

# Historicality in Literature: Subalternist Misrepresentations

*In History at the Limits of World History, the historian Ranajit Guha makes an extraordinary plea – for the historian to ‘recover the living history of the quotidian’ and to ‘recuperate the historicality of what is humble and habitual’ so as to turn the historian into a ‘creative writer’. Yet Tagore, whose essay Guha cites in his work, and much later J M Coetzee, had protested at literature being subsumed by history; a history that was taken to be a ‘fixed, self-evident reality to which the novel was supposed to bear witness’. While the question whether creative writing is a better way of writing subaltern history is to be debated, the repercussions of such a move on the future course of subaltern historiography remain to be seen.*

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Ordinary history is traditional, higher history mythical, and the highest mystical.

– Goethe, cited in Bhudev Mukhopadhyay’s epigraph to *Pushpanjali* (Calcutta, 1876)

History as a narrative concerned with the everyday world: this is the objective Ranajit Guha, in the epilogue to his *History at the Limits of World History* (2002), wishes historians to attain, and for a readymade manifesto for this programme he turns to the last but one article of Tagore’s prose writings as it appeared in his Centenary Edition, called *Sahitye Aitihasikata* or *Historicality in Literature* (1941). Guha sees Tagore, in this essay, speak up against the ‘pedantic historian’, and consequently, somewhat startlingly, he endorses the idiosyncratic approach of the creative writer to history as an aim for historians generally. Guha’s attempt to sidestep the necessity, for a historian, of the tools of his trade, of facts that constitute the ‘net of external events’, leads him through Tagore and the Upanishads, to the ‘facticity of being’ in Heidegger, which is opposed to the ‘factuality of historiographical representation’. It is facticity that leads to that desirable historicality that Tagore invokes, for facticity, in Tagore, is ‘an instrument of appropriation by which the self has made the world his own’. The ‘object-historical conventions of historiography’ that Tagore opposes are countered by a facticity that is located in the primal scenes of his childhood, for, ‘Unlike the factuality of historiographic representation, the facticity of being must be grasped in advance’.<sup>1</sup> This is an ideal method, proclaims Guha, for the pre-history of Tagore’s growth as a writer is contained there; thus historicality is situated at a depth beyond the reach of the ‘academic historian’.

Guha’s need to challenge and change the nature of historiography thus leads him to a different field altogether, ‘over the fence’ as he puts it, ‘to neighbouring fields of knowledge’ like literature, which historians must learn from in order to deal with ‘historicality’.<sup>2</sup> While the foundational aim of the subaltern project had been to critique elitism in south Asian historiography, 20 years on Guha stretches that intention to its limits, and at a depth, he acknowledges, unknown to his work till now. Guha’s vision of a new historiography had been located then on the question of subaltern representation in history; ‘history from

below’ had, in a sense, incorporated an element of creativity and imagination from its very inception. But the extraordinary plea here for the historian ‘to recover the living history of the quotidian’, this appeal to ‘recuperate the historicality of what is humble and habitual’<sup>3</sup> attempts to turn the historian, in fact, into a creative writer. Ironically, literary history shows that it was, in fact, the high modernist conception of art that defined the task of the creative writer as involving such a recuperation of the ‘living history of the quotidian’: Proust, Joyce, and Woolf come immediately to mind.

In an appendix to his book, Guha takes it upon himself to translate the essay by Tagore that he has discussed in the epilogue to *History at the Limits of World History*. The reading of it is an interesting experience, because it alerts the reader to a number of simultaneous developments in the thinking of not only Guha but also his colleague and fellow subaltern historian, Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his essay on Tagore, ‘Nation and Imagination’ in *Provincialising Europe* (2002). It is worth noting here that recently, a number of Bengalis fundamentally associated with the Subaltern Studies project, namely Guha and Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak (whose Deuskar lecture at the CSSSC on February 10, 2003 was on ‘Disgrace, Tagore, and Primary Education in West Bengal’), and Partha Chatterjee (who delivered the Sunil Sen Memorial Lecture at Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta, on ‘Rabindrik Nation ki?’ or ‘what is Tagore’s ‘nation’?’ in Bengali on April 29, 2003), seem to all be returning to Tagore (not infrequently reviled in his time for his wealthy, elitist family background, for being a ‘bourgeois writer’) in articles, speeches and epilogues. This sudden rediscovery of Tagore, that icon of the middle classes, after 30-odd years and a lifetime devoted to the subaltern project, is in itself a sociological phenomenon worth commenting upon for the deeply bhadralok instincts of a group of intellectuals who represent a generation fundamentally and all pervasively influenced by the culture of Tagore. Without venturing into any larger generalisations on the portent and symbolism of these Bengali subalternists’ qualitative investment in Tagore and what that might mean to subaltern studies generally, it should be enough to remark merely that perhaps at the root of this return to Tagore lies the shared personal and intellectual traditions of growing up in post-Tagorean Bengal, and that this current pre-occupation perhaps reflects the very nature of the beginnings of

