

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's Critique and Appreciation of Sāṃkhya Philosophy

Payel Bhattacharjee

Invited Lecturer, Alipurduar Mahila Mahavidyalaya

Abstract

The essay on Sāṃkhya philosophy by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay is an important contribution to modern Indian philosophical thought during the nineteenth-century Bengali Renaissance. In this work, Bankim presents the philosophy of Kapila as one of the most rational and ancient systems of Indian philosophy. He explains the fundamental concepts of Purusha and Prakriti, and the evolutionary process through which the universe emerges from the imbalance of the three gunas. At the same time, Bankim critically examines Sāṃkhya, arguing that its emphasis on liberation through knowledge and its indifference to devotion and action encouraged an overly other-worldly outlook in society. To overcome this limitation, he interprets Sāṃkhya in relation to the ethical teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, emphasizing the ideal of Karma-Yoga. Later thinkers such as Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo further reinterpreted Sāṃkhya ideas within modern spiritual and philosophical contexts.

Keywords: Sāṃkhya Philosophy; Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay; Purusha and Prakriti; Bengali Renaissance; Karma-Yoga; Indian Nationalism; Evolution

Introduction:

It is said that among the various schools of Indian philosophy, the Samkhya system is the most ancient. Samkhya philosophy teaches us how to attain deliverance from the profound suffering inherent in this material world—specifically from adhibhautika (suffering caused by other living beings), adhidaivika (suffering caused by supernatural forces), and adhyatmika (suffering arising from within oneself) afflictions. It posits that true liberation is attained through the discriminative knowledge (viveka) that distinguishes between Prakriti (Nature) and Purusha (Consciousness). The twenty-five fundamental principles (tattvas) of Samkhya—its dualistic ontology and its theory of cosmic creation—are beautifully expounded in Kapila's original Samkhya philosophy, subsequently in Ishvarakrishna's Samkhya Karika, and in various following commentaries and sub-commentaries. However, it may come as a surprise to find a highly analytical discussion on Samkhya philosophy penned by the very figurehead of the Bengal Renaissance—the man who pioneered the genre of the novel in Bengali literature. We have focused our attention on the discourse titled "Samkhya Darshan" by Bankim Chandra. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's essay on Sāṃkhya philosophy is a unique creation of Indian

*Corresponding Author Email: payelbhattacharjee100@gmail.com

Published: 24 March 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i3.45599>

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

philosophical literature, which is not a theoretical analysis of Sāṃkhya philosophy, but rather a burning document of the nationalist spirit of the 19th-century Bengali Renaissance. In this essay, Bankim identified the very ancient philosophy established by Kapil Muni as a precursor to Buddhism and criticized its atheistic, contempt for the Vedas, and other-worldly attitude as the main reasons for the political decline of the Hindu nation. The essay is part of a collection of essays and is written in a five-part format, where the reason why Sāṃkhya is not popular in the scholarly community of Bengal, the primacy of Nyaya and Vedanta is discussed first.

The Core Notion of Sāṃkhya and the Neglect in Bengal:

In the first chapter of the essay on Sāṃkhya philosophy, Bankim Chandra says that although Sāṃkhya philosophy is the oldest, the reason for its neglect in Bengal is its complexity and the idea of unnecessariness that is prevalent among scholars (Chattopadhyay). He writes that the scholars of Bengal consider Sāṃkhya to be very complicated, but the secret of our national mentality is hidden in it (Chattopadhyay). Secondly, in the second chapter, he explains the two theories of nature and purusha, highlighting the importance of theoretical knowledge (Chattopadhyay). Purusha is the passive, detached consciousness; nature is the aggregated form of the original substance, characterized by female qualities, and from which the world evolves (Chattopadhyay). By quoting from the commentary on the Sāṃkhya Pravachan, Bankim presents this dual view with extraordinary clarity, which is easy for the general reader to grasp (Chattopadhyay). In the third chapter, Bankim Chandra shows that as a result of the imbalance of the qualities of nature, 25 theories evolve: Mahat or intellect from nature, then Ahamkara, which produces the five subtle elements and the eleven organs of sense and action, and finally the five gross elements (Chattopadhyay). Bankim describes this process as an automatic play of nature, which does not require the creation of any God (Chattopadhyay).

