact body as soon as he has started on the story. Part I makes a dramatic setting of both in the context of a wide expanse of territory. Chanchal Kumari, the proud daughter of the cowardly chieftain of Rupnagar, makes a purchase of some pictures
from a Muslim woman pedlar; she respectfully takes one of
Raja Jangi and tramples another of Emperor Aurangzeb.
The news flies on wings until it reaches the ears of the hyper-sensitive Emperor of Delhi. A spark creates a conflagration.
There is a comprehensiveness in the technique that can make a simple incident create a triangular complication. It is this incident again that is utilised to indicate the state of affairs at both the places:

This is a dramatic way of introducing the action of the story, which Bankim had followed with comparative success in
Mrinalini and Sifraaj. Either by instinct or by study he
developed the Shakespearean method of striking the core of the plot
with the first shot. Half the background of the book is formed
in this Part I as it makes a broad survey of the adjacent kingdoms
of Rupnagar and Udaipur. The method followed is a dramatic
contrast between timidity and heroism: the father of the princess
is an antithesis to the prince after whom the title is named. The
exordium of Part I also indicates the shape of things to come. It
is suggested a tussle will ensue between a daring, chivalrous
chieftain deified by the princess, and his power-mad suzerain.
This part, captioned Chitr Charan, is thus a wonderful link action,
it bounces the story to the centre of the theme.

Preparation made, the scene shifts by a natural
sequence in Part II to the other side of the plot. The sub-title
of this part, Mandana: Narak, is significant enough; the
background that is opened in the preceding part, is completed by
a vivid picture of the Moghul harem. It is here that the first
enlargement upon the brief anecdote of the first edition occurs.
The whole of Part II except a few lines of Chapters 56 & 6, is
incorporated with the purpose of making the plot complex and the
atmosphere impressive. Bankim’s instinctive sense of technique
brings in a change at the right point. Only an artist of his
stamp could have the sense that he was darning no single-bed
mosquito net; he was putting up a tent that would be pulsing with
the life of hundreds. Vastness demanded addition of space and
increase of characters.

In this new extract we meet Zebunnesa. This Moghul
princess is represented as a debauched, satiated, dissipated woman,
withering in the cold luxury of the palace. Bankim is here
recreating history into fictional literature. The overriding
demand of a novel is resuscitated to in a surprising manner by a master craftsman. In the field of biography of the modern age, Lytton Strachey had to twist history to make Queen Victoria and Doctor Arnold life-like. The same cause accounts for the delineation, in later parts of *Evelina*, of the Emperor as a love-sick, lonely personage, priising in the prison-house of pomp and ceaseless activity.

With Zebunnisa, we enter the third story which is again triangular. Her appearance in the plot is perhaps not a resultant of the logic of events. And yet she is a necessary part of it; the other side of the pattern would become indistinct without her, the novel would lose the contrasting picture of fate-ridden pathos without the Zebunnisa-Moharak-Daria colouring. Snippets of conversation as well as penetrating recit parts undoubtedly create an atmosphere of dramatic emotion:

Action in the proper sense of the term is suspended up to Part III entitled *Vikalpa*. In relation to the whole plot, these three parts form a sort of link action and they are preparatory in character. The technique of dramatic contrast
is maintained all through. Zebunnesa’s life is bathed in pensive tears, it is a life of tragic desolation after all. Relief to the gloomy, pent-up atmosphere comes in the next stage. The freedom of the mountain air spreads in Part III; it is set against the stifling grandeur of the harem. Maniklal who predominates in the third part, is a Figaro, a type of cunning and dexterity; his consort is his proper counterpart. Lighthearted they are even in the midst of adverse circumstances. This light element is fused with the serious story of Zebunnesa. Pathos mingle with fun while providence directs the course of action towards the mechanical centre of the plot. It is at Udaipur that complication and resolution occur.

In the first edition, the one-action story was resolved in Part IV. The author must have felt that the close was succinct, abrupt:

"..."
The tendency to tell the last end of a tale persists even in the enlarged edition, but there it is no summarising of a latent plot. This not very necessary desire to linger on after the plot is technically finished, is seen also in Mrinalini and Devi Chaudhurani.