the subaltern studies project, whose 'internal coherence' has been seen by critics to be as much intellectual as personal and the endeavour being impelled by both ideological imperatives and group loyalties.<sup>4</sup> Tagore then becomes a site in which both these elements – the personal and the intellectual – that inform these subalternists' project come together in a problematic way.

Tagore formulates a poetics in his essay that is constructed around a moment of epiphany or transcendence that lifts him out of his everyday existence into a communion with the sublime, which is the essence of creativity. That moment of joy is reminiscent of Wordsworth's most important conceptual image in *The Prelude*: those 'spots of time' 'That with distinct pre-eminence retain/A renovating virtue'...'enshrining/Such is my hope, the spirit of the Past/For future restoration.' Wordsworth continues: 'Such moments/Are scattered everywhere, taking their date/From our first childhood', and in it, 'ordinary sights' become 'visionary'.<sup>5</sup> For Guha to suggest that the academic historian should try to enter that state of heightened perception leading to creativity in order to rid historiography of its 'statist blinkers' is, at the very least, a misreading of Tagore's intention. "All we need to do", Guha quotes the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre as saying, just as Tagore did, "is to open our eyes and see": advice that has been 'ignored by historians these last 60 years'.<sup>6</sup> Such a clarion call to historians to arise, awake, and change their methods and aims is, paradoxically, eerily reminiscent of the countless exhortations of nationalists such as Vivekananda in the 19th century who similarly commanded the people of India to 'open their eyes' and slumber no more; that this paradoxical echoing is completely contrary to Guha's own lifelong politics of historiography, fashioned against Indian elitist/nationalist historiographies in favour of a study of societies, histories and cultures 'from below' is obvious, but still unnerving. All historians from now on, Guha suggests, should situate historicity in a paradigm that shall go beyond the reach of the ordinary academic historian of today. This impulse to go beyond the confines of history has been a familiar charge among novelists and poets who have had a traditional quarrel with the expectation of critics of their unmediated relationship to history; to find a historian making a similar complaint, as Guha does here, is both unique and extraordinary.

The matter is further illuminated by taking a closer look at the essay Guha is dealing with. Guha translates the 'Bangla original' from the centenary edition of Rabindranath Tagore's works, and describes it as 'an authorised transcript of what he [Tagore] said in the course of a conversation with Buddhadev Basu, a leader of the younger generation of Bengali writers.' Sankha Ghosh, with whom Guha says he has checked his facts, should perhaps have mentioned to him that rather than there being 'no ground for doubt', there is indeed very considerable 'ground for doubt about the authenticity, - and, for that matter, finality - of the statement'.<sup>7</sup> Because the history of this article is slightly more complicated than its summation by Guha here, an investigation into its publication and subsequent retraction by Tagore throws all of Guha's conclusions apropos its statements into confusion. About its composition, at a time when Tagore was very ill, Buddhadev writes:

He doesn't sleep well at night, has various strange dreams, even talks in his sleep. Wakes up at 2'0 clock at night and finds it impossible to sleep again. At such times he then begins to relate a story or an essay orally. One day I gave him a few written questions on the relation between history and literature. I had

expected no more than a few words on the subject from him. The next day as soon as I arrived he said: 'What a lot of trick questions (*bor-thokano prasna*) you have come up with. Here.' With that he handed me a manuscript written down by Rani Chanda; he began it after he woke up and by the time we had woken up, it was finished. Two days later he felt that he had not said enough on the topic, so he added another short article to it...<sup>8</sup>

