

India in Indian Novels in English

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Indian novels in English have come a long way from the first attempt, made by none other than Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, whose *Rajmohan's Wife* was published in 1935, four decades after the author's death. His novel presented contemporary middle class life in rich detail, but its realism was modified by many other narrative conventions like the Sanskrit Kavya, Vaishnava love poetry or the English Gothic novel. By contrast, *Govinda Samanta, or the History of a Bengali Raiyat* (1874) or its revised and enlarged version, *Bengal Peasant Life* (1908) by Rev. Lal Behari Day was written as an entry in a contest to document rural life. It dealt with vivid details of rural Bengal starting from 1820 and ending with the year of the great famine, 1870. It was topical and full of local details like festivals of harvesting, feasting, illness, games and so on. The Bengali rural atmosphere had to be recreated in English, through descriptions of these local or regional rituals and customs. Certain Bengali words and translations of idiomatic expressions were also incorporated into the text. The great difficulty of presenting contemporary social reality, or society in general, in this novel, arose from the fact that the writer and the reader (here, the English reader) were from different linguistic registers. So the problem of communication was immense, and hence, very naturally, the image of India, as derived from this novel, and other similar novels, could not be complete. It is interesting to note that, even fifty years later, a novelist like Mulk Raj Anand, educated in western universities, had to confront similar problems.