Sāṃkhya as a Scientific Philosophy and the Critique of Other-worldliness:

In the fourth chapter, Bankim Chandra discusses the concept of direct inference, which gives Sāṃkhya the status of a scientific philosophy. The only way to get rid of the material, spiritual, and divine is through knowledge of conscience, i.e., the difference between nature and purusha, which does not require devotion or action. In the fifth and most important chapter, Bankim Chandra's critical view of Sāṃkhya philosophy is seen. He calls it "other-worldly" and says that this philosophy uses knowledge for liberation, not for acquiring material power (Chattopadhyay). The slogan of Western philosophy is "Knowledge is power," whereas Sāṃkhya's slogan is "Knowledge is liberation" (Chattopadhyay). Bankim Chandra claims that the main reason for India's political weakness was that Hindus had renounced renunciation and avoided war. He writes that if the knowledge of Sāṃkhya had given power, India would never have been defeated (Chattopadhyay).

He also sees the direct disregard for the Vedas as the beginning of the emergence of Buddhism, which later led to the decline of India (Chattopadhyay). He considers the Sāṃkhya language not Kapil's, citing its influence on later periods and making its complexity unacceptable to common people (Chattopadhyay). Such criticism is the essence of Bankim's nationalist view. He rejects the austerity of Sāṃkhya and feels the need for Karma Yoga. This article created a huge stir among scholars in the context of the Bengali Renaissance and was accepted as the

key to understanding the mentality of Hindu society. Swami Vivekananda accepted this criticism and promoted Karma Yoga, strengthening the foundation of Indian nationalism (Vivekananda). Today, it is an example of a lesson in post-colonial Indian philosophy, demonstrating how ancient theories influence national awakening.

Bankim Chandra believed that Sāṃkhya philosophy was the most logical and scientific of Indian philosophies (Chattopadhyay). He said that Sankhya philosophy did not resort to any supernatural means to explain the origin of the world, taking nature as the basic element, and the basis of Sāṃkhya philosophy is based on causal relationships (Chattopadhyay). He said that, according to Sāṃkhya philosophy, evolution can be compared to modern European science. This idea of the origin of the great ego from nature is a kind of philosophical theory of evolution. Although Bankim Chandra's analysis here cannot be directly compared with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution of life, he indicates that the idea of evolution was present in the Indian mind from ancient times (Chattopadhyay).

Bankim Chandra says that Sāṃkhya philosophy is atheistic and, since it does not accept deism or God, Sankhya completely denies the importance of the concept of God as the basis of moral and religious life (Chattopadhyay). Bankim Chandra shows that if we understand Sāṃkhya philosophy, we see that there are three principles of nature, i.e., the gunas of truth: Sattvaguna is the symbol of knowledge, peace, and purity; Rajaguna is the symbol of action; and Tamaguna is the symbol of inertia or ignorance. He saw the decline of Indian society as the result of the excess of these qualities and considered that coordination was necessary for national revival (Chattopadhyay). Bankim Chandra shows that, according to Sāṃkhya philosophy, liberation is the knowledge of the difference between Prakriti and Purusa, he did not see it as a philosophical self-separation. He thought that the idea of liberation of Sāṃkhya philosophy leads to moral progress, a social welfare-oriented life, and development of individual consciousness, and the development of national consciousness (Chattopadhyay). Thus, he linked the liberation of Sāṃkhya with social philosophy.

In Bankim Chandra's Gita commentary, he combined Sankhya and Yoga and showed the Bhagavad Gita as an analysis of the Sāṃkhya Yoga theory from a karmic and moral perspective (Chattopadhyay). He thought that the Gita is not merely theoretical; it teaches us through action, so, according to his idea, Sankhya has been transformed into a kind of moral realism (Chattopadhyay). He drew a comparison with the ancient French philosopher Auguste Comte and found a strange similarity between them. He said that the materialism or energy that modern European science talks about, Kapil had said so thousands of years ago through nature and pragmatism. He thought that Sāṃkhya philosophy is the original science of India (Chattopadhyay).

