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Writing on the Land: Form, Ecology, and Agrarian Development in Mid-Twentieth Century Bengal

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Writing on the Land:  
Form, Ecology, and Agrarian Development in Mid-Twentieth Century Bengal

by

Devin P. Choudhury

A dissertation in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Rhetoric

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Science and Technology Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Pheng Cheah, Chair

Professor Anne-Lise François

Professor Poulomi Saha

Professor Nasser Zakariya

Spring 2024



Abstract

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Form, Ecology, and Agrarian Development in Mid-Twentieth Century Bengal

by

Devin P. Choudhury

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Designated Emphasis in Science and Technology Studies

University of California, Berkeley

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In “Writing on the Land,” I look to literature in order to uncover visions of community, production, and human-nonhuman relation that emerged as alternatives to agrarian development in late colonial and early postcolonial South Asia, with a focus on Bengal. Reading works from Rabindranath Tagore, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Neel Mukherjee, and Mahasweta Devi that engage with various inflection points in the Bengali countryside between 1920 and 1980, I demonstrate that literary texts have the capacity not just to illustrate the specific instances of human and nonhuman resistance that haunted agrarian development in this period, but also to draw forth the often-radical critiques of capitalist modernity that inhere in the agrarian realm more broadly, as well as to articulate the possibilities that dwell embryonically in such critiques. The texts that I examine articulate these critiques and possibilities by way of form. Through the interweaving of their own literary forms with their representations of various sociopolitical and temporal forms, these texts defamiliarize and interrupt the ways in which the British colonial state and Indian postcolonial nation-state attempted to transform agrarian life and agricultural production in the mid-twentieth century. In turn, these texts articulate alternative understandings of progress, growth, and society; of metabolism, the human body, and the nation; of debt, labor, and peasant revolt; of death, the commons, and political action. “Writing on the Land” thus extends current work on literature and form by illustrating the way in which human entanglements with nonhuman beings and processes can both shape and derange our formal categories. It also challenges and augments conventional understandings of colonial and postcolonial development in South Asia: alongside famines and exploitation, technological revolutions and radical redistributions of land, a story emerges of the many other agrarian futures that this tumult made possible and foreclosed.

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## Introduction: Writing on the Land

...henceforth, industry must be subordinate to agriculture, which must be everywhere locally attuned to the environment.

- Colin A.M. Duncan, *The Centrality of Agriculture*, p. 38

“What can I tell you?” he said at last. “The world isn’t like a clock. Everything doesn’t always happen on time.”

- Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, p. 343

In November of 2020, Indian farmers marched on Delhi. Spurred on by the passage of the Farm Bills, three acts that deregulated Indian agricultural markets and opened them to corporate takeover, the march and subsequent establishment of “protest cities” along highways into the city formed perhaps the most spectacular instance of agrarian political action in the 21<sup>st</sup> century thus far: a mass refusal to submit to the ongoing subordination of rural livelihoods to the whims the global marketplace; an assertion of the centrality of agriculture and its practitioners to the functioning and identity of their local communities, the nation-state, and human life itself. Beyond their immediate success—Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the repeal of the Farm Bills in November 2021—the protests both offered up a vision of democratic, egalitarian political action<sup>1</sup> and assured agriculturalists of their immediate political influence at the national level. Farmers demonstrated this assurance in February 2024, marching once again on the Indian capital in pursuit of an expanded minimum support price for their crops, among other demands. Darshan Pal, one of the leaders of the *Saṃyukta Kīśān Morcā*<sup>2</sup> [United Farmers Front], put it succinctly: “We can surround Delhi whenever we want” (Pal quoted in Acharya et al.).

Pal’s pronouncement is notable not just for its confident, Mao-inflected assertion of agrarian power. Rather, I also read this claim as a tacit admission of the fraught relationship between agriculture, those who practice it, and capitalist modernity itself. After all, not only Delhi but all human communities are, to some extent, *always* “surrounded” by agriculturalists, if not literally—and this is often the case—then in the sense that such communities are fundamentally founded on products coaxed or wrested from the soil. As Pal’s claim suggests, however, this foundation, this surrounding, is typically taken for granted, only becoming manifest at moments of impasse or conflict. It is almost as if there is something slightly embarrassing about agriculture for those invested in dreams of endless economic growth, of human separation from and mastery over nonhuman nature: perhaps nowhere else do human beings so clearly confront their ongoing reliance upon nonhuman organic beings and processes, nonhuman *life*, with all the limits and affordances of the latter.

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the radical forms of solidarity and the leveling of caste- and gender-hierarchies that emerged over the course of the protests, see Smita Narula’s “Confronting State Violence: Lessons from India’s Farmer Protests” (2022), especially pp. 166-169.

<sup>2</sup> All transliterations are in ISO 15919, save for names of people and places that have entered common English usage, such as Rabindranath Tagore (Rabīndranāth Ṭhākur) and Visva-Bharati (Bīshvabhāratī). For edge cases—for instance, the names of authors whose works are widely translated into English but who may be less familiar to Western readers—I have tended toward the typical transliterations, rather than the more technical ISO 15919 renderings.



Indeed, for at least the past two centuries the central question as regards agriculture has not been how best to arrange human society in relation to the land and those who work it, but rather how best to drag agriculture kicking and screaming into modernity: how best agriculture can be made to support ever-expanding industrial production and bring nonhuman nature to heel.<sup>3</sup> It has become a cliché to note that the majority of human beings, particularly in the West, have been sundered from any real relationship with the source of their bodily subsistence. Less remarked upon, however, is the way in which agriculture has all but vanished from everyday accountings of human social and political order. Where, in particular, is agriculture in the modern nation-state, in this recalcitrant sociopolitical form that has, over the course of the past decade, reasserted itself with a revanchist vengeance? And how might accounting for agriculture, this site of proliferating, labor-mediated relations with nonhuman organic beings and processes, this most foundational of engagements with that which at once subtends and exceeds human life—how might such an account offer up the ground to reimagine the forms in which human beings organize themselves and their work upon the world, as well as, just as importantly, to make new sense of the cultural forms by which they make sense of their lives?

In this dissertation, I begin the project of answering these questions. To do so, I turn to literature: specifically, to literary engagements with agrarian development in South Asia and, in particular, Bengal.<sup>4</sup> The texts that I examine, which engage with various inflection points in the agrarian realm in Bengal between 1920 and 1980, put forth critiques of the foundations on which agrarian development, the postcolonial developmental nation-state, and capitalist modernity itself depend. However, they do not do so by way of a simplistic romanticism for an idealized, precolonial agrarian world. Rather, these texts, by way of both their representational content and formal inventiveness, outline visions—sometimes robust, sometimes only seeds—of forms of life, labor, and community underwritten by logics radically different from those undergirding capitalist modernity. These texts offer up alternative understandings of progress, growth, and society; of metabolism, the human body, and the nation; of debt, labor, and peasant revolt; of death, the commons, and political action. These critiques, these visions and understandings, emerge at the intersection between, on the one hand, attempts by the British colonial state and Indian postcolonial nation-state to incorporate the agrarian realm into flows of capital, molding both human and nonhuman beings into forms of existence amenable to scientized commodity production and the accumulation of capital; and, on the other, resistance on the part of the nonhuman beings and processes that comprise the land, as well as the humans who work with, on, and through these beings and processes. Such resistance manifests both actively and passively, through revolt and through the very materiality of the fragile, often-unpredictable living beings on whom agriculture depends.

My project is at once indebted to and in excess of the two thinkers with whose words this introduction begins. Following Duncan, I take a (re)centering of agriculture as a fundamental condition of anything approaching an ecologically just society. Rather than a political economic intervention, however—with which, despite its advocacy of agriculture as a “central *cultural* element in human society” (Duncan 38, emphasis mine), Duncan’s work is primarily concerned—this dissertation turns to a historical moment of profound flux, of nation-building

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<sup>3</sup> I am here both drawing on and expanding on Karl Kautsky’s foundational articulation of what he calls “the agrarian question”: “*whether, and how, capital is seizing hold of agriculture, revolutionising it, making old forms of production and property untenable and creating the necessity for new ones*” (Kautsky 12, emphasis Kautsky’s).

<sup>4</sup> A region that includes what is today the Indian state of West Bengal and the independent nation-state of Bangladesh. Here, I focus primarily on the former.

and rapid social, economic, and technological change in the countryside, in order to examine moments in which alternative forms of human organization, built on alternative foundations, shine forth as liberatory possibilities previously obscured by the colonial state or postcolonial nation-state. Out of these moments, I begin a larger project of imagining a world in which Delhi, each great city of the world, every human settlement, is always surrounded, traversed, and sustained by agriculture, not just physically but, too, culturally, socially, politically, and ecologically.

My attention to *form*, in turn, draws me to and then beyond Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, as well as his nonfictional ecocritical writings. Such works assert the incompatibility between regnant literary forms—the modern novel in particular—and the agential forces of nonhuman nature, whether the “epic mutability” (*The Hungry Tide* 154) of the tidal landscape of the Sundarbans or the vast temporal and spatial scales at which the seemingly improbable effects of climate change unfold (*The Great Derangement* 23-25, 62-63).<sup>5</sup> I owe much to Ghosh's exploration, both theoretical and practical, of the relationship between literature's formal limits and the complex entanglement of human and nonhuman beings. However, in this dissertation, I demonstrate the way in which literature, narrative fiction in particular, is in fact able bring such entanglements—whether they are born of labor or revolt, catastrophe or everyday life—into composed tension with many of our most fundamental forms: the nation and the state, the commodity and the labor process, even our very bodies. Such tension, especially when coordinated by the perhaps-productively-disjointed composition of literary form, can demonstrate, first, the way that accounting for our entanglements with nonhuman beings and processes can fragment familiar formal categories, whether sociopolitical, economic, or aesthetic; and, second and perhaps more importantly, the way that such fragmentation, such *decomposition*, lays the soil in which to cultivate forms more amenable to the ecological problems with which we find ourselves confronted. In this sense, I take literature as a privileged means of giving the lie to, as Teresa Brennan puts it, “the illusory yet material foundations constructed in the name of fantasy (human autonomy and will)” and turning instead to “the natural, generative foundations that sustain life” (Brennan 15): from the clock to the world.

Such a turn has gained a greater urgency in recent years, as its stakes have become increasingly clear. Most notably, the sudden visibility of anthropogenic climate change and subsequent popularization of the concept of the Anthropocene—a name for a new geological epoch in which human beings are a, if not *the*, primary geological agent at a planetary scale—has led many thinkers to revisit the foundations of humanistic and social scientific thought: our conceptions of modernity and the social<sup>6</sup>; of history, humanity and species, globe and planet<sup>7</sup>; of capitalism, particularly in its relation to the nonhuman and as regards its centrality to our current

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<sup>5</sup> On the question of literary form and climate change, see as well Elizabeth M. DeLoughery's *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (2019) and Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions* (2015).

<sup>6</sup> See the work of Bruno Latour, ranging from *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) to his more recent *Facing Gaia* (2017) and *Down to Earth* (2018).

<sup>7</sup> See, in particular, Dipesh Chakrabarty's *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021), which contains a revised version of his influential 2009 essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses.”

crisis<sup>8</sup>; and of self-contained entities as such.<sup>9</sup> These reconsiderations have often emerged from and participated in debates over the best way to understand our current historical conjuncture: are we truly in the Anthropocene? Might not Capitalocene be a more accurate term? Or Chthulucene? Plantationocene? And, an interrelated question: when precisely did this new epoch begin? With the first atomic detonation? The invention of the steam engine? The rise of agriculture?<sup>10</sup> The discussions that have arisen in response to these lines of questioning have been enormously fruitful in allowing us to think beyond a narrowly anthropocentric perspective, even as the best of this work has kept age-old sites of conflict—class, gender, sexuality, race, caste—squarely in view.

Related to these discussions—forming their backdrop, emerging in response to them, influencing them in turn—is the recent flurry of calls for a fundamental reorganization of our political, social, and economic forms, from the increasingly authoritarian techno-utopianism of Silicon Valley godmen like Peter Thiel and Elon Musk to variably socialist degrowth visions from thinkers like Jason Hickel and Kohei Saito.<sup>11</sup> This terrain has been summed up most succinctly by Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann, who raise the question of “the adaptation of the political” (Wainwright and Mann x): that is, of how political and economic conditions will transform, as they must, in relation to the challenges of a warming world. Against the three possibilities that seem most likely—broadly, forms of planetary sovereignty either capitalist and ostensibly democratic or non-capitalist, state-centered, and authoritarian, or, alternatively, the fragmentation of the world into capitalist nation-states animated by reactionary populism—Wainwright and Mann advocate what they name Climate X: some future form of planetary community no longer organized by capitalist value or by sovereignty either national or planetary, rooted in equality, dignity, and solidarity (25-46, 175-177). Both Climate X and the path toward it, however, remain intentionally vague, yet-to-be-determined. Indeed, the authors conclude with a call “not to draw up blueprints of an emancipated world, but to... affirm[] other possibilities” (197).

In this dissertation, I seek to uncover such possibilities, even as I continue the work of rethinking foundational humanistic and social scientific categories with our ever-evolving more-than-human entanglements in mind. The ultimate horizon of this research—toward which this dissertation is only a first, hesitant step—is the theorization of a *new peasantry*: that is, of a form of collectivity rooted in a needs-based, community economy<sup>12</sup>; a form of collectivity that, while

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<sup>8</sup> Here the thought of Jason Moore is instructive, particularly his *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015). Many of the forthright engagements with capitalism’s role in the climate crisis, including Moore’s work, Slavoj Žižek’s *Living in the End Times* (2010), and Andreas Malm’s *Fossil Capital* (2016), include responses, explicit or implicit, to Chakrabarty’s attempt to think humans from a species perspective. For a broadly Marxist critique of both Chakrabarty and Latour’s recent work on the Anthropocene, see Peter Osborne’s “The Planet as Political Subject?” (2024).

<sup>9</sup> Donna Haraway’s work is probably the most illustrative example here. See *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), at least as regards the Anthropocene.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the difficulty of assigning a beginning to the Anthropocene played a role in the recent decision by the International Union of Geological Sciences to reject a proposal declaring that we have entered a new geological epoch (Zhong).

<sup>11</sup> For Silicon Valley, see, in particular, Barton Gellman’s recent article on Thiel in *The Atlantic*, “Peter Thiel Is Taking a Break from Democracy” (2023). For degrowth, see Jason Hickel’s *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (2020) and Kohei Saito’s *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (2023).

<sup>12</sup> My conception of community economy comes from J.K. Gibson-Graham’s *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006). To wit: “an acknowledged space of social interdependency and self-formation” (Gibson-Graham 166), in which subsistence needs, surplus, consumption, and the commons are sites of ethical negotiation. As with Wainwright and

not opposed to technological innovation or use, prizes and emphasizes skillful human labor that is creative, joyful, and self-fulfilling. Such a collectivity must orient itself toward *more-than-human subsistence*, accounting not just for human needs but rather for those of the many beings caught within the webs of relation that make human life possible in the first place. In this sense, I am not rejecting the desirability of “growth” or “development” as such. Rather, this dissertation is a contribution to the project of, as the ethnographer Anand Pandian puts it, “pluralizing our own thoughts of progress” (Pandian 30). It is in order to undertake this pluralizing project that I turn to agrarian development in South Asia, an example of the mode of development that, to borrow a phrase from Sylvia Wynter, overrepresents itself as if it were progress itself.<sup>13</sup>

## Developmental Openings

### *Sowing Development, Reaping Disorder*

When I invoke the term *development* throughout this dissertation, I am referring to attempts to usher peoples, primarily in the so-called Global South, toward modernity as manifest in the industrialized nation-states of the West. This broad definition encompasses an understanding of development, first, as an economic phenomenon concerned primarily with increasing productive capacity—including, for instance, through the adoption of sociotechnical systems, labor practices, and understandings of a properly-functioning marketplace—and, second, intertwined but not entirely assimilable, as referring to processes oriented toward improving its subjects’ material standard of living. While it is common to periodize development as beginning in the aftermath of the Second World War, in the wake of decolonization in Africa and Asia in particular, my understanding of development includes as well what might be taken as development’s prehistory, its roots in earlier colonial economic and moral interventions. The need for such an expansive view of development is particularly necessary in India, where, despite certain highly important differences, the continuity between the colonial state and its postcolonial successor has been frequently observed.<sup>14</sup>

It may seem perverse to turn to development as a site from which to imagine futures sufficient to the challenges of anthropogenic climate change. After all, insofar as development is, broadly, oriented toward the replication the world over of models of modernity in large part defined by the quest for (typically capitalist) economic growth, it is deeply implicated in the emergence of these challenges in the first place, or at the very least in their recent hyper-intensification. Likewise, development, particularly in India, has functioned as a vital source of

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Mann’s Climate X, Gibson-Graham’s notion of community refuses a single ideal, instead making economy “a site of decision, of ethical praxis” (87) while retaining a focus on “the sociality that is always present” (88) therein. While I do supply certain broad ideals here, I believe they remain flexible enough to account for a diversity of economic ways of being.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Wynter’s “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument” (2003), in which Wynter refers to “our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself” (260).

