

Colonial Leisure and Opium-induced Visions in Bengal: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Kamalākānta* (1873–82)¹

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Leisure, or otium, is not necessarily the dominant modus operandi of university professors. If leisure is to be measured in contradistinction to workloads and publication outputs, Thomas Oberlies has most certainly never been a representative of a leisurely lifestyle. But then otium, or German "Muße", is a rather open concept, oscillating between non-activity on the one hand and being prerequisite of inspired activity and creative flow on the other.

The narrator of the text I want to discuss in this contribution is not an emeritus nor an early retiree. Leisure does not come to him as a boon after lifelong exertion, but is rather the natural privilege of a male Brahmin, or alternatively the ostracism utilitarian colonial Bengal had in store for obstinate, idiosyncratic mindsets. On the creative side, leisure enables our narrator to have his daily doses of opium and see through the vicissitudes and contradictions of the society he is watching from the margins. By this I do not mean to say that retirement should be used for experimenting with new drugs. But making good sense of leisure is certainly an essential part of it, and also finding the time for leisurely reading a Festschrift contribution on leisure.

Introduction

Work: Conducting serious business like eating slightly warm rice dishes, thereafter sleep; catching some fresh air, smoking tobacco, talking to one's wife etc.: this is what is called work.²

1 The following is an enlarged version of a talk I delivered at ECSAS 2021, Vienna, on a panel on notions of leisure in South Asia which I convened with Monika Fludernik (Freiburg). I owe the latter and my doctoral student Farha Noor the inspiration to re-read Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Kamalākānta* in terms of leisure, and also many insights into the concept of otium, stemming from their engagement in the Freiburg SFB on Muße.

2 "পরিশ্রম" – উপযুক্ত সময়ে ঈষদুষ্ণ অন্ন ব্যঞ্জন ভোজন, তৎপরে নিদ্রা, বায়ু সেবন, তামাকুর ধূমপান, গৃহিণীর সহিত সম্ভাষণ ইত্যাদি গুরুতর কার্যসম্পাদনের নাম পরিশ্রম। *pariśram – upayukta samaye īṣaduṣṇa anna byañjan bhojan, tatpare nidrā, bāyuseban, tāmākūr dhūm'pān, grhiṇīr sahit sambhāṣaṇ ityādi gurutara kāryasampādaner nām pariśram* (BR II: 55).

Thus writes Kamalakanta Chakrabarti, a Brahmin opium addict, a jobless loafer and, according to common perception, the epitome of idleness, in his collection of stray papers, or, more precisely, when defining “work” in an essay on utilitarianism. In about twenty pieces published between 1873 and 1882, held together by a loose and flexible narrative superstructure, this Kamalakanta vents his views on the *conditio humana*, the abject state of Bengali culture under British rule, and the various crises of the *bābus* and *bhadraloks*, i.e. the Bengali middle class.

His author, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–94), was one of the greatest celebrities of the so-called Bengal Renaissance: one of the first two graduates from newly-founded Calcutta University, Bankimchandra entered the Civil Service and made a career as Deputy Collector; he found ways in his busy life to claim his place in Bengali literary history as the first novelist in the language, editor of the front-ranking periodical *Bāngadarśan*, and author of a great variety of religious and satirical essays.³ Among the latter, the *Kamalākānta* series holds a special place, containing as it does some of the wittiest and most strident observations on Bankimchandra’s own class, the so-called *bābu* or *bhadralok*.

A classic of Bengali literature, the *Kamalākānta* series has been called Bankimchandra’s “secret autobiography” by historian Sudipta Kaviraj, and protagonist Kamalakanta his “alter ego”. Kaviraj describes *Kamalākānta* as a “text of madness” belonging to what Mikhail Bakhtin termed a “literature of laughter”, a text defying the “grammar of reality” and using the liminal mode of craziness, utter marginality, and intoxicated fantasy to comment on the colonial condition of his times (Kaviraj 1995: 28). It was through this somewhat pathological and highly self-contradictory narrator figure, Kaviraj argues, that Bankimchandra created a position to advance a smashing critique of his times – a critique his official persona for so many reasons could not venture to articulate. Opium acts as the catalyst that opens Kamalakanta’s vision, allowing him to see through the appearances and get to the essence of things; at the same time, he quite contradictorily personifies many of the prejudices, impasses and futilities of the *bhadralok* class himself. Divine vision allows him to speak to moths and cats, contemplate the resurrection of Bengali greatness and denounce the logics of market capitalism and exploitation of the lower classes;

