'This Little Book':

Reading *Govinda Samanta*

Thesis submitted to

Jawaharlal Nehru University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Philosophy

by

Swati Moitra

Centre for English Studies
School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110067, India
2010

Centre for English Studies
School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi- 110067, India

Date: 21/7/10

Certificate

This dissertation titled "'This Little Book': Reading *Govinda Samanta*" submitted by Swati Moitra, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree, diploma of any university or institution.

This may be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

(Prof. G.J.V Prasad)
Supervisor

Prof. GJV PRASAD
Centre for English Studies
School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi-110067

(Prof. G. J. V. Prasad)
Chairperson

Chairperson
Centre for English Studies
School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110 067

Date: 21/7/10

Declaration by the Candidate

This thesis titled "'This Little Book': Reading *Govinda Samanta*" submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree, diploma of any university or institution.

Swati Moitra

(Swati Moitra)
MPhil Student
Centre for English Studies,
School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies,
Jawaharlal Nehru University,
New Delhi, India

To the people who taught me to love stories

Contents

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have existed without Professor G.J.V. Prasad, who first nudged an impressionable M.A Second Semester student in a direction she didn't know she wanted to take, and whose infinite patience, guidance and sarcasm saved the same student's older, somewhat-wiser self from submerging in a cesspool of procrastination. Thank you.

This dissertation also owes much to Dr. Saugata Bhaduri, Dr. Soumyabrata Chaudhuri and Professor Neeladri Bhattacharya, for everything they have taught me over the years.

As always, my parents were there in every step, supportive and patient, with phone calls, prayers, funds when I needed them. My sister chipped in by playing Mafia Wars for me when I was otherwise indisposed, and entertained me by talking to me about some of my favourite things (read: television). My dog existed and was adorable, and that was more than enough.

I do not have words to thank the staff of the JNU Central Library, the National Library, Kolkata—the computer and microfilms section, in particular—the Asiatic Society Library, Kolkata, and the State Central Library, Kolkata. A special note of thanks to Subhash*da* at the Asiatic Society, for his diligence, and to the unknown Samaritan who helped me find an index I did not know existed. The Librarian at the Asiatic Society Library, for her helpful and kind words.

The UGC has funded my research, for which I am immensely grateful

My immense gratitude to Rawatji and Bhagwatiji at the Centre for English Studies, JNU, for their patience and their smiles.

My friends and family on Facebook, who listened to me whine, month after month. Brinda Bose, in particular, for her enthusiasm and her supportive *ilish-machh*. Sukanyadi, for being.

The various denizens of Lohit hostel: Raju bhaiyya, for sustenance; Priyanka, for stories at odd hours; everyone who said, 'Don't worry, *ho jaega*,' with a smile and a story of their own; the kittens; Parijat and Anirban, for encouragement and tea.

And last, but certainly *not* the least. Arunima, Debaditya, Gourab, Madhuri, Sudipto, Saptarshi, Subir, Moushumi, Sujay, Rukmini: my late night support group, my early morning wake-up call, my breezy evening laughter, my lazy afternoon procrastination. *Poth dekhae dear jonno onek onek dhonnyobad.*

Introduction

Mirror, mirror on the wall
Who is fairest of us all?
– *Snow White*, The Brothers Grimm[1]

Govinda Samanta, or *The History of a Bengali Raiyat* (1874)—*Bengal Peasant Life* (1878)[2], as it was renamed in a later edition—begins with an elaborate prefatory chapter titled 'Premises what the Reader is to expect, and what he is not to expect in this authentic history.' A preface is an announcement, a writer's manifesto, a proclamation of things to come; a 'contract' (Bandopadhyay 1996, 22), one might say, between the narrator and the reader, a setting up of terms and conditions that the reader has the freedom to discard if s/he so chooses. The omniscient narrator of *Bengal Peasant Life* begins, 'Gentle Reader, in case you have come with great expectations to the perusal of this humble performance, I deem it proper to undeceive you at the very outset,' (Dey 1984, 1), in the convention of much of eighteenth and nineteenth century English fiction, 'humbly' setting up the terms and conditions of his 'performance' as the 'historian' of 'Bengal peasant life,' drawing up the reader–narrator contract, positioning himself—cautiously, with a variety of 'dos and don'ts'—as the liaison between the world of the reader and that of the Bengali peasant.

The 'gentle reader' in this case, as it becomes clear as one progresses in the course of the novel, belongs to two distinct categories: the English-educated Bengali reader, and the *English* reader. The former is carefully distinguished from the 'Calcutta cockney, who glories in the Mahratta Ditch, despises the scenery of the country, and plumes himself upon the fact of his having never seen in his life the rice-plant' (17–18)—or, in other words, the anglicized *babu* who became the butt of ridicule and satire in contemporary fiction and drama; the 'gentle' Bengali reader of Lal Behari Dey's 'little book,' while English-educated, is devoid of the crassness of the 'cockney,' at once modern and capable of appreciating 'the country' and its earthy flavours, if not entirely familiar with it. The latter—the 'English' reader—requires special consideration while discussing all things Bengali, and the narrative voice therefore offers frequent helpful interjections such as, 'I forget whether I told the English reader—for the Bengali reader does not require to be told it—that in the village of Kánchanpur there was no such thing as a tavern,' (23)

or, 'Has the English reader seen a Bengali *charká*? It is not unlike the Jersey or the Saxon spinning wheel still used in the country parts of England and Scotland...' (57) The narrator's performance as the liaison must involve upholding his end of the contract, guiding his readers into the unfamiliar terrain of the Bengali village—of the novel itself, still a fledgling genre, fresh off the newly-sprung printing presses of colonial Bengal.

'Unashamedly replicating' (Mukherjee 2000, 56) the famous 'bill of fare' metaphor from the opening chapter of Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, the narrator of *Bengal Peasant Life* offers his readers a taste of what is to be served in the course of the novel:

> And *firstly*, of the first point. You are not to expect anything marvellous or wonderful in this little book. My great Indian predecessors—the latchet of whose shoes I do not pretend to be worthy to unloose—Válmiki, Vyás, and the compilers of the Puránas have treated of kings with ten heads and twenty arms; of a monkey carrying the sun in his arm-pit; of demons churning the universal ocean with a mountain for a churn-stuff; of beings, man above and fish below, or with the body of a man and the head of an elephant; of sages, with truly profound stomachs, who drank up all the waters of the ocean in one sip; of heroes as tall as the lofty towers of golden Lanká; of whole regions inhabited by rational snakes, having their snake-kings, snake-ministers, snake-soldiers hissing and rushing forth to battle. And some of my European predecessors, like Swift and Rabelais, have spoken of men whose pockets were capacious enough to hold a whole nation of diminutive human beings; and of giants, under whose tongue a whole army, with its pack of artillery, its pontoon bridges, its commissariat stores, its ambulance, its field post, its field telegraph, might take shelter from the pouring rain and the pitiless storm, and bivouac with security under its fleshy canopy. Such marvels, my reader, you are not to expect in this unpretending volume. The age of marvels has gone by; giants do not pay now-a-days; scepticism is the order of the day; and the veriest stripling, whose throat is still full of his mother's milk, says to his father, when a story is told him, "Papa, is it true?" (Dey 1984, 2–3)

It is a disavowal of anything 'marvellous' or 'wonderful'—that is to say, anything 'impossible' or 'supernatural', 'in defiance of all possible existence' (O. Chandu Menon, cited in Mehrotra 11), *unrealistic*: 'kings with ten hands and twenty arms' (Dey 1984, 2), with 'armies of ten thousand millions of soldiers' and '60, 000 sons, who were born in a pumpkin, nourished in pans of milk, reduced to ashes by the curse of a sage, and lastly, resuscitated by the vivifying efficacy of the

waters of the Ganges,' (Duff 39) remnants of an older literary tradition. The disavowal, in particular, of 'some of my European predecessors, like Swift and Rabelais,' is noteworthy; the narrator lays claim to not one but two literary traditions, Indian *and* European, and disavows both on the same ground, 'The age of marvels has gone by...' (Dey 1984, 3) The narrator's 'now' is a time of the mundane , and so the 'little book', the narrator further proclaims, is to contain no 'thrilling incidents,' because '[thrilling] incidents occur but seldom in the life-history of ninety-nine persons out of a hundred, and in that of most Bengal ráiyats never.' (3) It is to contain no 'love-scenes', because 'in Bengal—and for the matter of that in all India—they do not make love in the English and honourable sense of that word' (3). It is to contain no grandiloquence, because 'we, plain country-folk, talking of fields, of paddy, of the plough and the harrow have no sublime thoughts, and do not, therefore, require sublime words.' (4) It is to contain nothing but 'a plain and unvarnished tale of a plain peasant, living in this plain country of Bengal' (4)—nothing but the everyday. The narrator's 'now' is the time of 'scepticism'—of rationality, a virtue; but also of an end of innocence, as even 'the veriest stripling, whose throat is still full of his mother's milk, says to his father, when a story is told him: "Papa, is it true?"'—and the 'modern' author, to uphold 'the order of the day' (3), must deal only in that which is 'true' and 'perform,' therefore, the role of a 'historian'.

'A contract,' Shibaji Bandopadhyay reminds us, 'involves two parties: it is a matter between the producer and the receiver, the narrator and the reader. The product that emerges out of their mutual exchange, their co-operation, is by no means concrete—it's significance and value depends heavily on the reader's taste and inclinations.' (1996, 23) And so the narrator of *Bengal Peasant Life* announces, 'If you think it will suit you, I bid you welcome; if not, please pass on to some other quarter.'(4) The 'gentle reader', in opting to read on, accepts the 'narrative-contract' (Bandopadhyay 1996, 23) and must therefore accept the narrator's everyday history as 'truth', despite the occasional slips, the gaping cracks on the surface of the historian's mirror,

> Gentle reader, allow me here to make one remark. You perceive that Badan and Alanga speak better English than most uneducated English peasants; they speak almost like educted ladies and gentlemen, without any provincialisms? But how could I have avoided this defect in my history? If I had translated their talk into the Somersetshire or the Yorkshire dialect, I should have turned them

into English, and not Bengali peasants. You will, therefore, please overlook this grave though unavoidable fault in this authentic narrative. (61)

A 'narrative-contract' (Bandopadhyay 1996, 23) is not a cage; a narrative-contract is consensual and conditional, fragile, like words themselves—the reader has the 'freedom' of walking out of that contract, of turning 'sceptic' instead of surrendering to a suspense of disbelief. And therefore, the narrator turns plaintive: the truth of the narrative is at stake here, and the reader *must* uphold their side of the contract, *must* 'overlook' 'this grave though unavoidable fault in this authentic narrative' and not pry open the cracks in the mirror, not ask, like the upstart child, 'Papa, is it true?' (3)

Notes

[1] Santore, Charles. Illus. 1996. *Snow White: A Tale from the Brothers Grimm.* New York: Park Lane Press

[2] Dey, Rev. Lalbehari. 1984 [1878]. *Bengal Peasant Life.* New Delhi: Cosmo Publications. This edition will be referred to throughout.

Chapter One.

Out of Joint
Novel, Reality, History

One of the earliest Indian works of book-length fiction in prose to have unequivocally earned the title of a 'novel' in posterity, Lal Behari Dey's *Bengal Peasant Life* exists in the annals of literary history and criticism mostly as a part of lists enumerating the 'early novels'; as a passing reference, with occasional notes on its 'unusual' subject matter and words of praise for its 'realistic' representation of life in a Bengali peasant village. For instance, G.S. Sarma inducts the novel into his pantheon of 'nationalist' novels and praises its 'nationalist purpose' (40), observing, 'A reading of the novel also makes one see that the main purpose of the novelist here was to *depict realistically the life and manners of Bengal peasants*...' (36; emphasis mine). The novel, with its 'realistic' representation of the trials and tribulations of Bengal peasant life, is for Sarma a text of 'self-assertion', of 'overt' and 'emphatic' representations of Indian 'national identity'. Sumita Chakrabarty deems it a novel of 'a high standard, owing to its *realistic nature*' (540–541; emphasis mine)—'a novel of Bengal, in spite of having been written in English.' (541) Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her pioneering study of early Indian novels in English, notes *Bengal Peasant Life*'s 'vehement' 'avowal' of 'realism', and goes on to rank the novel amongst what she terms nineteenth century literature of 'protest', alongside texts such as Dinabandu Mitra's *Neel Darpan*, Mir Musarraf Hussain's *Jamidar Darpan* and Dakshina Charan Chattopadhyay's *Chakar Darpan*—all dealing with 'the oppression of the poor by indigo planters, landlords and tea planters' (2000, 56). This commitment towards the realistic representation of oppression, for Mukherjee, becomes a commendable affair, a marker of the novel's true worth, despite its rather 'surprising' 'slavish framing' (56–57), the 'openly imitative manner' (57) of the introductory chapter and the 'unnecessary allusions to western texts' punctuating the narrative,

> Day is not alone among his contemporaries in rejecting the 'sea of treacle' and thirty-feet-high kings, but *what strikes us is the openly imitative manner in which he wrote his introduction when the body of his novel is far from imitative.* His slavish framing of the novel does not prepare the reader for the elemental force of the core narrative that traces the declining fortunes of a poor peasant family of the Ugrakshatriya caste, living in the Bardhaman district of what is now West Bengal. (57; emphasis mine)

For both critics, the novel's 'realism' is testimony to its anti-colonial agenda—Sarma calls it a 'nationalist' novel; Mukherjee points to its proto-nationalist agenda by terming it a novel of 'protest'. Mukherjee goes on to posit the 'elemental force of the [novel's] core narrative' (57) against the element of 'imitation'—*Bengal Peasant Life*'s realism, therefore, becomes, a redeeming feature, surpassing the flaw that is 'slavish' 'imitation', which is but a demonstration 'cultural subjugation',

> It has been argued in the previous chapters that very few Indian writers in English dared to be critical of the British in the nineteenth century or in the decades immediately following it, and any expression of national pride was carefully removed in time to glorify ancient India before the Sultanate and Mughal regimes. It is fairly common to find in the novels of this period paeans of praise for the exemplary role of the British in rescuing the country from the 'anarchy and despotism' of the Muslim rulers....Apart from political acquiescence, their cultural subjugation too was demonstrated in the frequent and proud display of their familiarity with English literature. (55)

While Mukherjee's brief analysis does not dwell further upon *Bengal Peasant Life*, her identification of this contradiction between 'imitation' and 'protest', between 'cultural subjugation' and political resistance in the novel echoes the now-familiar binary of imitation/derivation and resistance in contemporary studies of British India. The difficulty with such categorization is that it is seldom adequate to comprehend the colonial encounter in its complexity—as Tanika Sarkar observes,

> It is perhaps time to remind ourselves that colonisation did not necessarily simplify the range of questions and problems for the colonised. Recent historiographical and cultural studies sometimes tend to reduce the whole complex enterprise of colonialism to the manageable yet impoverished proportions of a crude binary framework: whether the local assented to or refused the structures of colonialism. Further surgeries displace these structures from the realm of colonial political economy into a conveniently attenuated rump of the epistemological and ontological aspects of colonial mastery—these are now to be regarded as *real* structures. The recent historiographical shift further simplifies its task by locating these structures in a single form of Western power-knowledge with monolithic and fixed signs. A flat, uninflected, deductive structural determinism then reads the consciousness of the colonised mechanically off these signs. Moreover, since these signs are vested with totalitarian powers, the consciousness of the colonised is divested of all claims to an autonomous life and made parasitic upon the master discourse of colonialism. This discourse supposedly constitutes the iron cage of language and meaning within which the colonised mind may only perform mimetic gestures. (2001, 24)

A closer look at *Bengal Peasant Life* immediately highlights the inadequacies of a mechanical framework of analysis that involves locating and subsequently celebrating moments of 'resistance'. Keeping in mind the circumstances of the novel's conception—a contest held by Babu Joykissen Mookerjea, the zamindar of Uttarpara, offering a hefty sum for the best novel written either in Bengali or English for the best novel describing 'Social and Domestic Life of the Rural Population and Working Classes of Bengal', thereby, one might say, *demanding* a 'realistic' and factually accurate representation—and the repeated truth-claims of the 'matter of fact' novelist–historian—accepted almost uncritically in the novel's reception—when held under the strict scrutiny of facts, facts, facts alone throws up rather curious results. Tanika Sarkar points to one instance in the novel wherein Dey becomes almost lyrical in his praise of the Hindu widow in *Bengal Peasant Life*,

> English people have, somehow or other, got the idea that a Hindu widow receives harsh and cruel treatment from the relations of her husband. *This is not true.* There are no doubt exceptional cases, but, as a general rule, Hindu widows are not only not ill treated, but they meet with a vast deal of sympathy. Old widows in a Bengali Hindu family are often the guides and counselors of those who style themselves the lords of creation ... Old widows, provided they have intelligence and good character, assert, on account of their experience in life, their superiority over men younger than

> they. As to the privations of widows, a little too much is made of them. Besides the one supreme privation of having the fountain of their affections sealed up, the others, of which foreign writers make so much, are not worth speaking about. (1984, 133–134; emphasis mine)

Read in the context of intense debate in the public sphere over the Hindu widow and the Widow Remarriage Act XV of 1856, the novel's justification and rationalization of the chaste regime of the Hindu widow takes on a more problematic dimension. The ironic narration of the fate met by Áduri as she is conned into taking up the *bhek* of a Vaishnav mendicant, though ostensibly more critical of the imposture of the Vaishnava Vairági, betrays a sense of fear and revulsion toward a possible future sexual relationship between the widowed Áduri and Prem Bhakta Vairági,

> Vairágis, as men who are destitute of passion—for that is the meaning of the term—of course never marry; neither are female Vairágis given in marriage, they being like the angels in heaven; yet a pious Vairági has a religious female companion, who is to him a sort of helpmeet, and an invaluable auxiliary in devotional exercises. For this holy purpose Áduri was entrusted to the care of Prem-Bhakta who was the instrument of her conversion. (234)

The 'authentic', objective 'history' of the Hindu widow thus anticipates—remarkably, coming from the composer of a prize-winning essay titled *The Falsity of the Hindu Religion*—Hindu revivalist discourse of the not-so-distant future, wherein the figure of the widow, her so-called purity and her chastity, becomes a political resource. '*English people* have, somehow or other, got the idea that a Hindu widow receives harsh and cruel treatment from the relations of her husband. *This is not true*', (Dey 1984, 133; emphases mine) states the narrator–historian, emphatically rejecting colonial knowledge and thereby shaking off the accusation of 'cultural subjugation', at least temporarily—but herein one is prompted to ask if 'every species of contestation' is to be accepted equally, uncritically, and celebrated as an act of resistance, if the colonial subject-author is to be 'absolved of all complicity and culpability in the makings of structures of exploitation over the last two hundred years of Indian colonial history' (Sarkar 2001, 193) as reward for this 'resistance'.

Again, the 'brave' documentation of oppression of peasants in *Bengal Peasant Life*, remarkably, is punctuated by—in a show of abject 'political acquiescence'—hopeful interjections about the future of the ryot under the benevolent British Government,

> The year 1859 witnessed a great change in the status of the Bengal ráiyat. Act X. of that year is justly regarded as the Magna Charta of the peasantry of Bengal; and though, owing to causes inherent in the ráiyat himself, namely, his ignorance and the consequent want of spirit, that celebrated piece of legislation has not done him all the good it is calculated to do, it must be admitted that it has effected his legal emancipation. (Dey 1984, 364)

If 'protest' alone marks a novel's worth in the face of 'cultural subjugation', then, by the mechanistic logic of such a framework, one must relegate a text such as *Bengal Peasant Life*, with its damning combination of 'cultural subjugation' *and* 'political acquiescence' to the back-pages of literary history—or, at best, selectively celebrate the moments of resistance while actively suppressing the unsettling rest, including less than savoury instances of active contestation of colonial knowledge.