<sup>14</sup> As to the idea of development proper beginning in the wake of the Second World War, see in particular Arturo Escobar’s *Encountering Development* (1995). For continuities between colonial and postcolonial developmentalist ambitions in India, see “Visions of Development” in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

legitimation for both the colonial state's civilizing project—suturing over the internal contradictions of the liberalism of empire—and the authority of the postcolonial state—providing its justification for assuming leadership over the people constituting the newly-independent Indian nation (Gidwani xx; A. Gupta 33; *The Nation and Its Fragments* 203-205). This is to say nothing of the powerful depoliticizing effects of development, the ways in which it has, in India and elsewhere, attempted to paper over political realities—and thus possibilities—with technical fixes that resulted in the extension of state power (Ferguson 20-21; Li 7-9; *The Nation and Its Fragments* 208-219).

Despite its totalizing, homogenizing ambitions, however—despite the way in which it is predicated precisely on the *foreclosure* of any future aside from a perhaps-pale mimicry of the West—I take development as particularly well-suited to my project of interrogating and reimagining the foundations of capitalist modernity. Its own constrained imaginative capacity notwithstanding, development remains fundamentally oriented toward the future both in its aspirations and at the sites of its attempted enactment. As Jennifer Wenzel notes, the resource logics that often animate development practices—logics in which nonhuman nature is reduced to a set of resources intended for human exchange or use—are “sites of prodigious imagining” (Wenzel 148) insofar as they project nonhuman beings into a future in which these beings produce particular types of value; the same is true of development practitioners' attempts to inculcate in their human subjects the qualities of rational calculation typical of so-called *homo economicus*. As a consequence, when development is contested, the focus of the conflict is, necessarily, the shape of the future. Put differently, to resist development requires an alternative articulation of the future and how that future might be reached, however implicit. At the same time, as many have observed, development efforts almost never succeed quite as planned; whether this failure manifests as Bhabha-esque ambivalent mimicry on the part of formerly colonized nation-states (A. Gupta 40-42) or as a manifestation of the way in which capitalism is necessarily riven with alternative norms, modes of being, and practices of value-production (Gidwani xxiii-xxiv, 195-199; *Provincializing Europe* 66-71), it necessarily undermines both the solidity of the developmentalist project and the boundaries this project erects around the range of possible futures. In this sense, even those projects that do not face active resistance tend to produce unexpected results, including alternative articulations of development itself.

These features of development—its conflicted orientation toward the future, its inevitable impasses and surprises—are all the more notable and all the more generative in the realm of agriculture. Agriculture and the lives of those human beings who perform it are not just particularly favored objects of developmental intervention. They are also particularly resistant to the ostensibly ideal forms into which such intervention attempts to draw them. This latter point is due, perhaps first and foremost, to the enormous complexity of agriculture, a complexity that is in no small part the product of agriculture's reliance on a panoply of nonhuman organic beings and processes. Vinay Gidwani sums it up well: “Agriculture is a variable ecology, an evolving and spatially heterogeneous collective of human and nonhuman interactions, not a sector in a planning model” (Gidwani 105). Attempts to render this variable ecology legible and transformable, in turn, are everywhere riven with gaps, inconsistencies, and potentially fruitful disorder.

This ironic cultivation of disorder by those who aim for absolute control is not exclusive to development projects in the Global South. As Wendell Berry argues, it is a feature of so-called modern agriculture the world over (Berry 71). And yet development as it has proceeded in the (former) colonies has been a particularly messy affair, as development practitioners have

confronted manifestations of difference not just between humans and nonhuman beings but, too, between human beings. This is not to suggest that human difference plays no role in, for instance, agricultural modernization within the United States. Far from it.<sup>15</sup> However, postcolonial studies has meticulously demonstrated from its inception that the question of difference is particularly acute in the (post)colony, where attempts to instantiate sociopolitical and economic forms originating in the West often confront seemingly unassimilable phenomena, leading to the transformation of all parties involved. Such confrontations, I argue, often produce a defamiliarized or even inverted version of development, one that is often—although not always—generative of the alternative sociopolitical forms and futures that, in writing this dissertation, I set out to uncover.

### *Toward Bengal*

Bengal suggests itself for this research by way of its unique relation to the British colonial and imperial projects and, as well, the postcolonial Indian nation-state. As the site of the initial British incursion into South Asia, Bengal offers the opportunity to trace colonial and imperial influence over systems of land tenure and the allocation of agricultural labor, as well as the ways in which this influence played a role in the emergence of Indian anticolonial nationalism, particularly in the latter's economic, developmental form.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, in the post-independence period, the region, particularly West Bengal, has had a remarkably fraught relationship with agrarian development and agrarian capitalism more broadly: the nation-state's envisioned march toward capitalist modernity has been complicated in various ways by leftists both elected and guerrilla, by instances of rural unrest ranging from the famed Santal *hul* of 1855 to the more recent violence that erupted in the face of the state government's attempts to establish an industrial special economic zone in Nandigram in 2007.<sup>17</sup> It is often argued, for instance, that the Green Revolution—the importation of high-yielding seed varieties, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, improved irrigation, and mechanization that began in South Asia in the late 1960s—simply bypassed West Bengal entirely; while this claim is inaccurate—the technologies of the Green Revolution did reach West Bengal, albeit often later than they did states like Punjab and in a far patchier manner (Nandy and Siddhanta 103; *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital* 137-138)—it reveals the extent to which the transformation of agriculture in the state has been a contested, non-linear process. This process has been based, at least in the late colonial and early postcolonial periods that I examine here—that is, at least up to the election of the Left Front

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<sup>15</sup> Race and indigeneity, for instance, have in recent years come to the fore in accountings of the modernization of agriculture in the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See, in particular, Monica M. White's *Freedom Farmers* (2018) and Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013).

<sup>16</sup> I attend to several of these moments in the first two chapters of this dissertation: in particular, the 1882 publication of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Ānandamath* and the 1943 Bengal famine. For perhaps the most well-known account of British attempts to remake land relations in the immediate aftermath of their earliest seizures of political power in Bengal, see Ranajit Guha's *A Rule of Property for Bengal* ([1963] 2016).

<sup>17</sup> For a description of the changing agrarian landscape in the late colonial period—with which I deal in my first two chapters—see Sugata Bose's *Agrarian Bengal* (1986), Partha Chatterjee's *Bengal 1920-1947* (1984), Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri's "The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar, 1885-1947" (1975), and Iftekhar Iqbal's ecology-incorporating *The Bengal Delta* (2010). For works that deal with the late colonial period but extend into the post-independence mid-twentieth century—the latter of which I deal with in my third and fourth chapters—see Tariq Omar Ali's *A Local History of Global Capital* (2018) and Sugata Bose's *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital* (1993).

government in Bengal in 1977, at which point a series of rural reforms was implemented, attempting to redistribute land from rich to poor and to revitalize local village government<sup>18</sup>—in what Sugata Bose has described as the “logical relationship between capitalist development and non-capitalist relations of production,” the former relying on “[a] labour process primarily utilizing the unremunerated work of peasant families” (*Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital* 109-110).

Intertwined with this political economic history is the extraordinary ecological richness of Bengal, a region filled with fertile plains, shifting rivers, dense mangrove forests, and low, rolling hills. There is no way to think the agrarian scene, in Bengal or elsewhere, without confronting the ecological conditions through which this scene is acting, in which it is ensconced, and of which it forms a vital part. Such a merger is particularly generative in Bengal, where the very boundaries between land and water are often in a state of flux. As Iftexhar Iqbal demonstrates, the complex riverine land- and waterscape of the Bengal delta at once transformed and was transformed by changes in the system of land tenure—as the Permanent Settlement of 1793 repeatedly ran up against the fact that land beside rivers appeared and disappeared at prodigious speed, leading to complex struggles over land revenues and proprietorship between peasants, zamindars, and the colonial state (Iqbal 18-26)—and the construction of railways—as the embankments on which railways were built interrupted countless formerly free-flowing waterways, with consequences for the composition of the land and rural health as well (118-130). Likewise, K. Sivaramakrishnan has described the way in which the singular diversity of Bengal’s forests played an important role in forcing colonial forest department officials to rely on local knowledge in effecting their proto-developmental agendas, leading to endless revision of their working plans for Bengali silviculture (“Scientific Forestry and Genealogies of Development in Bengal” 263-274). In short, attempts to transform the agrarian realm in Bengal not only encountered alternative formulations of modernity and modes of human resistance but, too, a range of particularly volatile and visible nonhuman beings and processes that consistently complicated these attempts.

Vitally, these complications, these alternative formulations and modes of resistance, have historically formed an important strand within Bengali literature. As Auritro Majumder notes, this strand emerged perhaps most clearly in the Bengali novel, which “provided a formal template to the motor of combined and uneven development, offering its narrative structure and aesthetic strategies to represent the myriad social antagonisms of overlapping modes of production... In fiction, ‘land’ was the theme as well as the form” (Majumder 421-422). This is to say that Bengali fiction, as much as any strand of any literary tradition anywhere in the world, is explicitly concerned with precisely the problems that this dissertation investigates. Beyond the works that I consider here, novels like Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s 1939 *Āraṇyak* [*Of the Forest*], Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay’s 1944 *Pañchagrām* [*Five Villages*], and Akhtaruzzaman Elias’s 1996 *Khoyābnāmā* [*The Book of Dreams*] raise in explicit terms the subject of changing relations to and on the land, shifting conceptions and influences of nonhuman beings both living and divine, and, more broadly, the destructive impacts of Western modernity on those upon whom it is foisted.

I will conclude this section with a brief foray into one of the most interesting examples of this literary enfolding of labor and land relations, as well as their entanglement with Bengal’s mutable riverine landscape: Advaita Mallabarman’s 1956 novel *Titās Ēkṭi Nadīr Nām* [*A River*

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<sup>18</sup> For a detailed description of these reforms and their results, see Sunil Sengupta and Haris Gazdar’s “Agrarian Politics and Rural Development in West Bengal” (1997).

*Called Titash*]. The novel, which describes the interrelations of Mālo fisherpeople, local cultivators, and the river Titās, illustrates the conceptual and formal possibilities at play in the Bengali countryside. From the start, the text bodies forth a world outside the logics of development. The narrator depicts the Titās as external to established academic formations, illegible to the forms of scientific knowledge-production proper to the state: the river “has no such history [as other rivers] in its bosom. It is only a river... Its name is not in the pages of geography” (Mallabarmān 3). What is more, “the people of its banks do not know the etymological meaning of its name. They never tried to, nor did they feel any need to” (12). At the same time, the Titās is deeply intertwined with the lives of the Mālo, not just in its economic function as a source of their physical subsistence but, more fundamentally, as the substrate on which these fisherpeople make their lives, on which occurs the passage of their generations: on which they are able to make sense of the world. As the novel’s narrator puts it, “many histories of the affection of mothers, the souls of brothers, the compassion of wives and daughters have been *drawn upon* its banks” (13-14, emphasis mine). The river is both a work of art (9) and a manifestation of the flow of time (13); it is “not a river—it is one thousand years of untold stories, flowing in one direction, having fallen between the bounds of its two banks” (68).

If one takes this language seriously—that is, if one does not reduce it to a set of superstitions or blandly respected cultural beliefs, to mere social fact—then the relationship between the Mālo and the Titās in the novel is one in which humans and river constitute one another, in which neither can be understood, even exist, in the absence of the other. Tied to this merger is a shift in the conception of property: when discussing the ownership of land, the Mālo share a collective understanding that the zamindars

are not true. They are the exception amongst people. The tenants are true. Therefore, after many twists and turns, they [the tenants] are the owners of the soil. Not the owners of papers, but the owners of dwelling [*bās karā*]. In this manner, the owners of the Titās are the fisherpeople. The owner of the paper is the King of Āgartalā. The owners of catching fish are the Mālo. (83)

Ownership is not adjudicated by the state but rather by *dwelling*, a translation I have chosen insofar as *bās karā* here resembles the anthropologist Tim Ingold’s Heideggerian understanding of the term. A dwelling perspective, writes Ingold, “treats the immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld as an inescapable condition of existence... the world continually comes into being around the inhabitant, and its manifold constituents take on significance through their incorporation into a regular pattern of life activity” (Ingold 153). Here, this dwelling perspective—and, in turn, ownership—is intertwined with, but not reducible to, labor; at the same time, the ways in which the Mālo dwell upon the Titās include as well various festivals, boat races, and oral histories of ecological change. It is in relation to this perspective that the novel’s final scenes take on their full meaning: the Mālo culture collapses in the face of the machinations of their high-caste and -class enemies even as, almost simultaneously, the Titās begins to dry up. Co-constitution gives way to co-dissolution. Local cultivators then descend upon the newly-emerging land, staking their claims, putting the former river to the plough; and, as they do, the dwelling understanding of ownership collapses before the power of capital, as those who already control a great deal of land and money seize the lion’s share of the riverbed (Mallabarmān 254-256). The Mālo depart their village, and in the end “[t]hat Mālo neighborhood is no more” (269).



There is much more to be said about this extraordinary novel. Here, however, I will note only that I have paused with this text, first, because it demonstrates so clearly the way in which the complex ecological, sociocultural, and political economic relations of the Bengali countryside offer a site on which to formulate an alternate conception of so foundational an idea as *ownership* and, in turn, to stage a confrontation between this alternate conception and the notion of ownership through “paper” (83); and, second, because it allows us to think this alternate conception, this confrontation, in terms of *form*. The Mālo village, as social form, is founded in the dwelling of the fisherpeople, their entanglement with the Titās. It refuses, for as long as it can, any configuration by the state, the owners of capital, or upper-caste communities; its boundaries, both physical and social, expand and contract in relation to the movements of the river. This vision is both extended and complicated by the form of the novel itself, the narrative of which—as the stories of various characters often connect only tangentially, interweaving briefly and then darting away—seems to mimic the Titās itself, its waters eddying, swirling, and eventually running dry.

In brief, Mallabarman’s novel forcefully draws our attention to the way in which a literary text, through both formal innovation and representational content, maintains the capacity to reimagine the fundamental forms by which human beings organize themselves and make sense of the world. In *Titās Ēkṭi Nadīr Nām*, Mallabarman, a Mālo himself, uses this capacity for the purposes of mourning, a plaintive expression of grief for a community collapsing in the face of the depredations of capital, cultural loss, and ecological catastrophe—three forces that, here, perhaps anywhere, are utterly inextricable. The texts that I examine in this dissertation, on the other hand, turn toward the future. To understand the terms in which I make sense of this turn, however, it is first necessary to attend more robustly to the question of form.

## A Note on Method

### *Formal Stagings*

My understanding of form is perhaps best understood in relation to Caroline Levine’s recent, much-cited *Forms* (2015). There, Levine pivots away from an examination of literary form in its specificity and offers a much broader definition: form refers to “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” (Levine 3). Thinking this way, form is present just about everywhere, from prisons to novels, nations to poems—and, in Levine’s most provocative argument, all such forms must be thought together. She writes, “Literary form does not operate outside of the social but works among many organizing principles, all circulating in a world jam-packed with other arrangements. Each constraint will encounter many other, different organizing principles, and its power to impose order will itself be constrained, and at times unsettled, by other forms” (7). As a result of this flattening move—Levine “[s]uspend[s] the usual models of causality” (19), arguing instead for “social life... as composed of ‘loosely and unevenly collected’ arrangements” (17)—literary texts take on the capacity to effect political change, struggling alongside and colliding with other forms as all attempt to “impose their order on our experience” (16).