3 For good accounts of Bankimchandra’s life and works, see Sisir Kumar Das (1984), Tapan Raychaudhuri (1988), and the classic account by his relative Śrīś’candra Caṭṭopādhyāy (1988).

sobriety leaves him arguing with milk woman Prasanna about his natural right, as a Brahmin, to get his share of milk products for free.

Kamalākānta, to be clear, is not first and foremost a text concerned with otium, but work and leisure, idleness, laziness and otiose creativity are very much part of it – enough so, I hope to show, to warrant a new reading in terms of leisure, a reading that can hopefully add some novel aspects to Kavi-raj’s scrutinizing and extensive analysis of the text. *Kamalākānta* is a multiply oblique, inverted narrative with many narrative levels, as we shall see, and the theme of leisure crops up on almost all of them. The structure is that of an onion that can be peeled layer by layer, and this is what I want to do now.

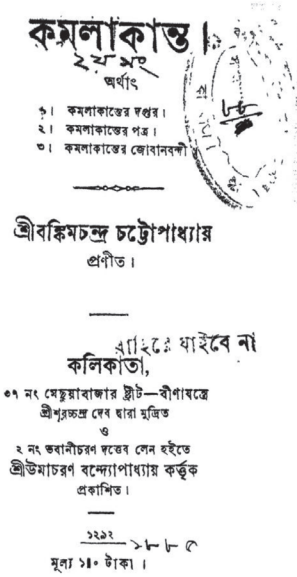


Fig. 1: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–94) in the only contemporaneous painting that is commonly available; Fig. 2: the frontispiece of *Kamalākānta* (2nd ed. 1292 BE [1885–86], from archive.org).

1. Otium as Kamalākānta’s refuge

For all his contradictions and abysses, Bankimchandra’s protagonist Kamalākānta is, on one level, very much at ease with himself. His existential reserve starts from his very basic instincts, mainly food:

I admit, my mind was at ease in the kitchen. Where there is the scent of *pulao*, *kabab* and *kofta*, where there is the sizzling sound of goddess Annapurna, the Bountiful, residing on top of a cauldron, my mind was at ease. Where the hilsa fish, anointed and bathed in a Ganges of sauce, is seated on a throne of earth, copper, glass or silver, there my mind bows in reverence and, overflowed with devotion, does not want to leave that pilgrimage site.⁴ (BR II: 58)

This sort of relaxed rejoicing in existence is not limited to food, but extends to Kamalakanta's (to him) absolutely unproblematic feeling of security in his social position. His birth as a Brahmin ensures his leisurely enjoyment of a safe existence at the centre of things. In one of his exchanges with Prasanna, the milk woman, he puts it in the strongest possible words by likening himself to none other than Lord Vishnu:

But I am your caged bird. I, Kamalakanta Chakrabarti, am always immersed in Yoga in this excellent vessel of yours like the infinite *puruṣa* lying on the ocean of kheer. This vessel of kheer, my cage, is my cage, my infinite bed. I am the kheer-drinking bird of that cage.⁵ (108)

The mythological image alluded to here is *Kṣīrodakaśayī Viṣṇu*, i.e. Vishnu as the highest soul lying on the ocean of kheer and dreaming the world into existence. Despite the incredible hyperbole involved in Kamalakanta comparing his secure position on Prasanna's kheer vessel with this cosmic scenario – what could come closer to creative otium or leisure than this image?