Indeed, the critical anxiety over passive imitation on the part of the colonial subject–author runs deeper than concern over 'the overt dependence on canonical literary texts from England' and 'the burden of servility that the English language indirectly conferred on most of the novelists' (Mukherjee 2000, 55) and extends, further, to the linguistic capacity of the 'first generation' English-language scholar in India—which, thereafter, adds an element of suspicion to the literary 'merit' of the texts produced by the said scholar. Ranajit Guha, in his discussion of English-language learning and the significance of gaining mastery over the language—the language of command and a 'source of prestige'—in early colonial India, cites Sivnath Shastri's comments on 'the nature of English education at that time' in his *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Bangasamaj* as 'evidence'; to quote from the source text itself,

> On one hand, the Bengali language began to be studied in the country with the indirect assistance of the Fort William college, and *pathsalas*, and so on came to be established for the learning of Bengali–on the other hand, there was an increasing tendency in the respected elite of Calcutta to

educate their children in English. Some Europeans took advantage of the situation and opened English schools in Calcutta. One European called Sherburne opened a school in Chitpore Road. The famous Dwarkanath Tagore had been educated in this school. Another European called Martin Bowle opened a school in Amratala; the famous Muttilal Seal had been educated in that school. Another European called Arratoon Petres had opened a school—of all the students in the school, Blind Nitai Sen of Kolutola and Advaita Sen the Cripple were the most famous. They could read and write broken, ungrammatical English, and therefore, the prestige that they enjoyed in contemporary Calcutta society knew no bounds. They attended *jatramahotsavs* dressed in *kaba chapkan* and brocaded shoes as a marker of their status. People would look at them with respect.

It is necessary here to talk about the nature of English education at that time. At that time, there was little interest in training the pupils in correct sentence formation or grammar. The principal focus lay on teaching English words and their meanings. The greater the number of English words and their meanings memorized by a person, the more fame he would gain as one proficient in the English language. It is said that the missionaries of Srirampore at that time would hand certificates to people vouching for their mastery over 200 or 300 English words. For this season, some boys at that time would memorize the English dictionary. In many schools, the pupils were made to recite English words at the end of the day in the manner of multiplication tables, such as—

Philosopher–*Bijnalok*, Plowman–*Chasha*.

Pumpkin–*Lau-kumro*, Cucumber-*Shosha*. (Shastri 52)

One would, in fact, find similar 'evidence' regarding the nature of English-language education 'prior to 1834' in Rev. Dey's autobiography, the *Recollections of My School-Days*. Dey writes,

When I was a little boy I had a sight of one of these Vocabularies, which used to be studied by a cousin of mine in my native village of Talpur. The English words were written in the Bengali character, and the volume, agreeably to the custom of the Hindus, began with the word 'God'. As a curiosity, I put down below the first words of my cousin's Vocabulary, retaining the spelling of the English word as they were represented in the Bengali character:

Gad : Isvar
Lad : Isvar

A'i : A'mi
Lu : Tumi
Akto : Karmma
Bail : Jamin (1969, 468–469)

Dey further writes, with characteristic irony, 'To the *Spelling Book* and the *Schoolmaster* were added the Tootinamah or the *Tales of a Parrot*, the *Elements of English grammar* and the *Arabian Nights' entertainments*. The man who could read and understand the last mentioned book was reckoned in those days, a prodigy of learning.' (469) There are similar interjections in *Bengal Peasant Life*, as the narrator exclaims,

> Our educated young men, our B.A.'s and M.A.'s in general, can hardly write a common letter in every-day English. They will write you a long Essay on the Feudal System in Europe, or a critique on "Macbeth," or an analysis of "The Flower and the Leaf;" but they will murder the Queen's English in writing a common business letter. There must be something vicious, something essentially wrong, in such a system of education.... Can nothing be done to remedy this disgraceful state of things? (Dey 1984, 116)

We must note that the narrator himself—and the author, one assumes, by extension—appears to be rather secure in his own grasp of the English language, by no means of the same league the 'educated young men' who 'murder the Queen's English.' (116)

Guha concludes, from 'evidence' of this nature, that while the English language managed to 'insinuate itself into education's code of power even at this early date', 'it did so only in an iconic sense'—'with these early nineteenth century learners, the language, as a signifying system, worked on the principle of similarity rather than that of contiguity.' (Guha 1988, 22) Such command over English, while sufficient for the task of copyists and accountants, could not equip Indians to perform 'more complex tasks' for the colonial administration, neither could it 'help the latter to assimilate the values and ideas of British liberalism well enough to justify any claim by the rulers that their rule was based on consent rather than on force.' (24) It was 'imperative', therefore, that

> English, as a linguistic form, should outgrow signality and function as a truly dynamic system of signs in its role as a medium of instruction....
>
> Under the conditions of colonial rule still in its formative phase, any progress from signality to semioticity in the most momentous political consequences. It was to forge that language at once into a hegemonic instrument wielded in order to persuade the subject population about the desirability of its own subjection.
>
> ...
>
> In short, education, mediated by English, deposited western values into the soul of the educated. (24–25)

It is quite telling that Guha's discussion—as he seeks to trace the development of 'a distinctly Indian' historiography—then goes on to focus on early Indian historiography in *Bengali* and the 'contest for prestige' that the Bengali intelligentsia entered into as they pitted their *matribhasha* against the 'dominant' English language. Here too the initiative, Guha writes, came from a desire to 'emulate'—for the Bengali language to imitate and, in the process, *rival* and *best* the language of command in its capacity to produce more 'authentic' works of history. For Guha, it is less an act of 'explicit' defiance or resistance, and more

> [a] movement, with its springs rooted deeply in that primordial relation which man, as species-being, has with his natural language, it was no more than a reflex action of the will. The passions it inspired and the metaphors of motherhood used to describe it, were all evidence of *its rootedness in such a primordial connection*. (43, emphasis mine)

It is, if one were to resort to colloquialisms, a 'no-win scenario'. The nineteenth century Indian writer in English either possesses dubious command over the language, or has his thought constituted in its entirety by monolithic 'western values'. The nineteenth century writer in Bengali enters into a rivalry with the language of command not as a deliberate act of contestation but out of a 'primordial' connection with the mother tongue, a 'reflex action' with no more agency

than a knee-jerk. The text produced by the colonised subject is always already 'lesser' than the text produced by the colonial masters. The Bengali writer, nonetheless, is somewhat better-placed than the English-language author to produce 'authenticity' (echoing, incidentally, the age-old debate in Indian literature on the 'Indianness' of literature in English), since the English-language text is either lacking in literary merit or derivative in nature. The solution, therefore, must again be a polite dismissal of such imitative texts into the rubbish bin of history, fishing them out—selectively—only when it is convenient and less embarrassing to do so, even at the cost of leaving blank spaces in significant sections of our literary history.

The Question of Reality

'The most significant defining characteristic of the novel is that it is modern,' (1) writes Sukumar Bandopadhyay in *Banga Sahitye Upanyasher Dhara* (*Forms of the Novel in Bengali Literature*), and cites the 'development' of 'individualism,' 'self-respect,' and the 'democratic impulse' as reasons behind the 'rise' of the novel in 'modern' India, as in the rest of the world. He goes on to observe,

> This is not to say that the novel burst into the world of literature like an unadulterated revelation or a mystifying conundrum; one discovers faint traces and indications of the shape of things to come even in early literature. One may catch a glimpse of the future coming of the novel wherever there has been an effort to represent reality or to portray the relationships and conflicts faced by the individual in society in literature, be it in verse, in religious texts, in farcical poems, in narrative poetry, in plays, and so on. (1965, 2)

'The novel,' thus, is the 'modern' culmination of a steady movement in world literature towards the representation of reality in literature, traces of which may be found even in the literature of antiquity. There is no consideration of any other form of novel-writing as 'the novel' is, by definition, realistic in nature; Bandopadhyay writes, 'In terms of development, perhaps, the

historical novel is the true precursor of the social novel,' (1965, 37) the implication being that the realist social novel is the pinnacle of achievement in terms of the 'development' of the novel. Bandopadhyay's study of the 'pre-history' of the Bengali 'novel' traces a rich and intriguing genealogy—from the Panchatantras and the Jatakas to traditional folk narratives, the works of Krittibas Ojha, Kashiram Das and Mukundaram, the *mangal kavya*s, the Chaitanya *carita*s and the Mymensigh *geetika*s, the 'Muslim' romances, drawing from Arabic and Persian literature, and so on. It is, however, telling that his method largely consists of drawing out the 'realist' elements in these diverse forms and mapping a definite movement towards the realist social novel; his discussion of Chandi and Manasa *mangal kavya*s, for instance, focuses on the increasing irrelevance of 'supernatural elements' as 'representations of reality become clearer and more expansive.' (Bandopadhyay 1965, 11) Sukumar Sen, in his seminal *Bangla Sahityer Itihash* (*The History of Bengali Literature*), echoes Bandopadhyay in his discussion of the works of Mukundaram [Kavikankanchandi] as he observes that the Mukundaram's works 'contain elements of modern literature—the novel' because of the poet's 'interest' in 'every aspect of the wider world that he had access to' and his capacity to 'represent' 'the emotions experienced by ordinary men and women in the course of life, its events and its accidents, in a manner that is at once deft and free from unnecessary spectacle' (1940, 445)—or, in other words, his penchant for realism, the novelist's forte. Sumita Chakrabarty, in her study of the 'movement' of Bengali prose fiction from the '*akhyan*' to the 'novel,' defines the novel as an 'exploration of aspects of human life (*bastab-jibon*) in their entirety.' (530) '*Bastab*' is 'reality'; Chakrabarty further explains, 'A narrative that eschews the supernatural in its representation of reality and explores the causes and effects of an event, or, at least, seeks an explanation of it, might be termed a realistic. A novel is a realistic narrative.' (530) The novel, she asserts, consists of the 'conflict between the society and an individual,' (Chakrabarty 531) and 'emerges' when 'man develops enough sense of self to question social norms.' (531) The nineteenth century is when 'people from all strands of the society' in India, and therefore, Bengal, developed this 'sense of self' and 'self-respect,' which is why the novel emerged in Bengal in the nineteenth century. (532) Curiously, Chakrabarty's survey of the nineteenth century Bengali novel contains instances of 'novels of a different strand' (543)—that is to say, novels that contradict the very definition of 'the novel' according to Chakrabarty and contain supernatural elements, such as Pyarichand Mitra's *Abhedi* (1871) and *Adhyatika* (1880), and Ramgati Nyayratna's *Ilchhoba* (1892). These novels, Chakrabarty hastily

adds, are 'by no means important.' (543) About Trailokyanath Mitra's seminal *Kankabati* (1892), with its ghosts, fever-dreams, unreal universes, magical roots, and so on, Chakrabarty claims, '[the] supernatural elements in this novel are of no consequence—it is a satirical novel.' (544) The clear presence non-realistic novel-writing, therefore, is explained away, even as it does not fit into the neat definition of the novel as inherently realistic, even as it sticks out like a sore thumb.

It has been a trend in Indian literary criticism to conceive of 'the Indian novel' is somewhat monolithic terms, where 'the novel' is essentially understood as inherently 'realist' in nature, its 'origin' bearing an uncanny resemblance to that of the novel form in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In *Upanyashe Ateet: Itihash o Kalpaitihash*, Meenakshi Mukherjee comments on the same as she identifies two 'main' modes of novel-writing in nineteenth century India—the realist and the historical novel—and observes,

> Perhaps, the tendency to grant more significance to the first [mode] of novel-writing in the academic works discussing Indian novels is an influence of Western aesthetic theory. Till mid-twentieth century, discussions of the English novel considered the relationship between the novel and realism a fundamental and inextricable one. Consciously or otherwise, our critics are of the same opinion. Hence the Bengali novel Durgeshnandini is often considered a 'romance' and not a 'novel', and Shyamaswapna (1885), a Hindi novel that displays elements of what we today call 'magic realism', has not been considered a novel at all in the history of Hindi literature..., (2003, 3)

Literary critics, rather ironically, are accused of 'being influenced by'—of deriving from—Western aesthetic theory, a charge that has been very often levelled against novelists by critics themselves.

It is similarly unsatisfactory to conflate the conditions of the novel in nineteenth century India with that of the novel in 'the world'—Europe—as the socio-economic and political situations that constituted that constituted the backdrop against which the novel 'arose' in India were by no means equivalent to those prevailing in Europe, or to sum up the 'rise' of the novel by simply declaring it an 'influence' of 'English education', of 'western impact' and the proliferation of print

and availability of English novels in colonial India. *Bengal Peasant Life*'s tryst with novelistic realism, with its contradictions and paradoxes demands a deeper probe into the beginnings of the early Indian novel.

Novel, History

'[Since] antiquity,' Roland Barthes observed, '"the real" has been on History's side' (147); it is of little surprise that the realistic English novel in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries sought to align itself with history and its claim to truth, although it is important to note that the realistic English novel's negotiations with history and the so-called 'rise' of 'historical sense' in Europe was considerably complex and often contradictory. Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her bid to distinguish between the early Indian English novel and the eighteenth/nineteenth century English novel, writes,

> The early English novel sought to associate itself with history—in this context, we might recall the names of some of the most important 18th century English novels, namely, *The History of Tom Jones*, *The History of Robinson Crusoe*, etc. The desire to align the novel with history is evident in the self-conscious use of the word 'history' in the title. However, Indian novels, in their desire to align themselves with history never sought to dissociate themselves from the *kaavya* tradition. (2003, 5)

'*O tempora! O mores!*,' (1878, 116) Lal Behari Dey's often-theatrical narrator of *Bengal Peasant Life* might have exclaimed, had he been made aware of such blatant neglect on the part of the latter-day critic of his 'little book' and its vehement avowal of realism, its *equally* vehement disavowal of non-realistic modes of traditional storytelling that might have the occasion to feature 'kings with ten heads and twenty arms' and 'a monkey carrying the sun in his arm-pit,' (2)

and, most importantly, its claim to 'authentic history,' so carefully introduced and negotiated in the prefatory chapter presenting the 'bill of fare.' (1)

A 'Hunger for History'

Bankimchandra Chatterjee's clarion call for a history of one's own in the pages of *Bangadarshan*—'Bengal must have her own history. Otherwise there is no hope for Bengal. Who is to write it?' (cited in Guha 1988, 1)—is often seen as representative of the 'rise' of a 'historical consciousness' in 19th century colonial Bengal. It is tempting to conflate this 'rise' with the narrative of the rise of a similar 'historical sense' in Europe, which allowed 'men to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them' (Lukács 1962). However, following Lukács' own analysis, it is evident that the so-called rise of historical sense in 19th century Europe is *itself* historically conditioned, and the conditions of development of a 'modern' historical consciousness in colonial Bengal—much like the conditions of development of the novel in the 19th century, as we have earlier discussed—are by no means equivalent to that of 19th century Europe.

Ranajit Guha, in his discussion of the so-called shift from quasi-historical narratives, grounded in myth, to modern, secular, *historical* narratives in colonial Bengal, takes his cue from Mikhail Bakhtin:

> ...Henceforth, there would be no going back to Purana.
>
> In saying this we take our cue from Bakhtin's observations on the role of the novel as a solvent of epic time. That role was paralleled in our culture by historiography in its relation to Puranic time. 'The epic,' wrote Bakhtin, with reference to the European genre of that name, 'has been from the beginning a poem about the past, and the authorial position immanent in the epic and constitutive for it (that is, the position of the one who utters the epic word) is the environment of a man

> speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible, the reverent point of view of a descendant.' With the phrase 'epic' replaced by 'Purana', this could pass for a precise description of the latter as that generic discourse by which our own culture had, since antiquity, constructed and cyclically reproduced the past as a sacred and ancestral time, distantiated altogether from the times and values of its authors. This was an 'absolute past', and lacked 'any relativity, that is, any gradual, purely temporal progressions that might connect it with the present,' and especially, that present where the authors and their audiences belonged. In Europe, the emergence of the novel was, according to Bakhtin, the signal of 'an enormous revolution in the creative consciousness of man,' precisely because it had the present 'taken as a starting point and center for artistic and ideological orientation.' It was the intrusion of the present which desacralized and finally destroyed the absolute past of the epic by putting it in direct contact with reality and experience.
>
> In our culture, the demolition of the absolute past of the Purana began with historicization rather than with novelization.... (Guha 33–34)

There are several observations to be made here, beginning with the simplistic equation of Bakhtin's 'epic time' with 'Puranic time', wherein 'Puranic time' stands in for cyclical time-reckoning in pre-British conquest India, without taking into consideration the distinct social contexts and the roles played by the epics and the Puranas—two very different cultural artifacts—in these societies. In this, Guha echoes Mircea Eliade's influential theorizations on time-reckoning in early India, which have set the tone for many contemporary discussions of the same, with the following assumptions: that time in early India was conceived in terms of eternal cyclic repetitions, a scheme of things so grand that human time is rendered insignificant and inconsequential in comparison. It is, furthermore, the sacred time of myth, 'continuous, with a beginning or an end. The cycle returns with unchanging regularity and in unchanging form. This amounts to refusal of history, for no event can be particular or unique and all events are liable to be repeated in the next cycle.' (Thapar 5–6) This understanding of time-reckoning in early India follows the commentary of the early Orientalist scholars such as William Jones, Francis Wilford, John Bentley and Thomas Colbrooke, who, in their quest for 'works easily recognizable as history backed by at least a skeletal chronology,' failed to find equivalents to 'the unity of Chronos and Clio which they ascribed to the Graeco-Roman world'—'[a]fter repeated and unsuccessful attempts at cross-referencing Biblical and Classical information with Indian texts, it was generally conceded that there was an absence of both a sense of history and of the notion of

linear time.' (4) 'Linear time' here is the diametrical opposite of cyclic time—it has a beginning and an end, and an emphasis on the uniqueness of particular events. Linear time is human time beginning with Adam and Eve, to Christ and leading on to Judgment Day, which, post-secularization, '[incorporates] the notion of change in time and the belief that change was progress as defined in nineteenth century terms.' (8) Linear time *liberates* human history from eternal repetition and the timelessness of myth—'demolishes' the 'absolute past' and puts it in 'direct contact with reality and experience.' (Guha 34)

Romila Thapar opposes such absolute segregation of cyclic and linear time, arguing that while '[i]n terms of an eschatology there is an evident difference of form between cyclic and linear time,' 'not only does cyclic time [in early Indian time-reckoning] have a genesis and a predicated termination (as does linear time), it can also encompass segments of time consisting of historical chronologies.' (8) Thapar's study underlines the co-existence of cyclic cosmological time with the 'relatively value free' time of the astronomers in early India—an aspect of time-consciousness that, while invisible to the early Orientalists *or* later commentators, had been noted by earlier scholars such as Alberuni in the 11th century, who had observed 'the difference between popular views [on time] and those of astronomers and mathematicians [in India].' (1) The prevalence, furthermore, of the use of eras—the Śaka era (AD 78), the Gupta era (AD 319–20), the Kalacuri Cedi (AD 247–8), and so on—and dating by regnal years—a practice that dates back to Aśoka's inscriptions in the 3rd century B.C—points to another kind of time-reckoning based on a precise point in human history—'calendar time' (Ricoeur 105)—that served a distinct functional purpose by allowing more precise dating in official documents (Thapar 32). The existence of such a mode of time reckoning did not mean an outright dismissal of cosmological time—in fact, a glance at the *caritas* and *va□śāvalis*, the biographies and the dynastic and regional chronicles, reveals quite the opposite as the texts frequently begin with origin myths of the dynasties in question, drawing upon the Puranas in order to legitimize the claims of the founders of the dynasties, before going on to concern themselves with genealogy and specificities of dynastic reign. Thapar refers to the Chamba *va□śāvali*, wherein the origin story links the dynasty to a heroic, Puranic ancestry; '[the] subsequent narrative of the rulers of Chamba revolves around changes of many kinds.... The chronology is what we would recognize as historical.' (32) Cosmological time co-exists with a more linear, more specific form of time without any apparent contradiction within

the same text even as '[c]ategories of time demarcate the earlier story from the later narrative.' (34)

A study of the treatment of time in the Puranas themselves further complicates the possibility of effortlessly equating 'Puranic time' with 'epic time'. Thapar's reading of time in the *Visnu Purāna* and its extensive list of genealogies shows that '[c]osmological time did not debar other forms of time reckoning, perhaps more realistic and therefore liable to be subsumed in cosmological time,' (29) as dynastic time 'in effect takes the functional form of historical chronology.' (31) These other forms of time-reckoning 'may be viewed as fragmentary arcs within the cycle which take on the role of linear time' (31); the sharp dichotomy between cyclic and linear time becomes 'increasingly vague.' (31) Various forms of time-consciousness may co-exist in a society, and '[t]he inclusion of cyclic time is not a characteristic of cultures which are historically stunted but an indication of historical complexity. This complexity is reflected in the perceptions of the past in pre-modern times, the premises of which are different from the writing of history today.' (44)

It is telling that H.H. Wilson—one of the most renowned Indologists of the 19th century—discussing the description of time in the *Visnu Purāna*, says, 'It does not seem necessary to refer to the invention (of time) to any astrological computations or to any attempt to represent actual chronology.' (cited in Thapar 43) It is similarly telling that while early Greek time-reckoning was also distinctly 'circular' in nature, early Greek historiography was viewed separately in the 19th century from their cyclic cosmology: 'In this case, cyclic time was not seen as negating history.' (43) Cyclic time, in contemporary thought at that time, was often said to be associated with 'primitive' and 'archaic' societies. '[A] refusal of history through recourse to cyclic time' (43) has been—as Thapar scathingly observes—frequently identified with *colonised* cultures, which, in itself, is an act of 'temporal distancing', of subtly arguing that 'such societies lived in another time', thereby constituting their otherness. Modernity *is* a temporal condition, indicating 'that what comes later is, despite some social costs, generally an improvement on what came earlier and that there is something not just about human history but about time itself which makes it so' (Banerjee 3), and a 'historically stunted' society must necessarily be one that is tragically 'backward', ripe for the 'improving' influence of 'change' and 'progress'.