A letter from Tagore to Buddhadev, dated May 24, 1941, mentions the conversation, and carries the entire text of the article; the editor of *Chithipatra* (Letters) refers to this as a 'typed letter-article' (*patra-prabandha*).<sup>9</sup> This letter had been reproduced as an article in letter form by Buddhadev in the journal *Kabita* in 1941 under the title *Sahitye Aitihāsikata O Sahityer Utsa* or 'Historicity in Literature and the Source of Literature'. The second part, *Sahityer Utsa*, - missing from the centenary edition Guha uses - is in complete contrast to the first part, being a vague and generalised pronouncement on the essential characteristics of creativity in mankind: from the delight of his own history in the first part, we turn now to a programmatic history of man. Crucially, there are a couple of sentences at the start and a final concluding sentence here that are missing from the text of the first part, *Sahitye Aitihāsikata*, as it appeared in the centenary edition. Tagore begins, in his letter: "Buddhadev, when I talked to you yesterday of historicity in literature, I had always known in my own mind that I was exaggerating. The reason for such deliberate exaggeration was that much bitterness has accumulated somewhere inside me." The concluding sentence of the letter reverts to this theme: "That is why, if you people go too far (*barabari koro*) with your insistence on the lessons of history, then I too shall get ready for battle (*komor bedhe*) and begin to go too far (*barabari korte*)".<sup>10</sup> (my translations)

Buddhadev's questions, according to Nepal Majumdar, were a mere pretext for Tagore's outburst, caused by the bitterness that he mentions had been accumulating in him for some time before the writing of this epistle. It had its antecedents in "the fact that for quite a few years, Realist and Marxist literary critics had been judging and analysing Rabindranath's poetry and achievements in literature from a historical/materialist ('aitihāsik bastubaad') standpoint. Because of this, a suppressed grief and dissatisfaction had accumulated in the poet's mind."<sup>11</sup> The publication of an issue of *Kavita* devoted exclusively to his poetry had been Buddhadev's personal act of atonement for any perceived public denigration of Tagore; however the very issue that was meant as a celebration of Tagore contained a few pieces that displeased him. Majumdar cites Dhurjatiprasad Mukherjee's 'Rabindranath's Politics', Nihar Ranjan Ray's 'Content in Rabindranath's Novels', and most galling of them all, Debi Prasad Chattopadhyay's 'Rabindranath's Prose Poetry' as the articles that instigated the greatest grief. Devi Prasad's Marxist tendencies had resulted in criticism that was not only wrong-headed, but also fixed according to his party affiliation; thus, he began: "Firstly, to call Rabindranath bourgeois should not be understood as an insult, it is merely a historical truth. And it is an unavoidable historical fact. In the sense that just as it was unavoidable that India should have a merchant class, similarly, it was unavoidable for him to be anything but a bourgeois poet."<sup>12</sup>

Reading Tagore on the meaning of those childhood moments Guha draws our attention to, I would suggest, therefore, that the concern, in Tagore, of the conflict between historicity and literature is an old preoccupation that needs to be linked, not to 'the logic of a developing critique of historiography', (as Guha

reads this essay to be), but to the poetics he formulated towards the end of his life in response to the accusation of younger Bengali writers that his poetry lacked a sense of social realism.<sup>13</sup> Guha summarises the essay as Tagore's 'last testament... on the relation of literature to historicity', but wrongly interprets Tagore's complaint 'I find it difficult of put up with the pedantic historian when he tries to force me out of the centre of my creativity as a poet' to indicate 'unmistakable hostil[ity]' towards 'history and historians'.<sup>14</sup> The irritation was to do not with history or the historian but with critics who insisted on the importance of history to literature; Guha's translation of the Bengali term 'aitihasik pandit' as 'pedantic historian' in itself begs question, for while the noun 'aitihasik' refers to a historian, used as an adjective for 'pandit', it may simply mean, slightly derogatorily, the historically minded pedant. *Sahitye Aitihasikata*: the stress, as far as Tagore is concerned, is almost invariably on the first term, 'sahitya', or literature; the historicity referred to in 'aitihasikata' is related to facts or events, which, Tagore says, mean different things to the historian and different things to the poet. Do not ask the poet to be a historian, Tagore's plea seems to be; his disgust with the insistence of Calcutta critics that he is disengaged from contemporary events leads him to say 'Dur hok ge tomar itihās' ('to hell with your history').<sup>15</sup> It would be more accurate, to conclude, therefore, that Tagore's intention in *Sahitye Aitihasikata* is to demonstrate how literature has been impoverished by the critic's preoccupation with history and realism; he is, arguably, not really bothered about historians or the discipline of history and how it deals with facts; he is concerned, rather, about the business of creative writing, and how that should deal with facts.