This attention to form as “the stuff of politics”—or, more radically, politics as a matter first and foremost of form, an argument that Levine draws from Jacques Rancière (4)—is a particularly compelling framework for examining the ways in which agrarian development operates, for reasons that I will examine in the next section. Likewise, I find Levine’s broad definition helpful, although I will use the language of *principle of composition* here, which seems to me to carry more of an implication of complex interconnection between the elements that a given form grasps together. However, it is important to note that my account of form differs from Levine’s in several important ways. First, it is difficult to accept Levine’s seeming rejection of causality and her broader commitment to something approximating the flat ontology underlying Actor-Network Theory (ANT).<sup>19</sup> There is much to be gained from acknowledging the extraordinary complexity surrounding any given phenomenon, and certainly any overly simplistic base-superstructure model—seemingly what Levine has in mind when she claims that “no form, however seemingly powerful, causes, dominates, or organizes *all* others” (16, emphasis mine)—is in need of significant complication. And yet too much leveling can lead us to lose sight of the forest for the trees; and, as Tom Eyers points out in his own gentle critique of Levine, there is no reason that an account of the structuring power of capitalism cannot coexist with an account of the effects of a number of other forms (Eyers 26). Indeed, this is a version of the methodology that I employ in this dissertation: I explore the way in which agrarian development in South Asia—as a manifestation of the capitalist penetration of agriculture, and thus of the latter’s structuring power—*relied* upon and *produced* certain logics of form,<sup>20</sup> that is, certain coordinated principles for drawing various phenomena into composed relations with one another; the resulting developmental forms would ostensibly effect, or at least play an important role in effecting, the transformative growth that development practitioners desired. In turn, I demonstrate the way in which these logics of form not only contained various contradictions, but also encountered manifold forms, entities, and entanglements that lie outside these logics. Such encounters lay the groundwork to envision alternative forms of community and development.

This leads me to a second way that I depart from Levine: my insistence on the specificity of literature, narrative fiction in particular, as regards its capacity to reveal these logics of form and stage these formal encounters. While Levine levels distinctions between literary forms and forms of other kinds, I find the former importantly singular in several senses. First, literature self-consciously asserts the fact of its *composition* and, in the case of the novels and short story I examine here, its *fictionness*. Anna Kornbluh, writing in Levine’s wake but drawing on Marxist theories of mediation, has noted the way in which “a novel engaged with a phenomenon stands a better chance of provoking thought of the phenomenon’s contingency and design than does the phenomenon itself” (Kornbluh 5n13). Another way to think about this capacity is as a sort of Shklovskian formal *defamiliarization*, a means of making readers “see[] things outside their context” (Shklovsky 167)—or, here, a means of denaturalizing the non-literary forms by which

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<sup>19</sup> Levine herself invokes ANT in the context of her refusal of “metaphysical assumptions about causality” (Levine 113), which refusal she elsewhere connects back to David Hume (19). She does not explicitly claim flatness, a term on which Bruno Latour famously insists (Latour’s *Reassembling the Social* (2005) is probably the most comprehensive instance); still, various thinkers have noted its presence in her work. See in particular Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian’s “Form and Explanation” (2017), pp. 657-658. With that said, I do not want to overstate the case. Levine admits that “our lives are certainly organized by powerful structuring principles, and it would be a grave mistake to overlook them” (17). However, she goes on to say that she wants to shift attention away from these deep structures, as their extreme intransigence in the face of political resistance can actually discourage such resistance.

<sup>20</sup> I have chosen this rather awkward phrase to avoid confusion with formal or symbolic logic.

human beings make sense of, organize, and are organized by their worlds. Literary texts maintain the capacity not merely to defamiliarize concepts—Shklovsky’s example is Tolstoy’s defamiliarization of the concept of flogging—but also to defamiliarize forms, the ways in which things are held in relation, the logic of any given grasping-together.

Such texts do so not just by way of their representational content, but also—and this brings me to the second, intertwined sense in which I find literature distinct from other forms—by way of their own literary forms, their own complex principles of composition. Whether a given literary work is arranging representations of various extra-literary forms within its own form or, alternatively, whether it formally mimics one particular extra-literary form—for instance, in the case of certain national allegories—the form of the work itself will always be a sort of *excess*, exerting its own force on the forms it coordinates or imitates, productively complicating the reader’s ideas as to the way in which such forms might manifest or come into contact with one another outside the text. In this sense, I take literature, at least for my purposes here, as a *formal stage*: a space in which the forms of texts and the forms these texts coordinate—literary form and formal content—are in a state of composed and mutually transformative interaction, offering up resources for both critiquing existing extra-literary forms and imagining new ones.<sup>21</sup>

Within the texts that I examine in this dissertation, I am particularly interested in what might be called *temporal forms*, principles of composition that produce bounded periods of time within which what occurs is drawn into meaningful order. Such forms have found perhaps their most incisive articulation in the work of Frank Kermode, who describes the way in which human beings attempt to make sense of the world and their lives by imposing imaginative concordances of beginnings, middles, and ends—imagined temporal unities<sup>22</sup>—on the otherwise troubling chaos of experience; within these concordances, these impartations of meaning, ends hold a privileged, coordinating place (Kermode 17, 30-31, 45-46, 57-58). Vitaly, Kermode makes sense of these concordances by “speaking in temporal terms of literary form,” of “[a]n inter-connexion of parts all mutually implied”; a duration (rather than a space) organizing the moment in terms of the end, giving meaning to the interval between *tick* and *tock*” (Kermode 57-58, emphases Kermode’s).

What Kermode really seems to be speaking of here is *narrative*. There is a resemblance—although not an absolute identity—between the way in which human beings make sense of time and, for instance, the narrative of a novel, the way in which it articulates and organizes its plot: according to some organizing principle or principles, a period of time is bounded, and events emerge and take on meaning in relation to one another, to a beginning and, in particular, an end. Kermode is particularly concerned with literary fictions and eschatological visions, both of which he sees as forms of consolation. Thinking with Levine, however, it becomes clear that the principles that Kermode identifies are at work just about constantly: that we consistently confront a vast number of temporal forms by which we make sense of the passage of our lives or the history of a nation. What is more, these varied temporal forms do not merely make life livable but, too, shape us, leading us toward certain desires, attitudes, and

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<sup>21</sup> Levine refers to fictional narratives as “productive thought experiments that allow us to imagine the subtle unfolding activity of multiple social forms” (19). I have chosen the metaphor of a stage to emphasize the way in which the form of the space—here, text—in which this unfolding activity occurs plays an important role in the conclusions we are able to draw therefrom.

<sup>22</sup> The language of temporal unity comes from Paul Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* (1984-1988), especially Volume 1, pp. ix, 66. Ricoeur, too, has been foundational for my understanding of temporal form.

behaviors. Narrative fiction is particularly well-suited to deforming and reimagining these temporal forms insofar as it is itself a model of temporal form<sup>23</sup>: in arranging and mimicking other temporal forms, then, the formal excess and defamiliarizing capacity of literature is particularly visible and particularly productive.

### *Forms of Development*

My turn to form, narrative in particular, is suggested by the operation of development itself, particularly insofar as it is primarily state-directed. Thinking once again with Gidwani, who is drawing on thinkers including Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Alain Badiou, and Giorgio Agamben, it is possible to define the state as *fundamentally a compositional entity, an entity that composes*. The state “seeks to connect... disparate elements (a multiplicity) into a set of some *thing: to make them one*” (Gidwani 94, emphases Gidwani’s). When occurring in this state-directed manner, as it did in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in India, development—which is also predicated on the rearrangement of elements in order to produce effects oriented toward the ostensible betterment of human life (70, 135)—is thus very much a matter of producing, deploying, and naturalizing certain forms. These forms are intended to bring forth from the subjects of development, human and nonhuman alike, certain forms of conduct amenable to the ambitions of the developmental state. Specifically, the production of exchange-value rears its head as a logic of form coordinating various principles of composition, arranging life’s many forms in relation to the demands of national or international markets: more broadly, in relation to the imperative to accumulate capital.

And yet these various developmental forms inevitably encounter complication. As I have argued, this resistance is particularly acute in the context of agrarian development, where the range of nonhuman beings and processes that these forms aim to compose presents an extraordinary array of challenges to the developmental state—and, for the purposes of the texts I examine here, opportunities for both critique and formal innovation. Indeed, recent years have seen an abundance of thinkers note the way in which nonhuman beings and processes are by no means inert, easily controllable participants in the human endeavors into which they are enlisted. One such intervention comes from Donna Haraway, who has popularized the ideas of making-and-becoming-with: in short, the way that entities do not emerge or operate in isolation but rather are always already entangled with companion species in forms of more-than-human kinship (Haraway 12-13, 58, 61). Other thinkers have pressed this idea more explicitly beyond the boundaries of life. For instance, Jane Bennett’s theory of vital materialism distributes agency through vibrant material assemblages, doing away with the idea of simple, unified bodies (Bennett 20-33), claiming as well that “all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations” (13). Elsewhere, Elizabeth Povinelli, citing and extending Bennett, has pointed to the way in which the power to shape and enforce the distinction between life and nonlife—a capacity that Povinelli calls geontopower—has formed a central part of settler late liberalism; Povinelli, too, mobilizes assemblages in order to challenge traditional accounts of intention and agency (Povinelli 5, 100-103).

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<sup>23</sup> One might also think here of M.M. Bakhtin’s description of his concept of the chronotope—“the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature”—as a “formally constitutive category of literature” (Bakhtin 84), particularly insofar as “in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time” (85).

These turns to becoming-with and the language of assemblage, to the distribution of agency and the denial of boundedness, do not merely offer resources to think the ways in which nonhuman beings both living and nonliving frustrate the typically-totalizing logics of form proper to agrarian development; rather, they would seem to gesture at the foundational instability, even impossibility, of form itself. Even the self-organizing organism, the paradigmatic union of form and matter, is in these accounts more accurately a complex, ever-shifting assemblage of living and nonliving beings, and to speak of specific principles of composition—the Aristotelian soul, for instance—is to miss the richness of what is really at play. I take this idea quite seriously, and it will surface on occasion in the chapters to come. At the same time, however, there is no getting away from form: it is a necessary means of making sense of our worlds, a necessary component of any political, social, or economic order. Even a Kropotkinian anarchism demands various collective and temporal forms. The question, then—and this is another way of phrasing the broad question to which this dissertation responds—would seem to be: what forms—sociopolitical, temporal, aesthetic—are sufficient to our increasingly sophisticated knowledge of the ways in which human and nonhuman beings are fundamentally entangled? And how might attending to the agrarian realm, to agricultural labor in particular, provide one means of answering that question?

These queries thus lead me away from the way in which attention to nonhuman beings *explodes* developmental forms and toward the way in which such beings—as well as recalcitrant humans—subtly *influence* these forms, leaving gaps, openings, *wounds*, and, in doing so, laying the groundwork for the formal experimentation in which my chosen literary texts engage. Of particular—although by no means exclusive—relevance here are the ways in which nonhuman beings make themselves felt within the production processes by which agriculture proceeds: in particular, in the temporal forms that organize and impart meaning to such production. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing has explored the way in which the temporal patterns of nonhuman beings make themselves felt within the practices of salvage accumulation on which modern global capitalism relies, shaping its rhythms, its “forms of temporal coordination” (Tsing 21-24, 131-135).<sup>24</sup> Shiho Satsuka, thinking with Tsing, makes this point more explicitly with regard to the production process, describing the way in which the nonhuman beings that capitalist modernity reduces to “‘natural’ resources are the products of the flow of life, which cannot be completely controlled by the mechanized tempo of capitalist production systems” (Satsuka 202). Even when seemingly successfully integrated into such systems, these beings offer up alternative rhythmic affordances, “even if they are ‘sideshadows’ and hard to capture by human senses disciplined in... industrial regimentation” (208).<sup>25</sup> Returning to the second epigraph of this introduction, we might say that Tsing and Satsuka draw our attention away from the clock and toward the world: toward the alternative temporal forms that inhere in the sowing of seeds, the raising of cattle, each new ploughing of the world’s many well-worn plots.

In the chapters that follow, then, I examine texts that account for this shift, as well as other ways in which nonhuman beings and human interactions therewith, particularly as

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<sup>24</sup> More recently, Tsing, along with Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena, and Feifei Zhou, has explored what they call *ferality*, “the state of nonhuman beings engaged with human projects, but not in the way the makers of those projects designed” (Tsing et al. 10). The authors offer the example of the way in which developmental and engineering projects the world over—including, vitally, Green Revolution irrigation projects in India, the example par excellence of mid-20th century agrarian development on the subcontinent—have repeatedly found themselves intertwined with and confronted by endlessly proliferating water hyacinth that block the flow of water (131-135).

<sup>25</sup> See as well the work of Elaine Gan, particularly her 2016 dissertation, “Time Machines: Making and Unmaking Rice.”

mediated by the labor of cultivation and by various types of human difference, interrupt the logics of form proper to agrarian development and the postcolonial developmental state. This is to say that the texts that I examine offer up moments in which the affordances and limitations of nonhuman beings in the agrarian sphere make themselves felt in unexpected ways, whether by their presence and action or, as in my second chapter, by their radical absence. Out of these intrusions, these sudden emergences and combinations, there emerge not only deformations but, too, new formal possibilities, new principles of composition from which we might begin to think beyond the apparent possibilities of the present. I take this latter movement—this *cultivation* of new forms in the corpses of the old—as vital to my overall project, even as, drawing on literature, it must remain somewhat abstract, a mere limning, a shadow.

One final point. I do not want to give the impression that the principles of composition that I bring forth in this dissertation are the hidden keys to a sort of pan-life flourishing, a pacifistic kingdom of lively and always-mutual becoming. This is a utopia in the strictest sense. Rather, agriculture, as Kregg Hetherington persuasively puts it, “is all about intimate multispecies relationships, relationships that necessarily involve killing. Harvesting, slaughtering, burning, cutting, ploughing, poisoning, shooting, clearing, trapping, weeding, culling, and selecting are all forms of killing” (Hetherington 52). Indeed, this is one reason that agriculture is an ideal site from which to think these questions: it requires a practical confrontation with the fact that human beings must manipulate and harm nonhuman beings in order to live. The question thus becomes how best to incorporate nonhuman beings into our forms of community while also acknowledging that violence and death will be a constitutive part of these forms. For his part, Hetherington calls for “agricultural democracy, in which varieties of plants, insects, and people have to negotiate ways of living and killing together” (58). Tsing proffers the idea of a latent commons, “fugitive moments of entanglement in the midst of institutionalized alienation... sites in which to seek allies” (Tsing 255). Like Hetherington, Tsing acknowledges that these “mutualist and nonantagonistic entanglements” (255) cannot be good for all players involved; likewise, they do not institutionalize well, lying beyond the reach of the state—and, what is more, the forms of development, the developmental forms, that I explore here. Both Hetherington and Tsing inform my still-evolving conception of more-than-human subsistence; I hope that the chapters that comprise this dissertation—chapters to which I now turn—begin to offer yet more resources with which to develop this line of thinking.

## Chapter Summary

The remainder of this dissertation is comprised of four chapters. Chapter 1, “Cultivating the Universal,” turns to Rabindranath Tagore, the most widely recognized figure in the history of Bengali letters, both in Bengal and around the globe. While Tagore is primarily known in the West as a poet and the first non-European winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, in this chapter I focus on his sociopolitical, aesthetic, and spiritual works, all of which, I contend, cohere with his literary output as part of his pursuit of a universal humanism, the project that consumed the final decades of his life. Specifically, I examine the Tagore’s program of rural reconstruction, which was deeply intertwined with his experimental university, Visva-Bharati. These two institutions were attempts to actualize the poet’s alternative vision of India, which was founded in his organismic understanding of society. In his writings at the time, Tagore rejects the

nation-state as mechanical and oriented toward the pursuit of power and profit, advancing a vision of an ideal social organism animated by the union of agricultural and aesthetic labor—a union that will, he contends, allow human beings to keep time with the rhythm of the finite universe, which he conceives as a song inseparable from its singer, the divine infinite. Such a society, the poet claims, could serve as the basis for a form of global community born of the exchange of cultural products and the creation of a universal literature rooted in the countless irreducibly local literary traditions maintained by the aforementioned social organisms: rooted, that is, in modes of literary production directly entangled with both the land and those who work it.