It ill-suits our purpose to uncritically accept presentations of a sharp dichotomy between 'Puranic time' in early India and the shift to 'historical time' in the 19th century, based as such presentations are on an inadequate consideration of the complexities of time consciousness in early India, as well as their propensity to lend themselves to the perpetuation of stereotypes about colonised cultures and the very nature of colonial modernity. History, as a 'modern' discipline in 19th century India, has inevitable connections with the colonial regime and its 'historiographic modality' (Cohn 5). History, as Cohn has argued, was seen to possess 'an ontological power in providing the assumptions about how the real social and natural worlds are constituted,' and was therefore 'the most valuable form of knowledge on which to build the colonial state.' (5) This was accompanied by other 'modalities'—travel and observation, survey (which would include mapping, bounding, classification of 'the territory's zoology, geology, botany, ethnology, economic products, history and sociology'), enumeration (through reports and census), generation and transmission of knowledge of the antiquities of India, 'art, architecture, scripts and textual traditions'; in other words, an immense enterprise to *know* India, since '[the] conquest of India was a conquest of knowledge.' (Cohn 16) The subsequent generation of volumes on India came hand-in-hand with narratives legitimising the British occupation and civilising mission in India, from sources as wildly disparate as the 'official' narratives from representatives of the colonial government that ascribed 'decay' in contemporary Indian society and culture to be the reason behind the British conquest of India,

> It is a common remark that science and literature are in a progressive state of decay among the natives of India. From every inquiry which I have been enabled to make on this interesting subject that remark appears to me but too well founded. The number of the learned is not only diminished but the circle of learning even among those who still devote themselves to it appears to be considerably contracted. The abstract sciences are abandoned, polite literature neglected and no branch of learning cultivated but what is connected with the peculiar religious doctrines of the people. The immediate consequence of this state of things is the disuse and even actual loss of many valuable books, and it is to be apprehended that unless Government interpose with a fostering hand the revival of letters may shortly become hopeless from a want of books or of persons capable of explaining them..., (Lord Minto, cited in Cohn 49)

to the narratives of the Christian missionaries, who saw the conquest of 'heathen', 'degenerate' India to be 'Providential',

> Can it be that a power so tremendous, over an empire so vast, and a people so countless, has been placed in the hands of a few Britons for no higher end than that of enabling them to gratify their ambition, their avarice, their vain-glorious tastes, and lawless appetites? No. Reason, philosophy, sound theism, Revelation,—all must unite in repelling the insinuation, as not less honourable than false.... The decree hath gone forth—and who can stay his execution?—that India shall be the Lord's—that Asia shall be the Lord's;—yea, that all the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ!
>
> Shall we then refuse to redeem the time—refuse to employ the means, now placed so abundantly within our reach, of extending the renovating principles of the Cross among the millions of our fellow-subjects in idolatrous India? (Duff 49–50)

The narrative of 'decay' served as a strategy of temporal distancing, constructing a society living in a time other than the time of the colonising British, the time of modernity and Progress; as Prathama Banerjee argues,

> Modernity thus seeks to sanitize otherness, now wished away to another time as if it were another land altogether. If time in modernity is reconstituted as chronology, as a potentially empty extension like space, a point which two different entities cannot occupy simultaneously, it is precisely to produce this effect. In this time, only one can exist in the present—the truly modern. (6)

The Indian past as an object of knowledge contributed to this act of temporal distancing by firmly establishing Indians as a people without history, without the requisite self-consciousness to strive towards progress and development. James Mill's iconic *The History of British India*, with its near-irrational dismissal of 'the Hindus'—prompting H.H. Wilson to critique Mill's

'imperfect knowledge' and 'extreme' representation in his Preface to Fourth Edition of *The History*—one of the most influential, if not *the* most influential historical text on 'British India', moved a step further away from the narrative of a glorious Hindu past and decay to one of perpetual lack of progress,

> The progress of knowledge, and the force of observation, demonstrated the necessity of regarding the actual state of the Hindus as little removed from that of half-civilised nations. The saving hypothesis, however, was immediately adopted, that the situation in which the Hindus are now beheld is a state of degradation; that formerly they were in a state of high civilization; from which they had fallen through the miseries of foreign conquest, and subjugation.
>
> This was a theory invented to preserve as much as actual observation would allow to be preserved, of a pre-established and favourite creed. It was not an inference from what was already known. It was a gratuitous assumption. It preceded inquiry, and no inquiry was welcome, but that which yielded matter for its support. (1826, 144)

Mill's text devoted two chapters to early Hindu culture, and saw little merit in the 'arts' of the Hindus, which he claimed 'remained in a low state of improvement', or their 'ingenuity', which, he observed, 'is in its infancy.' The 'fine arts' of the Hindus were equally 'rude', and their literature uninspiring,

> At this first stage the literature of the Hindus has always remained. The habit of expressing every thing in verse; a habit which urgent necessity imposes upon a people unacquainted with the use of permanent signs, and which the power of custom upholds, till after a certain progress in improvement, even among those to whom permanent signs are known; we trace among the Hindus to the present day. All their compositions, with wonderfully few exceptions, are in verse. For history they have only certain narrative poems, which depart from all resemblance to truth and nature; and have evidently no farther connexion with fact than the use of certain names and a few remote allusions. Their laws, like those of rude nations in general, are in verse. Their sacred books, and even their books of science, are in verse; and what is more wonderful still, their very dictionaries. (45)

Of note is the repeated use of temporal categories—'low state of improvement', 'infancy', 'rude', 'first stage of literature', as opposed to the ever-present spectre of the 'improved', 'advanced', 'sophisticated' European civilizations—that effectively relegate Hindu civilization to the time of non-modernity. The use of the present tense—'At this first stage the literature of the Hindus has *always* remained' (emphasis mine)—increases and magnifies the claim of a statement to general validity even as it 'freezes' the society at the time of observation and worse, 'contains assumptions about the repetitiveness, predictability, and conservatism of primitives.' (Fabian 81) The debasement of contemporary, colonised India is thus explained logically by the debased nature of the Hindu civilization itself, the 'rude' Hindu mind and the changeless Hindu society stuck in the earliest stage of progress.

'It is of course easy and tempting,' cautions Uday Singh Mehta, 'to dismiss Mill's views on India as utterly driven by a jaundiced set of prejudices that therefore deserve no serious consideration.' As Mehta observes,

> It is the perspective, and not so much the details, from which Mill crafts his *History* and the authority he claims for it that matter and which give it its enduring and perturbing relevance. It is a perspective of truth and not of life from which things, beliefs, situations, and ways of being are judged not by reference to the local positivities or the bounded finitude within which experience occurs. Rather they are judged as forms of knowledge, as truth claims, when underwritten by Mill's epistemology generate a universal typology in which all things must be hierarchical. From this perspective progress is always, even if only implicitly, the only evaluative yardstick. (95)

Framed as a problem of governance for the British Empire, Mill's ultimate concern in *The History* is thus the exact discernment of *where* India stood at that time in terms of civilizational stages, and the construction a hierarchy of civilizations,

> To ascertain the true state of the Hindus in the scale of civilization, is not only an object of curiosity in the history of human nature; but to the people of Great Britain, charged as they are

> with the government of that great portion of the human species, it is an object of the highest practical importance. No scheme of government can happily conduce to the ends of government, unless it is adapted to the state of the people for whose use it is intended. In those diversities in the state of civilization, which approach the extremes, this truth is universally acknowledged. Should any one propose, for a band of roving Tartars, the regulations adapted to the happiness of a regular and polished society, he would meet with neglect or derision. The inconveniences are only more concealed and more or less diminished, when the error relates to states of society which more nearly resemble one another. If the mistake in regard to Hindu society, committed by the British nation, and the British government, be very great; if they have conceived the Hindus to be a people of high civilization, while they have in reality made but a few of the earliest steps in the progress to civilization, it is impossible that in many of the measures pursued for the government of that people, the mark aimed at should not have been wrong. (1817, 429)

Present lack of progress, however, presented the opportunity for future progress, the actualization of which could happen only with the application of an external force. '...[W]herever the Hindus have been always exempt from a domination of foreigners, there they are uniformly found in a state of civilisation inferior to those who have long been the subjects of a Mahomedan throne,' Mill pronounced—the rudimentary progress that had been achieved under the 'foreign' Islamic rulers could only be improved upon by British governance. Mill's 'history' of 'British India', along with its ilk, therefore, performed a crucial task in the abetment of this very progress—that of appropriating the Indian past and *giving* a history to a rude people who had none, 'It is allowed on all hands that no historical composition existed in the literature of the Hindus; they had not reached that point of intellectual maturity, at which the value of a record of the past for the guidance of the future begins to be understood.' (1817, 374) 'Others,' as Prathama Banerjee points out, 'with other histories and other temporalities, can no longer by themselves appear on the stage of world history to disrupt its script; being chronologically past, they have to be first re-*presented*' (6)—the non-modern subject is '*non*-present yet *re*-presentable'. (7)

'[It] is not possible to appropriate a people's past without imposing the appropriator's will on their will, without ousting them from the site of an autochthonous occupancy, without violating the traditions of a pre-existing right of use'. (Guha 1988, 49) The appropriation and objectification of Indian past on a discursive level was accompanied by a very real violation of everyday time with the coming of the colonial regime—an aspect of colonial modernity that narratives of a 'quick,

painless, and total transition from cyclical Kaliyuga to linear time, from "myth" to modern "history" on the Western model' (Sarkar 1997, 188) fail to capture. Clocks were introduced in colonial Bengal in the 19th century with the colonial regime; unlike the movement from the early 13th and 14th century clocks showing hours alone to the 'modern' apparatus of disciplinary time in Western Europe, which took place over a period of nearly 500 years, and not without tension or struggle, '[c]locks and disciplinary time came more or less together [in colonial Bengal],' (190) abruptly and 'under conditions of alien rule.' (190) For the educated middle-class Bengali, 'disciplinary time manifested itself primarily in the form of clerical jobs in British-controlled government or mercantile offices...along with, perhaps, the new educational institutions' (190): *chakri* (work). Days were now bound by clock-time, afternoon siestas a thing of past as the government in Calcutta made it mandatory for workers to stay in the office, in the 'unfamiliar' enclosed space of the modern city building, even at noon (made official on 3 November, 1763), and one was left with no time of their own, controlled as it was by the routine of work—the regular hours a contrast with the seasonal variation of labour in village life. Different days of the week began to assume 'idiosyncracies' of their own,

> Saturday was a day when the dark, hidden propensities of society rose to the surface: over-indulgence by working men, defiance by schoolboys, mindless shopping and gluttonous consumption by those returning from work, making prices shoot up incredibly in Sunday markets. Nothing was good about the day except for waiting wives, whose husbands returned from the city that night. Sunday was suspect too, for all work had been forbidden on that day for no reason. (Banerjee 44–45)

This was accompanied by Victorian standards of punctuality and discipline at the workplace and colonial narratives about the 'lazy native'—the 'sedentary' Bengali *babu*. His favourite pursuits are sedentary.' Time management now became a concern, a virtue to be cultivated, as schoolbooks began to abound in advice on how to manage time (Banerjee 45). The traditional alamanacs, the *panjika*s, along with their listing of the textured everyday time of an older mode of time-reckoning now started to provide additional information such as railway timetables, stamp rates, interest rates, Christian calendars, and so on, thus '[attempting] to pack newer and

older time-reckonings and mismatched temporal duties into the average Hindu everyday without it falling apart.' (Banerjee 45)

The experience of appropriation of times past and present found its discursive expression in two significant ways, the first being the proliferation of what Sumit Sarkar has called the 'Kaliyuga literature of colonial Bengal'. Jitendra Nath Mohanty, in his discussion of time-reckoning in early India, rejects the conceptualization of the four yugas as cyclic time and reframes them as a means of 'determining units of cosmic time-calculation' and, more pertinent to our discussion here, 'of recurring valuational types' (80)—a theory of *change*. Sumit Sarkar writes, 'For some two thousand years, from the Vana Parva of the Mahabharata onwards, Kaliyuga has been a recurrent and powerful dystopia, a format for voicing a variety of high caste male anxieties.' (307) Kaliyuga is a time of rapid, frightening social change and disruption of the Brahmanical social order—a time when the Sudras have overturned the scriptures and ceased to serve the higher castes, a time when women choose their partners and wives deceive their husbands, a time of unforeseen natural calamities and many other catastrophes. 'The nineteenth century made a selection, with new stresses, from this impressive catalogue,' significant among which was the distress over the disciplinary regime of *chakri*; as a 1885 play titled *Kerani-carit* (*Tales of a Clerk*) lamented, 'We lose the day's salaries if we reach office a minute late... half the salary goes on fines...: there is not a single gap in our day's routine.' (307–308) 'Kaliyuga literature'—very often through absurdity and dark humour—expressed the experience of time gone out of joint, utter discordance.

The experience of being relegated to another time, to the waiting room of world history found its expression in another significant way, exemplified by Bankimchandra Chatterjee's 'call': 'Bengal must have her own history.' (Guha 1988, 1) If the Kaliyuga narratives caught the Bengali middle-class at moments of introspection and pessimism, the call for a history of Bengal is in many ways representative of what Sumit Sarkar calls a kind of 'forward-looking male activism' characteristic of 19th century colonial Bengal,

> You have to write it. I have to write it. All of us have to write it. Anyone who is a Bengali has to write it....

> Come, let us join our efforts in investigating the history of Bengal.... It is not a task that can be done by any one person alone; it is a task for all of us to do together. (Bankimchandra Chatterjee, cited in Guha 1988, 1)

History offered the possibility of objective truth, of continuity with India's 'glorious' past and a rational explanation for her present state of subjugation, and, furthermore, had the potential to offer hope for future progress—a coherent narrative with a beginning, middle and an end. It would be a history of one's own, directly disputing with the truth-claims of 'biased' colonialist narratives. As an article written by an author with a rather apt pseudonym, 'Bharati Defensor', in the pages of Lal Behari Dey's *Bengal Magazine* claimed, 'The history of British India has yet to be written.' (272) The article went on to accuse British historians of maintaining double standards and approaching their Indian subject-matter with a sense of 'contempt',

> ...a few words now for the general form of all these histories. It would be strange indeed if this were impartial, or what would to the 'misguided sciolists' otherwise known as educated Indians, appear as such. The writers were not unfrequently actors in the transactions which they related, and even when they were not, they could only enter into the feelings of their own race: those of the others—comprising as these did varied races and nationalities—being a sealed book to them. They might indeed have learned in time; but as their intercourse went on, the unchecked career of conquest which accompanied it, changed the astonishment, we might almost say, awe with which they had contemplated a type of civilization so very different from their own, into contempt: a feeling which surpasses all others in its capacity to blunt the faculties of observation. It impelled them, without thinking twice of it, to accredit their opponent with the vilest motives. What among European belligerents was a perfectly fair manoeuvre became duplicity and treachery, what among them was a justifiable act of warfare became cold-blooded assassination or savage carnage. (274)

'Our sole object is self-defence,' (278) wrote the author as he took up various narratives of the infamous 'Black Hole' incident and proceeded to pick them apart, leading to the conclusion that '[if] we have succeeded in proving any thing, we have shewn that the history of British India is written in a most one-sided way.' (279) Equally succinct was Bankimchandra Chatterjee, who wrote, 'In our opinion there is not a single work in English that is a true history of Bengal,' (cited

written in a most one-sided way.' (279) Equally succinct was Bankimchandra Chatterjee, who wrote, 'In our opinion there is not a single work in English that is a true history of Bengal,' (cited in Guha 1988, 56) and the only remedy to the problem, of course, is a history of one's own. Prathama Banerjee writes,

> Colonial histories were claiming that all the Bengalis had was a past of passive victimhood, of being repeatedly conquered by outside powers, of whom the British were the latest and the best, because they forced a hitherto backward people into modernity, and therefore into history. As if the history of the colonized was always already determined from outside, and such a history, therefore, was best written by an outsider. As if, being 'backward' and not quite present to modernity, the colonized could be re-*presented* by the truly modern. (7)

The 'true history' of Bengal had yet to be written, and it had to be written by Bengalis themselves. Meenakshi Mukherjee writes, 'The tide of re-writing India's history at the end of the 19th century was propelled on one hand by the nascent nationalism, and on the other hand by a lack of faith towards narratives written by British historians.' (2003, 14) The so-called 'rise' of a historical consciousness in colonial Bengal, what Mukherjee calls the 'hunger for history' (*itihāsbubhukhha*), borrowing words from Rabindranath Tagore (15)—leading to a proliferation of historiographical writings and a marked interest in history and all things historical, including historical novels and plays—would contribute significantly to the nascent nationalist discourse, harping upon the glory of early Indian civilization and the possibility of a renaissance. It was, furthermore, an effort on the part of the Bengali literate classes to reconstitute themselves as *modern* subjects, *present* on the stage of world history and capable of re-presenting themselves instead of being *re*-presented, belonging to the same time as the colonizing British and thereby, finally, overcoming the perpetual time-lag imposed upon them by colonialist assertions of a historically stunted society, living in another time.

The Problem with Peasants

The *bhadraloks*' leap to modernity did not come without its set of problems. The time of modernity, by its very nature, might be inhabited only by the *truly modern*—'[o]thers, with other histories and other temporalities, can no longer by themselves appear on the stage of world history to disrupt its script,' (Banerjee 6) and the literate Bengali classes, while on their determined leap forward, found many such 'others' in their midst, the presence of whom disrupted and threatened to upset the possibility of a painless transition into modernity. The logic and coherence offered by a history of one's own had its own share of pitfalls as well. 'Historical explanation,' Prathama Banerjee points out, 'by its very nature, required that the present fallen state of the colonized be explained in terms of political contingency of colonialism. The question now was—what lay in the nation's past that led to its present subordination.' (9) The answer, Banerjee says, 'generally boiled down to that single "fact" of history—the presence of the "primitive", the non-Aryan, the *asabhya* within the nation' (9)—that is to say, the presence of 'primitive' 'aboriginies' such as the Santhals. Furthermore, between the two extremes of the 'civilized' high caste male *bhadralok* and the 'primitive' Santhal, there existed other social groups who were, in their own way, in varying manners and degrees, 'backward', 'non-modern', and therefore posed similar threats to the possibility of becoming truly 'modern'. The so-called introspective inward turn of the *bhadralok* in the nineteenth century, which went hand-in-hand with 'forward-looking activism', led to the identification of many such pockets of unacceptable backwardness 'within', from the primitive Santhals to the opposite sex to the 'humble' peasants of rural Bengal, who then, very often, became 'objects of [the] reform/revivalist discourses' (Sarkar 1997, 172) that proliferated nineteenth century Bengal.

Lal Behari Dey's quest to write an 'authentic history' of the Bengali peasant must be considered in this particular context, in the light of the fact that the humble Bengali peasant and his native rural Bengal would steadily become a staple of discussion in the nineteenth century, featuring prominently in economic and historical narratives, in the pages of newspapers and periodicals and novels, almost always in terms of his 'backwardness' or his status as a foil to the urbanized *bhadralok*. A 'narrative-contract', as we have already noted, is a matter between 'the producer and the receiver, the narrator and the reader' (Bandopadhyay 1996, 23)—in *Bengal*

Peasant Life, between the narrator–historian and the 'gentle reader.' At the cost of violating our own 'contract' with the narrator–historian, we might ask—where does the peasant stand in this contract involving the 'authentic history' of 'Bengal peasant life'? We might borrow Shibaji Bandopadhyay's question—asked in a somewhat different context—and wonder, 'The Permanent Settlement was constructed upon a contract between the British administrators and the landlords, a not-contract between the landlords and the peasants—are we to assume the same [in this case]...?' (138)

Such questions are dangerous.