For a final word on the subject, however, we may turn to the troubled history of the article's appearance in print. That Tagore was dissatisfied with his utterances on the subject of historicity and literature was evident when he spoke of the fact that he had exaggerated; in the next letter to Buddhadev too, he referred to the article, saying: "This time you left the ashram after having gathered many baskets of scolding. I can only hope that all twelve annas of that are not useless rubbish."<sup>16</sup> But with the passing of time, that dissatisfaction turned into something like despair. In a desperate effort to curtail the damage he perceived himself as having done in allowing his thoughts to be put into these articles, he revised and rewrote them for prior publication in *Prabasi* before Buddhadev could bring them out in *Kabita*. In three successive letters to Ramananda Chatterjee, editor of *Prabasi*, on June 2, 6 and 8 of that year, he expresses his unease. In the first of these, he complains: "I am unsure about whether these articles, which I have spoken aloud, are worth anything." In the next letter, he is more worried: "All those things I had said to Buddhadev in this condition, from my sick bed, have really no value... Keep only those things that are worth publishing. I think there are some new things on literature that are worth keeping. But those have not been captured..." By the third letter, he is categorical in his denial of the articles:

Noticeably, there is a discrepancy between what I had said and what was written down. I was unwell, that is why I could not check it myself – now I see I was wrong... It is not done to publish such scoldings spoken orally. One's own standing is reduced by doing so, I have really understood that now.<sup>17</sup>

Thus it came to be that *Sahityer Utsa* was rewritten and published in *Prabasi* as '*Sahitya, Shilpa*' (Literature, Art) before Buddhadev could bring it out himself, with an editor's note by Chatterjee attached: "The poet, despite his illness, had revised

and edited as far as possible the conversations between Buddhadev babu and Rabindranath that had been transcribed. Not satisfied with that, he has written and sent us this short article." Buddhadev must have been dismayed with these developments, for he writes to Rabindranath on June 25, 1941, requesting him to write a small note for the publication of the pieces in *Kabita*, so that readers could distinguish the articles as genuine – that note however, was never sent. He published the pieces regardless, with the plea: "to understand the poet's entire intention, it is essential to read this (entire version)."<sup>18</sup> Rabindranath had found himself, in fact, unable to accept the first piece, *Sahitye Aitihasikata*, as well. A revised version of that too was sent to *Prabasi*, this time transcribed by Sudhir Kar, but Tagore eventually changed his mind yet again and withdrew it from publication. Significantly, in this version, the poet had given it the title *Sahitye Samasamayikata* or The Contemporary in Literature; the title *Sahitye Aitihasikata*, Historicity in Literature, seems to have been Buddhadev's own rather than Tagore's.<sup>19</sup>

How does such an interpretation of Tagore's intent in this essay, and, subsequently, of Guha's misinterpretation of that intent, affect the mission of subaltern studies? If what is at stake for subaltern studies is the apprehension and representation of subaltern agency in history, and if Guha sees Tagore's words on the matter of history as influential to the degree of issuing a mandate on what historiographical representation should be, then his marked misinterpretation of Tagore should say something about the state of subaltern studies today. What of Guha's hope that this creative history would be a better way of writing history – does that include his original historiographical mission of grasping subaltern agency? While there are no easy answers to such questions, the vexed relationship between creative writing and subaltern history might be nominally illuminated by the example of at least one subaltern historian who has an alternate incarnation as creative artist. Partha Chatterjee has written, adapted, and staged plays in Bengali for the last 25 years in Calcutta – contrary to Guha's vision, in his case the two spheres have so far remained completely segregated on paper. It may be remarked, though, that one of his plays, 'Ramnidhi', published in *Ekkhon* magazine in 1985, is an interpretation (not an adaptation or Bengali version, he writes) of Peter Shaffer's 'Amadeus', and deals, in fact, with the nature of creativity and the creative imagination, contrasting the inborn talent of a famous 19th century Bengali songwriter, Ramnidhi Gupta, with the methodically attained plodding expertise of a professional rival, Kriparam.<sup>20</sup> Here Chatterjee, in a sense, has dramatised the concerns of Guha in 'The Poverty of Historiography', presenting the contrast between a man who attains a degree of competence through hard work (Guha's 'pedantic historian') in the figure of Kriparam and the spontaneously creative artist, Ramnidhi, whose individual perception transforms music-hall trivia into the artistic sublime, within the ironic framework of the play itself. Guha's idea, on the other hand, is to blur the line separating history-writing from literary creativity, demanding now, it seems, that history be written in literary terms; what the repercussions of such a move on the future course of subaltern historiography remains to be seen.