- 4 মানি, পাকের ঘরে আমার মন পড়িয়া থাকিত। যেখানে পোলাও, কাবাব, কোফতার সুগন্ধ, যেখানে ডেকচী-সমারুচা অন্নপূর্ণার মৃদু-মৃদু ফুটফুটবুটবুট-টকবকোধবনি, সেখানে আমার মন পড়িয়া থাকিত। যেখানে ইলিস মৎস্য, সতৈল অভিষেকের পর ঝোলগঙ্গায় স্নান করিয়া, মৃন্ময়, কাংস্যময়, কাচময় বা রজতময় সিংহাসনে উপবেশন করেন, সেইখানেই আমার মন প্রণত হইয়া পড়িয়া থাকে, ভক্তিরসে অভিভূত হইয়া, সেই তীর্থস্থান আর ছাড়িতে চাহে না। *māni, pāker ghare āmār man paṛiyā thākita. yekhane polāo, kābāb, kok ph'tār sugandha, yekhāne ḍek'cī-samārūrphā annapūrṇār mṛḍu-mṛḍu phuṭphuṭbuṭbuṭ-tak-bakodhvani, sekhāne ilis mātsya, sataila abhiṣeker par jhol'gaṅgāy snān kariyā, mṛnmay, kāmsyamay, kāc'may bā rajat'may sīṅhāsane upabeśan karen, seikhānei āmār man praṇata haiyā paṛiyā thāke, bhaktirase abhihūta haiyā, sei tīrthasthān ār chārite cāhe nā.* (BR II: 58).
- 5 আমিই যে তোমার খাঁচার পাখী – তোমার ঐ পরম ভান্ডের মধ্যে আমি শ্রীকমলাকান্ত চক্রবর্তী ক্ষীরোদশয্যাসায়ী অনন্ত পুরুষের ন্যায় সদাই যোগমুগ্ধ। ঐ ক্ষীরোদের ভান্ড আমার অনন্তশয্যারূপী খাঁচ। আমি ঐ খাঁচার ক্ষীরপায়ী পক্ষী। *āmii ye tomār khācār pākhi – tomār ai param bhāṇḍer madhye āmi śrīkamalākānta cakrabartī kṣīrod'shayāśāyī ananta puruṣer nyāy sadāi yog'mugḍha. ai kṣīroder bhāṇḍa āmār anantaśayārūpī khācā. āmi ai khācār kṣīrapāyī pakṣī.* (BR II: 108).

2. Kamalakanta's idleness

Often what is one person's otium appears as idleness to another. So it goes here also: from the very start, the reader is not left in the dark about the outside perception of Kamalakanta's persona. The text opens with a fictive editor's foreword in which one Bhishmadeb Khoshnabis, Kamalakanta's relative and host for a number of years, tells the readers what to make of his scribblings: Kamalakanta was crazy, there was no consistency in what he did and wrote; he had some education in English and Sanskrit, but lacked the practical wisdom of how to please Sahibs and superiors and therefore lost his accountant's job. An unmarried loafer and opium-addict, Kamalakanta had no fixed place to stay and used to hang out wherever he happened to be (*yekhāne sekhāne pariṅyā thākita*); Bhishmadeb, the editor, took care of him because he was mad, but one day clad in ochre like a *brahmacārī*, he disappeared and, as a farewell bakshish, left him a bundle of papers wrapped in an old, worn piece of cloth.

What was I supposed to do with this priceless jewel? First I thought I should donate it to Agni, the god of fire. But then philanthropy got the better of me. I thought that one who doesn't help others is born in vain. In this collection there is an excellent remedy for sleeplessness: whoever reads it falls asleep. So in favour of those who suffer from insomnia I set out to publish Kamalakanta's works.⁶

So it is as the outcome of madness and utter idleness that Kamalakanta's writings are presented to the public. Sudipta Kaviraj calls this fictive editor's voice the "Babu chorus" (Kaviraj 1995: 35), representing the common middle-class assessment of Kamalakanta and his likes: utterly useless, idle, good-for-nothing, and his musings being no more than the senseless gibberish of a madman.