Chapter Two.

Present Imperfect

The twentieth century has not found ways of entering this godforsaken country, these deserted lands and empty forests, free from human civilization—one wonders if the nineteenth century has, either. These places are still enshrouded in the mysterious darkness of the past ages—anything can happen here.

– Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, *Aranyak.*[1]

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

– L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*[2]

A Foreign Country

'Travel to the interior villages of Bengal,' wrote Srikrishna Das in his *Sabhyatar Itihash I* (*The History of Civilization*), 'and you will see that the adim kal is present again.' (Banerjee 67) 'Adim kal' is 'ancient times'—or, more appropriately, '*primordial* times,' qualitatively different in nineteenth century jargon from the *prachin* past 'reclaimed' in the emerging 'Indian historiography of India.' It is 'the underside of history' (55), a fruitless temporality without progress, incapable of 'causing civilization by its own internal logic.' (55) The 'interiority' of the villages in question serves as an indication of their distance from the hub of modernity, the colonial city; from modernity itself, modernity being that exalted stage of 'progress' one must move towards on a linear route. Lal Behari Dey, in his account of his first journey to Calcutta from his native Talpur, thus offers a vivid description of the remoteness—the 'interiority'—of the village, the absence of 'zemindari *dak*' and 'rail-roads' (Dey 1969, 458)—in other words, modern modes of communication—and the dependence on the sole messenger, the *Kasid*, whose task was to ferry letters, money and articles of household consumption, 'especially in the shape of

luxuries, which could not be procured either at Talpur or in the neighbouring villages, such as cocoa-nuts, betel-nuts, oranges, sweet-plums, dates, cardamums, and the like' (459) over 'thirty miles of water and forty miles of land' (459). The route itself was perilous, 'as the river was in those days infested with pirates' (460) and the roads with 'robbers, and clubmen' (460)—tangible reminders of the difference between Calcutta and Talpur. The young Lal Behari's own journey began with the family-priest and the astrologer's benediction, with superstitions about 'weeping at such a time' (462) and 'looking behind' (463) at the start of a journey, with incomprehensible prayers chanted by the priest and female relatives and neighbours, and ended—after four days of walking and a day aboard a boat—at 'Jagannath's Ghat, close to the Mint' (465), to his father's residence in a 'monster building' owned by the Maharaja of Burdwan, inhabited, at that time, 'by at least five hundred traders and merchants, who had come from all parts of India, from Behar, from Oudh, from the North Western Provinces, from Rajpootana and from Punjaub,' (465) the cosmopolitanism of the modern city a sharp contrast with the superstitious, feminine domain that is the village, where omens and the family-priest's words still hold greater sway than the allure of the Mint, a living symbol of British economic might in India. The past, one might say, is another country, and it is this distance that allows the paradoxical presence of the *adim* past *in* the present.

This conflation of the spatial with the temporal would be a characteristic aspect of nineteenth century Bengali thought, with the proliferation and acceptance of the 'Western navigational calendar which fixed time zones according to longitudes and facilitated cartography and travel across the world' (Banerjee 64) as a 'practical' mode of time-reckoning—that is to say, with the proliferation and self-conscious acceptance of 'the spatial intent of time.' (64) Time-reckoning in early India, as we have already discussed, did not preclude chronology or 'calendar time' (Riceour 105), but co-existed with other forms of time-reckoning; the proliferation of the Western calendar and the modern clock in British India followed the administrative imperative for a unified system of time-reckoning across the entire territory. The conflation of spatial and temporal allowed the educated middle classes to interpret difference as *distance*, and to conceive of progress in terms of location: every mile away from the colonial city a step away from civilization, into the 'backward' villages of rural Bengal and further away, into the untamed forests and hills, the domain of the incorrigibly 'primitive' 'tribals.' *Bengal Peasant Life* takes its

readers to one such village, Kánchanpur, 'about six miles to the north-east of the town of Vardhamána, or Burdwán.' (Dey 1984, 5)

The narrator's roving eye maps the terrain of the fictional Kánchanpur with the meticulousness of a landscape painter or the 'visualism' (Fabian 106) of the anthropologist: the main street cutting through the village, the 'mud cottages thatched with the straw of paddy' (Dey 1984, 11), the two Siva temples and half-a-dozen ships selling 'rice, salt, mustard, oil, tobacco, and other necessities of Bengali life' (12), the 'picturesque tanks' (12) and the 'lofty embankments' (13), the magnificent *palása* trees at the southern section of the village, the giant *Vakula* tree and the banyan tree. Everything is categorized and classified—trees come with their scientific names; an entire chapter is devoted to paddy and its cultivation; Bengali ghosts get their own (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) catalog, as do the 'three' kinds of friends that a Bengali peasant boy is likely to have—with an almost scientific precision and a remarkable attention to detail. There is similar exactitude in the delineation of the habits and customs of the natives of Kánchanpur as the author offers 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 7) of an exorcism or a *sati*, a village women's 'parliament' or a day in a *páthsala*; one can almost visualize a rural establishment not unlike Hunter's rural Bengal, wherein the 'pulse' of life did not 'move a single beat faster for all the calamities and panic of the outside world.' (8)

The predominance of visual description—in vogue in the eighteenth and nineteenth century realist novel, which, in an 'incessant need to authenticate [the] "real"' (Barthes 146) sought develop newer, more complex and more appropriate, more *perfect* techniques of representation of reality as it really was—is of particular note. Visualization renders the object of knowledge concrete and *distinct*, translates it into an entity separate and 'distant from the knower' (Fabian 121): the Kánchanpur in the pages of *Bengal Peasant Life* is far away, physically and temporally, from the modern city of the reader where time moves too quickly; the peasant inhabitant of Kánchanpur, with his 'non-modern' beliefs and practices, his mode of life, attuned to the demands of cultivation and the seasonal variations of nature, is by no means a 'contemporary' of the upstart 'Calcutta cockney' (Dey 1984, 17–18) and the 'gentle reader' alike (let alone that of the 'English' reader). The visual, furthermore, as a privileged mode of knowing in empiricist and positivist theories of knowledge (Fabian 120), bolsters the narrator's claim to history and truth-telling, sets him up as a dispenser of authenticity, justifying the ways of the

peasant to his readers who are—having chosen to read beyond the first, prefatory chapter, accepting all his terms and conditions—now contract-bound to accept his claim to truth.

Authentic

'Authenticity' in *Bengal Peasant Life*, however, is derived not only from the narration of a true history of the Bengali peasant, but also because of the very nature of *subject* of narration: it is an 'authentic' history because the Bengali peasant and the world he inhabits is 'authentic,' *pure*, untouched by colonial modernity, unlike the colonial city and its citizens, the crass Calcutta 'cockney' and his more sophisticated counterpart, the 'gentle reader' of the novel. It is important to note at this point that the educated middle class or the *bhadralok*, 'far from being a purely metropolitan phenomenon cut off from the countryside' (Sarkar 1997, 170), had a rather complicated relationship with rural Bengal. Calcutta, as the headquarters of the British government in India, and the hub of British commercial activity in India the nineteenth century, commanded unparalleled significance in the colonial economy (a position it would gradually lose to newer hubs of commercial activity like Bombay and Ahmedabad, beginning with their rise to predominance in cotton textiles in the first decade of the twentieth century). The government and mercantile offices located in Calcutta employed a significant bulk of the educated middle class; the colonial educational institutions based in Calcutta provided 'English education', which had, at that time, become essential to gain a foothold into the *bhadra* professions. The decline of once-thriving urban centres like Krishnagar, Nabadwip and Murshidabad and the burgeoning of printing presses added to Calcutta's prominence as a cultural hub in nineteenth century Bengal. A significant section of the Calcutta-based middle class were in fact first-generation immigrants to the city who retained ties with their ancestral villages through family members—parents; extended family; often, wives and children—who continued to stay there, through annual trips during Durga Puja or through rentier income. The bustling colonial city moved in its own rhythm: the days were bound by clocks and calendars, and dictated by the demands of *chakri* and the whims of employers, leaving one exposed, among other things, to racist humiliation. Nineteenth century narratives of the city speak of narrow alleys and confined spaces—the single,

rented room or the all-male *messbari*, the often-degrading experience of putting up with one's distant, well-off relatives or acquaintances hailing from the same village; the busy streets and the relentless, unfamiliar sounds, 'the [horse-drawn cart's] noise, the swish-swish of the driver's whip, the earth-shaking horns of the large Wellers and Normandys.' (Singha 11–12) Lal Behari Dey's recollections speak of mosquitoes and illnesses, another common complaint,

> I had been told before I left my native village that Calcutta was a place of sickness and of mosquitoes. For the mosquitoes I did not much care as I slept under curtains; but to sickness I did succumb. I had scarcely been a month in Calcutta when I had a violent attack of diarrhoea, from which I had hardly recovered when I was laid prostrate by a severe form of fever. (Dey 1969, 30)

The series of bans and attempts at curbing traditional public activities by the city authorities—disallowing *rath yatra*s in certain major thoroughfares, the ban on public *sang* performances during the Charak festivities in 1874 on the ground of 'obscenity', the ban on urinating in public places, and so on—were alternately met with suspicion and displeasure as 'Calcutta registered itself as a city which forced the indigenous urban population into recasting their ingrained bodily disposition and public activities according to strange, uncustomary norms imposed by the city's rulers' (Sarkar 2001, 29: Note 14), at times with the backing of the 'reforming' city elite. Calcutta, in nineteenth century imagination, thus, appears at once a city of opportunities and a den of thugs, a city of wonders and of sin and perversion; Hutom wrote,

> *Ajob shahar Kolketa* |
> *Ranri bari juri-gaari michhe kothar ki keta* |
> *Hetha ghute pore gobar hashe bolhari aikyata;*
> *Joto bak biral-e brahmagyaani, badmaishir phaand paata* | *(Singha 33)*
>
> *(Strange city this, Calcutta.*
> *Whores, mansions, carriages, lies, all of so many fashions.*
> *Here people laugh at others' misfortunes, such is their unity;*

Frauds claim great knowledge and evil traps abound.)

'*Tafat thakai shaar katha*,' the song concluded: 'it is best to maintain a distance.' (Singha 33) Albeit satirical, Hutom's song reflects middle-class anxieties surrounding the 'strange city,' Calcutta, with its 'whores', 'mansions', 'carriages' and 'lies', 'evil traps' everywhere, waiting to ensnare the unassuming citizen. Calcutta, ultimately, was a city 'where the bhadralok did not yet feel at home, an experience embodied in the practice of the Bengali gentleman, till well into the twentieth century, calling his city residence *basha*'—with its connotation of migration and impermanence—'reserving the more intimate term *bari* for the ancestral village home.' (Sarkar 1997, 176–177)

The 'changeless' Bengali village served as a counterpoint to this 'strange city' and its inexplicable concoction of the wonderful and the terrible; as Rajnarayan Basu, in what Sumit Sarkar calls a moment of 'rural retrospect' (201)[3], lamented in *Sekal-ar-Ekal*, 'selfishness' had overwhelmed the new 'English educated' *bhadralok* and their wives. One might find still find 'mutual sympathy' and respect for age-old customs and norms of behaviour, but only in the 'far-off' villages, that remained untouched by the corrupting influence of European civilization. In texts like Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay's *Kalikata Kamalalay* (*Calcutta, the Abode of Kamala*; 1823), the villager appeared as the 'alter ego' (Guha 2008, 334) of the jaded city-dweller, raising uncertainties about the transgressions of existence in the modern city,

> The visitor interrogates his host closely on some matters of urgent concern. Is it true, he asks, that the residents of this city go out to work after an early meal and don't come back home until fairly late at night, and that too simply to eat and sleep in before leaving for work first thing next morning? Isn't it a fact that most of them have no use any more for the traditional Hindu codes of conduct, including those concerning morning and evening worship, and that even things like the funerary ceremonies (*shraddha*) required to end the state of ritual pollution caused by a death in the family have all been abandoned? How is it, he wonders, echoing rumours circulating in the outback, that they all dress like foreigners in Calcutta, eat meals prepared for them by Muslim cooks, drink brandy on ritual occasions, ignore shastric literature published in Bangla, and read nothing other than what is available in English and Persian? (332)

The city-dweller, in his turn, assuages the visitor's worries, but the anxieties remain pertinent, always under the bright surface of optimism about modernity and development, threatening to overwhelm order, much like in the apocalyptic Kaliyuga narratives, and thus the unnamed rural women in *Bengal Peasant Life* observe, while discussing husbands,

> A man may load his wife's person with ornaments, and yet may not love her. I have heard many rich people of Calcutta are of this sort. Their wives are adorned in every limb, and have jewels the very names of which I never heard; and yet those rich Bábus seldom sleep at night at home. They sleep at Máchhuá Bázár. But your husband is very good; after candlelight he never goes out of doors; he is very gentle; he never beats you, nor rebukes you. (Dey 1984, 179)

The 'changeless' rural society, constant in its 'authenticity,' was a relief from the ever-changing city, its 'backwardness', paradoxically, the principal source of its attraction. Sumit Sarkar notes this strand of overwhelming longing for the rural in the parables of Sri Ramakrishna,

> It is remarkable how often the everyday toil of peasants, artisans and women is made to convey messages with a positive content—unlike, we shall see, most of Ramakrishna's images drawn from city life. The peasant, sticking to his ancestral land even if crops have failed in a year of drought, working carefully and hard to bring just the right amount of water to his field from a distance, is often made to epitomise the perseverance needed for true bhakti. The housewife who prepares fish in various ways to suit the distinct palates of her many children becomes the symbol of multiplicity of paths to the divine. The bhakta can remain in the world but not be lost in its temptations, like village women minding their babies, talking to customers while they work at the *dheki* (husking machine), careful that their hands do not get injured. Evident in such parables is a love and delight in the sensuous details of rural workaday life, where individual labour can be seen to produce immediate, palpable results: land yielding crops, women turning fish into many dishes, grain being husked into rice. City life—and more particularly the life of the intellectual and the clerk—must have appeared singularly bereft of this feel of sensuous productivity, to Ramakrishna as well as to his audience.

> Ramakrishna's parables of village life do occasionally mention instances of zamindari oppression—but always as things which have to be accepted, facts of life no different from droughts or other natural calamities. Rural hierarchy is accepted and even idealized at times in the figure of the baramanush patron. (296–299)

Ramakrishna's appeal to the urban middle classes, Sarkar argues, lay—among other things—in his 'rustic' dismissal of the city and its impositions, *chakri*, 'His earthy parables seemed to bring back a rural world from which the city bhadralok now sometimes felt they had unwisely uprooted themselves.' (301) A similar vein of nostalgia and desire runs through *Bengal Peasant Life* as the narrator meticulously, *lovingly* describes the terrain of Kánchanpur and the activities of its inhabitants, with details seamlessly woven in from Lal Behari Dey's own life and childhood; indeed, much of the novel's power lies in the seductive manner in which the narrative lingers over the intricacies of life of rural Bengal, be it in the description of a traditional Bengali wedding and its many, distinctively rural rituals (*Malati's Marriage*), or the tongue-in-cheek classification of Bengali ghosts and the exorcism of Áduri (*The Village Ghost*) that manages, at the same time, to shine with a sense of good-natured affection for the quaint charm of a world where ghosts and exorcists are real. Elsewhere, in his 'recollections,' Dey writes about the performance of certain rituals in his childhood in a manner that is particularly illuminating in this aspect,

> At this distance of time I do not remember the details of the ceremony [performed on the day he attended school for the first time], but this much I recollect that I put on new clothes, that I had to repeat some words, that I had to bow down several times with my head to the ground, that the family-priest received gifts in money and clothes, that presents were sent to the *gurumahasaya* or schoolmaster of the village who was to initiate me into the mysteries of reading and writing, and that a piece of *khadi* or ochre, (the equivalent of chalk in the villages of Bengal) was put into my hand. I was thus solemnly and religiously commended to the especial favour of the goddess of learning and wisdom.
>
> In this age of rampant unbelief, all this may be deemed a silly superstition. But silly it certainly is not: and if it is somewhat superstitious, it is only the excess of an essentially good feeling. It cannot be denied that the most important epoch in the history of a child is the period when he is

> sent to school; and it is doubtless attended with the most beneficial affects both on the child and on his parents, if that period is entered upon with a sense of the importance of the occasion, and with an invocation of the divine blessing. (450–451)

That is which is 'superstitious'—of the domain of the irrational and the non-modern—is rationalized citing universal truths, 'It cannot be denied that the most important epoch in the history of a child is the period when he is sent to school.' (450) It therefore follows, *naturally*, 'doubtlessly,' (451) that it is 'most beneficial' for the child *and* his parents 'if that period is entered upon with a sense of the importance of the occasion, and with an invocation of the divine blessing.' (450) The 'superstitious' nature of the ritual is then redeemed by the fact that 'it is only the excess of an essentially good feeling,' (451) and anyone who fails to discern this 'good feeling' is one corrupted by the 'rampant unbelief' of 'this age' (451), of modern times.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee, in his preface to the collected works of Ishwar Gupta—arguably, the first 'modern' poet of Bengal—spoke of discovering an odd sense of pleasure in the works of his predecessor, despite the old-fashioned 'obscenity' the marred the same, 'At that time, *puja*s were obscene—festivals obscene; the night of *navami* of the Durga Puja a famous affair. The *sang*s of *jatra* would be entertaining only when obscene. *Panchali*s and *half-akhrai*s were written for the sake of obscenity...' (1936, 836) This pleasure was the pleasure of the 'purely Bengali,' which is like 'the mother's *prasad*'; a pleasure that is curiously defined by the fact that it belonged in the past (*shekal*), because '[p]urely Bengali poets are no longer born now—they cannot be born; *they need not be born*.' (836; emphasis mine) The 'purely' Bengali poet 'cannot' be born in these times, tainted and corrupted by colonial modernity. The nostalgia contained in the 'cannot' is countered and balanced by the emphatic 'need not', because that which is 'purely Bengali' is also by definition 'not modern,' and therefore 'backward', as testified by the unpardonable 'obscenity' of Ishwar Gupta's poetry, which was the malaise of his times. The urban *bhadralok*s' yearning for the rural was this desire for the purity of a seemingly uncomplicated past, which, by definition 'cannot' exist in the time of *now*. It was a desire tempered by the knowledge of the 'need not', because that which is authentic and belongs to the past is also not modern, is authentic *because* it is not modern, is, at once, longed for and unwanted; the seemingly changeless rural society became a palimpsest upon which multiple,

conflicting emotions played out, 'exposing difficulty and ambivalence.' (Sarkar 1997, 302) The true history of India and the Indian people, Hunter wrote, were not the '[e]loquent and elaborate narratives' 'of the British ascendency in the East,' which were but 'records of the English Government, or biographies of the English Governors of India' (6)—the true history of India was the history of the 'silent millions who bear our [the British] yoke' but 'have found no annalist' (6) of their own. 'The colonial concept of the undisturbed, Asiatic village-community,' Prathama Banerjee argues, was 'appropriated by Bengali historians, who argued that the real history of India was not the restless ephemerality of the politics and regimes, but the unperturbed community of restful villages' (61); more than that, however, the truth, the authenticity in Govinda Samanta's history, as narrated by the author-historian in *Bengal Peasant Life*, was drawn from the same source as Ishwar Gupta's poetry: the fact that it remained untainted by modernity, belonged to another time.