“Cultivating the Universal” lays the groundwork for the remainder of the dissertation in two main ways. First, it begins with an extended discussion of the conceptions of agrarian development proper to the British colonial state and the mainstream Indian anticolonial nationalist movement, conceptions that, while not identical, share a number of important features: in particular, an understanding of the productive capacity of the land as a central metric and motor of so-called historical progress. This investment in productivist notion of progress, intertwined with the reduction of nonhuman beings to natural resources always already apprehended in relation to eventual human use or exchange, will continue to manifest in relation to the developmental ambitions of the postcolonial nation-state throughout the second, third, and fourth chapters: indeed, it is in opposition to this notion of progress and its concomitant conception of nonhuman beings that many of my texts make their offerings. Second, my reading of Tagore provides a sort of model of the way in which a transformation of foundational concepts can lead to a rethinking of both sociopolitical and aesthetic form: by attending to the way in which the poet turns such ideas as *progress*, *waste*, and *surplus* on their heads and then cultivating conversation between these inversions and Tagore’s broader claims about the forms of the nation-state, society, and the literary text, this chapter poses, in explicit terms, the question of how we might think different forms of community and development.

The next three chapters continue this pursuit. More explicitly than “Cultivating the Universal,” they utilize the methodology that I have outlined here, examining works of narrative fiction in order to grapple with the logics of form deployed by the colonial state and the postcolonial developmental nation-state. In Chapter 2, “In the Kingdom of Hunger,” I think with Bhabani Bhattacharya’s 1947 novel *So Many Hungers!* in order to reimagine the nation form in relation to one of the primary phenomena against which the Indian nation-state defined itself, assuming its developmental mandate: famine. More specifically, I contend that Bhattacharya’s novel, which depicts the onset of the massive 1943 Bengal famine alongside the anticolonial nationalist Quit India Movement, departs from traditional understandings of social realism, taking seriously Mohandas K. Gandhi’s theory of a connection between the individual’s bodily well-being and the health of the nation itself. In turn, the text poses the self-devouring body of the starving peasant—and, more broadly, metabolism as an other that both haunts and constitutes the human—as the foundation of the nascent Indian nation. From this new basis, the novel adumbrates an alternative notion of this nation, one given form by the materiality of the human body, with its inherent finitude, need for sustenance, and capacity to endure, at least for a time, in the face of absolute deprivation. Indeed, if my first, third, and fourth chapters investigate the ways in which attention to human-nonhuman entanglement can suggest new forms with which to organize ourselves and make sense of the world, this second chapter examines what forms of community are suggested by the ever-present possibility of radical *disentanglement*, when the human body is largely severed from its nonhuman surroundings.

In Chapter 3, “Beyond Debt,” I turn to indebtedness, a peculiar form that, I argue, offers insight both figurative and literal into the temporal logics of development: the way in which a commitment to the pursuit of Western modernity has forced the Indian developmental nation-state into a set of seeming temporal boundaries within which events take on meaning, even their status as events, in relation to the ever-receding horizon of historical contemporaneity with the West; the way in which literal debt has served as a means of suturing various ostensibly primitive others to the body of the modern nation. I come to these claims through a reading of Neel Mukherjee’s 2014 novel *The Lives of Others*, which holds in composed tension, first, a self-conscious national allegory centered on a middle-class Bengali family whose attempt to modernize their paper business traps them in a debt spiral, suggesting the aforementioned formal correspondence between indebtedness and the Indian nation-state’s developmental ambitions; and, second, the formally unstable narrative of the family’s wayward eldest son’s work as an organizer during the Naxalite movement of the late 1960s, in which revolutionary violence is interwoven with agricultural labor in such a way that the former emerges as a sort of harvest. Mukherjee’s novel thus draws forth, largely by way of its own formal inventiveness, the way that the developmental nation-state is always haunted by—indeed, produces—alternate modes of being and of conceiving the future, particularly through agricultural practices relying on the rhythmic affordances of nonhuman beings.

Finally, in Chapter 4, “Notes on Decomposition,” I examine the temporal form of the production process that defined agrarian development in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: what I call, following the work of James C. Scott, high-modernist agricultural commodity production,<sup>26</sup> in which package programs of high-yielding variety seeds, nitrogen fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation, and agricultural machinery were extended to areas throughout the so-called Third World. These programs were intended to replace, as much as possible, recalcitrant, unruly local conditions. Such production, I claim, functions by way of the imposition of a highly particular form: a bounding of the production process both temporal—now caught between the purchase of inputs and the fetishized commodity—and spatial—as certain elements of the process are isolated as much as possible from other nonhuman beings and processes and, as well, actively coordinated with one another toward a single end. In order both to reveal the cracks and impasses in this form and to adumbrate an alternative form of production, I turn to Mahasweta Devi’s remarkable 1979 short story “Bichan [Seed].” Devi’s story centers on the struggles of Dulan, a wily laborer who mobilizes a sudden gift of infertile land in order to grift the Block Development Office for resources—specifically, industrial seeds and fertilizer, as well as money for imagined bullocks—which he immediately either consumes or sells, bypassing the production process entirely. Soon a local landlord uses the land to hide the bodies of murdered labor activists, and, eventually, Dulan’s own son. The story concludes with Dulan sowing his grifted seeds in his corpse-fertilized plot, killing the landlord when he arrives to complain, and then offering his paddy to the other members of his outcaste village such that the dead will live on in the seeds the community sows in turn. I argue that “Bichan” not only decomposes the form of high-modernist agricultural commodity production, ironically defamiliarizing both the entities it coordinates and the effects it produces, but, too, offers up a vision of a more-than-human commons in which cultivation becomes a means of overcoming human finitude through uneasy collaboration with nonhuman beings, mediated by the decomposing human corpse. Alongside these alternative forms of community and production, I conclude this final chapter by beginning

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<sup>26</sup> See Chapter 8 of Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* (1998).



to theorize an alternative understanding of *praxis*—a project that, here, remains necessarily embryonic.

Over the course of these four chapters, then, I begin to lay the ground on which to cultivate alternative forms of development, production, and collectivity. I do so by making visible alternative agrarian futures that the tumult of development efforts in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal at once made possible and foreclosed: the ways in which human beings might have organized themselves in concert with those nonhuman beings alongside which they subsist or even flourish. Still, this dissertation remains, self-consciously, a mere first step. To draw these former futures into our present, to translate them into terms by which they might yet provide us tools for the coming decades, will require yet further attention to the stories we tell about agriculture: to the way that these stories tangle themselves among roots and soil, insects and sun and wind, seeds and human hands.

## Chapter 1: Cultivating the Universal

But my words are not for writing on the page, they are for writing strip by strip with an iron digging-tool on the bosom of the country [*dēshēr buk*]. They are not that kind which the pandit writes in ink in a pamphlet on the theory of agriculture [*kṛShitattva*], they are of a type with the cultivator's own desire [*kāmanā*], which he imprints in the bosom of the soil [*māṭir buk*] with the blade of the plough.

- Rabindranath Tagore, *Gharē-Bāirē* (*The Home and the World*), p. 127

Oh valiant child of the soil [*mṛttikā*],  
You declared war to liberate [*muktidān ditē*] the soil  
From the terrible fortress of the desert; the battle goes again and again;  
Crossing ocean waves, on the empty shores of inaccessible islands,  
You settled thrones of green in unwavering faith,  
In the heart of the impassable mountains, on page after page of stone,  
You wrote the victory-story [*bijay-ākhyānlipi*] in leafy letters,  
Bewitched the dust, and on the many signless wastes [*cihnaḥīn prāntarē prāntarē*]  
Your own system [*panthā*] prevailed.

- Rabindranath Tagore, “BṛkShabandanā” (“Hymn to Trees”), p. 14

In the final three decades of his life, Rabindranath Tagore turned away from the Indian anticolonial nationalist movement. Although the poet remained in contact with the movement's leaders—Mohandas K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose—he directed his primary attentions toward Bolpur, a small town 100 miles north of Kolkata. There, he would do the work by which, as he put it to his son Rathindranath in 1916, he aimed to overcome “petty nationalism” and take “the first step toward universal union,” planting “the first flag of victorious universal humanism” (*Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* 179). This mission manifested in two intertwined institutions: Visva-Bharati, an experimental university in Shantiniketan founded in 1921, where Tagore offered a forum for scholars and students from around the globe; and, just as important in Tagore's eyes but often forgotten now, the Pallīsaṅgaṭhan Bibhāg (Institute of Rural Reconstruction), a semi-autonomous division of Visva-Bharati founded in 1922 in Sriniketan with the help of English agronomist Leonard K. Elmhirst, dedicated to rural uplift both material and spiritual.

It is in this context—Tagore's attempt to combat nationalism with a universalism founded in aesthetic production and rural reconstruction—that I would like to read the two quotations with which this chapter begins. Each raises the idea of the *land as text*: however, this is where their similarities end. The quotation from *Gharē Bāirē*, Tagore's classic 1916 novel, comes from Sandīp, the treacherous anticolonial nationalist: the words to which he refers—those of a type with the plough-writing of the peasantry—are dedicated to deploying the idea of the “idol of the country [*dēshēr pratimā*]” (*Gharē Bāirē* 125), to Sandīp's plan to use the image of the country as a goddess [*dēbīpratimā*] in order to mobilize the masses in service of the nationalist Swadeshi movement. In their full context, Sandīp's words are implicitly linked to an elite dismissal of the masses as incapable of independent thought, as well as to the Islamophobic characteristics of the

Swadeshi movement (124-125)—both reasons that Tagore, once an ardent supporter of the movement, chose in the end to abandon it (“Discipline and Mobilize” 76-78, 89-90; *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal* 81-84). For Sandīp, the land is made text via the inscriptions of the plough, which reflect the (false) beliefs and (foolish) desires of the common cultivator. Reading this text, he finds the material to manipulate that cultivator in the service of power—ostensibly the power of the nation, but, in fact, his own.

The second quotation comes from Tagore’s 1926 poem “BṛkShabandanā,” published in the 1931 collection *Banabānī*, some of the poems in which were tied to the *BṛkSharōpaṇa Utsab* (Tree-Planting Festival) at Shantiniketan, which Tagore introduced in 1928 alongside the *Halarōpaṇa Utsab* (Ploughing Festival) at Sriniketan. Here, the land becomes a different type of text—one born, it is important to note, not from the efforts of human beings but rather from those of the tree, that “valiant child of the soil.” This text is, on one level, a written story [*ākhyānlipi*]; however, the tree also “pronounced light’s first hymn [*bandanā*] upon the rhythmless [*chandōhīn*] stone” (“BṛkShabandanā” 13), and its branches “composed the first shelter of music” (14). Thanks to the tree, the land sings the hymn of life-force [*prāṇ*] itself; Tagore’s poem implicitly mirrors this hymn, titling itself a *bandanā*. If in Sandīp’s vision the land is rendered text by the inscriptions of the plough and by the human belief systems associated with those inscriptions—the ostensibly foolish belief systems of the masses and the systems of those who manipulate them in turn—Tagore’s poem proffers a vision of life itself giving rise to music, rendering the land a song.

Between these two quotations, then, the poet frames the conflict between nationalism and universalism in terms of *the land*: or, more specifically, in terms of *the land as signifier*. Put differently, Tagore poses the problem of nationalism—and, more broadly, the problem of anticolonialism—in terms of the interrelated ways in which we *conceptualize* the land—that is, construct the concept of the land as a particular type of signifier or collection of signifiers, *as a particular type of text*<sup>1</sup>; and *apprehend* the land—that is, encounter the materiality of land and produce knowledge of and from that encounter. How might we think the land differently, outside the enduring and intertwined logics of colonial capitalism and liberal, progressive theories of history? How might this rethinking inform a new epistemological approach to the land, oriented toward the production of different forms of knowledge, as well as toward different forms of production? And, finally, how might this new understanding of the land and our relationship to it function as the basis for new modes of human organization beyond both the nation-state and the international order?

In this chapter, I examine Tagore’s work at Shantiniketan and Sriniketan in order to provide one set of answers to these questions. Placing the poet’s projects in conversation with the ideology of development as it manifested under the British Raj and within the anticolonial Indian nationalist movement, I contend that Tagore offers forth a vision of rural life and agricultural production animated by what the poet understood as uniquely Indian ideas of ecological and human interdependence, unity, and, in the end, transcendence. The poet understood this vision as the first and most important step toward a form of global community dependent not on the nation-state but rather on the interconnection of various organismic societies. At its core, however, Tagore’s project is perhaps most radical insofar as it reconceptualizes the land: its underlying ontology; its relationship to history; the epistemological modes by which it is apprehended; and, finally, its role in providing both the resources and creative energy necessary

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<sup>1</sup> By text, I do not necessarily mean a *written* text—a crucial distinction.

for the creation of universal literature [*bishvasāhitya*] and, in turn, a universal humanity.<sup>2</sup> It is this reconceptualization that makes possible what Poulomi Saha has described as Tagore’s “locally-rooted globalism” (P. Saha 3): his simultaneous dedication to the specificity of Bengal and to the idea of a global—but not cosmopolitan—community.

It is important to note that I do not return to Tagore’s project in order to advocate that we take up where he left off. First and most obviously, the conditions of possibility for such an immense undertaking do not currently exist, although the argument could be made that in the coming cataclysm of anthropogenic climate change it is quite possible that we will see some fundamental reshaping of global economic, social, and political relations. Likewise, I do not intend this chapter as a straightforward endorsement of Tagore’s politics, which, at least until the final years of his life, were often deeply paternalistic in relation to the peasantry: consider, for example, his claim that “[o]nly he who is not a child should be given complete freedom” (“The Tenant Farmer” 208), and as such tenant farmers should not have the right to transfer their land freely. What is more, Tagore was relatively conservative regarding land reform for much of his life, at least until his visit to the Soviet Union in 1930, when he was nearly 70 years old (Raha 145). Finally, we must contend with Tagore’s construction of an idealized Indian past primarily via reference to Hindu texts: although Tagore espoused Hindu-Muslim unity—indeed, pan-human unity—and advocated for the eradication of the practice of untouchability, there are nevertheless moments in his writing in which an idealized, precolonial Indian village floats into view. At such moments, it is important to call to mind B.R. Ambedkar’s critique of the horrific forms of social violence—caste-based, communal, patriarchal—that haunted and continue to haunt the Indian countryside.<sup>3</sup> Tagore’s paeans to communal Indian village life occasionally elide these forms of violence even as the poet forcefully critiques them elsewhere.

With all of this being said, Tagore’s vision of rural reconstruction, considered in its full intellectual context,<sup>4</sup> poses the question of the land in such a way as to draw our attention to its role in the colonial project, as well as in the dreams of the postcolonial Indian nation-state. Against this vision of the land, Tagore reimagines human society as an organism that joins with the land itself in creative production, thereby realizing unity between humans, between humans and nonhumans, and between humans and the infinite. Put differently, the poet offers forth an alternative to development itself. To return to Tagore, then, is not merely to confront the violence of colonialism and its legacies in the postcolonial nation-state: it is to imagine new ways of organizing ourselves in relation to the land and to each other, with creative and especially literary production as the tie that binds us together.

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<sup>2</sup> This concept has typically been taken up as *world literature*, sometimes noting similarities with Goethe (*What Is a World?* 310-311), sometimes contrasting Tagore and Goethe (Chaudhuri 76-77). However, as will become apparent over the course of this chapter, “universal literature” is perhaps the more apt translation. Nor am I alone in this translation: Surendrenath Tagore, Rabindranath’s nephew, used the term “universal literature” in his 1936 translation, completed during Rabindranath’s lifetime.

<sup>3</sup> See Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* ([1936] 2016).

<sup>4</sup> I do not mean to imply that the ecological dimensions of Tagore’s thought have not been explored, nor that Sriniketan has received no attention. For the former, see Debarati Bandyopadhyay’s *Rabindranath Tagore: A Life of Intimacy with Nature* (2019), as well as, for a more speculative representation, the Otolith Group’s 2018 film *O Horizon*. For two recent examples of the latter, see in particular Uma Das Gupta’s *A History of Sriniketan: Rabindranath Tagore’s Pioneering Work in Rural Reconstruction* (2022) and Dikshit Sinha’s *A Poet’s Experiment in Rebuilding Samaj and Nation: Sriniketan’s Rural Reconstruction Work, 1922-1960* (2019).