Critique of Passivity and the Need for Action:

If we go to the criticism of Sankhya philosophy according to Bankim Chandra, then we will see that he is saying that this Sankhya philosophy is very enlightening but its side is not enough for the common people, and for that, he has tried to harmonize it with the Gita, which he feels requires a combination of devotion and action (Chattopadhyay). Also, according to Bankim Chandra, the Purusha or soul is shown as completely passive in the Sankhya philosophy

(Chattopadhyay). This extremely passive attitude was not completely acceptable to a Karma Yogi. He felt that, through human action, society or the country could improve (Chattopadhyay). Bankim Chandra clearly mentions that all the philosophers who followed Sankhya have destroyed the original scientific theory or scientific tone of the Sankhya philosophy through arguments. Bankim Chandra strongly complains that the Sankhya philosophers could not take its scientific theory forward or make it more relevant to life (Chattopadhyay). There is a more extensive discussion on this subject in the fifth and final chapter of "Sāṃkhya Darshan" (Chattopadhyay). It is suspected that the main aim of Bankim's discussion was to highlight the apparent anti-Vedic aspects of Sāṃkhya. He knew that reverence for the Vedas had perverted the thinking of Hindu Bengalis. Therefore, he spent a lot of space on the Vedas in his discussion of Sāṃkhya (Chattopadhyay).

Some Contemporary Perspectives on Sāṃkhya Philosophy:

After the Bankim era, Swami Vivekananda was one of the most eminent contemporary Indian philosophers. In his book "Dharmavijnana", has shown that Kapil's idea is that there is no need to accept a God who is a quality or a person; because the Sankhyas say that when nature is capable of creating all these different forms, then there is no need to accept God (Vivekananda). However, Kapil accepts a special kind of God; he says that we are all trying to be free, and when the human soul is free in this effort, then he can be absorbed in nature for some time. At the beginning of the next Kalpa, he can appear as an omniscient and omnipotent being and become the ruler of that Kalpa. In this sense, he can be called God. Kapil has been silent about God up to this point. He has not given any further explanation (Vivekananda). Sri Aurobindo accepted the Sāṃkhya concepts of Purusha and Prakriti, but he did not regard its dualism or doctrine of separation as the ultimate truth (Aurobindo). According to Sāṃkhya, Purusha and Prakriti exist independently and remain separate from each other. However, Sri Aurobindo held that they are actually two different expressions of a single Supreme Reality, Sachchidananda (Aurobindo). He also adopted the evolutionary idea found in Sāṃkhya and interpreted it as the basis of spiritual evolution (Aurobindo). Krishnachandra Bhattacharya took the concept of 'Kaivalya', or liberation, in Sāṃkhya philosophy to a new and distinctive level (Bhattacharya). He explained Sāṃkhya as a stage in the development of 'subjectivity' or subjective consciousness, in which the soul gradually frees itself from the bonds of matter and returns to its own true nature (Bhattacharya).

Sankhya studies in this country and abroad before Bankim: The Samkhyapravachanasutra was first published in Serampore (1821). It was accompanied by a commentary by a monk. Henry Thomas Colebrooke was the first to write about it in English. On 21 June 1823, he delivered a lecture on "The Philosophy of the Hindus" to the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland. It was published in the Transactions of that Society (Vol. 1, Part I, London, 1824, pp. 19–43), and later reprinted in Colebrooke's Miscellaneous Essays, I (London, 1837). On this basis, Hegel had the opportunity to say something about Sankhya (and Nyaya-Vaisheshika) in his series of lectures on the history of philosophy (Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie, I Band (Einleitung); English translation: Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy, trans. E. S. Haldane, Volume One, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1894, 1955, pp. 128–141, "The Sankhya Philosophy of Capila").