Change/less

In 1893, a disgruntled F.H. Barrow wrote in *The Calcutta Review*,

> For the last 20 years and more I have been constantly in and about Bengal villages, and their state has to me been nearly always suggestive of decline, compared with the past. Here and there a successful pleader, or a trader is building himself a new house, even digs a tank: but more often it is ruined buildings, and silted up tanks, and dilapidated ghâts, that meet the eye. Then there are evident signs of a withdrawal of capital from the land;—embankments, water sources, and tanks are all in disrepair. Villages are chiefly owned in coparcenary, and the sharers are generally absentees, where formerly there was either one resident proprietor, spending his money on the spot, and interesting himself in maintaining the agriculture, or a body of cultivating owners. (309)

Barrow painted a sorry picture of a population decimated by 'fever, cholera and floods', reeling from the after-effects of 'the decay of local industries, and of the indigo system,' and abandoned by their Indian landlords *and* the British government in Calcutta except when it came to the

collection of revenue and rent; quite unlike the many-splendoured Arcadia of yore described by T. B. Macauley,

> Of the provinces which had been subject to the house of Tamerlane, the wealthiest was Bengal. No part of India possessed such natural advantages both for agriculture and for commerce. The Ganges, rushing through a hundred channels to the sea, has formed a vast plain of rich mould which, even under the tropical sky, rivals the verdure of an English April. The rice-fields yield an increase such as is elsewhere unknown. Spices, sugar, vegetable oils, are produced with marvellous exuberance. The rivers afford an inexhaustible supply of fish. The desolate islands along the sea-coast, overgrown by noxious vegetation, and swarming with deer and tigers, supply the cultivated districts with abundance of salt. The great stream which fertilises the soil is, at the same time, the chief highway of Eastern commerce. On its banks, and on those of its tributary waters, are the wealthiest marts, the most splendid capitals, and the most sacred shrines of India. The tyranny of man had for ages struggled in vain against the overflowing bounty of nature. In spite of the Mussulman despot and of the Mahratta freebooter, Bengal was known through the East as the garden of Eden, as the rich kingdom. Its population multiplied exceedingly. Distant provinces were nourished from the overflowing of its granaries; and the noble ladies of London and Paris were clothed in the delicate produce of its looms. (1840)

Exaggerations notwithstanding, the sharp dissimilarities between 'the garden of Eden, the rich kingdom' of Macauley's description and Harrow's 'declining' rural Bengal, bereft of capital, speaks of a widespread shift in the economic state of rural Bengal—and Bengal at large—a shift that took place in the course of a little over a hundred years. Indeed, the economic history of Bengal post-1757 is a history of rapid, constant change and the inevitable tension that accompanies colonisation and the 'confrontation of two alien systems of political economy' (Palit 1). At the heart of this tension lay the question of land revenue, which would become the principle source of income for the British government in India[4] and go on to fund further efforts of expansion of the Empire—wars, as well as the Company's trading activities in China, for instance; in the rather self-satisfied words of an anonymous author writing in *The Bengal Magazine* in 1851,

> Whatever may be the moral character of the wars in which we have been engaged during the last ten years, and whatever the political value of the territories which have thereby been added to our Indian empire, we have at least this satisfactory conclusion, that England has been burdened with no portion of the expense. It has been met, partly from the resources of the country itself, and partly from loans borrowed on the security of Indian income.

It is noteworthy that the so-called 'Indian Debt', amounting to £ 51,000,000 in 1857, rose to £ 97,000,000 in 1862 and £ 200,000,000 in 1901. (Dutt xii) The Company's sources of income from India—and Bengal—were not, of course, limited to land revenue alone, but it did make up a significant bulk of it. As the historian R.C. Dutt put it, 'It is not an exaggeration to state that Bengal, with its Permanent Settlement, yielding a steady and unvarying income from the soil, enabled the British nation to build up their Indian Empire.' (406) The British East India Company's purchases in India, termed 'Investment', amounted approximately to about 33,00,000 rupees before 1757. (Sinha 219) The Company, like other European traders in Bengal, imported bullion from abroad for trade purposes since '[for] more than two centuries the Europeans had found that the trade with Bengal whether carried on by companies or by the individual free traders or by illicit means had always been so much in favour of Bengal that the balance had to be supplied in cash.' (12) Post-Plassey, however, things changed abruptly as the 'supplies were at last found in Bengal "by means independent of commerce"'. (12) Private trade among the Company servants and their native *gomostas* took the shape of free-for-all, 'get rich quick' schemes as they claimed themselves exempt from duties in the course of inland trade and, furthermore, engaged in rampant abuse of Company permits (*dastuks*) and flouting of existing trade norms by trading in 'salt, betelnut and tobacco which were hitherto prohibited to all Europeans.' (68) Much of this wealth was remitted to England through Dutch and French channels, as well as in the form of diamonds. The Directors of the East India Company, aware of the rapid economic decline of Bengal in the wake of this drain of wealth, sought to rein in the so-called 'privileged inland trade' of the servants of the Company, but it 'lingered on till about 1771' (74) nonetheless, causing incredible damage to the local economy in the process. The trade of Indian merchants (other than that of the *gomostas*), in the meantime, had been severely hampered. In the words of Nawab Mir Qasim, who wrote in an angry letter,

> In every pargana, every village and every factory they [the *gomostas* of the British private traders] buy and sell salt, betelnut, ghee, rice, straw, bamboos, fish, gunnies, ginger, sugar, tobacco, opium and many other things. They forcibly take away the goods and commodities of the ryots and merchants for a fourth part of their value... they oblige the ryots to give five rupees for goods which are worth but one rupee... near four five hundred new factories have been established... they expose by government to scorn and are the greatest detriment to me. (cited in Sinha 69)

At the same time, land revenue collected by the East India Company, after having been granted Dewani rights, continued to rise, to amounts thrice of what was collected by Maharaja Nand Kumar, the then Dewan, in 1764–65 and twice of what was collected by Mahomed Reza Khan in 1765–66 (Dutt 92–93), even in the face of events that devastated the Bengali countryside—namely, the famines of 1770 and 1785, which reduced the population of Bengal by a third and laid waste to populous, thriving human settlements. 'A statement of the annual revenue of the East India Company in Bengal, under the signature of William Wright, Auditor of India Accounts, shows that in 1785–86 the surplus amounted to Rs. 92,35,442, in 1786–87 Rs. 1,47,63,276 and in 1787–88 Rs. 2,06,55,817.' (Sinha 220) In 1792–93, at the time of the Permanent Settlement, the surplus amounted to Rs. 18, 580, 00. (Sinha 221) In the scathing words of R.C. Dutt, 'The last Mahomedan ruler of Bengal, in the last year of his administration (1764) realised a land revenue of £ 817,553; within thirty years the British rulers realised a land revenue of £ 2,680,000 in the same province,' (ix) at the cost of 'the exhaustion of the wealth, the produce, the food of the people.' (87) The apparently 'changeless' rural Bengal of Hunter, unperturbed by the 'calamities and panic of the outside world,' (8) therefore, did in fact go through its own share of 'calamities and panic' following the Battle of Plassey; it would not, perhaps, be too far-fetched to claim that the Bengali peasant, given an option, *would* have preferred *less* change in his rural domain. The categorical framing of 'Bengal peasant life' as an embodiment of backwardness, thus, had behind it a history of 'material constitution' (Banerjee 17) of *economic backwardness* of the peasant in rural Bengal through systematic economic drain post-1757, a process in which the educated middle classes of Bengal played an active role.

The 'Improving' Landlord (New and Improved)

The Permanent Settlement in 1793 was 'a serious attempt' on the part of the Government 'to transform a semi-feudal social system into a "money economy" by resuming the rent-free service tenures which sustained it,' (Palit 1) 'an attempt at providing an economic and political framework for creation of land market.' (2) The Government had settled upon a 'permanent' settlement of revenue rates in Bengal after extensive consideration; as Bernard Cohn reminds us,

> Starting in the 1770s in Bengal, the British began to investigate, through what they called 'enquiries,' a list of specific questions to which they sought answers about how revenue was assessed and collected. Out of this grew the most extensive and continuous administrative activity of the British, which they termed the land-settlement process. Entailed in this enterprise was the collection of 'customs and local histories' which in the British discourse related to land tenure. The process culminated in the production of settlement reports, which were produced on a district-by-district basis. (5–6)

Granting rights to the existing landlords was considered the simplest means of securing collection of revenue, without bringing about large-scale social disturbance. It was, furthermore, a means of an alien government trying to ascertain governance in a territory they still had little control over, despite overall political control; '[the] English notion of landlordism lent its weight to the idea of perpetual limitation of the estate demand'—'[the] purpose was to leave a surplus as capital for the 'improving landlord,' (9) who, apart from collecting rent and discharging revenue, would provide for the general 'improvement' of land and produce in rural Bengal. The landlords, thereafter, were granted further rights as the Regulation 7 of 1799 and Regulation 5 of 1812 (the infamous *Pancham* and *Haptam* laws, in local parlance) gave them power of distraint over ryots and Regulation 8 of 1819 allowed them to lease out estates in times of crisis, recognising sub-leaseholders in the shape of Patnidars, Durpatnidars and Sehpatnidars, even as the rights of the tenants themselves were left undefined and unprotected until Act X of 1859 and Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. Meanwhile, government expenditure in works of public utility rural Bengal would fall from Rs. 4,70,000 in 1885 to Rs. 2,64,000 in 1891. (Barrow 309)

Not all existing landlords welcomed the Permanent Settlement—many found the assessment too harsh; many others lost their estate to the rigorous Sale Law as they failed to keep up with the new revenue system even as new landlords took their place and others, like the Maharaja of Burdwan, solidified their estate by transferring 'almost the whole of his zamindari to his lawyers and amlahs and re-purchased it benami,' (Palit 10) thereby also managing to earn a lower assessment. The Settlement 'brought about a new notion of property and established the right of an individual over land' (Bandopadhyay 2003, 56) in Bengal; it was even argued that the 'magic touch of property' would lead to a reawakening in the economy of Bengal (Sen 2003, 38). It created a class of 'professional rent-receivers',

> Their raison d'etre was to maximise rent. They thought of their estates in terms of rents and not men and territory. Their entrepreneurship lay in land-speculation. They placed their huge unearned income in what had become the safest and most remunerative form of investment. They controlled the land market and purchased all sorts of holdings from the estate to the jote.
>
> ...
>
> Apart from landholding, these landlords indulged in exclusive money- and paddy-lending. The landlords, both big and small, were in most cases local mahajans or money-lenders. (Palit 19–20)

The new generation of landlords, furthermore, were educated and organised, aggressively promoting their interests through their own journals and associations—the Landholders' Society, and its successor, the British Indian Association—even as they retained control over the countryside through old-fashioned means like maintaining *lathials*. Even the presence of the newly-introduced British system of justice and police failed to overcome *lathi raj* in rural Bengal, which was frequently used by the landlords to resolve land disputes through coercive means.

The 'improving landlord,' however, proved to be something of a chimera. He showed up every now and then in reports about newly-dug wells or zamindar-funded primary schools or freshly-cleared forestlands, made ready for cultivation, and more frequently in narratives about the 'good zamindar' and the 'bad zamindar', wherein the 'good zamindar' appeared as a

counterpoint to the ubiquitous 'bad zamindar,' was one who looked after his tenantry with a paternalistic goodwill; the zamindar duo of Nava Krishna Banerjea of Durganagar—an alumnus of the Hindu College, a member of the British Indian Association who proclaimed, on his 'accession to the *gadi*' that 'there was to be thenceforth an end of all injustice and oppression' (Dey 1984, 318)—and Jayachand Ráya Chaudhuri of Kánchanpur—'an ignorant man' 'unacquainted' with Sanskrit and 'not having had the benefit of English education' who belonged to that 'class of zamindárs who were the greatest curses to their country' (260)—are a classic instance of this 'good' zamindar/'bad' zamindar binary in nineteenth century narratives. The Permanent Settlement 'allowed a profit of 10% on the collection for the agency but as it contained rebates for abolition of sayer or toll duties levied by landlords and maintenance of embankments etc., the profit came to 20% in reality.' (Palit 152) The landlords were asked 'not to violate the rights of hereditary ryots,' to 'conform to the paragana rate or the average rate of a pargana having several villages' for the rent of other classes of ryots, to 'exchange kobuliyats and pattas with their ryots' to establish their rights, to refrain from collecting *abwab*s or surcharges—'provisions that were rendered virtually nugatory' by the abolition of the offices of Patwaris and Qanungos, the only depositories of village records in the mofussil and officered by men, thoroughly conversant with local customs,' (Palit 152) a development also lamented by Wilson in *The History of British India*, '...the Kanungo had been abolished in the lower provinces [of Bengal], shortly after the conclusion of the perpetual settlement; and in Bengal, his services were missed as soon as inquiry was directed to those particulars on which alone equitable assessments could be formed.' (537) The Permanent Settlement was a contract between the landlords and the Government, and the peasant, though implicated in the contract, was not party to it; '[the] law was directed to the landlords only, with requests to obey a code of conduct towards peasants,' (Palit 152) 'requests' that were not necessarily considered important or worth upholding by the professional rent-receiving class, who did not hesitate to levy *abwab*s 'of a protean variety' (Palit 155) or 'override the rights of khudkasht ryots of long-standing' by '[ousting] them outright and [making] a fresh rent-roll with them or newcomers' (Palit 171). The reports of collectors from the districts confirmed this general picture; for instance, F.H. Burnett, the acting collector of Rajshahi, wrote in 1811,

> [the] zamindar pretends to consider his ryot a tenant-at-will, tenders a pottah at an exorbitant rate; the ryot who considers himself a species of Mukarraridars conceives that he is entitled to hold his lands at a fixed rent and therefore refuses the pottah; the [zamindar] distrains and the ryot is ruined. (Palit 153)

The practice of blatant violation of the 'requests' that came as a part of the administration–landlord contract was even more severe in the level of petty landlords such as the jotedars, whose immediate presence and influence in the rural scene made them even greater threats to the ryot.

There were further impediments to the being of the 'improving landlord,' in the shape of Hindu inheritance laws and subinfeudation. Ashok Sen writes,

> Distribution through inheritance and the incredible attraction of agricultural land for the middle classes engaged in various professions led to the creation of innumerable small landlords [in nineteenth century Bengal]. As the statistics provided by the Board of Revenue in the final decade of the nineteenth century tell us, almost 99 per cent zamindaris collected less than rupees five thousand yearly revenue. Almost 85 per cent zamindaris collected less than rupees one hundred yearly revenue. While the percentage of zamindaris that collected more than rupees five thousand revenue was close to 1 per cent, these zamindaris held more than 50 per cent of agricultural land in Bengal. The 1874–75 Bengal Administration Report therefore observed that thousands of small landlords could not but depend on *chakri* or other professions for their sustenance as their land earned them very little rent. Many lawyers, barristers, bureaucrats, clerks, teachers, authors and businessmen at that time owned at least a little bit of agricultural land. On the other, the 10 March, 1884 issue of the weekly *Anandabazar Patrika* informs us that the middle classes in the mofussils could not do without rentier income. These classes were the ones producing school students, as well as employees of the court and lawyers, clerks, employees of the postal department and the police. (2003, 43–44)

The 'magic touch of property' served to corner most of Bengal's agricultural income in favour of the 'non-productive classes' but did little to 'improve' the state of the Bengali peasant; on most occasions, the *bhadralok* landlord's dependence on rent outweighed his capacity to contribute in the 'improvement' of the state of the agricultural land or its produce, a task that would be quite

beyond most ryots except the large jotedars, who themselves indulged in little actual cultivation, preferring to indulge in money-lending and trading in agricultural produce instead. Multiple levels of *patnis* further ensured the segmentation of the zamindaris, with 'every patnidar fulfilling his responsibility by paying his share of rent to the one above him' (Bandopadhyay 2003, 58) while the 'unfortunate peasant', the one in actual charge of the land and cultivation, remained in the bottom.

It is of note that some time in the middle of the eighteenth century, production of crops such as sugarcane, the famous Bengal cotton and silk, began to disappear; by the end of the nineteenth century, most cultivators were dependent on cultivation for sheer sustenance, surplus or the accumulation of capital being a distant dream. In the words of Raja Rammohan Roy,

> Q. 43. Have the cultivators any means of accumulating capital under the present system?
>
> A: Certainly not. Very often, when grain is abundant, and therefore cheap, they are obliged... to sell their whole produce to satisfy the demands of their landlords and to subsist themselves by their own labour. In scarce and dear years, they may be able to retain some portion of the crop to form a part of their subsistence but by no means enough for the whole. (cited in Palit 166)

The subsequent rise in production of cash crops such as tea, jute and indigo in Bengal did very little to improve matters for the cultivators.

Planters and Landlords

Indigo had been picked up as a major cash crop for the East India Company's investments in India in the eighteenth century; at the turn of the nineteenth century, the indigo plantation system had become a fairly established one in India, with the rising prices of indigo inviting greater attention of the private traders as well as the Government. Chittabrata Palit observes,

> After the degeneration of the hoped-for 'improving' landlords into mere rent-receivers, the Government pinned their hope on these capitalist farmers, for rural entrepreneurship. The demands of remittance and Free Trade put a premium on the growth of cash crops. The existing mode of production under the withering touch of the landlords, appeared incapable of delivering the goods. The planters were looked upon as new economic messiahs. (4)

Most of these 'rural entrepreneurs', however, came to India with very little capital of their own, and since *nij* cultivation often proved very expensive, especially in periods of slump in indigo prices, the planter preferred to convince—very often, manipulate or coerce—settled ryots into taking advances and cultivating the crop for them at a minimal cost, a method that was to have severe repercussions on agriculture in Bengal in the course of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Regulation V of 1830 provided the planters with the power of distraint of ryots, thereby '[purging the planters] of the stigma of being interlopers' and 'admitted' them to 'official grace' (Palit 100). Regulation IV of 1837 opened doors for European settlers to own property outside the site of the factory, with the eloquent backing of Bentinck and Metcalfe who, furthermore, pointed out the 'political utility' of the planters 'as sentinels of a precarious empire in the interior.' (Palit 99)

The influx of European planters, and the competition they posed to the Indian landlords in the interior as well as their attempts to bribe the ryots into cultivating indigo, causing losses to the zamindar, was bitterly complained against by many landlords. The aggressive, at times violent means taken up by the European planters to curb competition posed by Indian enterprises in indigo was also another source of conflict between the European planters and Indian landlords; '[in] Nadia alone, 140 native planters were recorded by the Resident of Kumarkhally in 1824', which 'brought in its trail patent conflicts between native landlord–planters and European planters.' (Palit 102) Not all landlords, however, responded negatively to the influx of European indigo planters in Bengal; the *Sambad Kaumudi* wrote in 1831,

> At the time when the petition against colonization was signed, to whatever zamindar's house we could go, the chief topic of conversation was the good or evil to be expected from the English setting in this country and engaging in agriculture. Some said that evil was certainly to be

> anticipated from it. 'Sir' said they, 'what injustice the indigo planters are doing'... The zamindars replied: 'We do not anticipate any evil whatever from their coming. On the contrary, the landlords will receive more rent, more labourers will be required and they will receive higher wages... (cited in Palit 138)

The most influential of the landlords, led by names such as Rammohan Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore, advocated the planters' cause heartily; an article in *The Bengal Magazine*, titled *Indigo Planters and Missionaries*, quotes Raja Rammohan Roy's speech in the Town Hall meeting of 15 December, 1829, in support of Free Trade and Colonisation,

> ... As to the Indigo Planters, I beg to observe that I have travelled through several districts in Bengal and Behar, and I found the natives residing in the neighbourhood of indigo-plantations evidently better clothed and better conditioned than those who lived at a distance from such stations. There may be some partial injury done by the Indigo Planters, but on the whole, they have performed more good to the generality of the natives of this country than any other class of Europeans whether in or out of service. (139)

This early collusion of the planters and the Indian landlords extended to the indigo-planting—several indigo concerns, including ones owned by Prosannakumar Tagore, were run on a basis of partnership—as well as in their efforts to subdue insubordinate ryots; '[in] the Faridpur district the local zamindar Gopimohan Dutt jointly led an expedition with Dunlop of Panch Chur factory with their combined force of lathials numbering 700/800 men, in an effort to oust the Ferazees from the chur and crush their over-mighty leader, Doodoo Meah,' (Palit 113) who was then falsely implicated for rioting in a case that was fabricated by the zamindar and the planter. Indeed, the planters could not have infiltrated into the interiors of rural Bengal to the extent that they had achieved without the collaboration of the landlords. This phase of collaboration between the landlords and the planters ended only after their political fallout over the so-called Black Acts controversy, which was then followed by further clashes.