## Visions of Development

In this section, I outline the British colonial and Indian anticolonial nationalist development ideologies. I focus on the period of Crown Rule in the aftermath of the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion, the period in which Tagore put forth his alternate vision of rural life and labor. These ideologies have already received an enormous amount of scholarly attention, and my purpose here is not to reconstruct the (pre-)history of development in India.<sup>5</sup> Rather, beginning with the colonial state, I consider the land in relation to three intertwined elements of British imperial ideology: first, the way in which the land interacts with—indeed, becomes central to—the *understanding of history as progress* foundational to the imperial project as a whole; second and immediately following upon this interaction, the way in which the land undergoes what I describe as a *temporal and spatial displacement*; and, third, the *epistemological systems* through which the colonial state apprehends the land and, in turn, subjects it to the aforementioned displacement. Following upon the Tagorean form of the question with which this chapter began, I am here concerned with the *type of text that the land becomes* and *the way in which that text is interpreted*. Having undertaken this investigation as regards the British Raj, I examine the developmental thought of the anticolonial Indian nationalist movement, which, as many have noted, operated within the same problematic as that of the Raj.<sup>6</sup>

### *Land, the Motor and Metric of Progress*

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into 20<sup>th</sup>, the British Empire maintained an ideological commitment to the liberal notion of a progressive, universal history—a commitment that, both implicitly and explicitly, served as a justification of the imperial project. The most famous formulation of this notion, appearing in the works of thinkers like Charles Grant, Thomas Macaulay, James Mill, and John Stuart Mill, placed various peoples along a set of civilizational stages, arranged along a rectilinear, universally applicable scale of historical progress. Through the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the liberal ideology of empire rested on the assertion that while the peoples of India remained stalled at an early stage on this scale, they were nevertheless ripe for forward movement. However, this movement was entirely dependent on British intervention in the form of empire (Mehta 80-82, 87-88). The aftermath of the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion saw British confidence in this progressive project decline, with the rise of culturalist claims that Indians were, in actuality, unsuited for progressive transformation: Indians were ostensibly resistant—or, alternatively, vulnerable—to British efforts to cultivate their civilizational capacities. Nevertheless, the idea of history as fundamentally progressive endured. The assertion

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<sup>5</sup> For a particularly clear articulation of the moment in which I am interested, see Bipan Chandra's "Colonial India: British versus Indian Views of Development" (1991).

<sup>6</sup> My use of "problematic" here draws on Althusser: to wit, a "definite theoretical structure... the absolute determination of *the forms in which all problems must be posed*" (Althusser et al. 23, emphasis Althusser's). A given problematic not only makes visible the objects that lie on its terrain—that is, "ties an object or problem to its conditions of existence, which lie in the conditions of its production," these objects and problems reflecting said conditions, the problematic, such that the latter is immanent to the former, such that the former can only be thought in relation to the latter; rather, a given problematic also "defines and structures the invisible as the defined excluded, *excluded* from the field of visibility and *defined* as excluded by the existence and peculiar structure of the field of the problematic; as what forbids and represses the reflection of the field on its object, i.e., the necessary and immanent interrelationship of the problematic and one of its objects." (24, emphasis Althusser's).

that empire's end—in both senses of the word—might be successfully guiding Indians through progressive history and to the altar of self-governance returned, at least to a certain extent, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the Raj contended with the demands of anticolonial Indian nationalists (Mantena 8-12; Metcalf 43, 222-234).

The land and agricultural production had been tied to progress through history since long before the formal British colonization of India, most notably in what Richard Drayton has called the “ideology of agrarian improvement” (Drayton 55). At the time this ideology emerged in early modern England, it was framed in millenarian terms: the improvement of agriculture was the means by which man might reclaim the spoils of Eden (50-54). It is important to note that in the context of the early ideology of agrarian improvement, *to improve* did not function primarily in its currently familiar sense of “making something better,” but rather referred to “operations for monetary profit,” in particular “profitable operations in connection with the land” (*Keywords* 114). Thus, for 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century English commentators, improving the land depended not just on more effective agricultural techniques, but foremost upon the conversion of waste and common land into private property in order to produce profits for landowners. Indeed, the ideology of agrarian improvement worked in tandem with the demands of a nascent capitalism to justify the “classic form” (*Capital Volume 1* 876) of primitive accumulation: the enclosure movement in England (Drayton 50-54).

By the time of formal English colonization in India in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of improvement was even more clearly linked to a young agrarian capitalism, in which a landowning class sought primarily to maximize return from rents and investments of capital (*The Country and the City* 60-61; *Keywords* 114). Accompanying this shift in the mode of the production was a new understanding of history: the eschatological structure of the early ideology of agrarian improvement had given way to a notion of progress as immanent to the structure of history itself, rather than as the product of divine providence (Blumenberg 30).<sup>7</sup> The attempt to export this mode of production to the colonies was intertwined with a conception of said mode as that best suited to improving the land—a process now framed primarily in economic terms—and therefore both “moral and necessary” (Drayton 87). Thus the (capitalist) improvement of the land was tied to—made foundational to—the capacity of colonized subjects to achieve civilizational progress, to move forward through history.

The relationship between the improvement of the land and civilizational progress is perhaps most apparent in the aforementioned concept of waste land—that is, land that is un- or insufficiently-cultivated. To improve waste land was understood, building upon the work of John Locke, as productive not merely of value in the more familiar sense—that which is produced by labor—but also in the sense of right moral conduct. To improve waste land through labor and industry was to be rational, civilized, and, perhaps more radically, human (Gidwani 22-26). This correspondence—between improvement of waste land, on the one hand, and, on the other, right

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<sup>7</sup> It is worthy of note that Blumenberg's opposition to Löwith's secularization thesis is not without its challengers—and nor would I unproblematically count myself among Blumenberg's adherents. Given the eschatological conception of the land in early Indian nationalism—which I will explore in my analysis of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath*—I am curious as to whether it might be possible to position the land, given its innate productive limitations, as a sort of eschatological remnant within the ostensibly secular conceptions of history and *infinite* progress typically understood as proper to modernity. This argument would, of course, complicate Blumenberg's claims—and in that sense it must also remain a subject for a potential future paper. For now, for an excellent overview of Löwith, Blumenberg, and Koselleck's takes on the structure of historical time in modernity—as well as a biting critique of the practices of periodization on which these takes rely—see Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty* (2008), especially chapter 3. My thanks to Kyra Sutton for this final citation.

moral conduct and civilizational status—has extraordinary implications for the relationship between the land and the location of a people on the rectilinear path of universal progressive history: *historical location is inscribed upon the land itself*.

The way in which history is inscribed upon the land is readily apparent in perhaps the most famous instance of the ideology of agrarian improvement in Bengal, the Permanent Settlement of 1793. The Settlement was predicated on the belief that zamindars, once in possession of the privileges of landownership, would take on the role of “improving landlord[s] after the contemporary English model” (*A Rule of Property for Bengal* 225); in other words, these landlords, driven now by self-interest and the desire to leverage their property in the service of personal profit, would invest capital in said property, cultivating waste land and building irrigation infrastructure (225-227). Central to the Settlement was also an assessment of Bengal as possessing vast tracts of waste land—by the reckoning of Cornwallis, then governor-general of India, a full third of the Company’s territories were “jungle” (Iqbal 20). As Vinay Gidwani notes, Cornwallis made his assessment despite his belief that he lacked concrete, dependable data. That he was able to do so is indicative of the way in which waste land functioned as a stand-in for degree of cultural difference between colonizers and colonized: Bengal must be largely waste, given the civilizational inferiority—and, in particular, the indolence—of its inhabitants (Gidwani 21-22).

However, Gidwani’s choice to assign causality to the aforementioned cultural difference—Cornwallis’s comments were possible because they “were generated by a network of premises that had *already* rendered ‘India’ as an object in imagination” (22, emphasis mine)—is, perhaps, premature. Following David Arnold, it is also worth noting the ways in which the perceived excesses, dangers, and unruliness of the Indian landscape in turn influenced colonial conceptions regarding the degraded or stalled historical position of Bengal’s inhabitants (Arnold 42, 80-82). That is, the apprehension—or, rather, imagining—of the land as largely waste was not merely the product of a British belief in cultural difference; rather, the opposite was true as well. Thus not only was the state of the land a metric of the historical position of the Indian people: at the same time, *to transform the land was also to move through history*. Crucially, the state of the land—as well as the degree of its improvement—was assessed not merely in relation to its capacity to produce exchange-value, but also in relation to its aesthetic qualities: particularly in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, improvers sought to “transform the country into something that *looked* and functioned like the rural landscape and agrarian economy of contemporary Britain” (105, emphasis mine).<sup>8</sup>

Even in the aftermath of 1857, as the ideology of liberal imperialism gave way to the conservative culturalism of the British Raj, the land—or, more specifically, agricultural production, placed within the sphere of “economy” as distinct from “society”—remained a site of progressive ambition (Ludden 268-269). This ambition, however, had to manifest without damaging the (newly defined) traditional Indian village community, the continued functioning of which was considered foundational to the stability of the British imperial project (Dewey 354; Mantena 5, 10-12). Against the *laissez-faire* thinking of the liberals, then, the British Raj turned increasingly toward state intervention in the agrarian economy (Dewey 353, 362-363; Hobsbawm 123; Ludden 258; Zachariah 27). I will return shortly to the question of the state,

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<sup>8</sup> As Glenn Stone and James C. Scott have pointed out, this use of a specific aesthetic metric in judging the quality of agricultural production spread throughout the colonial world and has persisted well into the 20th century, if not to the present day. See Stone, “Agriculture as Spectacle” (2018), p. 662, and Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (1998), pp. 273-278.

which becomes more important when considering the place of the land in the ideology of development present in the thought of anticolonial Indian nationalists, as well as in Tagore's critique of this ideology. For now, it is important to note the way in which this development placed even greater pressure on the land as the motor of progress in India: if traditional village society was not amenable to modernization, nevertheless agricultural production was, and therefore progress relied upon the colonial state's efforts to improve the latter. Lord Mayo, then Governor-General of India, stressed this exact point in 1870:

For generations to come... the progress of India in wealth and civilisation must be directly dependent on her progress in agriculture... the future development of Indian commerce will mainly depend upon the improvement in the quantity and quality of existing agricultural staples, or on the introduction of new products... There is perhaps no country in the world in which the State has so immediate and direct an interest in such questions. (Mayo quoted in Strachey 352)

Throughout of British rule in India in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, then, the land functioned as both measure and motor of the colony's progress through rectilinear, universal history. Tied to this phenomenon was a *temporal displacement* of the land, which proceeded on a number of simultaneous levels. Uday Mehta has written convincingly as to the ways in which the liberal ideology of progress, when confronted with unfamiliarity, "cannot admit the present as present": in the context of historical time, the ideology displaces difference, thrusts it into the past, renders it "a provisional or remnant form of extraordinary and spectral survival, like shadows that can be seen despite the absence of their substantiality or ghosts of the past that haunt and are merely hosted by the present" (Mehta 108). While Mehta is referring to the colonial encounter with human communities, I contend that the displacement of difference into the past would apply to the land as well—both in its economic and moral status as waste land and in its aesthetic unfamiliarity, particularly as manifest in the concept of jungle (Arnold 80-82; Wenzel 176).

At the same time, though, the British Raj conceptualized the land, particularly in relation to waste, in a fundamentally *proleptic* manner. This proleptic orientation is apparent in John Locke's foundational—at least for liberal thought—claims regarding the relationship between land, labor, and property. For Locke, the land, in the absence of human labor, is essentially worthless: "'Tis labour then which puts the greatest part of value upon land, without which it would scarcely be worth anything... nature and the earth furnished only the almost worthless materials, as in themselves" (Locke 282-283). All land, in itself, is waste<sup>9</sup>; it *will* be valuable through the application of human labor. At the same time, the very concept of waste implies a *reduction of the land to its productive capacity*. The reduction of nature to a set of natural resources has been described so many times and in so many different ways that it would be unwieldy to go into them here<sup>10</sup>; however, it is important to stress the temporal dimension of this reduction, as these natural resources are apprehended not in their immediacy but rather in

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<sup>9</sup> In referring to land "in itself," I am of course simply maintaining Locke's categories. As has become increasingly apparent in recent years, land in itself—that is, land absent any human influence—has not existed for quite some time.

<sup>10</sup> For two classic references, however, see Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1947] 1969), especially 3-42, and Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" ([1954] 1977). See as well Marx's somewhat smirking claim that "It appears paradoxical to assert that uncaught fish, for instance, are a means of production in the fishing industry. But hitherto no one has discovered the art of catching fish in waters that contain none" (*Capital Volume 1* 287n7).



relation to their *potential*: specifically, their potential to function as *exchange-value* at some point in the future, after human labor has been applied. Mary Louise Pratt has referred to this phenomenon, specifically in the context of colonial environments, as the “improving eye,” which “produces subsistence habitats as ‘empty’ landscapes, meaningful only in terms of a capitalist *future* and of their *potential* for producing a marketable surplus” (Pratt 60, emphases mine); or, as Jennifer Wenzel, building on Pratt, puts it, “inventory joins with proleptic imagination to take stock of improvement that will have happened in a future perfect” (Wenzel 148).

This temporal displacement is accompanied by, intertwined with, a *spatial* displacement. The future in which the productive capacity of the land will be actualized—in which the exchange-value it produces will be realized—is a future that will occur *elsewhere*. As Drayton puts it, “the idea of ‘improvement’ had at its heart the theory that Nature was best used to yield commodities which might be *traded widely*, rather than to support local subsistence” (Drayton 87, emphasis mine). And, indeed, a similar principle operated under the British Raj, as farmers were encouraged—sometimes a euphemism—to produce for the (global) market rather than their own subsistence, a process that in Bengal was centered around indigo and then jute (Ali 22-36; *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital* 53-62). Thus the land of the colony is conceptualized as at once temporally prior *and* a future to be actualized elsewhere.

This particular conception of the land relies on specific ontological and epistemological foundations, both of which rely on specific institutionalized modes of apprehension and knowledge production: or, to return to the Tagorean framing, the ideology of development under the British colonial state relied upon rendering the land a particular type of text, which in turn relied upon a particular type of reading practice. Ontologically, the ideology of agrarian improvement coincided with the final triumph, in the natural sciences, of the mechanistic model of the universe over the organic—that is, an understanding of the universe as operating according to “predictable behavior of each part within a rationally determined system of laws” (Merchant 193). The mechanical model of the universe emerged alongside the Baconian impulse toward the domination and ordering of the natural world: the aforementioned reduction of nature to a set of resources, objectified and external to human society, which this society could dispose of as it would (Heidegger 22; Horkheimer and Adorno 3-42; Merchant 111, 177-180, 185, 192-215; Smith 13-14). So too were space and time reconceptualized, abstracted away from human experience and toward the imperatives of exchange. Time was understood as the time of the clock, as well as the time of the factory: rationalized, quantified, and abstracted from human action (Agamben 96-97; Koselleck 82-84; Thompson 63-70). As Walter Benjamin puts it, time became “the measure by which the duration of a mechanical change is reckoned” (*Origin of the German Trauerspiel* 262). This understanding of time is also what Benjamin has referred to as “homogenous, empty time” (“Theses on the Philosophy of History” 261): importantly, the time proper to the conception of history as progress (*Provincializing Europe* 23). Space, on the other hand, was understood to be mathematical, geometrical, a quantifiable, measurable, neutral container for matter (Lefebvre 1; Mehta 127).

Accompanying this ontology were specific epistemological techniques and, in the Indian context, institutions designed to produce knowledge via those techniques. In the aftermath of 1857, as the colonial state increasingly intervened in agricultural production, these techniques and institutions were necessarily formed around, as well as limited by, the form of the state itself.<sup>11</sup> Put differently, the centrality of the colonial state shaped and was shaped by the forms of

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<sup>11</sup> For an exploration of the ways in which the centrality of the state shapes the forms taken by development, see Scott’s *Seeing Like a State*.

knowledge construction and material intervention through which the development regime operated. For example, the regime's attempts to mold the human population and nonhuman environment relied upon modes of apprehension that would render this population and environment legible, available to quantification and statistical analysis; these modes of apprehension, particularly insofar as they were applied to the land, required that the state standardize currencies, weights and measures, as well as that it centralize the institutions necessary for these forms of analysis to occur (Ali 80-85; Goswami 80-81; Ludden 251, 257-258; *Modernity at Large* 115-116, 125-126; "Scientific Forestry and Genealogies of Development in Bengal" 257, 259-261).