6 এই অমূল্য রত্ন লইয়া আমি কি করিব? প্রথমে মনে করিলাম, অগ্নিদেবকে উপহার দিই। পরে লোকহিতৈষিতা আমার চিন্তে বড় প্রবল হইল। মনে করিলাম যে, যে লোকের উপকার না করে, তাহার বুথায় জন্ম। এই দপ্তরটিতে অনিদ্রার অত্যুৎকৃষ্ট ঔষধ আছে – যিনি পরিবেন, তাঁহারই নিদ্রা আসিবে। যাঁহারা অনিদ্রারোগে পীড়িত, তাঁহাদের উপকারার্থে আমি কমলাকান্তের রচনাগুলি প্রচারে প্রবৃত্ত হইলাম। *ei amūlya ratna laiṅyā āmi ki kariba? prathame mane karilām, agnidebke upahār dii. pare lokahitaiṣitā āmār citte baṅa prabal hailā. mane karilām ye, ye loker upahār nā kare, tāhār bṛthāy janma. ei daptarṭite anidrār atyutkrṣṭa auśadh āche – yini pariḅen, tāhār'i nidrā āsibe. yāhārā anidrāroge pīṛita, tāhāder upakārārthe āmi kamalākānter racanāguli pracāre prabrṭta hailām.* (BR II: 49).

3. Idleness inverted

But who were the Babus to blame others for idleness? Weren't they themselves the epitome of parasitical laziness, much vilified in the colonial discourses about lazy natives, which they had sufficiently internalized? Indeed so, and Kamalakanta, the babus' other self but yet one of them, of course returns the compliments. Bengali males, he argues in an essay full of puns against received gender roles, do justice to their masculine selves only when talking and delivering speeches, but collapse into the feminine in the bedroom and into the neuter in all economic activities (BR II: 65). Brahmins, in another essay, are happy with chewing the husks of their great traditions of learning, whereas it is the Sahibs (i.e. western Orientalists) who dissect their kernel (BR II: 77).⁷ In an opium-induced vision of Bengal rising again to fame, Kamalakanta changes roles and slips into an average Bengali self, promising to give up all laziness (*ālasya*) (BR II: 80). When, again under the influence of opium, Kamalakanta complains about the humming of a bee, the bee retaliates by telling him that it is actually the Bengalis' humming – always talking, always complaining, never doing anything – that she is really sick of (BR II: 95f.).

The most smashing remarks on the idle good-for-nothingness of the Bengalis are reserved for the very last essay, the *Parīṣiṣṭha* or Appendix. Here Kamalakanta converses with a preying bird eventually morphing into the English colonialists of the subcontinent and presenting itself as the benefactor of other species. Kamalakanta writes:

I saw that under the bird's perch below on the ground, countless small animals like ants were running around. I asked the bird: 'I see, all these are ants. How do they prove your benefaction?' The bird: 'They are small like ants indeed and also almost look like ants, but they aren't ants. They are called Bengalis. Look there, a drop of milk has fallen down from my perch, and the Bengalis come running around, with much beating, pushing and shoving, to drink that milk. They live on the few drops of milk falling down from my perch. So am I not their helper?'⁸ (112).

7 For a German translation of this essay, see Harder (2011: 171–90).

8 দেখিলাম দাঁড়ের নিচে, মেজের উপর পিপীলিকার ন্যায়, অসংখ্য ক্ষুদ্র ক্ষুদ্র জন্তু কিল কিল করিয়া বেড়াইতেছে। পাখীকে জিজ্ঞাসা করিলাম – ও সব তো পিপীলিকা দেখিতেছি। ওখানে তোমার পরোপকারিত্বের প্রমাণ কই? পা। উহারা পিপীলিকার ন্যায় ক্ষুদ্র বটে, দেখিতেও প্রায় পিপীলিকা, কিন্তু উহারা পিপীলিকা নয়। উহাদিগকে বঙ্গজ বলে। ঐ দেখ আমার দাঁড় থেকে এক ফোঁটা দুধ পড়িল আর বঙ্গজগুলা কিল কিল করিয়া মারামারি ঠেলাঠেলি করিয়া ঐ দুধটুকু খাইতে আসিল। আমার দাঁড় হইতে যে দুই এক ফোঁটা দুধ পড়ে তাই খাইয়া উহারা

In the end when the bird has flown away, Kamalakanta asks Prasanna, the milk woman, to sweep these “Bengalis” – apparently real ants he discovers in front of himself once he is sober again – to sweep these “Bengalis” away, and this is what she does.