### 'Piercing the Veil of the Real'

Tagore's formulation of his notions about the moment of epiphany in the essay *Sahitye Aitihasikata* could have been said to have been a reformulation of his phrase 'piercing the veil of

the real', discussed by Dipesh Chakrabarty alongside a late Tagore prose poem, 'The Flute' in *Provincialising Europe*, in the context of the same literary debates in 1930s Bengal that form the backdrop for *Sahitye Aitihasikata*.<sup>21</sup>

A close reading of *Sahitye Aitihasikata* shows that the emphasis there is quite clearly on the extraordinary character of certain ordinary moments in Tagore's life. In this short monologue of less than four pages, a little less than two are taken up with describing, in great detail, three instances in his childhood when he was touched with a strange joy. The recurrent motif here is one of sheer bliss touching the child's/poet's soul in the midst of the poverty or mundane nature of his life, such as a moment in the garden in his house, described as being 'indigent like myself', in which, at day break, the 'light fell on the trembling coconut fronds and the dewdrops burst into glitter'. 'No one else', he concludes, "was instructed by the history of that day in the profound significance of that sight as was Rabindranath."<sup>22</sup>

This poetic vision is exactly captured by the phrase cited by Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'piercing the veil of the real', used by Tagore to characterise Sister Nivedita's mission in India, and is valuable to us for showing perhaps a certain continuity of thinking in Tagore. Nivedita was able to love India, Tagore had suggested in a speech on the occasion of her death in 1911, because she was able to 'pierce the veil of poverty and incompleteness in the country as a whole'. She was able to 'see' what other Europeans had not; where they had stopped at the real disappointments of life in India, she had gone beyond those. Tagore's point of view here, as Chakrabarty puts it, was that "realistically seen, India could indeed be disappointing... To be able to love India was to go beyond realism, to pierce the veil of the real, as Tagore put it" (p 150). The use of metaphors in the construction of opposites in both cases are very similar: on the one hand the garden, or India, is poor, miserable, indigent, but possessed of true beauty once the veil is torn, or seen through at a particular moment.

Interestingly, the stories Tagore wrote in *Galpaguchha* in the 1890s find an important place in both Guha and Chakrabarty's essays, and are worth a short digression. Chakrabarty analyses the stories to claim that they represented Tagore's 'critical eye', i.e., they embodied that side of him which 'sought out the defects in the nation for the purposes of reform and improvement'. This was in contrast to the 'adoring eye' that 'saw the nation as already beautiful or sublime' in his poetic compositions. The division seems easy to illustrate: Chakrabarty offers examples from the stories and quotes from Bengali literary critics who show how the stories embodied "the evils of dowry, the domination of wives by husbands, of oppression of women, of selfishness between families marrying into each other, ... of quarrels among brothers over property" (p 151). In contrast, in his poetry and songs, Tagore depicted the same Bengali villages as sites 'of arcadian and pastoral beauty' 'blessed with divine grace', and Chakrabarty quotes from the song 'My golden Bengal, I love you', as well as from *Dui bigha jami* as examples. He concludes:

The former [the stories] was amenable to historicist and objective treatment; it stood for the familiar and political desire of the modern to align the world with that which was real and rational. The poetic, argued Tagore, took us outside of historical time. Together, prose and poetry posed and answered the question of the two ways of seeing in Bengali nationalism (p 153).

There is a problem here, however, firstly even with the examples used: the reference to *Dui bigha jami* is strange, because

the portion quoted, as Chakrabarty himself mentions, is an often-anthologised extract, and only a small portion of the whole. What Chakrabarty does not mention is that the extract is also directly opposite in temper and tone from the rest of the narrative, which is stridently polemical. While he describes the central character in the poem as having been evicted by a greedy landlord and speaking in 'sorrow and grief' when he utters the lines 'I salute you Bengal, my beautiful mother', he strangely smoothes over the fact that this illustration of Tagore's 'adoring eye' is then framed and contained within a narrative (about a rapacious landlord and a false court case robbing a poor man of his ancestral land) that is representative of the 'critical eye'. The either/or construction of the stories as didactic and the poems as celebratory thus breaks down even before it is properly built up.