In the context of agriculture, the British colonial development regime relied upon "a *textual* construction of agriculture with statistics" (Ludden 269-270, emphasis mine). The state subordinated local knowledges to expertise, gathering an enormous amount of data that made possible the abstraction of localities, the (attempted) production of a series of homogenous spaces differentiable only by reference to their capacity to produce exchangeable commodities. As these data were analyzed at higher levels of government, they were increasingly separated from the conditions in which they were initially gathered. Perhaps the clearest example of this move were cadastral surveys, which determined land values and were vital not just to the collection of land revenue but to the functioning of the entire state apparatus of the British Raj—and which relied on increasingly abstract measures in their determinations of value (Goswami 56, 135-137; *Modernity at Large* 123-126).<sup>12</sup> Vitaly, insofar as the land was taken as an expression of a given people's historical positionality—a situation, as I have demonstrated, that was particularly acute in post-1857 colonial India—the abstraction of the land's productive potential into a series of quantifiable metrics allows a highly precise understanding of that positionality. Because the land is now apprehended *as text*, the *inscription* of historical progress—or lack thereof—on the land is now made literal: the land, written in statistics, discloses its future potential and the historical positionality of those who cultivate it. At the same time, by compiling huge amounts of data in reference to the productive capacity of the land, the colonial state constrained the proleptic imagining through which adherents of the ideology of development encountered the land: the potential, the productive capacity of the land, was now known with an extraordinary degree of precision.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Stages of the Goddess, Land*

The rise of anticolonial nationalism in colonial India was in no small part spurred by economic thinkers who accepted—and, indeed, intensified—many of the premises of the

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<sup>12</sup> I do not want to give the impression that this project was unidirectional, that the colonial state was able to unproblematically apply schemes of development or improvement that were conceived in the metropolis. Rather, as I noted in the introduction to this dissertation, these schemes often encountered resistance, whether from recalcitrant humans or from the extraordinary ecological complexity and abundance of Bengal itself—and, as a result, the colonial state was repeatedly forced to alter its practices of evaluation and extraction, even if only temporarily (Iqbal 18-26, 38; *Modern Forests* 29-33, 34-37; "Scientific Forestry" 255-262). However, I am more concerned here with the aims of the colonial state, rather than with the ways in which these aims were frustrated by their contact with material realities, at least insofar as it is possible to separate the two.

<sup>13</sup> For an exploration of the ways in which the rise of statistics and probabilistic thinking paradoxically both did away with determinism and made the world more regular and predictable, see Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (1990), as well as Theodore Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking: 1820-1900* (1986).

colonial ideology of development (Ludden 259-264; Watts 261).<sup>14</sup> There was nothing wrong, they contended, with the colonial understanding of development, which was desirable. History was indeed rectilinear and progressive, and improved productive capacity was the means to forward movement. The problem was that Britain was failing in its promises to provide this means, this movement—or, rather, not just failing but purposefully obstructing the efforts of the Indian people. These economic nationalists argued that Britain was actively draining India’s economy in its rapacious desire for raw materials and a market for its own manufactures. The issue lay largely with the doctrine of free trade, to which the British continued to pay lip service even after 1857; in its place, Indian anticolonial nationalists explicitly turned to the power of the state as the primary agent of development—a turn, it is worth noting, that coincided with many of the actual practices of the British empire in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Gidwani 79; Ludden 262; *The Nation and Its Fragments* 202-205; Vaidyanathan 947; Zachariah 27).

The explicit centrality of the state and the opposition to unfettered free trade lead to another important distinction between the developmental claims of anticolonial nationalists and those of the colonial state: the former maintained an ideological commitment, inspired by the economic nationalism of Friedrich List, to a place-based understanding of the proper realm of development: specifically, the territorial extension of the Indian nation. In contradistinction to their understanding of the British project as one in which India was entirely subsumed into the British imperial economy, its specificity erased by the abstracting power of global capital, these nationalists sought to create a self-contained and self-sufficient national economy (Goswami 215-224, 272-274). Whereas the imperial global order was “superimposed, parasitical, and unnatural,” the Indian nation was “a natural unit of productive activity and the genuine substance of wealth” (Sartori 160). The state would then function as the means by which the bounded, autarchic Indian nation could develop (160-164). The interplay between nation and state, what is more, would emerge out of a historical progression within which colonization was not the spark, as British liberals contended, but rather an interruption, a violation: for anticolonial Indian nationalists, the precolonial history of India had prepared them for political independence, for nationhood—to be aided, of course, by a powerful, interventionist state (Mehta 106-107; *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* 131-138).

Within this altered developmental ideology, the land took on a number of guises. A notable early iteration was the vision of the land as the body of the nation itself, specifically in the guise of the goddess-mother; this vision, of course, is that which Saṅdīp, in Tagore’s *Gharē-Bāirē*, deploys in order to ensnare the Hindu peasantry in the Swadeshi movement. The most representative instance of the land-as-nation, as goddess-mother, occurs in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s 1882 novel *Ānandamath*, which contains the central nationalist hymn “Bandē Mātaram.” Here, the connection between the state of the land—defined, once again, in relation to its productive capacity—and the historical positionality of India—now a nation, as opposed to a collection of colonized peoples—is made explicit. The mother is declared both “land [*dēsh*, a complex word perhaps more commonly signifying ‘country’]” and “birthland [*janmabhūmi*]”; in “Bandē Mātaram,” a hymn to the mother specifically in her manifestation as Durga, she is “Rich in waters [*sujalān*], rich in fruit [*suphalān*],/Cooled by the southern airs,/Verdant with the harvest fair [*shasyashyāmalān*]” and “Radiant with foliage and flowers in bloom [*phullakusumita-drumadalashōbhinīm*]” (Chatterji 145). *Dēsh*—which here invokes a territorial,

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<sup>14</sup> For examples of this orientation, described below, see Romesh Chunder Dutt’s *The Economic History of India* ([1902] 2006), Dadabhai Naoroji’s *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901), and M.G. Ranade’s “Indian Political Economy” (1906).

(proto-)nationalist understanding of land—and *bhūmi*—which often refers to the materiality of the land, to soil—are imbricated almost entirely. The material state of the land corresponds to the status of efforts to defend this territorial extension from exploitation by, at least in Bankim’s novel, a vicious Muslim nawab.

When the exactions of this nawab, in conjunction with a drought, bring about a famine—the 1770 famine, in which an estimated 10 million people died—the indignities and violence of foreign domination manifest in the collapse of arable land into jungle:

In village after village hundreds of fertile plots [*urbbar bhūmikhaṇḍasakal*] lay untilled [*akarShit*] and unproductive [*anutpādak*], or were covered with jungle [*jaṅgal*]. The whole land [*dēsh*] was filled with jungle. Where once rows of smiling dark green crops had graced the land and countless cows and buffaloes had grazed, where parks had once been the dallying-grounds of village youths and maidens, now dense jungle gradually began to grow. (188)

The degradation of the nation thus emerges not just in the indignities that the nawab visits upon the people—aggressive taxation, which causes the famine in the first place—but also, and indeed far more so, in the degradation of the land. The land, as goddess-mother, is now manifest as the fearful goddess Kali, who, unclothed, wild, is crushing the people beneath her feet. She gives rise not to crops but to jungle, making it clear that the productive capacity of the land is only a good when it manifests agriculturally: Kali is, to borrow an apt description from Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, “fecund and awful” (Rushdie 421, emphasis mine).

The idea that the evil doings of the nawab have changed the shape of the land-as-goddess-mother is explicitly tied to a stagist conception of history, in which the stages are inscribed upon the land in the shape of agricultural production. Prior to Kali came the mother-as-she-was, Jagaddhatri, who “subdued the wild beasts such as the elephant and lion underfoot and set up her lotus throne in their dwelling place”; after Kali will come Durga, who “crushes the enemy and roams on the lordly lion’s back” (Chatterji 150). The path to Durga requires that the Bengalis “let the people cultivate the land [*kr̥Shikāryyē*], may the earth [*pr̥thibī*] abound in crops and let the people grow in prosperity [*shr̥ībr̥ddhi*]” (230). The land is once again the motor of rectilinear, progressive history, here tied to the development of the nation, which proceeds in a series of civilizational stages—albeit stages that, in contradistinction to post-Orientalist colonial reckoning, begin from a former prosperity. These stages then proceed through the trials of degradation and the wilderness, toward an even greater future prosperity: independent India as the promised *land*.<sup>15</sup> The land is once again temporally displaced, albeit in a different way: while the land is still apprehended primarily in relation to a future-to-come, it is not understood as located at an anterior historical moment, but rather in a fallen historical present—fallen, of course, because of exploitation, and not the deficiencies of the beings, human and nonhuman, who dwell upon and comprise the land. At the same time, the spatial displacement of the land occurs on a different scale: whereas the colonial notion of the land envisioned its ultimate valuation as occurring throughout a globalized, Britain-centric imperial economy, Bankim and his contemporaries understand this valuation as occurring almost entirely within the autarchy of the Indian-nation-state-to-come.

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<sup>15</sup> See footnote 7. If Durga is in some sense the land’s final form, is there a way in which the land(-as-goddess-mother) functions in an eschatological sense, an impassable horizon within the rectilinear, infinite, progressive history of mankind?

By the final years of the British Raj, this conception of the land—as the body of the nation, as an explicitly Hindu goddess—had shifted slightly. This shift is apparent in Nehru’s reflections on his attempts to mobilize the peasantry:

Sometimes as I reached a gathering, a great roar of welcome would greet me: *Bharat Mata ki Jai* - Victory to Mother India! I would ask them unexpectedly what they meant by that cry, who was this *Bharat Mata*, Mother India, whose victory they wanted? My question would amuse them and surprise them, and then, not knowing exactly what to answer, they would look at each other and at me. I persisted in my questioning. At last a vigorous *Jat*, wedded to the soil from immemorial generations, would say that it was the *dharti*, the good earth of India, that they meant. What earth? Their particular village patch, or all the patches in the district or province, or in the whole of India? And so question and answer went on, till they would ask me impatiently to tell them all about it. I would endeavour to do so and explain that India was all this that they had thought, but it was so much more. *The mountains and the rivers of India, and the forests and the broad fields, which gave us food, were all dear to us, but what counted ultimately were the people of India, people like them and me, who were spread out all over this vast land. Bharat Mata, Mother India, was essentially these millions of people, and victory to her meant victory to these people.* (Nehru 55, final emphasis mine)

Nehru reframes the religiously-charged image of the goddess-mother—now explicitly *Bharat Mata*, Mother India—such that it no longer refers to the land, but rather to the people of India: he has, following on Partha Chatterjee’s interpretation of the above passage, rationalized and secularized the image, torn it away from what he understands as its somewhat irrational conception in the mind of the soil-wedded peasant—an impression that Saṅdīp, perhaps, would share (*Nationalist Thought* 147).

Nevertheless, the land remains *a* motor of progress—as against *the* motor of progress—now tied to an explicit commitment to industrialization and land reform that was aimed at bringing the soon-to-be Indian nation-state in line with other countries around the world (133-146). It is important to note that Nehru very clearly considered industry a far more important motor of historical progress than agriculture. Indeed, to a certain extent Nehru and his ideological compatriots believed the Indian agricultural sector to be riven with the irrationality of small-holder cultivators and ostensibly feudal systems; in this, they were in alignment with earlier nationalist economists, who were particularly angered by the way in which colonial policy had prevented industrialization and, by destroying rural handicrafts, thrown the population back to the increasingly overtaxed soil—a consequence that not only prevented economic advancement, but cultural, social, and political progress as well (Chandra 84-89; Gidwani 85-87; Goswami 210-215; *Nationalist Thought* 146-150). In this, Nehru departs from Bankim and, like the British, clearly considers the state of the land as occupying and signifying not a fallen present but a historical lag: “We in India do not have to go abroad in search of the Past and the Distant. We have them here in abundance. If we go to foreign countries it is in search of the Present” (Nehru 690).

In this shift, there emerges a conception of the land that more clearly resembles that of the colonial state—temporally anterior, but projected into a future-elsewhere. The postcolonial nation-state inherits not just the institutions of its colonial predecessor, but its vision of the land as well—and, indeed, the two are deeply intertwined. How, then, to reimagine this vision, these institutions? Tagore provides one answer.

## Tagore's Rural Reconstruction

It is difficult to summarize the ways in which Tagore opposes the British colonial and especially the Indian anticolonial nationalist ideologies of development, particularly the ways in which these ideologies conceptualized the land and nonhuman beings more broadly. This difficulty is due to the fact that Tagore's opposition manifests not just in the specifics of his own projects at Shantiniketan and Sriniketan, but rather in the very problematic from which he confronts the problem of revitalizing rural life in India. Thus for clarity I attend to Tagore's thought using a somewhat schematic, tripartite structure. First, drawing on Tagore's critique of the Nation<sup>16</sup>-state, I examine the poet's conception of history, particularly insofar as it departs from the liberal, progressive understanding of history proper to the British empire. Tagore's idiosyncratic understanding of history leads me to the ontological and epistemological foundations of this understanding: his vision of reality as a song inseparable from its singer; of life as all-pervasive and fundamentally creative; and of the creative act on the part of human beings as the means by which they recognize their unity with each other and with the infinite, with *Brahma*.<sup>17</sup> Finally, I explicate Tagore's organismic vision of society and his experiments in rural reconstruction, focusing on the ways in which these experiments aimed to infuse life into society, giving rise to a social organism that was oriented toward a particular mode of reading the land, and, in turn, making possible a form of global unity that was neither cosmopolitan nor inter-National. At each moment, I attend to the ways in which Tagore thinks the land, imagining it outside the constrained prolepses of colonial capital and anticolonial nationalism: imagining it, that is, as a radically different type of text, to which human beings must relate in a radically different manner.

### *The Railroad of Progress*

Tagore was not always opposed to nationalism. Rather, for several years in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the poet was an ardent—if somewhat idiosyncratic—nationalist, a central contributor to the early Swadeshi movement in Bengal. Prior to this period, his relationship to the concept of the nation was more fraught, as he on the one hand noted its association with blindness and avarice while, on the other, declaring it a “living thing” (Tagore quoted in S. Das 390). By the time of his 1916 lecture tour through the United States and Japan, however, Tagore's understanding of the Nation had changed. In *Nationalism*, the collection of three lectures from that tour, the poet describes the Nation as “the organized self-interest of a whole people, where it is least human and least spiritual” (*Nationalism* 60); as, “in the sense of the political and economic union of a people... that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose” (55). The Nation is “the aspect of a whole people as an organized power. This organization incessantly keeps up the insistence of the population on becoming strong and efficient” (104); it is an “organization of politics and commerce... [which] becomes all-powerful

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<sup>16</sup> In keeping with Tagore's practice of capitalizing “Nation” in *Nationalism* (1917), I will capitalize the word when referring to Tagore's post-Swadeshi conception thereof.

<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that this term is not *Brahmā*, the Hindu deity, but rather refers to the idea of *Brahman*, the infinite, the ultimate reality. I have maintained the term *Brahma* here because Tagore repeatedly uses it in his English-language writings, and, indeed, I contend that it is somewhat different from—albeit deeply tied to—the conceptions of *Brahman* present in the Vedantic traditions on which Tagore draws.

at the cost of the harmony of the higher social life” (57-58) and which “take[s] away man from the fulness of his communal life, with all its living associations of beauty and love and social obligations, and... turn[s] him into so many fragments of a machine for the production of wealth on a gigantic scale” (81). The Nation, in sum, is the mechanical organization of the community in such a way as to maximize power and profit.

Tagore does not oppose the organization of human beings for mechanical purpose in and of itself. Rather, he admits that such organization is present within all forms of human collectivity, as there is always a tendency toward self-preservation that the mechanical organization serves (55). It is this tendency that gives rise to government, which, while something of a necessary evil, maintains the capacity to function in harmony with society. Even the drive for profit is not inherently destructive: Tagore notes that the pursuit of self-interest, if kept within proper bounds, can harmonize with the greater interests of the collective (*Creative Unity* 145). However, the Nation always exceeds the healthy bounds of self-preservation and self-interest. Whereas Tagore compares non-national government to the hand-loom, in the products of which “the magic of man’s living fingers finds its expression,” the hum of which “harmonizes with the music of life,” government by the Nation is like the power-loom: “relentlessly lifeless and accurate and monotonous in its production” (*Nationalism* 63). The political and economic organization of human beings, when it has permeated the entirety of a given population, “drains man’s energy from his higher nature where he is self-sacrificing and creative” (104). This final reference to creativity bears emphasis: rather than decrying material exploitation, the poet focuses on the way in which the Nation pulls human beings out of time with the music of life—an expression that, for Tagore, is quite literal—and drains their creative energy.