Paradoxically, but not without its representational logic, it is someone excessively idle and a Bengali himself who in *Kamalākānta* gets to say these things, submerging the greatest offences in an overarching self-offence. Indeed, protagonist and narrator Kamalakanta is a trickster-like figure, acting in many roles and adopting multiple perspectives.

4. Marginal leisure

This narrator figure acquires its strength, but also complexity and contradictoriness, by virtue of being an insider and outsider at the same time. Thus Kamalakanta’s perfect ease with his brahmanical privileges and unease with the downtrodden state of the Bengali race, side by side with his casual dismissal of the whole lot of them in the end – all of these attitudes, of course, are broken again and again in the spiraling, oblique satirical framings of the text.

The outsider narrator, by the way, is a common feature in colonial satire, with Punch-like tricksters, celestial bards, supernatural spirits, even gods casting their glances at the topsy-turvy colonial conditions in periodicals like the Bengali *Basantak* or *Pañcānanda*, the Hindi *Mat’wālā*, or the Marathi *Hindū Pañca*.⁹ Kamalakanta, outsider and marginal insider at the same time, has the additional advantage of not only *viewing* a scenery, but also *reflecting* it in his own persona. Marginal he has to be from the start in order not to break apart under the weight of his own pronouncements and self-denigrating stances.

What has this got to do with otium and leisure? I would argue that only in such marginal, liminal spheres is there a space of otiose leisure, at a distance from the daily turmoil, to narrate, reflect, fantasize, imagine; to be creative, and still retain a focus on contemporary social ills. In this madman’s situation

জীবনধারণ করে। আমি উহাদিগের উপকারক নই? *dekhilām dārer nice, mejer upar pipīlikār nyāy, asaṁkhyā kṣudra kṣudra jantu kil kil kariyā beṛāiteche. pākhīke jijñāsā karilām – o sab to pipīlikā dekhitechi. okhāne tomār paropakāritver pramāṇ kai? pā. uhārā pipīlikār nyāy kṣudra baṭe, dekhiteo prāy pipīlikā, kintu uhārā pipīlikā naḥ. uhāḍigake baṅgaj bale. ai dekha āmār dāṛ theke ek phōṭā dudh paṛila ār baṅgaj’gulo kil kil kariyā mārāmāri ṭhelāṭheli kariyā ai dudh’ṭuku khāite āsila. āmār dāṛ haite ye dui ek phōṭā dudh paṛe tāi khāiyā uhārā jīban’dhāraṇ kare. āmi uhāḍiger upakārak nai?* (BR II: 112).

9 Cf. Harder and Mittler (2013), especially the introduction by Hans Harder and the chapters by Prabhat Kumar, Swarali Paranjape and Chaiti Basu.

of colonial Bengal, it took Bankimchandra a madman to leisurely, creatively depict the state of things.

5. Opium and otium

If in order to channel the right perception on the colonial situation it takes Kamalakanta as a trickster, opium is the trigger that allows him to see things in their proper perspective. “Men cannot hear all conversations, and it was only due to the grace of opium that I got a divine ear and could hear all this,” he writes when listening to a discussion between flowers,¹⁰ or later when talking to a bird (BR II: 110); elsewhere, depressed after bargaining about his free share of curd with Prasanna, the milk woman, “I pondered and pondered, and in my grief had a good dose of opium. That’s when my eye of wisdom opened up” and made him see the world as one large market place.¹¹ During the Durga Puja, he deplores having had too much opium, triggering a veritable utopia of awakened Bengal followed by a terrible hangover (BR II: 79). The cat he discusses capital and equality with confirms that “You are Kamalakanta, the farsighted, since you take opium.”¹² Or again, “Lying there on the charpoy, I took opium. My eyes opened, I received eyes of wisdom,” and he beheld the world as a husking pedal.¹³

Otium and opium, one could say, go hand in hand; opium functions as a turbo mode of leisure induction and grants Kamalakanta the creative visions that lay bare in the most stupendous metaphors and similes the workings of colonial domination and extraction – the pun being that opium is a drug traded by the British. If the new work ethic is British, the means to see through its machinations also comes from their hands.