Chakrabarty's compartmentalisation of Tagore's strategies in the initial period of his writings from 1890 to 1910, when he wrote the stories in *Galpaguchha*, as a "division of labour ... between the prosaic and the poetic" are based on the fact that Tagore developed his theories on the prose poem (although, by the term *gadyakabita*, Tagore is largely referring to free verse rather than the literal 'prose poetry') much later, in 1932, when he said: "That which gives me the taste of the ineffable, I will not refuse to accept as poetry, regardless of whether it comes in the shape of prose or verse."<sup>23</sup> To treat the prose as prosaic and the poetry as poetic in the early period, however, confuses form with content; it is remarkable how, in the Tagore essay Guha deals with, *Sahitye Aitihasikata*, Tagore himself identifies his prose as emptied of history. There, the same stories in *Galpaguchha* are evoked by Tagore to claim (referring to himself in the third person): "thanks to his (the poet's) creativity, what came to be reflected in *Galpaguchha* was not the image of a feudal order nor indeed any political order at all, but that history of the weal and woe of human life which, with its everyday contentment and misery, has always been there... manifesting their simple and abiding humanity across all of history..." While Tagore's intentions do not necessarily negate Chakrabarty's contention that the stories contained 'a trenchant critique of society and a clear political will for reform', it is still interesting to note that Tagore himself characterised their writing as 'gathering those wonderful impressions of weal and woe in my heart' in which his 'inner soul delighted'.<sup>24</sup> What Tagore denies here is exactly that reading of Chakrabarty's that would align these short stories with the 'prosaic'; to be able to write these 'sketches of country life month after month in a way nobody had done before', it was necessary for the 'creator' to work 'all alone in his studio'. "Like the supreme creator, he (the poet), too, creates his work out of his own self", Tagore declares, and in his mind, it is clear from the essay, there is no distinction between the lyrics in *Chitra*, the narrative poems in *Katha O Kahini* and the stories (Tagore's term, 'sketches', also blurs the line) in *Galpaguchha* which are discussed together in one long paragraph, or, since the essay was spoken and transcribed, in the same breath, so to speak.<sup>25</sup> Both are rooted in an act of creation in which the maker delves into his own resources (which come from 'delight') to fashion a representation located beyond history (Mughal or British, it doesn't matter, Tagore says) in the joy of craftsmanship. Chakrabarty's reading of the stories as prosaic and as 'amenable to historicist and objective treatment' is exactly what Tagore means, one might conclude, when he uses the term 'pedantic', for it is this sort of historical reading he is reacting to when he

had said, as he might have to Chakrabarty if he had been a contemporary, 'dur hok ge tomar itihās'.

This brings us to a larger point about the novel and the nation that have been symbiotically linked together in a profusion of postcolonial works. Here Chakrabarty seems to fall into the same trap of treating the two entities as two sides of a coin, when he takes his argument about the division between the prosaic and the poetic in Tagore further to say: "The new prose of fiction – novels and short stories – was thus seen as intimately connected to questions of political modernity." Ironically, in a chapter devoted to poetry, Chakrabarty elides any mention of verse only at the crucial instance of the formulation of national modernity, when a cursory glance at the history of Bengali literature (the site in which Chakrabarty's argument is located) will show that the nation was first imagined, and arguably more influentially imagined (for we tend to forget how much more influential poetry was in the 19th century), in the poetry of Iswar Gupta (*Bharat Santaner Prati* circa 1853), of Rangalal Bandopadhyay (in *Padmini Upakhyan*, 1858), of Hemchandra Bandopadhyay (in *Bharat Sangeet, Bharat Bilap*, 1871). While it would certainly not be wise to dispute that 'the new prose of fiction' was connected to political modernity in Bengal, it would be historically more accurate to mention that poetry had not only preceded it in that regard, but also remained a powerful arbitrator in matters of political modernity right up to the 1950s in Bengali culture. Issues of authenticity and nationalism in modern Bengali poetry had agitated society in its search for a new, modern idiom with which to articulate the nation long before its advent in prose, and subsequently in simultaneous concert with it, throughout the period under discussion.

Chakrabarty's discussion of *Banshi* engages with Tagore's conceptualisation of what 'the function of the poetic was in the world of the modern'.<sup>26</sup> In that poem, Tagore's attempt seems to be to articulate his engagement with modernity and the nation in a definitive way; to show not only that he could do what T S Eliot had achieved, for instance, in the poem *Gerontion* (which is what the younger generation accused him of being unable to do), but also to frame and present the difference of his own particular aesthetic, which said there is something that

transcends the mundane, lifting us beyond the ugliness of modern life towards an eternal beauty.