Ishwar Krishna's Sankhyakarika was first published in a Latin translation by Christian Lassen ("Iswara Crishna Sankhya-Caricum tenens" in *Gymnosophista sive Indicae Philosophiae documenta*, Vol. I, Bonnae ad Rhenum, 1832). In 1833, Colebrooke's essay was translated into French, along with Sanskrit sources, by G. Pauthier (*Essais sur la Philosophie des Hindous, traduit de l'Anglais et augmentés de textes sanskrits*, Paris, 1833). The German translation of Sankhyakarika was by C. J. H. Windischmann. Colebrooke also made an English translation of the Sankhya. It was published with the Gaudapada commentary (and his English translation) by Horace Heman Wilson (Oxford, 1837). In 1852, the Sankhya was translated into French by Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire (*Premier mémoire sur le Sankhya*, Paris, 1852). An edition of Sankhyakarika and Tattvakaumudi, a combination with Vachaspati's work, was published from Calcutta by Rasamoy Dutta (1848). In 1867, 1871, and 1873, both these books were edited by Kashinath Shastri Prabhu (Benares), Taranath Tarkavachaspati (Calcutta), and Chuntiraj Shastri (Benares). Sankhya-Pravachana-Sutra with various commentaries was edited by James R. Ballantine (Allahabad, 1852–56). It was also published in the *Bibliotheca Indica* of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. In his edition (including part of the commentary by the scholar Bhikkhu), it was published in Calcutta (1862–65). FitzEdward Hall also published a complete text of the commentary by Vijnanabhikshu (Calcutta, B.E., 1854–56). It was reprinted by Jivananda Vidyasagar (Calcutta, 1863, 1872). He himself reprinted the book in 1873 with the scholarship of Aniruddha. Ballantine also published *Tattva Samasa* along with an English translation of Sankhya-Pravachana-Sutra in 1850 (*A Lecture on the Sankhya Philosophy*, Mirzapore, 1850). Bankim himself mentions Max Müller's work on the subject of Sankhya. Three other works can also be named: E. Roer, *Lecture on the Sankhya Philosophy*, Calcutta, 1854. Ch. Schoebel, "The Doctrine of Existence according to the Systems of Yoga, Vedanta and Sankhya," *Proceedings of the International Orientalist Association*, I, Paris, 1873, Vol. 2. Reverend Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay's *Dialogues on the Hindu Philosophy* (1861) and his own fluent Bengali translation *Shaddarshan Sangbad* (1862, 1867) have already been mentioned. Another book should be added to this: Madhvacharya's *Sarvadarshan Sangraha*. It was first published in 1858 under the editorship of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, B.E.). Taranath Tarkavachaspati also reprinted it in 1793 (1872 AD). In 1864, at the encouragement of Vidyasagar, Jayanarayana Tarkapanchanan and Maheshchandra Nyayaratna translated the book into Bengali. It also has a chapter on Sankhya (Chapter 14). The Bengali translation contains some words that are not in the original; however, Joynarayan did not claim that he translated it word for word. This suggests that when Bankim began writing about Sankhya philosophy, the work of discovering, editing, and publishing the original texts and their commentaries had just been completed. After Bankim, this work was carried out more extensively. The explanation and analysis also progressed much further. However, Bankim also deserves the honour of being one of the pioneers in this regard.

Eclecticism and the Contradictions in Bankim's Thought:

Eclecticism is not a philosophical system; rather, it is a mental attitude. In the context of Bankim, many have pointed out various contradictions in his work. At the conclusion of his analysis, Asitkumar Bhattacharya arrives at the following verdict: ultimately, Bankim may not be recognized as a philosopher. The reason for this is that he wove a web of arguments solely to substantiate preconceived premises—premises derived from the tenets of uncritical faith.

Consequently, underlying these arguments is a lack of that comprehensive and unwavering logic which characterized the thought of Rammohan and Akshay Datta. His foundation is inherently weak and constantly shifts ground, making the emergence of contradictions inevitable.