The landlords had been strongly opposed to Act XII of 1841 and Act I of 1845 'which secured [the planters'] undertenures considerably and trenched upon landlord rights' (Palit 120) and had watched the planters' growing influence in rural Bengal with concern. Post-1857, the planters grew further in influence as they were honoured by the British government for their support of the administration during the Revolt—much to the landlords' chagrin, six planters in Murshidabad and Nadia were made Honorary Magistrates; '[the] vanity of the rural elite was pricked beyond measure.' (Palit 135) This followed a period of bitter, intense debate in the pro-landlord and pro-planter newspapers and magazines, a debate that grew worse with the passing of the Act X of 1859 that sought to secure tenancy rights to a certain extent. Meanwhile, the slump in indigo trade in the 1850s and the simultaneous rise in grain prices led to serious altercations between the planters and the landlords; indigo cultivation frequently degenerated into cultivation by means of coercion, even as the landlords sought to encourage the already-disgruntled ryots to reject advances and cultivate rice, which would be more profitable for the landlord as well, unlike indigo. It is important not to downplay the agency of the discontented ryots themselves in the Indigo Revolt of 1860–61, who had suffered through forcible appropriation of their lands for indigo cultivation at great personal costs; it is equally important to note that the zamindari instigation and 'support' of the Revolt was not merely out of sincere altruism or concern for the losses incurred by the ryots but also out of a need to 'improve' their own position of influence in rural Bengal and to convince the administration to appoint 'a commission of enquiry to find out the truth of the bankruptcy of European management of indigo trade in Bengal', which, they believed, would help them to 'persuade the Government to withdraw its patronage from the planters and corner them.' (Palit 145)

The Good Landlord

The figures of the 'good' zamindar and the 'bad' zamindar, considered in this light, acquire a slightly different significance. As the dispenser of the 'authentic history' of Bengali peasant life, the narrator of *Bengal Peasant Life* is contract-bound to speak not only of the kind of 'authentic' 'backwardness' that is at once longed for and unwanted but also of the material constitution of

'backwardness' in rural Bengal. And therefore, as the narrative progresses, its tone grows considerably darker as one catastrophe after the other befalls the rural idyll—the 'bad' zamindar, Jayachand Ráya Chaudhuri, demands *máthot* from an already indebted Govinda, who earns the zamindar's wrath by failing to pay the surcharge; the 'indignant' meetings of the peasants fail to protect Govinda, whose house is set on fire by the zamindar's *láthials*; Govinda sinks further into the *mahajan*'s debt-trap; Kálamanik falls prey to the *láthials* for daring to stand up to the zamindar. Meanwhile, Mádhava, Govinda's brother-in-law, is forced to accept the indigo planter Murray's advance, and even the 'Bengali heroism' of the peasants of Durgánagar and the active support of the 'good' zamindar, Nava Krishna Banerjea, fails to save Mádhava from meeting an untimely death. An epidemic and a famine mean further debt for Govinda, and loss of land, which ultimately leads him to the city and into the life of a daily-wage labourer—again provided for by another 'good' zamindar, Máharáját Mahtáp Chánd Bahádur, 'the greatest landholder in Bengal' (Dey 1984, 375)—wherein he dies a lonely, miserable death and is finally 'delivered from all his troubles' (375).

Meenakshi Mukherjee is of the opinion that it is 'these later chapters' that 'lift the novel above its documentary status' (2000, 58), but herein we argue that these later, darker chapters further circumscribe *Bengal Peasant Life* in its 'documentary-ness', evident in the shift in title from *Govinda Samanta* to *Bengal Peasant Life*, from the story of a individual Bengali peasant to one that is an 'authentic history' of the Bengali peasantry and their life. It is this act that necessitates the presence of the 'good' zamindar and the 'bad' zamindar in the narrative. The narrator, after the introduction of the 'bad' zamindar, reminds his readers,

> I beg the reader not to run away with the idea that all zamindárs of Bengal are like Jayachand Ráya Chaudhuri, of Kánchanpur. Amongst landholders, as amongst every class of men, there are black sheep as well as white. Before this story is wound up I hope to present to the reader the picture of a just, humane, and philanthropic zamindár—the father of his people; but the lines of our hero had fallen on unpleasant places, and it was his fate—so Govinda expressed himself—to have his homestead in the zámindari of a man who was a Bengal tiger in human shape. (Dey 1984, 262)

There is a clear distinction drawn here, almost a reassurance—not 'all' landlords are like the 'bad' zamindar—which is then rationalized with the statement of a 'scientific', 'universal' truth, 'Amongst landholders, as amongst every class of men, there are black sheep as well as white,' (262) and it is Govinda's 'fate', as the protagonist himself states, that has placed him in the wrong zamindar's domain,

> *Govinda.* "The fact is, though the *Kompáni Báhádur* is just and merciful, it has made laws on the supposition that the jamidárs have common honesty and humanity. The *Kompáni Báhádur* never dreamt the jamidárs would be so wicked."
>
> *Rasamaya.* "But you don't mean to say that all jamidárs are wicked. The jámidar of my maternal uncle in Zilla Hugli is said to be a very good man. My uncle says that that jamidár is the father of his ráiyats. He not only does not exact illegal cesses, but in a season of drought, or of inundation, he exempts the ráiyats from paying rent."
>
> *Nanda.* "I daresay there are a few jámidars of that sort. But fifteen annas of them are tyrants...." (270)

Reassurance, straight from the mouths of the ryots themselves: not 'all jámidars are wicked', only some of them are. The Company administration is 'just and merciful,' and the 'good' landlord upholds the paternalist ideal of tenant–landlord relationship, in which the landlord, though clearly in a position of power over the tenant, is nonetheless a positive figure because of the benevolent nature of his actions; a happy social hierarchy where there is no oppression, no internal strife or desire for upward mobility.

Nava Krishna Banerjea, the young, philanthropic zamindar of Durganágar is presented thereafter as the anti-thesis of Jayachand, the archetypal 'good' zamindar who 'promotes the welfare of all his tenants', whose 'accession' 'to the landlordry of Dakshinpalli' is 'greeted by the peasantry of the district with an enthusiasm similar to that of the people of Ayodhyá on the consecration of Ráma to the regal office,' (313) the mythological reference serving as a bolster for the 'good' zamindar's image before the readers. It is telling that while the 'bad' zamindar is 'unacquainted' with Sanskrit and does not have 'the benefit of English education' (260), the 'good'

zamindar is an alumnus of the Hindu College and is a member of the British Indian Association, a thoroughly 'modern' man unlike the 'bad' zamindar, who is 'ignorant' and 'a Bengal Tiger in human shape,' a 'black sheep,' an anachronism in the face of Bengal,

Bankimchandra Chatterjee, in *Bengal's Peasants*—the sociological essay which, in the words of Shibaji Bandopadhyay, is 'painted in the colours of a novel' and makes 'room' for the trials of one Paran Mandal, a fictional Bengali peasant (1996, 40)—writes,

> We have no enmity towards zamindars. No zamindar has ever harmed us. On the contrary, we consider many zamindars to be particularly worthy of praise. Amongst those friends whose affection we count as one of this world's foremost pleasures, are many zamindars. Zamindars are at the top of Bengali society: who does not wish to be the object of their affection?...
>
> We must emphasize this: what we are saying does not concern the whole class of zamindars. If anyone says that all zamindars are wicked and oppressive, he is extremely untruthful. Many zamindars are magnanimous, affectionate towards the peasants, and full of integrity. Therefore the descriptions published in this essay do not apply to them. Some zamindars are oppressive: this essay is aimed at those. I have used the word "zamindar" for the sake of brevity. Where I have said or will say it, it is to those oppressive zamindars that I refer. The reader is not to take it to refer to the whole class of zamindars. (122–123)

The use of 'we' (*amra*) as narrative voice is rather telling; '[we] have no enmity towards zamindars,' (122) Bankim argues, and why should 'we'? 'Amongst those friends whose affection we count as one of this world's foremost pleasures, are many zamindars' (122): the narrator, after all, is one among 'them'. Bankim's 'good' zamindar is also a 'well-educated' (131) one, and the reader is *instructed* to remember to distinguish between the 'good' zamindar and the 'bad' zamindar in the course of the essay; further reminded that '[the] tenants of many zamindars are not good tenants. If they were not harshly treated, they would pay no rent. If the zamindar had to bring law-suits against everyone in order to collect the rent, he would be ruined.' (132) *Some* zamindars—'bad' zamindars, or their equally 'bad' henchmen, the *naib*s, *gomosta*s, and so on—practice 'tyrannies' on the peasants and are responsible for their financial ruin,

> That some members of this group oppress the peasants is a stain which is to their shame. The removal of this stain is in the hands of the zamindars themselves. If there are five brothers in a family, and the characters of two of them are bad, then the other three brothers try to reform the characters of these two. We advise the zamindars as group to act in the same way.... We ask the British Indian Association to consider this idea seriously. (132–133)

Bankim's essay begins with an unsettling question, 'Amidst this profusion of prosperity, I have one question to ask—where is this prosperity? Hasim Shekh and Rāmā Kaibartta, with their borrowed ploughs and two skin-and-bone oxen, plough knee-deep in mud, bare-footed and bare-headed, for six in the sun: have they become prosperous?' (114) The feeling of unsettlement grows as the essay progresses and the narrator, with a 'novelist's' colour and passion, tells the tale of the 'imaginary' Paran Mandal and the many oppressions he suffers in the hands of the zamindar, and asks, 'Whose prosperity is the country's prosperity? I see your prosperity and mine, but are you and I the country?' (117) The nineteenth century rhetoric of 'improvement' and 'reform', with its doctrines of *jatna*[5] and *anushilan*[6], made 'improvement' a moral imperative. For the 'objects' of the various discourses of 'improvement', however—the 'backward' peasants, the 'chained' women, the 'primitive' Santhals—'improvement' required an impetus, an external stimulus from an outside force that was capable of 'progress' itself and was capable, subsequently, to push those left behind into the domain of modernity and progress. The 'improvement' of the 'backward' peasants, therefore, was the moral imperative, the responsibilty of the educated, 'modern' middle classes: 'I see your prosperity and mine, but are you and I the country?' (117)

This imperative of 'improvement' and the reality of the 'improving' landlord presents a moment of disjuncture: to admit to failure would be an admission of material as well as moral failure, further complicated by the ever-present sense of longing for the 'authenticity' preserved in the domain of the backward, the non-modern. The figure of the 'good' zamindar, therefore, appears almost as a desperate measure, an ideal, a model to divert questions of culpability of the educated middle classes in the backwardness of the peasant; the narrator of *Bengal Peasant Life* thus 'crowns' Nava Krishna Banerjea with 'complete success,' despite his evident failure within the narrative to prevent his ryots' from being assaulted by the planters' men or tortured into accepting the advance,

> As in the course of this narrative we shall not have occasion to mention the name of Nava Krishna Banerjea, the zamindár of Durgánagar, we may remark once for all that, though often opposed by the indigo-planter of Nildángá in his honest endeavours to protect his tenants and to ameliorate their condition, his exertions were crowned with complete success; and there is no name in the long roll of zamindar's of Bengal which stands higher for philanthropy, liberality, uprightness of conduct, and public spirit than the honour name of Nava Krishna Banerjea. Concerning Mr. Murray, of whom the reader will not hear again, we may state that the Rob Roy principle which he adopted—"the simple plan that they should take who have the power, and they should keep who can"—did him little good. His oppression created universal disaffection among the peasantry, and produced an outbreak some years afterwards; and he had so completely mismanaged affairs that the Bengal indigo concern, of whom he was a servant, were obliged to shut up shop and sell the factory to the highest bidder. (344–345)

The upholding of Act X of 1959 as the deliverance of the peasantry of Bengal—despite its failure to safeguard the rights of tenants other than the occupancy ryots, who, very often, were jotedars themselves, and the opposition of the Act from certain sections of the landlords—is an instance of similar desperation, because the alternative is an admission of failure and culpability, and worse: the possibility of a peasant revolt *unsanctioned* by the 'good' zamindar; Bankimchandra hits an almost hysterical note as he writes,

> Whose prosperity is the country's prosperity? I see your prosperity and mine, but are you and I the country? And how many people do these peasants represent? If you leave them out, how many people will be there in the country? According to the figures, it is they who are the country—the majority of the people of the country are peasants. What can you and I accomplish? But if all the peasants were to run amok, who would be left anywhere? What would not happen? (117)

It is worth quoting the final question in its original Bengali glory: '*Kintu shokol krishijibi khepile ke kothay thakibe? Ki na hoibe?*' Such questions are dangerous. Such questions, in violation of the 'narrative-contract,' probe into those very 'faults', those fault-lines that the narrator–historian has beseeched the reader to 'overlook': place one at the very 'edge of the narrative, face to face

with the gaping abyss' (Bandopadhyay 1996, 39) that threatens to engulf in whole the comfortable logic of 'authentic history' and its comprehensible order.

What would not happen, indeed.

Notes

[1] Bandopadhyay, Bibhutibhushan. 1975. *Aranyak.* Kolkata: Mitra O Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

[2] Hartley, L.P. 1953. *The Go-Between.* Penguin Books: Harmondsworth.

[3] 'In Bengali poetry, the "epic" style of Michael Madhusudan Dutta in the 1850s and 1860s had glorified heroic action in defiance of overwhelming odds. Precisely around the 1880s, this began to be partially displaced by the more introspective Romantic lyricism of Biharilal Chakrabarti and Rabindranath, where nature was given a new centrality. A rural retrospect became prominent also in autobiographies, which were now being composed in unprecedented number thanks to the simultaneous entry of print culture and vernacular prose. They were coming to acquire a "developmental" format, in which a man's life became "a study of his progress towards ad absorption into his historical role"—and yet it was reformist authors using this format who seemed to linger most over idealized memories of childhood spent in traditional rural families. Introspection and intimate detail, marginalized in the central narrative adult public activity, could be given freer rein in memories of childhood, and these consequently became channels for "exposing difficulty and ambivalence".' (Sarkar 1997: 301-302)

[4] 'Land is the main source of the revenue of the British government in India. The Government follows in this respect the principles and practice of its predecessors, both Mohammedan and Hindu; and, while it avails itself of a convenient and profitable means of making provision for the public charges, it consults the advantage, and conforms to the notions and feelings, of the people.' (Wilson 1844, 293)

[5] Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's classic Bengali primer, *Varnaparichay* (1855) in its construction of the Gopal/Rakhal dichotomy (the eternal 'good' boy/the rebellious 'bad' boy) lists *yatna* (care) and *parisrama* (exertion) as one of the primary virtues of the 'good' boy. Brian A. Hatcher translates *yatna* as 'devoted effort' (181), tracing its genealogy to the *Neetishastra* tradition and the *Hitopadesha*, bearing with it connotations of duty, virtue and order. As the opposite of *yatna*, Vidyasagar lists *alashya*, 'idleness'. Industry and devoted effort link social improvement with the inculcation of personal morality; improvement therefore becomes a moral responsibility on the part of an individual.

[6] *Anushilan* or 'practice' becomes a significant category in Bankimchandra Chatterjee's thought in *Dharmatattva* (1888).

Chapter Three.

The Abyss Gazes Also

...men and women become the same... the Shudra will place his foot on the Brahman's head...
– Aghorechandra Kavyatirtha, *Kalir Abasan ba Kalki-avatar Geetabhinoy*[1]

In the course of the authentic history of Bengali peasant life, the narrator–historian takes his readers to the Kánchanpur *hát*, the village market, 'held on Tuesdays and Saturdays on a plain in the south-west corner of the village.' (Dey 1984, 165) The reader 'accompanies' the protagonist Govinda to a Tuesday *hát*, a *hát of three*, called so 'because three clear days intervened between that day and the following Saturday.' (166) Amidst the sounds of the buyers and sellers, all 'speaking in an assembly of some hundreds at the top of his voice,' 'at the same moment of time' (167) and the familiar images of the sellers 'squatting on the bare ground' or on 'gunny bags spread upon the earth' or 'low wooden stools,' organized 'into five long rows or streets,' the 'articles for sale put out, according to their nature, either on the ground, or in gunny bags, or in baskets' (167) , the zamindar's clerk and the police constable collecting their respective *tolá*s, stands an European gentleman, accompanied by a 'Bábu-looking person' (170) and 'a coolie with a bag under his arm.' (170) The Bábu opens a book and begins to read, and 'Govinda and scores of other people listen attentively' to 'something about God, about sin and salvation, about a Saviour for the children of men' (171); Govinda distinctly hears the name '*Jesu Khrista*'. The European gentleman in question, the narrator discloses, is in fact Reverend Friedrich Kleinknecht, 'a German clergyman connected with the Christian Missionary Society,' (171) stationed at Kánáinátsálá, seven miles away from Kánchanpur and a figure familiar to the natives of the latter as he had preached at the village market as well as within the village proper, and had visited the households of a few influential inhabitants of the village. Rev. Kleinknecht, the narrator further discloses, 'was very affable in his manners', 'had no hauteur or arrogance in his

demeanour towards the children of the soil', 'never lost temper in his discussions with Hindus, thought it was sorely tried by the irrelevant arguments and incoherent reasonings of his opponents', 'gave medicines to the poor people of the village if sick at the time of his annual visit' (171) and 'spoke the Bengali language almost like a Bengali.' (172) All these qualities made Rev. Kleinknecht a 'universally liked' figure in Kánchanpur; 'indeed,' the narrator tells his readers, 'little boys used to go up to him, and, catching his coat-tails, used to say—"Padre Sáheb, *salám*,"' (172) the approval of small children no doubt an added testament to the goodness and strength of character of the good Padre.

The Padre speaks with great sincerity and passion, painting a vivid portrait of the sufferings of humanity and 'the labouring poor', greatly affecting his audience in the process, 'While the preacher was going on with his subject with great earnestness and fluency, one here and another there exclaimed—"All that the Padre Sáheb is saying is quite true!"' (172) At the end of the sermon, Christian tracts written in Bengali are distributed to the listeners, 'who showed such eagerness to obtain them that they trod upon one another's toes, and nearly threw the missionary and his catechist off their legs.' (173) One cannot say if the listeners obtained the Christian tracts out of a genuine interest in the Word of God or to 'store it up as a curiosity; sell it for a few pice; or use it for waste paper,' (*The Missionary Register*, cited in Bhabha 174), but our hero, Govinda, the narrator assures us, 'got hold of a tract entitled the *Satya Áśraya* ("The True Refuge") which he took home and used occasionally to read.' (173)

The episode is but a brief interlude in the narrative of *Bengal Peasant Life*; the Padre walks in, inconspicuous, and walks out of just as quietly, an unobtrusive figure, irrelevant to the action of the episodic plot. Nonetheless, as the plot takes a darker turn and plunges Govinda, as well as those dear to him, into great peril, one envisions the spectre of the Padre and his passionate sermon, looming not far behind: a reminder of his considerable *historical* role in the events that take up a significant section of the narrative and lead, ultimately, to Mádhava's death—namely, the Indigo Controversy and the subsequent Revolt in 1860, leading to the formation of the Indigo Commission in which Reverend J. Sale—'a Baptist' who had spent 'about eighteen months in Jessore' (Oddie 112)—performed the officially-ordained role of the representative of the ryots, even as 8 other missionaries offered their testimonies as witnesses before the said Commission.

The Star in the East

Some of us are perhaps familiar with the capital of British India as it exists at the present time, but let us cast a look behind us, and contemplate it as it was a century ago—

"The living solitude of a city of idolaters."

We will only touch on such sights as then daily met the eye of the least observant, not attempt to depict the social condition of the people—our readers can imagine for themselves what *that* must have been.

Floating down the Hughli, the noble river on which Calcutta lies, were human corpses, in various stages of decay. We will not stop now to inquire how they came there; this will become by and by, for we shall have much to say of this river.

The Suti fires were to be seen frequently blazing, and many widows mounted the pyre, assured by the Brahmans that they should be happy in heaven for as many years as their husbands had hairs in their bodies, which were considerately calculated at the number thirty-five millions. We read of instances of thirty-seven females being burnt alive with the body of one man, who had more than a hundred wives; of eighteen perishing with another, who had forty wives; of fifteen with another; and of tender children of eight years of age sharing the same sad fate!

...

Unclad beggars, *i.e.* Fakirs and Sunnyasis, ranged *ad libitum* through the town, with their matted hair hanging down to the length of two or three feet, and their bodies besmeared with "the most sacred of Indian cosmetics." A Hindu, after visiting a European, would have his garments washed, to free them from the impurity contracted from a *mlechha* (unclean outcast). Thirty persons were sometimes seen to drown themselves together, for merit or misery; lepers were constantly burned or drowned; aged people were known to bury themselves alive in one grave; a holy Brahman assisted in drowning an old man in sport, that he might see the fun, and years afterwards related the fact to a missionary as an achievement worthy of admiration.

We will not deepen the shades of our picture by any reference to the disgusting celebrations in honour of the idols, which, alas! continue to this day; nor to the fact of Hindu mothers casting their tender infants into the stream....