Realism, Tagore had said in 'Notes to "Modern Poetry"', was but a preference, as 'in fact the real is a product of human selection, conscious or unconscious.'<sup>27</sup> By deliberately choosing to describe 'flowers that are withered and worm-eaten', modern poets were like the 'aghorī sect', deliberately selecting an 'offensive diet and unclean objects'. The depiction of reality for the sake of realism is useless; thus his anger, in the same essay, at Eliot's 'Aunt Helen', where the butler sits with the chambermaid on his lap after the demise of their strict mistress, before whom they had been so careful before. It might have happened, Tagore says, but 'Is that enough?'<sup>28</sup> Tagore's purpose behind the accumulation of images of 'rubbish' when he describes Kinu the milkman's lane in *Banshi* seems to be for it to act as a contrast, in the poem, to a final moment of epiphany or transcendence that is directly reminiscent of the moments of childhood joy in ordinary surroundings recounted in *Sahitye Aitihasikata*. After describing the trapped shadow of the monsoon in the damp room and comparing it to the feeling, in the narrator, of being bound on all sides, tied to a half-dead world, the poem comes to its denouement. Comparing this climactic penultimate verse to a 'dissolving shot', Chakrabarty shows how the poem now "mounts nothing short of a full-scale attack on the historical and the objective".<sup>29</sup>

Suddenly some evening  
the raga *Sindhu-baroan* would be played,  
and the whole sky would resonate  
with the pain of separation  
of all times.

And then in an instant  
it becomes clear  
that this lane is a terrible lie  
like the insufferable delirium of a drunkard.<sup>30</sup>

The realisation this music brings is that 'there is no difference at all/between Akbar the emperor and/Haripada the clerk', that "the imperial parasol and the broken umbrella go together toward the same Vaikuntha".

Once more, then, surroundings that are tawdry and banal, or 'miserable' and 'indigent', which are the words he used to

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describe his garden, as well as the reality of the India Nivedita had served, are transformed by the epiphanic moment, brought about here not by the play of light or a heap of clouds but by the sound of music floating above the lane. This belief in the transcendental function of art or love in Tagore can be traced to be at the root of all his problems with the modernists. For this vision of the emperor and the clerk transcending the reality of the dirty lane to move together towards eternity denies history and takes refuge instead in the redeeming power of art. This emphatic assertion seems almost to be, in the context of the essays discussed above, a poetic formulation of his cry: 'dur hok ge tomar itihās', to hell with your history, a cry that has resonated often enough in the annals of literary conflicts. Thus as late as in the 1980s we may witness the indignation of J M Coetzee, similarly arraigned by critics for writing novels that were too literary, when he had objected strongly to "the 'powerful tendency, perhaps even dominant tendency, to subsume the novel under history', where history was taken to be a fixed, self-evident reality to which the novel was supposed to bear witness".<sup>31</sup> The historical parallels between the situation in which Tagore found himself in the 1930s in pre-independence colonial India and that of Coetzee, battling with the view that "only those novels that in a realist mode put their literariness in the service of ethics, politics, and history deserved to be valued and taken seriously in the pressing circumstances of South Africa in the 1980s" are remarkable. Both writers were reacting to elements in the system with a judgmental, bureaucratic cast of mind (censors in the case of Coetzee, critics in the case of Tagore), and both responded by insisting on literature as a specific kind of discourse, distinct from the discourses of history, politics and ethics; Coetzee characterised this as 'storytelling as another, an other mode of thinking', while Tagore reiterated, referring to himself in the generalised third person, that "In his own field of creativity Rabindranath has been entirely alone and tied to no public by history. Where history was public, he was there merely as a British subject but not as Rabindranath himself."<sup>32</sup>

Without going in greater detail into the complications of the relation between modernism and Tagore, which would have to include a discussion on the relation between the urban and the modern, on the importance of nature to Tagore, and on the moment of epiphany in modernism contrasted to the Tagorean moment transcending the real, it might be apposite to end by pointing out that to appreciate Tagore as a modern poet we need, perhaps, to rely on the fragmentary, imagistic, and intense songs of the *Gitobitan* rather than on the programmatic and somewhat forced protestations of poems like *Banshi*. Those high priests of modernism, Flaubert and Pound, for instance, had advocated concreteness and exactness as well as an appeal to the sub-conscious through suggestion and indirectness as the prime objectives of the modernist writer; the very qualities that at least one recent writer and critic has found in Tagore: "Tagore's most enduring creative legacy to the Bengali bourgeoisie was ... a gift of songs in which the consciousness of Bengali modernity first found utterance and in which the impress of its creation and history was subliminally contained...(in) lyric moments of implication and inquiry."<sup>33</sup>