The root of the contradictions inherent in Bankim's philosophical thought must be sought within Bankim himself: specifically, in his failed attempt to reconcile indigenous traditions with modern European concepts. He lacked the courage to embrace a purely Lokayata worldview. Instead, he sought refuge in the Samkhya philosophy. Yet, even within that system, much remained unacceptable to him, and its inherent incompleteness continued to trouble him. Nor was he able to construct a coherent philosophy of life based solely on his experiences of the real world. Rather, his approach was to attempt to glean and adopt whatever seemed meritorious from any given philosophical system. Consequently, his philosophical thought remained fundamentally uncentered. Thus, shifting ground repeatedly, he ultimately came to anchor his beliefs in Bhakti (devotion). He could not bring himself to discard Comte, nor could he cast aside Mill or Spencer. Yet, at most, he remained only semi-conscious of the fact that their ideas were incompatible with those of the Gita—and indeed, could never be reconciled.

Such is the peril of eclecticism. However natural the attempt to synthesize mutually exclusive concepts—such as the scriptural authority of the Vedas and the ideology of Hindutva—may appear to the eclectic thinker, to the external observer it is the inherent contradiction that stands out most starkly. Thus, no matter how earnestly Bankim strove to distinguish himself from other Hindu revivalists, his enduring legacy—beyond his stature as a litterateur—remains that of a figure firmly situated within that very same intellectual stream. Despite the profound spiritual epiphany recounted in Dharmatattva, he did not emerge as a religious preceptor; instead, to borrow Aurobindo's phrase, he evolved into a "political guru." Had the currents of events during the 1880s and 1890s flowed in a different direction, it is conceivable that the Bankim of Samkhya-darshan might have garnered far greater honor and recognition.

Conclusion:

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's discourse on Samkhya philosophy holds particular significance, serving as a testament to his rational intellect and scientific mindset. Through his analysis of Samkhya, it becomes evident that he positions himself as a comprehensive psychologist and an evolutionary scientist. Bankim Chandra posits that the Samkhya concepts of Prakriti and Purusha offer a highly logical explanation for the creation of the universe. He further asserts that Samkhya's approach—which does not posit the existence of a God as the creator of the universe—bears a striking resemblance to Western evolutionary theories. However, Bankim Chandra was not content to confine himself merely to theoretical discussions; rather than adopting a pessimistic outlook, he emphasized the importance of Karma Yoga (the Path of Action). He believed that if the knowledge derived from Samkhya were to render individuals averse to action or passive, it would prove detrimental to society. Consequently, he argued that the ancient Samkhya philosophy must be rigorously tested against the touchstone of modern logic and transformed into a dynamic, life-affirming philosophy—one in which spiritual inquiry and the pursuit of truth serve as the primary guiding principles.

References:

- Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. (1877). *Sāṃkhya Darshan* (essay). In *Collected Works of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay*.
- Swami Vivekananda. (1997). *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.
- Sri Aurobindo. (2005). *The Life Divine*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
- Krishnachandra Bhattacharya. (1956). *Studies in Philosophy*. Kolkata: Progressive Publishers.
- Charles Darwin. (1859). *On the Origin of Species*. London: John Murray.
- Dasgupta, Surendranath. (1922). *A History of Indian Philosophy, Volume 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Halbfass, Wilhelm. (1988). *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Larson, Gerald James. (1979). *Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of its History and Meaning*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli. (1923). *Indian Philosophy, Volume 2*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Sarkar, Sumit. (1973). *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House.
- Bhattacharya, Krishnachandra. (1956). "Studies in Sāṃkhya Philosophy." *Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 1. Calcutta: Progressive Publishers.
- Ray, Alok. (1970). "Bankim Chandra: The Intellectual Background." *Journal of the Asiatic Society*.
- Sengupta, Anima. (1959). "The Evolution of the Sāṃkhya School of Thought." *Journal of Indian Philosophy*.
- Harun, S. (Ed.). (1999). *Bangladeshe darshan: Aitihya o prakriti anusandhan* (Vol. 2). Dhaka: Bangla Academy.