The Nation, for Tagore, is thus a scalar problem, an instance of deleterious impulses exceeding their proper proportions. Central to this excess is the state, a modular method of organization and a means to the creation and maintenance of the Nation. It is, Tagore puts it, “an abstraction and relationship of men utilitarian” (36).<sup>18</sup> If society, for Tagore, is an organism—a point to which I will attend in greater detail shortly—the state functions as a technology that subordinates this organism to its own imperatives, recalling the poet’s description of the power-loom. Reliance on the state helps transform the organism into a machine, as the principle of organization now comes from an external source—the state—as opposed to from within the organism itself. The externality of the state is particularly acute in relation to Indian society. Even from his nationalist, Swadeshi period, Tagore repeatedly asserted that precolonial Indian society operated for the most part independently from state power. In his well-known 1904 address “Swadeshi Samaj,” for example, Tagore claims that “[t]he state is the sovereign power in England. The old-time *raja-shakti* in our country was different. In England the state is mainly responsible for the well-being of the people, but in India this was so only to a limited extent... In our country it was the king who was comparatively free, and on the people was cast the burden of their civic obligations” (*Greater India* 3-4). In his post-Swadeshi thought, Tagore would continue this train of thought, for example in a 1918 letter to Edwin Montagu, the British

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<sup>18</sup> It is important not to collapse the state and the Nation into one another. While the two are intertwined, they are not identical, as Tagore stressed years later, in a 1924 address in Japan: “I have come to warn you in Japan—the country where I wrote my first lectures against Nationalism at a time when people laughed my ideas to scorn. They thought that I did not know the meaning of the word, and accused me of having confused the word Nation with State. But I stuck to my conviction, and now after the war do you not hear everywhere the denunciation of this spirit of the Nation, this collective egoism of the people, which is universally hardening their hearts?” (“International Relations” 476).

Secretary of State for India: “[m]any of the activities which come within the functions of the State in a free country have to be taken up, however difficult that may be, by our own people in their own social programme; because in India the state and the people are not one, and therefore service to our own country can never truly be rendered by us through the agency of the government” (*Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism (SWoEaN)* 302).

In turn, Tagore maintains that the Nation-state is wedded to a desire for a type of progress that is deeply destructive to human flourishing. In keeping with his understanding of the Nation as fundamentally aligned with self-interest and the production of wealth, Tagore stresses the way in which progress, at least as the colonial state and Indian nationalists articulated the concept, actually refers to an improved material standard of life, often at the cost of spiritual and social goods (“Can Science Be Humanized?” 665; “City and Village” 307; “Civilization and Progress” 628; “International Relations” 473; “The Robbery of the Soil: Introduction” 34; “The Philosophy of Leisure” 618; *The Religion of Man* 34-35; *SWoEaN* 193, 198). To describe the harmful nature of this conception of progress, Tagore repeatedly deploys the metaphor of the road, in particular the railroad. In his *Nationalism* lecture “Nationalism in Japan,” for example, Tagore refers to “the lumbering structure of modern progress, riveted by the iron bolts of efficiency, which runs upon the wheels of ambition”; this machine will lead to collisions and, eventually, “[a] day will come when it will fall in a heap of ruin and cause serious obstruction to the traffic of the world” (*Nationalism* 46). Elsewhere, he describes the relationship between India and the British in similar terms:

We have for over a century been dragged by the prosperous West behind its chariot, choked by the dust, deafened by the noise, humbled by our own helplessness, and overwhelmed with speed. We agreed to acknowledge that this chariot-drive was progress, and that progress was civilization. If we ever ventured to ask, ‘Progress towards what, and progress for whom’—it was considered to be peculiarly and ridiculously oriental to entertain such doubts about the absoluteness of progress. Of late, a voice has come to us bidding us to take count not only of the scientific perfection of the chariot but of the depth of the ditches lying across its path. (“Civilization and Progress” 622)

While Tagore rejects progress as it manifests for the Nation, he is nevertheless not opposed to the idea of progress as such. Rather, Tagore is clear that although he opposes the Nation’s exclusive emphasis on material concerns in its notion of progress, he has no issue with such concerns in and of themselves: indeed, he often celebrates new scientific techniques, agricultural ones in particular (“City and Village” 307; *The Co-operative Principle* 12). Such material concerns, however, must be accompanied by—indeed, subordinate to—the concerns of human social and spiritual well-being (“City and Village” 312-313; *SWoEaN* 193).

### *The Progress of Life Itself*

Thus Tagore calls for a progress toward what he sees as the proper end of human life: greater unity between human beings; between human beings and all of finite reality; and between human beings and the infinite (*Creative Unity* 21-26, 193; “Introduction” 35; *Nationalism* 95-96, 113). If Tagore’s metaphor for progress conceived as material gain is the (rail)road, he compares his own ideal of progress to *growth*—an appropriate distinction given Tagore’s use of organism and machine in differentiating between society and Nation, respectively. The poet is explicit



about the opposition between the two metaphors: “A railway train makes its progress towards its terminus station—it is movement. But a full-grown tree has no definite movement of that kind, its progress is the inward progress of life. It lives, with its aspiration towards light tingling in its leaves and creeping in its silent sap” (20).

Although Tagore’s choice of metaphor clearly draws attention to the different *pace* of his desired mode of progress, his recourse to life and growth marks a qualitative shift as well. Growth, Tagore notes, differs from construction in that it proceeds via synthesis rather than enlargement (“Construction versus Creation” 404). It is, as he puts it, “the movement of a whole towards a yet fuller wholeness” (“Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore” 68)—wholeness to which the increase of mere material objects, the progress characteristic of the Nation, can never hope to obtain. This wholeness emerges out of life—and can characterize human activity—insofar as life, at least ideally, is fundamentally *creative* and *rhythmic*.

For Tagore, life—and specifically life as *prāṇ*, perhaps better translated as life-force or vitality—is quite literally the creative expression, in finite reality, of *Brahma*, the infinite (*Creative Unity* 8; “Kabir Kaiphiyat” 26-31; *The Religion of Man* 68; *Sādhanā* 22). It is important to clarify here that *prāṇ* is not entirely restricted to living beings; rather, *prāṇ* is at play in all things at all times, living or inert (*Sādhanā* 21-22).<sup>19</sup> As Tagore puts it in *Gītāñjali*: “That life [*prāṇ*] in which my mind will rise in frenzy/In the midst of death, hidden/Is that same unbounded life [*prāṇ*]” (*Gītāñjali* 99).<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere, Tagore expands the conception of *jīvlīlā* (organic life, *jīb*, and play, *līlā*) (“Kabir Kaiphiyat” 26) to characterize life in this wider sense: everything, down to “atoms and molecules” (27), is in fact a manifestation of the joyous, irrational play of creation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In keeping with the idea that Tagore was no foe of science and technology, the poet found support for his theory of an omnipresent life-force not just in the Upanishads but also in the contemporary scientific research of Jagadish Chandra Bose, famed Bengali physicist and physiologist and Tagore’s close friend. Bose’s research was far-reaching: he began his career studying electro-magnetic waves before transitioning into the field of botany. It was in his botanical research that he came to a conclusion that seemed to confirm Tagore’s own belief: after applying electrical impulses, as well as narcotics and poisons, to animals, plants, and metals and tracking their responses thereto, Bose came to the startling conclusion that “It is difficult to draw a line and say, ‘here the physical phenomenon ends and the physiological begins,’ or ‘that is a phenomenon of dead matter, and this is a vital phenomenon peculiar to the living.’ These lines of demarcation would be quite arbitrary” (Bose quoted in P. Geddes 90). Bose went on to explicitly frame this discovery of “a pervading unity that bears within all things” as evidence of the claim of his ancestors, which Bose quotes: “They who see but one, in all the changing manifoldness of this universe, unto them belongs Eternal Truth—unto none else, unto none else!” (Bose quoted in P. Geddes 97-98). Tagore understood Bose’s discovery similarly, although rather than framing it in terms of *Brahma*—the Eternal Truth to which Bose refers—he instead makes reference to the all-pervading life-force, *prāṇ*. As Tagore put it in his 1937 obituary notice on Bose:

The stuff of life lies secretly hidden in insensate matter. The expectation that Jagadish would give this supposition a scientific basis greatly excited me at that time. For right from my childhood I was acquainted with the words of the Rishis: *yadidam kinca jagat, prana ejatinih-srtam—‘Everything that is this world, that is moving, is born of life and pulsating with life’*. This pulsation is being spoken of by science today. But at that time it had not been scientifically proved that this pulsation was the same as the palpitation of life itself. I believed that proof was not far away. (Tagore quoted in Radice 138, emphasis in the original)

<sup>20</sup> This and all other translations from *Gītāñjali* are mine, except where otherwise noted, as Tagore’s English translations are famously quite different from the Bangla original. For my current purposes, I have attempted to maintain the most literal sense of the words and syntax, and as such I have robbed it of a great deal of poetry.

<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that *līlā* is not play in the sense of human games, but rather classically refers, as the editors of Tagore’s *Selected Writings on Literature and Language* (2001) put it, to “the ‘sport’ of providence, some deity or the world order, in a free, often *irrational* or *inscrutable* exercise of its forces” (*Selected Writings on Literature and Language* xii, emphasis mine).

This playful expression is, in turn, fundamentally *rhythmic*. Tagore returns to the concept of rhythm repeatedly throughout his writings; it is a central aspect of creation and, thus, of finite reality. As he puts it,

Creation is in rhythm, the rhythm which is the border on which *vidyancha avidanchya*, the infinite and the finite, meet. We do not know how, from the indeterminate, the lotus flower finds its being. So long as it is merged in the vague it is nothing to us, and yet it must have been everywhere. Somehow from the vast it has been captured in a perfect rhythmical limit, forming an eddy in our consciousness, arousing within us a recognition of delight at the touch of the infinite which finitude gives. It is the limiting process which is the work of a creator, who finds his freedom through his restraints, the truth of the boundless through the reality of the bounds. (“The Philosophy of Our People” 166-167)

This idea—that rhythm functions as a sort of border between *Brahma* and the finite world, that it is in rhythm that creation occurs and, subsequently, emerges into human consciousness—is so important to Tagore that he includes it in his definition of creation itself: “Creation is the revelation of truth through the rhythm of forms” (“Construction versus Creation” 401). The relationship between rhythm, creation, and life creeps into Tagore’s diction elsewhere as well: writing of poetry, he notes that rhythm is “not a mere enclosure for keeping ideas from running off in disorder, but a *vitalizing force*, making them indivisible in a unity of creation” (402, emphasis mine).

Thus rhythm is the fundamental organizing principle through which the finite world assumes recognizable form: “It is this magic of mathematics, this rhythm which is in the heart of all creations, which moves in the atoms and in its different measures fashions gold and lead, the rose and the thorn, the sun and the stars” (“The Principle of Literature” 17). The poet takes this idea to its logical conclusion. The finite world is not just a rhythmic creation, but a song sung by the infinite: “We seem to feel that the manifestation of the infinite in the finite forms of creation is music itself, silent and visible... This world-song is never for a moment separated from its singer. It is not fashioned from any outward material. It is his joy itself taking never-ending form. It is the great heart sending the tremor of its thrill over the sky” (*Sāadhanā* 141-143). This world-song—or, alternately, “world-verse”—is the “*living* idea which reveals itself in an eternal symphony, played on innumerable instruments, all keeping perfect time” (“Creative Unity” 33, emphasis mine). Finite reality itself is a living, creative expression, a rhythmic play.

Returning to Tagore’s conception of history and historical progress, then, it is now possible to understand the import of Tagore’s alternate metaphor. To say that the mode of progress better suited to human well-being, to human society, is “the inward progress of life” (*Nationalism* 20) is to reject *rectilinear progress* in favor of *keeping time with the rhythm of the world-verse*; or, rather, *getting in time* with that rhythm. The poet is clear that while the instruments of the world-verse keep perfect time—that although the mountain pine in “its every inch maintains the rhythm of an inner balance” (“Civilization and Progress” 629)—human beings are an exception. The independent will of the human being, at least on occasion, “does not move in the same rhythm [*tāl*] with the play [*līlā*] of the world [*jagat*]” (“Kabir Kaiphīyat” 30-31). This is true not just of the individual but of (organismic) society more broadly, a claim that Tagore once again makes in relation to the imagery of the rectilinear progress, that is, the imagery of the road:

Our living society, which should have dance in its steps, music in its voice, beauty in its

limbs, which should have its metaphor in stars and flowers, maintaining its harmony with God's creation, becomes, under the tyranny of a prolific greed, like an over-laden market-cart jolting and creaking on the road that leads from the things to the Nothing, tearing ugly ruts across the green life till it breaks down under the burden of its vulgarity on the wayside reaching nowhere. ("Civilization and Progress" 629)

In clinging to the road—that is, to the mode of progress typical of the Nation—society is jerked out of its rhythmic relationship with living creation and, in turn, with *Brahma*. Tagore goes further, drawing on metaphors that link the destructive form of progress to his description of the state as an external mechanism, killing the organism that is human society: "life's progress should be a perfect progress of the inner life itself and not of materials and machinery; the non-living must not continue outgrowing the living, the armour deadening the skin, the armament laming the arms" (*The Religion of Man* 34-35). The result of such mechanical progress, as against the play of creative, living growth, is phrased, once again, in terms of rhythm: "For Life has its own natural rhythm which a multiplication table has not; and proud progress that rides roughshod over Life's cadence kills it at the end with encumbrances that are unrhythmic" (32).

How, then, can a human being, a human society, humanity itself, get back in time with the rhythm of the world-verse? For Tagore, the answer is human creativity: creative production called forth by the rhythmic, creative play of the world-verse of which human beings are a part; creative production in which human beings can recognize themselves, objectified, in the external world, and so come to realize their unity with each other and with *Brahma*. Just as humans are unique in their ability to break rhythm with the world-verse, so too are they unique in their ability to enter into felt relation with it. The poet claims that humans have a unique *surplus*—a term on which he repeatedly insists ("Appendix I" 166; "Man" 215; *Personality* 10-11; *The Religion of Man* 43-64)—of spiritual energy: that is, they are capable not only of meeting their own necessities, but also of a form of creativity that mirrors *Brahma's* creative expression of finite reality (Bishvasāhitya 66; *Creative Unity* v, 22-23; *Sādhanā* 124-125).<sup>22</sup> This creative impulse in human beings, itself a manifestation of the infinite within them, is called forth by their encounter with the external world, with finite reality as it exists beyond the creative individual:

This great world, where it is a creation, an expression of the infinite—where its morning sings of joy to the newly awakened life, and its evening stars sing to the traveller, weary and worn, of the triumph of life in a new birth across death,—has its call for us. The call has ever roused the creator in man, and urged him to reveal the truth, to reveal the Infinite in himself. It is ever claiming from us, in our own creations, co-operation with God, reminding us of our divine nature, which finds itself in freedom of spirit. (26)

Although the world-verse is present in all things, it is most apparent in the beauty—specifically, the *superfluous* beauty, beauty as "uneconomical, unnecessary expenditure [*bēhisābi bājē*

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<sup>22</sup> Readers may note a certain similarity between the Tagore's theory of surplus—and *prāṇ* more broadly—and certain more familiar notions in so-called Western philosophy, in particular Henri Bergson's *élan vital*. Indeed, Tagore, like Bergson, relates *prāṇ* to the theory of evolution (see Bergson's *Creative Evolution* ([1907] 1944) and Tagore's *The Religion of Man* (1922) in this regard). However, the poet—who in fact met Bergson in 1920—was very clear that his theories were distinct, and of Vedantic origin: discussing the ideas of "the forest dwelling sages of old," he writes, "All that is, emerges from life and throbs in life. This is no theory of Bergson—this is the message of the great child" (Tagore quoted in Palit et al. 173).

*kharac*]” (“Bishvasāhitya” 65)<sup>23</sup>—of the phenomenal world. Through this beauty, “the heart knows, in the midst of the world [*jagat*], there is only one heart that is expressing itself” (66); the human heart, too, expresses itself, an aspect of the expression of the infinite heart.