Placed in the context of modern Indian history, and, more specifically, in the context of Bengali middle-class culture, Tagore is freed from the essentialist, universal reading of his poems as repositories of mystical wisdom and spirituality, and consequently as the very antithesis of the modern. Chakrabarty's

location of Tagore's modernism in poems such as *Banshi* depend on his reading of the poem as an attempt by Tagore to 'libidinise the very materiality of language'; his conclusion that thereby, Tagore's poems become 'as much a resource for living in the city... as any modernism could be' depends too heavily on a false construct: that of an oppositional relationship between the prosaic and the poetic, and perhaps misunderstands the nature of the modernist enterprise.<sup>34</sup> The flickering image of the aged but still powerful poet raging against the forced inculcation of a fixed history into readings of literature, agitated about misrepresentation in his last essays, still debating the nature of the modern in art that we have come away with here, should lead, in the end, to a more radical reinterpretation of his role as a modern poet than has been possible either in Chakrabarty or in this space. **EW**

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## Notes

- 1 Guha, p 79.
- 2 Ibid, p 5.
- 3 Ibid, p 94.
- 4 See David Ludden, Introduction to *Reading Subaltern Studies*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2001, 3, who places the imperative more on group loyalties than on intellectual imperatives.
- 5 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: Book Twelfth* (1850), lines 208-10.
- 6 Guha, p 94.
- 7 Guha, p 95.
- 8 Buddhadev Basu, *Shab Peyechhir Deshe (Wish-Fulfilling Country)*, Vikalp, Calcutta, 2001, p 78.
- 9 Sutapa Bhattacharya (ed), Rabindranath Tagore's *Chithipatra (Letters)*, Vol 16, Vishwabharati Publications, Calcutta, 1995, pp 154-55, 159. All subsequent references to *Chithipatra*, unless otherwise mentioned, are to Vol 16, and all the translations from this volume are mine.
- 10 *Chithipatra*, p 159.
- 11 Nepal Majumdar, *Bharate Jatiyata O Antarjatikata Ebong Rabindranath (Indian Nationalism and Internationalism and Rabindranath)*, Vol 6, Dey's Publishing, Calcutta, 1996, p 313.
- 12 Majumdar, pp 316-17.
- 13 Guha, p 86.
- 14 Guha, p 77.
- 15 My translation. Guha's version, 'Off with Your History' is more literal but too archaic.
- 16 Tagore to Buddhadev, June 4, 1941, *Chithipatra*, p 162.
- 17 Letter from Tagore to Ramananda Chatterjee, June 8, 1941, *Chithipatra*, Vol 12, Viswabharati, Calcutta, 1986, p 219.
- 18 *Chithipatra*, p 402.
- 19 See letter from Tagore to Chatterjee, July 7, 1941, *Chithipatra*, Vol 12, p 219.
- 20 Partha Chatterjee, *Ramnidhi in Ekkhon: A Journal of Literature and Culture*, Autumn: 1985, pp 65-115.
- 21 'Nation and Imagination' in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2002, pp 149-79.
- 22 All quotes from Tagore's essay are from Guha's translation, Appendix, *History at the Limit of World History*, pp 95-99.
- 23 Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Prose Poem' in Sisir Das and Sukanta Chaudhuri (eds), *Selected Writings on Literature and Language: Rabindranath Tagore*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001, p 332.
- 24 Chakrabarty, p 151; Guha, p 99.
- 25 Guha, p 98.
- 26 Chakrabarty, p 163.
- 27 Notes to 'Modern Poetry' in *Selected Writings*, p 328.
- 28 Ibid, p 290.
- 29 Chakrabarty, pp 166-67.
- 30 *ibid.* (Chakrabarty's translation)
- 31 Peter McDonald, 'The Writer, the Critic, and the Censor: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the Question of Literature', unpublished paper, Oxford, 2003.
- 32 Guha, p 97.
- 33 Amit Chaudhuri, 'The Flute of Modernity', *The New Republic*, October 19, 1998, p 46.
- 34 Chakrabarty, pp 170-71.