> Such was the pitiable condition of the Hindus. (Weitbrecht 1–4)

This rather fantastic and all-too-sincere excerpt from Mrs. Weitbrecht's 'sketches' of early missionary activity in Northern India, in a chapter titled 'A Land of Darkness and Sorrow,' with all its exaggerations and unmitigated bleakness, sums up the sense of *horror* that many missionaries expressed about the spiritual state of India—always *Hindu* India—suffering under the yoke of 'Moslem tyranny' and the burden of their own false religion; Calcutta in the 1700s might very well be Sodom and Gomorrah, come to life again, waiting for the healing touch of the true religion—Christianity—to redeem the land and its people. The 'real object' of the 'missionary enterprise,' as Alexander Duff argued, was 'to achieve for India and other benighted lands, what has been done, and it may be, under happier auspices, more than has been done for Britain' (430)—to wage 'spiritual war,' (63) to 'hasten' and 'realize' 'God's grand design' (430) so that India, and indeed, 'all the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ!' (50) The British conquest of India was but a part of 'God's grand design' (430), a part of 'a progress that is steadfast, a development that is clearly defined,' (50) namely, the Christianization and subsequent salvation of 'heathen' Indian.

We must, at this point, note the importance of not conflating missionary discourse in its multiplicity and missionary agenda in India with that of the colonial administration. Edward Said, in a brief note in *Orientalism*, writes,

> To colonize meant at first the identification—indeed, the creation—of interests; these could be commercial, communicational, religious, military, cultural. With regard to Islam and the Islamic territories, for example, Britain felt that it had legitimate interests, as a Christian power, to safeguard. A complex apparatus for tending these interests developed. Such early organization as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (1698) and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (1701) were succeeded and later abetted by the Baptist Missionary Society (1792), the Church Missionary Society (1799), the British and Foreign Bible Society (1804), the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews (1808). These missions "openly joined the expansion of Europe." (100)

'Joining' in the project for 'the expansion of Europe' is a rather simplistic observation; European missionaries were no strangers to assertions of racial superiority (Oddie 197), or to the language of 'progress' and 'decay,' as we have seen in the case of Alexander Duff[2], or Reverend James Long, who wrote about the 'elevation of the natives of India' under English rule from 'thraldom of superstition' and 'anarchy' to a state where 'India will be able to govern herself' (Oddie 182). Missionary discourse in colonial India co-existed and often overlapped with that of the British colonial regime on a variety of matters, from the spread of English-language education in India to general opinion on the 'depraved' state of civilization in present-day colonized India. Furthermore, the missionaries collaborated with the British Government in India in the production of knowledge *of* India, which 'included data which bolstered social reform and other legislative measures', as well as 'information about the attitudes and mood of the people which could be of use in attempts to avert rebellion.' (184) Duff railed against the 'Anglo-Indian society's' 'ignorance of localities and statistical detail, whether referable to the physical or moral condition of the country and its inhabitants' (522) and asserted that it was the missionary's duty to survey 'the actual condition of the people [of India], through every variety of relationship' (63–64); Long, meanwhile, argued 'had the English been acquainted with the "views of sepoys and Native chiefs" prior to 1857, they might well have been able to prevent the uprising and save "millions of money and torrents of human blood"' (Oddie 184–85). Nonetheless, the expansion of the Kingdom of 'God and His Christ' upon earth—that is to say, God's spiritual empire—is not equivalent to the 'expansion of Europe'; the dichotomy of the believer and the non-believer, the saved and the damned, is not equivalent to the dichotomy of Europe and the Orient. 'Progress' in Duff's vision of India happens through the 'renovating principles of the cross' (Duff 50), and Long's India 'basks' 'in the beams of Christian light' (Oddie 182): *only* a Christian India is capable of salvation. The missionaries, ultimately, had their own agenda in India, which was not always in sync with that of the existing colonial regime; the missionary–government partnership was *conditional*, and very often, they would be found in disagreement or outright conflict.

The Company, after its arrival in India, had very little interest in the spread of Christianity; in the words of an anonymous author in an article titled 'Christianity in India' in *The Calcutta Review*, June 1860,

> Unlike the Portuguese, the first English settlers [in India] brought no missionaries in their train. An indifference to the spread of Christianity has been always a marked feature of British Colonization, more especially at the time when the East India Company received its first patent... The Agents of the Company disclaimed all desire to spread Christianity. They came to India to trade; their business was to send large dividends to the shareholders or to accumulate fortunes for themselves, and they thought as little of the souls of the Hindoos as their brothers at home did of the souls of the Native Americans. (202)

With the solidification of British power in India, the conflict grew stronger, especially with the 'unauthorized' arrival of William Carey in Bengal on board a Danish ship after failing to 'obtain permission to proceed to India in a Company's vessel' (340), and the subsequent arrival of other Baptists 'without the licence of the Court' (341); the Baptists were offered asylum by the Danish settlement in Serampore, wherein they settled and set up a press, with the express permission of the Danish Governor on the condition that no material of 'political nature' would be published from the press (Baptist Missionary Society 18). Lord Wellesley's government, 'avoided giving direct encouragement' (Wilson 1844, 341) to the missionaries of Serampore; Wellesley's successor, Sir George Barlow, the Acting Governor General, was 'less favourable,'

> Entertaining, in common with most of the Company's servants of that day, a dread of the multiplication of uncovenanted European residents in India, he was disinclined to relax any of the restraints which the Legislature had imposed, and refused to sanction the continued presence of the new arrivals who had not provided themselves with a license from the Court. The teaching of the missionaries had also begun to excite some uneasiness among the natives of Calcutta, and the connexion of the mutiny at Vellore with their religious apprehensions imposed upon the Government the obligation of setting the mind of their native subjects at ease with respect to the designs of their rulers, by the public prohibition of those expedients resorted to by the missionaries which were most likely to offend the religious sentiments and exasperate the feelings of the people. (342)

The missionaries were thus allowed to retain the building they had obtained in Calcutta to serve as a chapel and to continue with 'private instructions' or their translations of scriptures into Bengali and Persian, but they were forbidden from preaching in public streets, sending forth itinerant preachers to the villages and the distribution of controversial religious tracts. Lord Minto's government, apart from renewing these restrictions, further strengthened them, especially after the publication of a 'scurrilous' pamphlet on Mohammed, which had angered 'the most respectable Mohammedan residents of Calcutta,'

> ...it was deemed necessary to direct that public preaching in the mission-house of Calcutta should be discontinued, and to renew the prohibition of the issue of religious tracts; and, in order to bring the missionary press more immediately under the control of the officers of the Government, the missionaries were commanded to remove it from Serampore to Calcutta. (343)

And so Weitbrecht wrote,

> It remained for Protestant and Christian England to stand out alone, as a government intolerant of its own religion, and to hold India *a preserve for heathenism*, where conqueror and conquered should never know the bonds of brotherhood, by the sympathies and hopes of a common religion. (29)

India was opened up as a field for missionaries—'a certain number of persons, under the cognizance of the Court of Directors,' (388–389) under the condition that they would not offend Indian sensibilities—in 1813 with the renewal of the Company's Charter.[3] This difficult beginning of the missionary–government relationship in colonial India, in many ways, shaped their relationship; the missionaries and the government were to be in disagreement over a host of issues, such as the so-called failure of the Government to take up the cause of Christianization of India and imparting 'a thorough Christian education' (Duff 314) to India's young. On the latter, Duff wrote,

> ... we have seen enough with our own eyes and heard enough with our own ears, to satisfy us that, in the present corrupt state of human nature, the genuine native tendency of any institution, which attains full maturity in the communication of knowledge without religion, is inimical not merely to true religion and sound morals, but also to the political peace and wellbeing of a community. We hesitate not to affirm that every such institution in India will ultimately be found, when perhaps it is too late, nothing better than a manufactory of infidels as regards all religion—a manufactory of rebels, as regards allegiance to the British Government. (453)

The missionaries' 'labour', therefore, is 'to correct the blunders of the Government,' Duff argues, 'and to save [the Government] from the ruinous consequences of its own unenlightened policy,' (456) thereby positioning themselves as *moral* authorities, as the guardians of the government's conscience in British India.

Missionaries and Indigo

> **Pandit:** The indigo planters have taken everything belonging to Vindumadhav's family—
>
> **Doctor:** I have heard of the planters from the Padres, and now I see them myself....
>
> **Deputy:** A Padre was walking through a village under Valley Saheb's concern. When the ryots spotted the gentleman, they screamed, 'the indigo ghost has come out, the indigo ghost has come out,' and escaped to their respective homes. But slowly the ryots were astonished by the grace, kindness and forgiving nature of the priest, and as he expressed his earnest sympathy at the sufferings of the tormented ryots, their respect for him increased.... (Mitra 51)

Like Rev. Kleinknecht in *Bengal Peasant Life*, the unnamed missionaries in Dinabandhu Mitra's seminal, highly controversial play *Neel Darpan*, are but fleeting presences, mentioned only in passing, irrelevant to the principle action of the plot; of note, however, is the weight placed upon the Padre's word as truth, and the placement of the Padre as a sympathizer and confidante of the the ryots'. This, again, is a brief reminder of and homage to the historical role of the missionaries

in the indigo disputes. In 1852, Rev. J. Lincke of the Calcutta Missionary Society (C.M.S) 'noted numerous complaints of oppression from planters as well as from zamindars and others' (Oddie 103) the course of his travels in the Krishnagar district; in the year after that, Rev. F. Schurr referred to 'the great iniquity and tyrannical oppression of the Indigo Planters' (103) in an angry letter to the Secretary of the C.M.S. The ryots themselves, 'whether Hindu, Muslim or Christian, appealed to the missionaries to intercede' (103). The Rev. Bomswetch, pastor at Balabhpur in Krishnagar district, found himself 'under considerable pressure' from the village heads and Christians to 'buy up and rent out land in order to prevent it falling into the hands of a neighbouring planter who, it was feared, would extend compulsory cultivation.' (104) Bomswetch refrained from interfering in the dispute in this particular instance, but the missionaries in the indigo districts found the ryots' pleas to for assistance difficult to turn down, especially when situations turned violent, as they often did, or when 'the victims included Christians who naturally expected the missionary to carry out his pastoral obligations and intercede on their behalf.' (104) The missionaries attempted speaking to the planters, which did not always yield positive results, driven as the planters were with the need to keep the indigo concerns profitable.[4] Furthermore, the planters' oppressive and 'un-Christian' actions in the districts made it difficult for the missionaries to go forth with their agenda: 'In the interior the Christian missionary was frequently told by the Indigo-ryots that his teaching would fall on deaf ears if he professed the same religion as planters' (Dutta 29); Rev. Bomswetch wrote from Krishnagar, 'We are surrounded in large numbers by those on account of whom the name of Jesus is blasphemed among the heathen and only self-righteous, blind Christian Pharisees ever fail to see how by those our work is almost completely thwarted.' (Oddie 105) Rev. Cuthebert told the Indigo Commission, 'It is found in a thousand instances most difficult to improve the moral condition of a people whose social condition is extremely low... to use an eastern proverb: "An empty belly has no ears."' (104–105)

The Calcutta Missionary Conference of September 1855 made the missionaries' involvement more direct and public after the presentation of a paper by Rev. Schurr, titled *On the Influence of the System of Indigo Planting on the Spread of Christianity* (Oddie 106), in which Schurr railed against the 'indescribable' misery (106) of the ryot under planter oppression and suggested remedies, both religious and secular, for the alleviation of the ryots' suffering, which included, 'The appointment by the Government of a trustworthy commissioner, to enquire into all

the evils of the Indigo-system. The Government, assisted by the Commissioner, should elicit the advice of intelligent ryots for future guidance and policy-framing, on Indigo.' (Dutta 33) The title of the paper is telling; it is this interference with their mission that spurred the missionaries into intervention and into conflict with the planters—who were furious with publication of Schurr's paper and a report of the discussion that followed (Oddie 107)—and the administration, which rejected the missionaries' petition (2 September, 1856) calling for an inquiry (108). After the rejection of the petition, the Calcutta Conference decided that 'since the Government of Bengal, without alleging any reasons whatever, has in an unqualified manner refused to accede to the reasonable request of this Conference,' (109) they would petition the Parliament asking for the appointment of a Royal Commission. They found a set of influential allies in the British Indian Association, who, as we have discussed[5], had their own agenda to pursue against the planters, and began to argue in favour of an inquiry commission in their journals and newspapers.

Matters grew worse as outbreaks of protest and violence increased in the indigo districts in 1860. Rev. James Long, who had hitherto been on the fringes of the missionary intervention into the Indigo Controversy, found himself thrust into the forefront when '50 ryots presented themselves at my door [in his residence at Mizapur] who had fled from Nuddea and Jessore Districts to escape the oppressions of the planters, they brought me a letter from Mr Bomswetch—I could not turn the people away...' (111) The Calcutta Missionary Conference considered the crisis in another meeting and 'drew up a short memorial to be presented to the Lieutenant-Governor relative to the appointment of the Indigo Commission' (112). In a subsequent meeting with the Lieutenant-Governor, the committee discussed the proposed Indigo Commission and 'pointed out that the Government had made no provision to represent the ryots on the Commission', 'that the ryots who gave evidence should be protected from fear of the consequences', and 'that the proceedings of the Commission should not be published until the investigation had been completed'. (113) Following the meeting, Rev. Sale was appointed to the Indigo Commission as the representative of the ryots. The Commission began its hearing on 18 May, 1860, examining 134 witnesses including 15 officials, 21 planters, 8 missionaries, 13 landlords and 77 ryots, (114) and concluded in a note that was decidedly unfavourable towards the existing model of indigo plantation in Bengal.

The missionaries' successful intervention in the indigo problem did not earn them friends among the planters, but Long was satisfied to note that

> ...the natives now see that we Missionaries are not 'partakers with other men's sins, but rather reprove them'—and Natives hostile to Christianity are beginning to see that Christian love to *all* men independently of the color is a *reality*, and that the Missionary is the best friend of the Hindus both in temporal and spiritual things. (117)

The Revs Bomswetch and Lincke reported similar 'favourable impression[s]' in Krishnagar, '*They* [the native non-Christian population], considering the Missionaries as the chief cause or instrument, by which favourable results have been brought about, can not speak highly enough in their praise, & are in a manner ready & willing to listening their preaching & teaching.' (117) This eminently practical need for the missionaries to be able to go forth with their 'work' in the villages without distractions or disturbances, to a large extent, spurred on their ultimate decision to intervene and take sides in the Indigo Controversy, even at the cost of being accused of political activism. There was also, however, a framing of the missionaries' impulse to intervene in terms of a *moral compulsion* to question the 'un-Christian actions' of those that proclaim to be Christians and to help those in need of assistance; in Rev. Long's words,

> We came to the conclusion unanimously that it was our duty as Missionaries to do what we could for these poor people *Who cannot help themselves*—that we repudiate taking up the question on any *political* ground but simply that Indigo Planting interferes with our own work as much as the Slave Trade does with Mission work on the coast of Africa; Even the Redeemer himself healed all manner of diseases among the people. (Oddie 111)

The missionaries' 'duty' is a sacred duty, ordained by God; the reference to 'the Redeemer' and his 'healing' of 'the people' underlines the righteousness of their actions, frees the missionary from the taint of having a 'political' agenda. Practicality goes hand in hand with righteousness,

'...Indigo Planting interferes with our own work as much as the Slave Trade does with Mission work on the coast of Africa' (111); spreading Christ's message, after all, is the ultimate means of offering salvation to the 'poor people' 'who cannot help themselves,' but such a manner of salvation is possible only when the material conditions of existence are elevated—'an empty belly has no ears,' (105) or no concern for the salvation of one's soul, for that matter.

It is this context that we must place Rev. Kleinklecht's howsoever brief appearance in *Bengal Peasant Life*, which, then, ceases to be just an allusion to the missionaries' historical role in the Indigo Controversy, their position as the representatives of the ryots before the Indigo Commission and the world. The spectre of the missionary takes on the shape of a powerful moral presence in the narrative, spurring on the narrator–historian to fulfil his obligation to narrate the 'authentic', not merely in forms that are attractive and comforting, *acceptable* fables about changelessness and the paradoxically preserved purity of a time long gone by. The categorical framing of 'Bengal peasant life' as an embodiment of backwardness, as we have already discussed, had behind it a history 'material construction' (Banerjee 17) of 'backwardness,' a process in which the educated middle classes had active roles to play[6], which brings us face to face with the abyss:

> I see your prosperity and mine, but are you and I the country? And how many people do these peasants represent? If you leave them out, how many people will be there in the country? ... What can you and I accomplish? But if all the peasants were to run amok, who would be left anywhere? What would not happen? (Chatterjee 1996, 117)

'Bengali Heroism': This far, but no farther

Rev. Schurr, in his paper presented before the Calcutta Missionary Conference of September 1855, had damning statements to make about the nature of oppression of the Bengal peasantry, by the indigo planters as well as the Bengali landlords. 'To Schurr, the greatest enemies of the natives of Bengal were their own countrymen, by whom they were very often deprived of their civil or social rights.' (Dutta 32) After finishing the presentation of his own paper, Schurr further presented before the Conference a statement prepared by some indigo ryots in the Krishnagar district, wherein the ryots stated that while they 'gladly paid taxes to the East India Company', they 'scarcely felt the Company's Government to be their rulers, so strong was the oppression of the Zamindars and the Indigo-planters of that distruct.' (35) The petitioners further claimed that they desired payment of their rent directly to the Company government, and not via the mediating present of the Zamindars and the planters. This equation of the indigo planters and the zamindars by Schurr and his petitioners would be a recurring theme in the missionaries' position in the course of their intervention in the Indigo Controversy, accusing both groups of oppressing ryots; even in its initial, ultimately-rejected petition demanding the appointment of what would ultimately become the Indigo Commission, the Calcutta Missionary Conference, demanded a thorough investigation of 'the powers and influence of the zamindars and planters, and how those powers are used; the resources and earnings of the labouring classes, and the proportion which these bear to the rent that they are compelled to pay.' (Oddie 108)

The indigo planter of Nildánga, Mr. Murray, embodies all the ills of the European planters the missionaries had railed against. '[A] gentleman of good family and of some education' (Dey 1984, 302), Murray is a unfailingly polite and hospitable, especially to Europeans, pays a 'monthly subscription of ten rupees to an English school' (320) in the neighbourhood, doles out free medicine to sick villagers; his name, the narrator exclaims, 'has been found in the subscription lists of the Tract and Bible Societies, and even in the reports of one or two missionary societies carrying on their operations in Bengal.' (303) The same Murray, however, in sharp contrast with his hospitability and charity, his Christian faith, 'certainly' 'compelled unwilling ráiyats to take contracts for indigo, forcibly seized the lands of poor and helpless husbandmen, and sowed them with indigo seed, burnt the houses of many, imprisoned

them to his factories, and employed his *láthiáls* (club-men) to plunder villages' (302)—a living, breathing embodiment of the ryots' name for him, '*Mári*', meaning 'either flogging or the plague'. (321) The narrator is careful to specify that not all indigo planters—like all zamindars—are 'blue devils,' but 'the system which they follow, being pernicious in the extreme, is sufficient to convert the gentlest of human beings into ferocious tigers, unless, indeed, they choose to bring ruin upon themselves.' (304) The only 'good' indigo planters are 'rich East Indian gentlemen', 'confined to the district of Poorneah,' who are loved by their ryots and looked upon as '*Ma–báp*' (304)—upholders of the paternalistic ideals of tenant–landlord relationship,

> ...not birds of passage, like the European, whose only object is to make money and then run away to merry England as fast as steam can carry them; but men born and bred in the country, and who purpose also to be buried in it. They are kind to their ráiyats, and their ráiyats look up to them as benefactors. Such planters—alas, that their race is dying out!—are like the better sorts of zamindars. (304–305)

The ryots of Durgánagar rise up against Murray in a show of 'Bengali heroism' with the battle cry, '*Mari sáláke máro!*'—with the complete consent of their zamindar, the 'good' zamindar Naba Krishna Banerjea, and the assistance of his own *láthiáls*—but fail to prevail against his band of well-trained club-men and *sarkiwálás*, and Murray's own pistol. Later, Murray is seen torturing the rebellious *mandal* of Durgánagar into submission and colluding with the corrupt Dárogá, thereby freeing himself from the possibility of legal persecution. Mádhava meets an untimely death in the process of being shifted from one indigo factory to another, far away from the scene of 'the affray', as his wound festers in the absence of medical attention.