A second nucleus is furnished by the few lines of narrative quoted above. The plot takes a vertical movement once again from here and the action is finished in two rounds. The first culminates at the end of the original edition which is Part IV in the rewritten form. Rāndhra Yuddha (Part IV) sounds the first trumpet of war in the novel; its reverberation rises into a tumultuous symphony of many voices in the penultimate parts. There is perhaps hedging of action in between the old and the new parts, but dramatic action is maintained through behind-the-scene activities. Zebunnessa is dressed up in Part II for her real entry in Part V. All the characters of all the 'stories' are entangled hereafter in some form or another. Aurangzeb comes on the stage in his white costume and complication begins in the second round. So long he was physically absent although enough referred to for being known to the audience in his true colours. The hedging device that keeps action in suspense, throws the next strip of it into relief and gives the story a fuller swing.

The last four sections have added to the dignity and grandeur of the narrative while increasing the momentum of the swing at every stop. Rabindranath's famous estimate of Rāisingha, especially in point of its speed and ever-widening process, becomes a marked feature henceforward. The tagging of the second part in the midst of the old story already referred to, was to intensify the dramatic emotion in the subsequent parts. Aurangzeb is skilfully entangled in Part V, and very soon his presence is actual and widespread in the plot. As the story advances, the three
episodes mix and mingle in the common current which runs towards the author's indicated focus. The dramatic centre coincides with the mechanical centre in Part VI.

Bankim seems to have been carried along the current of his narrative in the added portion of his novel. Intensification of sentiment occurs as if by the logic of events. Even the captions have a distinct tonal value:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{রাজা} - \text{রাজাকার} \\
& \text{বন্ধু} - \text{বন্ধুকার} \\
& \text{রাধা} - \text{রাধিকা} \\
& \text{তন তন} - \text{তনতন} \\
\end{align*}
\]

The reader is perhaps reminded of the sub-titles in *A Tale of two Cities*; the Dickensian flavour in these fiery names is apparent. But Bankim's narrative is chastened and subdued, whereas the Victorian novelist has preferred rather to elaborate similar scenes under the impulse of emotion.

The scenes are generally dramatised. The few comments of the author are his own pointers to the gathering fullness of the development of the plot. Although the stress is on incident, the incidents bring the characters into clear relief as well. And behind these rolls evermore the current of the broil and battle of history. They attain consummation in the last part. It contains as many as sixteen chapters, the greatest in number among all the parts. The dramatis personae seem to develop the technique independent of the author, here as elsewhere generally in *Rāisingha*.

It has been found in many a case before that Bankim Chandra's novel took on a dramatic structure almost by the force of his genius. A neat plot is developed according to the laws of causality and irrelevant matter is practically tabooed in a Bankim scheme. The recits about history in *Rāisingha* fit in with the historical texture; they help grow the plot by
increasing the speed of the action. It needs no small courage to include in fiction professedly factual matter like the challenge of Rajsingha to Aurangzeb; it is in the form of a letter dealing mainly with matters political (Part V, Chap. 6). Bankim does it easily and repeats the skill, in part, at a later stage (VII. I): they seem to flow from his pen as naturally and fittingly as the few snatches of songs which enrich the book. They become acclimatized in the climate of the drama. Or, rather, they elevate the tone of it to a newer level.

These experiments are integrated in the texture of the plot because in Rajsingha it seems to be moulded by the need of the story and the characters. In other words, a novel of action has been treated dramatically. Craft is a miracle in the hand of a master: the question of category melts. Thomas Hardy, an otherwise sound technician, has often failed to raise his men above the tentacles of his plot. Fate seems to be the super-artist in his novels, although the rendering is mainly dramatic; this has tended to benumb his characters and squeeze them into a steel-frame. Jude the Obscure is perhaps an extreme example in this direction. Even Henry James inadvertently put the fetters of his theory on his dramatis personæ; his passion for a "scenic" presentation of the story at the expense of the panoramic, very often made his novels rather uninspiring.