10 সকল কথোপকথন মনুষ্য শুনিতে পায় না, আমি কেবল আফিমপ্রসাদাৎ দিব্য কর্ণ পাইয়া এ সকল শুনিলাম। *sakal kathopakathan manuṣya śunite pāy nā, āmi kebal āphim'prasādāt dibya karṇa pāyīā e sakal śunitechilām.* (BR II: 74).

11 ভাবিয়া চিন্তিয়া, মনের দুঃখে আফিমের মাত্রা চড়াইলাম। তখন জ্ঞাননেত্র ফুটিল। *bhābiyā cintiyā, maner duḥkhe āphimer mātrā caṛāilām. takhan jñān'netra phuṭila.* (BR II: 76).

12 তুমি কমলাকান্ত, দূরদর্শী, কেন না আফিমখোর। *tumi kamalākānta, dūradarśī, kena nā āphim'khor* (BR II: 87).

13 আমি সেখানে চারপাইর উপর পড়িয়া আফিঙ্গ চড়াইলাম। তখন চক্ষু বুজিয়া আসিল। জ্ঞান-নেত্র উদয় হইল। *āmi seikhāne cār'pāir upar paṛiyā āphiṅg caṛāilām. takhan cakṣu bujīyā āsila. jñān'netra uday haila.* (BR II: 89).

6. Leisure gone sour in colonial times

The background on which we have to read this text is of course the economy of British India. The logic of capitalism propagated a new work ethic of efficiency. Clock time was introduced as a means to regulate the new work regime (cf. Guha 2008); local traditions of learning were devaluated and superseded by English education. The new hierarchies this system produced put (or created) the *bhadralok* middle-classes into a position of superiority in relation to the populace at large, while simultaneously making them the subalterns of the colonial regime with limited space for maneuvering. One of the widespread psychological effects among this class was boredom: a sense of unfulfilledness and frustration born from a thoroughly unwholesome social setup and their position of dependency therein.

In terms of a work-life balance scheme, otium would appear to be the opposite of work; but in qualitative terms, I would argue, the opposite of otiose leisure is none other than boredom. Boredom is inhibited, obstructed leisure or otium. Leisure presupposes a certain wholeness, a certain degree of autonomy and ease, to arise – a wholeness that had arguably been thoroughly disrupted by the colonial condition.

7. Satire as Bankimchandra's *ersatz* leisure

How then to evaluate Kamalakanta's leisure? One would say that the otiose leisure it takes to creatively address the abysses of the colonial mindset has to retreat to the outermost margins of society. Its space is nowhere to be found in the system. It is a multiply liminal position from which it arises, hedged off by joblessness, idleness, madness and opium from the inner citadels of that society. One might go as far as to say that Kamalakanta's leisure is a mere caricature of leisure, an almost pathologic otium pushed to the limits of probability.

Writers, of course, are at liberty to invent such improbable locations. For Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Kamalakanta proved to be the ideal location from where to advance his most radical critique of colonial Bengal. According to literary historian Sisir Kumar Das, the Kamalakanta series was Bankimchandra's most favorite among his own writings (Das 1984: 104), and it speaks for itself that after creating this character in 1873, Bankimchandra occasionally revisited Kamalakanta until as late as 1882.

Remarkable indeed is the leisurely, flow-like quality we find in these writings: far more free and “otiose” than his novels and treatises. It is in his satires, Bankimchandra’s “fun writings”, that Bankimchandra got closest to the free flow of literary imagination, making them the location of an *ersatz* otium that his position in the colonial system otherwise prevented him from enjoying.

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