Sparks of 'Bengali-heroism' in Kánchanpur, against the 'bad' landlord, meet with a similar fate: while members of Govinda's caste—the Ugra–Kshatriyas, or Águris—stand by him, ryots from the other castes have little interest in supporting Govinda to stand up against the all-powerful landlord; the 'political' machinations at the smithy and the 'indignation meeting' end up as mere moments of sound and fury as Govinda's house is burnt down and afterwards, his land is confiscated and sold in a wrongful application of 'the terrible *Pancham*' (362). The hot-headed

Kálamánik refuses to answer the zamidar's summons, threatens and plots to put an end to the zamindar's tyranny, only to bravely succumb to a brutal attack by the zamindar's *láthials*.

What would not happen if the Bengali peasants were to 'run amok'? What would *not* happen? *Bengal Peasant Life* ponders upon these problems as the peasants of Kánchanpur and Durgánagar *are* 'angered' ('*Kintu shokol krishijibi khepile ke kothay thakibe?*'; '*khepile*' referring to *'khepe jawa*', 'angered' or 'maddened') and *do* 'run amok'. Indeed, some of the most powerful episodes in the novel feature the peasants' discontent, giving voice to their complaints and their righteous anger; despite ultimate professions of faith in the Company's benevolence and paeans to the Act X of 1859, the criticism of the colonial administration and its failure to uphold its promises—often veiled with irony, and downright direct on occasion—a strident intervention,

> The object which Government had in giving such extraordinary powers to landholders was to enable them to realise their rents regularly, and transmit them punctually to the public exchequer; but in consulting its own interest, the Government virtually consigned the entire peasantry of Bengal to the tender mercies of a most cruel and rapacious aristocracy. Happily, a more enlightened and humane legislation has taken away from the code those iniquitous regulations, but it is worthy of note that, for half-a-century, those horrible engines of oppression were allowed, by a Government calling itself Christian, to grind to the dust many millions of probably the most peaceful people upon earth. (361–362)

The 'denunciation of planter oppression and colonial misrule,' as Tanika Sarkar observes in a different context, 'is on the grounds of peasant distress, the peasant emerging as the litmus test for the nature of government', (2009, 179) and it is easy to see why *Bengal Peasant Life*—in the few instances it has found a place in critical discussions—has been primarily considered a novel of 'resistance' or 'protest' in the league of *Neel Darpan*—the translation of which had already raised a storm in the civil society and lead to the incarceration of Rev. Long, the translator—or a proto-nationalist enterprise. Intriguing, however, is the fact that while the peasants do voice their righteous anger and 'run amok,' however briefly, their ultimate fate is either subjugation or wretched death; unlike the rebellious peasant–hero of *Neel Darpan*, Torap, the peasants in *Bengal Peasant Life* do not even have the satisfaction of physical retaliation, that of beating the

planter 'to jelly' (Mitra 40) or 'biting off' (59) the planter's nose as revenge for the loss of his left hand, let alone any material triumph, as though the proud waves of 'Bengali heroism' can only go this far, and no further as the narrator forecloses all routes to success; as though only possible narrative of a peasant protest must be a narrative of tragedy.

Here shall your proud waves be stayed

The seeds of the tragic outcome are strewed within the narrative itself, as the narrator–historian reminds his readers,

> We have represented the Águris to be a spirited and brave class; but it must be remembered that they are spirited compared only with other Bengali ráiyats, and Bengali ráiyats are, as a rule, a sheepish and submissive race. Were Bengal peasants like Irish cottiers, Orangemen, Ribbonmen, and the rest, zámindari oppression would be impossible. (Dey 1984, 280)

The Águris, prior to this, had been identified as a caste '[somewhat] fairer in complexion than Bengal peasants in general, better built, and more muscular in their corporeal forms', a 'bold and somewhat fierce race,' (278) with a fierce 'sense of honour' (280)—in sharp contrast to the 'ordinary Bengali ráiyat', who is represented as one who is 'content quietly to submit, even without a protest, to any amount of kicking,' (278) 'accustomed' 'to be daily beaten, cuffed and kicked by the zámindar and his deputies.' (277–278) The 'fierceness' of the Águris as a caste, as opposed to the *Sadgopa*s and 'other classes of husbandmen' is a *natural* quality, as is the passivity of the other castes; the 'natural' meekness and passivity of the Bengali peasant, then, becomes the key to his own tragedy.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee offers similar 'natural causes' in *Bengal's Peasants* as an explanation for the 'perpetually miserable condition' of India's 'peasants' and 'labourers', 'The first is the great fertility of the land, and the second is the warmth of the climate. From these two causes civilization arose in India very early. But from these same causes, wages became low. And grave social inequality became established.' (Chatterjee 142) Such 'miserable condition,' Bankim goes on to assure, is not 'inevitable,' but 'their inevitability is such that they will always make their appearance unless they are prevented by the power of other laws', laws that 'are under control of the king and the community.' (143) The responsibility for the peasants' 'progress', therefore, falls entirely upon the administration,

> That Bengal's peasants are poor, and in want of food and clothing, is not the fault of the zamindars alone. Nor is it the result of natural laws alone. The faults of the zamindars and the results of the natural laws can be rectified by government legislation. It is the nature of the strong to oppress the weak. Governments exist to prevent that oppression. (143)

Herein, again, colonial 'misrule' is questioned, and the distress of the peasant becomes a 'litmus test' for governance. (Sarkar 2009, 179) What is intriguing, however, is the fact that by evoking the 'natural,' responsibility shifts in its entirety from the oppressors to the lawmakers and administrators—'the king and the community'—the upholders of social hierarchy, even as there is a foreclosure of the *possibility* of the 'weak' peasant displaying 'strength', because 'it is the nature of the strong to oppress the weak,' and it is the 'nature' of the 'weak' to be oppressed by the 'strong'.

The narrative foreclosure of the possibility of a *non*-tragic demonstration of peasant strength 'heroism' in *Bengal Peasant Life* is accompanied by lamentations on the passing of an 'authentic' rural aristocracy, one that does not *necessitate* a show of 'heroism' on the peasant's part in the first place. The 'good' indigo planters, *Ma–báp* of the rural peasantry, are a dying race, like 'the better sorts of zamindars' (305). They belong to another world—that of the changeless, authentic (lost) Bengali village; they belong to another, uncorrupted time, when social hierarchy was a happy hierarchy, without a murmur of discontent, wherein every imbalance in power was a

benevolent and 'natural' one, as 'natural' and nourishing as the relationship between parent and child instead of one based on economic exploitation. The fruitless, tragic peasant uprisings in *Bengal Peasant Life* do not take place in order to *upturn* social hierarchy but to inspire those in the upper rungs of the social ladder and restore it to its *true* state, wherein a dutiful administration—be it that of the landlord or the government—watches over a contented peasantry in a just, benevolent fashion; they are fruitless and tragic *because* they must restore social order, the tragic tale of their 'heroism' an inspiration for 'the king and the community'. The rebellious peasants of Kánchanpur and Durgánagar, could not—for instance—be any further removed from the rebellious 'primitive' hill-men of David Arnold's description, whose 'seize of the police station' is a conscious 'inversion' of social order, with the recognition that 'they were on top now.' (Arnold 131) Such manner of rebellion cannot exist in the 'authentic history' of Bengali peasant life; Kánchanpur, after all, as has been repeatedly asserted, is a rural idyll, one without internal politics, without strife and tension between castes,

> ...short of eating, drinking, and intermarrying, there is a good deal of intercourse and kindly feeling between members of different castes. An Águri may have a *goála* (milkman), or a *sadgopa* (agricultural caste), or a man of any other caste, as his most intimate friend, although they may not enjoy each other's company at dinner... (Dey 1984, 149)

where trouble is brought on only by the perverse forces of the 'bad' zamindar, much like the 'bad' planter in Durgánagar or Swarpur, the peasant village that forms the backdrop of *Neel Darpan*,

> **Sadhu:** Now there is no happiness here. Your garden is gone, your stock of rice is diminishing. Alas! It has been but three years since the sahib became a patnidar, and he has managed to destroy the village in the process. One cannot look at the house of the mandals of Dakshinpara, oh! What it was, and what it used to be! Three years ago there would be 60 people eating twice a day in that household. They had ten ploughs, about 40/50 cows. What a courtyard they had, like a racecourse! When they gathered their harvest in the courtyard it would seem as though lotuses have blossomed in a pond. Their stable was like a mountain.... (Mitra 1)

Such manner of rebellion cannot be allowed to exist in the narrative of *Bengal Peasant Life*, because that way anarchy lies, lies madness; that way falls apart all polite fictions of a changeless, strife-less rural idyll and reveals the deep-seated contradictions within the society; that way leads one over to the 'edge' of the 'narrative' and forces one to gaze into the abyss that foretells a dystopic future, wherein peasants are no longer docile, no longer humble, a future wherein they 'run amok' and cause riots—a dystopia not unlike that envisioned by the 'non-modern' writers of the Kaliyuga narratives[7].

The narrator–historian's mirror of 'truth' turns on himself, the abyss also gazes back, and what is revealed are deep-seated contradictions *within* the narrative, the 'authentic history' that purports to be a 'progressive' history but shrinks back in revulsion when the possibility of sexual relationship between the widowed Áduri and Prem Bhakta Vairági arises[8]; when the possibility of a *successful* peasant rebellion, against the oppressive planter *and* the landlord—the *bhadralok* who profits from rentier income derived from the peasant's cultivation without indulging in any form of productive rural entrepreneurship—and puts forth the 'good' zamindar/'bad' zamindar dichotomy, desperately seeking to reassure. The narrator, for all his proclamations of 'modernity,' finds himself unceremoniously pulled back into the domain of Kaliyuga literature and its 'irrational,' 'non-modern' anxieties of a time when the Sudras have overturned the scriptures and ceased to serve the higher castes, a time when women choose their partners and wives deceive their husbands and a host of other calamities; the concordance of history dissolves in a time of utter discordance.

Notes

[1]Kavyatirtha, Aghorechandra. 1997[1902]. Cited in Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

[2] Also discussed in Chapter One.

[3] Wilson reports massive debates in the House of Commons over the thirteenth clause in the East India Bill on the licensing of missionaries. (1844, 388–397)

> 'Rev. Schurr cites an instance when his representations on behalf of the indigo-ryots were outright rejected by the proprietor of the Amjoopi Indigo concern, in the Krishnagar district.
>
> ...
>
> The planter's animosity towards the good Christian padre in the interior often assumed violent forms. Rev. Bomswetch recounts a case in which he was physically threatened by the planter of the Nishchindipore Indigo Concern when he ventured to make the planter take back some rupees of advances that had been forced upon two Christian indigo-ryots.' (Dutta 14)

Abhijit Dutta further argues that 'the planter's distaste for the missionary stemmed from sociological factors besides psychological and economic ones,' because the missionary was often viewed as 'a hypocrite', 'interested only in making converts,' and 'a sour, strait-laced individual, a foe to innocent pleasure and laughter, a person in whose presence one could never be at ease.' (14)

[5] In Chapter Two.

[6] Please refer to Chapter Two.

[7] Discussed in Chapter One.

[8] One is given to wonder if there is more to the episode of '*The Village Ghost*', wherein Áduri is accused of 'looking' 'intently'—lasciviously—at the young mendicant and smiling 'archly' at him as she gazed into his eyes, and is subsequently revealed to have been possessed a ghost, who proclaims.

> *Ojhá: But why have you come into the body of chhoto bou?*
>
> *Áduri: Because she is vain of her beauty, and because she looks into the faces of men and smiles. (Dey 1984, 110)*

Conclusion.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee's last novel, *Sitaram*, ends with a curious piece of dialogue between two commoners, Ramchand and Shyamchand, who discuss and debate the events of the novel while enjoying a leisurely smoke,

> **Shyamchand:** So many people say so many things! Some say the king and the queen have not been capture at all, that the god-like being came and saved them. Then the Muslims took a fake king and queen to Murshidabad and executed them
>
> **Ramchand:** And you believe it! It is but a story written by Hindus, nothing more than a novel.
>
> **Shyamchand:** How do we know if this is a novel or that is novel? Maybe that one too is a novel, only written by the Muslims. But what does it matter to us, we are but small fry, such events are of no concern to us. We are safe, that is enough. Now, prepare the tobacco please. (Chatterjee 1947, 164)

In a novel full of splendid themes and magnificent action, the chorus of commoners has the last word; the grand event of a Hindu king's fall are reduced to 'nothing more than a novel,' and blown away in puffs of smoke by 'two ignorant and rather uninterested men who dismiss all history as ultimately unknowable as equally uncertain versions of certain events, and finally, as supremely irrelevant to the likes of them'. (Sarkar 2001, 189) It is the ultimate ironic recognition of the pretensions of the realistic novel by none other than the pioneer of realistic novel-writing in Bengal, of the fragile uncertainty of the alliance between the realist novel and history. 'Papa, is it true?' asks the precocious child, threatening the precious balance of the father's marvelous tale (Dey 1984, 3); the 'little' tale of 'authentic' Bengali peasant life, its 'plain' sorrows and joys and its

old-fashioned charm finds itself similarly threatened, put off-balance when one abandons the so-called 'narrative-contract' and probes into those 'grave' faults the narrator had pleaded one to 'overlook', when one asks, echoing the author of *Bengal's Peasants*,

> Whose prosperity is the country's prosperity? I see your prosperity and mine, but are you and I the country? And how many people do these peasants represent? If you leave them out, how many people will be there in the country? According to the figures, it is they who are the country—the majority of the people of the country are peasants. What can you and I accomplish? But if all the peasants were to run amok, who would be left anywhere? What would not happen? (1996, 117)

As the peasants' discontent finds a place in the narrative, one discovers, underneath the bright surface of the 'modern' historian's mirror, dark abysses that reflect anxieties that are decidedly 'non-modern': that of a world turned upside-town, of social hierarchies being dismantled and the 'weak' peasant rising to revolt, without consent, without warning, without checks and balances; the peasant, after all, was never a part of the 'permanent' 'settlement' between the administration and the landlords—the educated middle classes—or the 'narrative-contract' between the narrator-historian and his 'gentle reader,' the English-educated Bengali readership and the Engllish reader.

The iron logic of 'authentic' 'history' crumbles and disintegrates, and all that one is left with is a tale riddled with self-contradiction—'nothing more than a novel.' (Chatterjee 1947, 164)

Works Cited

Arnold, David. 1982. 'Rebellious Hillmen: The Guden-Rampa Risings, 1839–1924,' in *Subaltern Studies I*, ed. Ranajit Guha. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Bharati Defensor. 1875. 'How the History of British India Has Been Written,' *The Bengal Magazine* IV (40), 272–280.

Bandopadhyay, Bibhutibhushan. 1975. *Aranyak*. Kolkata: Mitra O Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

Bandopadhyay, Srikumar. 1965. *Banga Sahitye Upanyasher Dhara*. Calcutta: Modern Book Agency.

Bandopadhyay, Shibaji. 1996. *Bangla Upanyashe 'Ora'*. Calcutta: Papyrus.

Bandopadhyay, Sandip. 2003. '*Gram Bangla: Unish Shatak*,' in *Unish Shataker Bangalijibon O Sanskriti*, ed. Swapan Basu and Indrajit Chaudhuri, 55–71. Calcutta: Pustak Biponi.

Banerjee, Prathama. 2006. *Politics of Time: 'Primitives' and History-writing in a Colonial Society*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Baptist Missionary Society. 1811. *Brief Narrative of the Baptist Mission in India*. Boston: Lincoln & Edmands.

Barrow, F. H. 1893. 'Census and the Decline in Bengal,' *The Calcutta Review* 97(194), 308–325.

Barthes, Roland. 1984. 'The Reality Effect,' in *The Rustle of Language*, 127–140. United Kingdom: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

Chakrabarti, Sumita. 2003. '*Akhyan Theke Upanyash: Unish Shatak*,' in *Unish Shataker Bangalijibon O Sanskriti*, ed. Swapan Basu and Indrajit Chaudhuri, 530–546. Calcutta: Pustak Biponi.

Chatterjee, Bankimchandra. 1936. *Bakim Rachanabali Vol II*. Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad.

———1947. 'Sitaram,' in *Anandamath/Devi Chaudhurani/Sitaram*, ed. Brajendranath Bandopadhyay and Sajanikanta Das. Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad.

———1996. *Sociological Essays: Utilitarianism and Positivism in Bengal*, trans. S. N. Mukherjee and Maria Maddern. Calcutta: □ddhi India.

Cohn, Bernard. 1996. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Dey, Rev. Lalbehari. 1969. 'Recollections of My School-Days,' in *Bengal Peasant Life. Folk Tales of Bengal. Recollections of My School-days*. Calcutta: Editions Indian.

———1984 [1878]. *Bengal Peasant Life*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications.

Duff, Rev. Alexander. 1988 [1839]. *India and India Missions: Including Sketches of the Gigantic System of Hinduism Both in Theory and Practice*. Delhi: Swati Publishers.

Dutt, Romesh Chunder. 1908. *The economic history of India under early British rule, from the rise of the British power in 1757 to the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837*. London: Kegan Paul.

Dutta, Abhijit. 1989. *Christian missionaries on the indigo-question in Bengal, 1855–1861*. Calcutta: Minerva Associates.

Fabian, Johannes. 1983. *Time and the Other*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basic Books.

Guha, Ranajit. 1988. *An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth-Century Agenda and Its Implications*. Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences.

———2008. 'A colonial city and its time(s),' *Indian Economic Social History Review* 45(3), 329–351.

Hartley, L.P. 1953. *The Go-Between*. Penguin Books: Harmondsworth.

Hunter, H. H. 1975 [1868]. *The Annals of Rural Bengal*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications.

Lukács, Georg. 1962. *The Historical Novel.* London: Merlin Press.

Macauley, T. B. 1840. *Lord Clive.* Available online at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/clive/txt_complete.html#08 (accessed on 25.04.2010)

Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna. 2003. *A History of Indian Literature in English.* United Kingdom: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers.

Mehta, Uday Singh. 1999. *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought.* USA: University of Chicago Press.

Mill, James. 1817. *The History of British India, Vol. I.* London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy.

———1826. *The History of British India, Vol. II.* London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy.

Mitra, Dinabandhu. 1969 [1860]. 'Neel Darpan,' in *Dinabandhu Mitrer Neel Darpan*, ed. Sri Bhabani Gopal Sanyal, 1–75. Calcutta: Modern Book Agency.

Mohanty, Jitendra Nath. 2001.'Between Indology and Indian Philosophy,' in *Exploration in Philosophy: Indian Philosphy.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi. 2000. *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

———2003. *Upanyashe Ateet: Itihash o Kalpaitihash.* Calcutta: Thema.

Oddie, Geoffrey A. 1999. *Missionaries, Rebellion and Protonationalism: James Long of Bengal 1814–87.* Richmond: Curzon Press.

Palit, Chittabrata 1975. *Tensions in Rural Bengal Society: Landlords, Planters and Colonial Rule, 1830–1860.* Calcutta: Progressive Publishers.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1988 [1985]. *Time and Narrative, Vol 3.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism.* New Delhi: Penguin Books.

Sarkar, Sumit. 1997. *Writing Social History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Sarkar, Tanika. 2001. *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.

———2009. *Rebels, Wives, Saints*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.

Sarma, G.S. 1978. *Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.

Santore, Charles. Illus. 1996. *Snow White: A Tale from the Brothers Grimm*. New York: Park Lane Press.

Sen, Ashok. 2003. '*Banglar Arthaneeti, Bangalir Unish Shatak*,' in in *Unish Shataker Bangalijibon O Sanskriti*, ed. Swapan Basu and Indrajit Chaudhuri, 37–54. Calcutta: Pustak Biponi.

Sen, Sukumar. 1940. *Bangla Sahityer Itihash, Vol. I*. Calcutta: Ananda Publishers.

Shastri, Shivnath. 1903 [1955]. *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Bangasamaj*. Calcutta: New Age Publishers.

Singha, Kaliprasanna. 2009 [1868]. *Hutom Pechar Naksha*, ed. Nimaichandra Pal. Calcutta: Bibekananda Book Centre.

Sinha, N. K. 1956. *Economic History of Bengal: From Plassey to Permanent Settlement, Vol. I*. Calcutta: N.K. Sinha.

Thapar, Romila. 1996. *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

The Calcutta Review. 1860. 'Christianity in India,' *The Calcutta Review* 34 (68), 198–217.

Wilson, Horace Hayman. 1844. *The History of British India: From 1805 to 1835, Vol. I*. London: Madden.

Weitbrecht, Mrs. Mary. 1858. *Missionary Sketches in North India*. London: J. Nisbet and Co.