But in Bankimchandra's Rajsingha, life is a gushing current. It defies to be limited by structure, it moulds the plastic materials of the episodes by its overflowing vitality. His first attempt, Durgeshmandini, is just a pointer. The tradition is carried on in Kanalkundalā, and after the compromising technique in Mrinalini, the flow is almost even, ever-widening, boisterous. Rajsingha has the look of a vast watering main where the converging waves play ceaselessly against the "erosions of contour" which they
produce. There is no load of supernumerary details of Walter Scott
to act as hurdles on the stream of life. Neither is there the
proclivity for profusion of Charles Dickens. The picture is
different in Bankim Chandra. Behind the self-propelled narrative
he is at the helm, strong, relentless, his eyes upturned towards
the star of his objective.

It is this life that makes the story of Rāisingha
so lively and impressive. The war scenes go to the making of
that impression. He describes them with a gusto and the
picturesqueness of the narrative is to a great extent due to the
vigour infused into it by these scenes. He elongated the original
story with the purpose of glorifying Rajput chivalry against the
background of startling battle scenes; these are laid out in a
splendid series of incidents unique in fictional literature. By
their side his own sketches in Ānanda Math and Sītārām appear to
be fragmentary. Even he himself has not been able to recapture
elsewhere the epic grandeur which the cumulative strokes of
Rāisingha suggest. The method adopted is peculiar to Bankim
Chandra. In consonance with the weight and profundity of the
theme of Rāisingha he has raised up his art to the level of our
ancient epics:
It is difficult to stop quoting. The description follows in the next chapter. It is a continuous process, as long
as necessary, even in the diminutive first edition. In the second round of action in the revised version, this art is spread up in the entire Part IV; in Chap. 2, the narrative reaches epic dimensions. It appears there is a union of the historical method with the fictional, which is perhaps a variant of the technique used in the Battle Books of the Mahābhārata.

Bankim's private study is a thing of conjecture, but it may be presumed an old scholar like him must have taken the Rāmāyan and the Mahābhārata for his province. The influence of the latter at least is evident in him; it appears the description of famine and pestilence in Ananda Math is taken bodily from this great epic. In Raigina the epic technique is also observed in the use of mighty persons engaged in titanic wars. The novelist has even used a significant war-cry Śrī Śrī to give to his narrative the tone of an epic. Pure summary method or the recit of the epic is naturally inadequate in fiction, and hence the mixed art of summary and dialogue. The scenic parts serve to transfuse life into the dry chronological story.

Characters many and various dazzle the eye as the kaleidoscopic scenes change one after another. Everything seems to be vast: spatial texture, the stature of the men and women, their long list, all are things of the epic setting. Perhaps ambitious projects were in the air in the last part of the nineteenth century. Michael Madhusudan, Hemachandra, and Nabindrachandra were the children of the same age; they were planning topics unattempted yet in prose or verse. It is not improbable Bankim felt the same urge to make an experiment of a modest type in his own domain of fiction.

We are not exactly hazarding an opinion. The pattern and spirit of the book tend to confirm it. Rabindranath's impassioned appreciation verges on that line:
After grappling successfully with such an ambitious plan, the novelist enters the stage. The concluding chapter is in the form of an apologia. It is the dramatic technique of Epilogue transformed into fictional prose. Of his nine full-fledged novels, it occurs in as many as three others, Mrinalini, Krishnakanter Will, and Sitaran. The modern critic of craft is in favour of objective and dramatised rendering of everything. But the time of Bankim was different. And in a country where religion is a question of sentiment, a writer who ventures into the forbidden field, has to offer an explanation. It is an obsolete
technique, a relic of the great age of classics

Notes and References


2. *निरेक्ष-पीड़ित-प्रक्कट-सृष्टि-विशेष-कथा (कोष) निरेक्ष-सृष्टि-कथा विशेष-कथा, निरेक्ष-सृष्टि-कथा विशेष-कथा कथा कथा कथा।* (Pathayoda, Sahitya Parishad, 1893)


4. The extract is quoted in Chap. III (Durgesnandini).

The quotations from the novels of Bankim Chandra have been taken from the Sahitya Parishad edition.