In giving expression to the creative impulse born of the encounter with the world-verse, humans do not simply recognize themselves, but also their unity with the external world and, in turn, with the infinite. As Tagore puts it, “the urging of our artistic nature is to realize the manifestation of personality in the world of appearance, the reality of existence which is in harmony with the real within us” (*The Religion of Man* 132-133). This harmony is—to mix musical terms—rhythmic: in a discussion of rhythm, the poet explains that the encounter with the world-verse “produces a music in our consciousness by giving it *a swing of motion synchronous with its own*” (“Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore” 73, emphasis mine).

Thus it is by exercising their creative faculties that human beings can keep time with the world-verse. True human progress consists of a series of creative acts: the creation of beauty, the expression of joy.<sup>24</sup> However, this would seem to apply only to the individual, and thus marks a seeming impasse: progress, at least the mode of progress with which both Tagore and I are here concerned, is a collective endeavor. What then does the progress of life itself mean in the case of the social organism—or, more radically, humanity itself? Tagore offers an answer; before attending to this answer, though, it is important to clarify the poet’s conception of the land.

### *Whither the Land on the Beat of the World-Verse?*

Both the British colonial state and Indian anticolonial nationalists rendered the land a text that was primarily apprehensible through data relating to its productive potential. In doing so, they effected a spatiotemporal displacement in which a temporally anterior land was to be actualized, in the form of commodities, in a future-elsewhere. How might holding to a Tagorean notion of progress—a notion of progress based on entirely different ontological presuppositions—change human conceptions of and relations to the land? First and foremost, the notion of the world-verse depicts the land as an entirely different type of text, requiring a different mode of reading. Whereas the colonial state and anticolonial nationalists produced knowledge of the land through the analysis of statistics, Tagore imagines the truth of the land—the truth of finite reality—quite differently. As he puts it,

What is the truth of this world? It is not in the masses of substance, not in the number of

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<sup>23</sup> Swapan Chakravorty translates this phrase as “thrifless excess” (“World Literature” 144). While this is clearly the more poetic translation, I have chosen to proceed more literally, emphasizing language that recalls the poet’s consistent recourse to the metaphor of *surplus* as that which renders human beings unique. The word *kharac* (expenditure), in particular, is quite specific. As I will demonstrate in my reading of Tagore’s reimagining of society, as well as his reconceptualization of the place of the land in relation to history and human society, this re-translation is by no means inconsequential.

<sup>24</sup> Tagore’s apprehension as regards rectilinear, progressive history extends as well to statist historiography. As Ranajit Guha puts it, the poet believed that “history has been impoverished by historiography’s preoccupation with the public and the average to the exclusion of the individual and the creative” (*History at the Limits of World History* 89). This claim, in turn, leads Guha to the idea that Tagore’s concern was with the way in which literature might approach questions of historicity through the everyday, an approach that lies beyond the reach of “statist World-history narratives” (92). As I will demonstrate, Tagore’s attention to the connection between the everyday and historicity—a connection made possible through the creative act—is an important part of his project of rural reconstruction and his broader social vision.

things, but in their relatedness, which neither can be counted, nor measured, nor abstracted. It is not in the materials which are many, but in the expression which is one. All our knowledge of things is knowing them in their relation to the Universe, in that relation which is truth. (*Creative Unity* 5)

For Tagore, the truth of the land does not lie in its productive capacity, determined scientifically; rather, it lies in the relation between the land as a creative expression of the infinite—the writing or singing of the life-force of which Tagore writes in “BṛkShabandanā”—and the creative expression that the land subsequently calls forth from human beings. The truth, put differently, does not lie in an abstract quality belonging to the land alone, but rather to the *relation* between human beings and the land, a relation that is formed in no small part by the aesthetic qualities of the land and aesthetic receptivity in human beings.

One of the most revealing ways in which Tagore’s understanding of the land departs from that of his Indian nationalist and British colonial contemporaries is the poet’s reconceptualization of *waste*. Waste, for these contemporaries, refers primarily to land understood as un- or insufficiently-cultivated, land that could be exploited in such a way as to unlock its latent potential. Such an understanding is only possible when the land is reduced to its productive capacity; and, in turn, such an understanding is vital to the temporal and spatial displacement of the land. However, Tagore’s claim that the world-verse is most visible in beautiful, “uneconomical, unnecessary expenditure” (“Bishvasāhitya” 65) on the part of the nonhuman world leads toward a radically different concept of waste. Here, we might recall Tagore’s invocation, in “BṛkShabandanā,” of “*signless wastes [cīhnaḥīn prāntarē prāntarē]*” (“BṛkShabandanā” 14, emphasis mine), which one could also translate to *symbolless wastes*. Wastes are wastes because, in the context of the Tagorean world-verse, they *fail to signify*: or, recalling the poet’s reference to “*rhythmless [chandōhīn] stone*” (13, emphasis mine), because they *do not sing*.

Tagore’s poem is clear, though, that life has reached around the globe, to “inaccessible islands” and “impassable mountains” (14). Insofar as it exists at all, then, waste would seem to be a peculiarly human problem. It is born of the mechanization of life, a phenomenon at the center of which lie the exact processes of quantification and abstraction by which the colonial state apprehended the land (“The Philosophy of Our People” 306-307). It can be seen in processes that rob the land of its aesthetic beauty in the pursuit of material profits: for instance, Tagore laments the effect of gunny bag factories on the banks of the Ganges, which subordinate the “unheard melody” of the “mother-call of the Ganges” to the pursuit of “utility” (“Construction versus Creation” 405-406).

This different understanding of waste illuminates the spatiotemporal contours in the land born of the world-verse. In a Tagorean conception of the land, no spatial or temporal displacement occurs: the land’s value, manifest in its “expenditure,” is realized immediately upon the human being’s encounter with the land as a manifestation of the world-verse, an encounter in which the “surplus” of spirit in that human is called forth. Here, the poet’s subversion of the language of the marketplace, of consumption and profit and greed, calls up an understanding of time defined by the instant of the aesthetic encounter between the human being and the nonhuman land, rather than the imperatives of the marketplace, themselves ensconced in and defining a vision of infinite historical progress.

It can of course be objected that the Tagorean understanding of the land that I have here outlined can only exist because it does not address that central concern of the colonial state and anticolonial Indian nationalists: agricultural production. It seems, on its face, a different thing

altogether. And yet the poet's vision extended far beyond the aesthetic encounter, toward a transformation of society and production in the service of these encounters: or, perhaps more accurately, in the service of human unity.

### *In the Heart of the Country*

Tagore's program of rural reconstruction was a central part of this transformation, seeking both to lay the material foundations necessary to creative production and to democratize that same production, extending it even to those engaged in what the poet understood as brute agricultural labor. To comprehend the true vitalizing power of Tagore's work at Sriniketan, however, it is first necessary to turn more robustly to his organismic understanding of human society.

Tagore describes society as an end in itself: it is "a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being... a natural regulation of human relationships, so that men can develop ideas of life in co-operation with one another" (*Nationalism* 55). It is the "expression of those moral and spiritual aspirations of man which belong to his higher nature" (113). This expression, when functioning properly—when healthy—takes highly specific geographical form, relying upon a reciprocal relationship between city and village, urban and rural. Cities and towns function as the organs of the organism of society: "The vital forces of our body are gathered at various centres. In the lower types of life these centres are not organized; with evolution, the brain, the lungs, the heart and the stomach gain in their functions. These may be compared with towns" ("City and Village" 305). Thus cities and towns are vital to the proper functioning of a society: "[a] civilization which comprises mainly village life cannot advance very far" (305). With that being said, villages are necessary to animate the organism:

Villages are like women. In their keeping is the cradle of the race. They are nearer to nature than towns, and in closer touch with the fountain of life. They possess a natural power of healing. It is the function of the village, like that of women, to provide people with their elemental needs, with food and joy, with the simple poetry of life and with those ceremonies of beauty which the village spontaneously produces and in which she finds delight. (311-312)

A functioning society, in short, is one in which there is a healthy exchange between these various elements of the body, such that the village provides "food and health and fellow-feeling" while the city provides "gifts of wealth, knowledge and energy" (304). Elsewhere, Tagore likens this exchange, which he calls "a spontaneous social adjustment," to the "circulation of blood in our bodily system" ("The Philosophy of Our People" 158).

As previously stated, the Nation-state functions as a tool that mechanizes this bodily system, pulling it out of time with the rhythm of life: this mechanization, like the social organism itself, manifests in a specific geographical form. In the face of the Nation-state—more specifically, of the impositions of the British colonial state, impositions that Tagore feared anticolonial nationalists would continue—the social body of India has taken ill. Tagore refers to modern cities as "tumour[s]" that "feed upon the social organism that runs through the villages... [and] appropriate the life stuff of the community and slough off a huge amount of dead matter, while making a lurid counterfeit of prosperity" ("City and Village" 312). Villages thus have fallen to pieces, to "reckless wastage... where the light of life is being dimmed, the joy of

existence dulled, the threads of social communion snapped” (314). Tagore phrases this imbalance by way of a metaphor of soil exhaustion:

the scholars, the poets, the musicians, the artists as well as the scientists have to collaborate, have to offer their contribution. Otherwise they live like parasites, sucking life from the country people, and giving nothing back to them. *Such exploitation gradually exhausts the soil of life, the soil which needs constant replenishing by the return of life to it, through the completion of the cycle of receiving and giving back.* (“Introduction” 40, emphasis mine)

Tagore’s phrasing here—not just his recourse to the terminology of soil health, but, too, his invocation of “the scholars, the poets, the musicians, the artists” (40)—already adumbrates the shape of his reconstructed village society, suggesting both the priority of the aesthetic and the importance of ecological flourishing.<sup>25</sup>

The effect of the imbalance between rural and urban is felt in many arenas of human life, but it is the dulling of the creative impulse, as well as the destruction of creativity’s conditions of possibility, that the poet finds more concerning. In the face of rampant materialism, the centralization of power, and the collapse of village life, Tagore is less concerned with “the poverty problem” than the “problem of unhappiness,” as happiness, unlike wealth, “is final... is creative... has its own source of riches within itself” (40). What is more, happiness and creativity are necessary to the cohesion of social life: to the cohesion of the people (“*Bānlā Jātīya Sāhitya*” 112). Thus as social life dissolves in the atomizing effects of the Nation, so too does creativity decline; as creativity declines, so too do the social bonds that connect individuals within a social organism; and a hideous feedback loop ensues.

The creativity of the social organism is also the foundation of Tagore’s global and universal visions, his opposition to the fundamental parochialism of the Nation-state—as well as, vitally, the “colorless vagueness” (*Nationalism* 51) and “imbecility” (“Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore” 59) of cosmopolitanism. A properly functioning society is creative at a scale that exceeds the individual human being: as Tagore puts it, “[t]he peoples being living personalities must have their self-expression and this leads to creations. These creations are literature, art, social symbolism, and ceremonials” (*Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism* 226). Different peoples must share these creations, as it is only by doing so that a thing called humanity can coalesce (“*Bishvasāhitya*” 70-71; “The Centre of Indian Culture” 469, 484-485; “Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore” 76, 81). The Nation, by hampering the creativity of individual peoples and substituting in its place a monotonous and superficial interest in materiality, as well as by its inherently competitive and exclusionary nature, prevents any real sort of global community from coming into being (*Nationalism* 62-63; “International Relations” 472-475).

Against the Nation, then, Tagore pushes for the creation, on the part of each individual people, each individual society, of works that, while emerging from a particular time and place (*dēshkālpātra*), transcend that time and place and enter onto the scale of the global. Tagore puts it in language that reflects the connections he identifies between rural life, agriculture, and the

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<sup>25</sup> We might note that Tagore’s language recalls, in many ways, Marx’s theory of metabolic rift, although causal responsibility lies with the Nation rather than capital. For a full explanation of the Marxist concept of metabolic rift, see John Bellamy Foster’s *Marx’s Ecology* (2000), especially 155-163. For an important critique of the concept as reinforcing a dualistic conception of nature and society, see Jason W. Moore’s *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015), in particular chapter 3.

universal, connections to which I will come shortly: “[t]he seedlings, that were reared within their enclosures, must now be transplanted into open fields” (“The Centre of Indian Culture” 484).

One of the most important instances of this movement from a cultivated particularity into the realm of the global and, in turn, the universal, takes the form of *universal literature* (*bishvasāhitya*): literature that expresses what is universal in human beings, that is a product of the “universal man [*bishvamānab*], the mason [*rājmistri*]” under whom all temporal, emplaced human writers work as “laborers [*majur*]” (“Bishvasāhitya” 70). Out of the work of universal literature, which captures “the relation between all human efforts at expression” (74), humanity *as a whole* recognizes itself in the world, understands its unity with the *Brahma*, and moves to the beat of the world-verse. While Tagore’s conception of universal literature—typically rendered “world literature”—has received a large amount of scholarly attention, few have remarked upon its roots in the material particularity of specific times and places, the rural foremost among them. It is important to note that Tagore makes a sharp distinction between activities that are merely life-sustaining and those superfluous, creative activities that are the product of the human being’s surplus of spirit (“The Philosophy of Our People” 157-158). As I will explain, one of the primary goals of Tagore’s rural reconstruction is to do away with this divide, bringing the former into the realm of the latter. However, even when life-sustaining labor has been reduced to its most brute level—as Tagore claims it has in the age of the Nation—the everyday life and labor of those who perform it nevertheless remains the base of literature as such:

just as, in human settlements, farming and ferrying are going on—in that place ploughs are being made in the blacksmith’s place, husking peddles in the carpenter’s, money at the goldsmith’s—just so, at the same time, in all these places, the work of literature too is going on; it takes no rest. (“Grāmyasāhitya” 89)

Rural literature, village literature, emerges from these everyday tasks, connecting them and allowing them to transcend themselves; and yet it is only able to do so because, as the poet puts it, “[t]he various tasks of the everyday are going on in the midst of the village, and a tune [*rāginī*] of the eternal is striving without cease to ring up from their gaps” (89). At the same time, rural literature, that which is born of this up-ringing, lays the foundation for universal literature. I must quote Tagore at length:

Just as the roots of a tree are entangled in the soil [*māṭi*] and its top spreads [*chorāiyā poriyāchē*, which also implies a *scattering*] toward the sky, so everywhere the base of literature stays for the most part entangled and concealed in the soil [*māṭi*] of the homeland [*swadēsh*]; it is indigenous [*dēshīya*], local [*sthānīya*], in a special, narrow sense. It is enjoyable and accessible only for the common people [*jansādhāraṇ*] of the *dēsh*<sup>26</sup>; outsiders get no right of access. That part of literature that is global [*sārbabhaumik*, also implying *universality*] stands upon this provincial substratum. There is always a connection between such low literature and high literature. There is no comparing the roots beneath the soil with the fruits and flowers, leaves and twigs of that part that reaches toward the sky; nevertheless, for those of spiritual and philosophical

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<sup>26</sup> Because Tagore’s concept of *dēsh* is not actually readily assimilable to its most common translations—country, nation, land—I have chosen to leave the term in transliterated Bangla.



knowledge, their likeness and kinship cannot be dispelled. (91)

Thus it becomes clear that, for Tagore, the crisis in the villages, in particular as manifest in the problem of unhappiness, has global stakes. At least in India, the destruction of village life does not merely lead to the sickness of the entire social organism; rather, it prevents as well the constitution of a unified humanity, as it inhibits the process by which rural life and labor give rise to the rural literature that, in turn, makes possible the universal literature that expresses the universal in human beings: that constitutes something like a universal humanity. I turn, then, to Tagore's proposed solution: his global university at Shantiniketan and, just as important, his program of rural reconstruction at Sriniketan.

### *Cultivating the Universal in the Village*

Tagore's project was clear: to resuscitate India's villages, thereby providing the social organism with the vital force necessary to thrive—and, if necessary, to survive the mechanical influence of the Nation that so many of his contemporaries so ardently desired. To do so, the poet undertook a holistic project that drew inspiration from precolonial Indian village life, the co-operative system in Europe, and, in the latter part of his life, elements of production in the Soviet Union; at the same time, the project of village reconstruction was explicitly tied to Tagore's university at Shantiniketan, in a seeming attempt to actualize the creative and global ambitions that the poet tied to rural life. The project took a highly specific and, arguably, impractical form: Tagore made no attempt to change property relations or to provide the peasantry with greater political power relative to the zamindars. His focus, he repeatedly made clear, was not simply to meet the material requirements of the increasingly impoverished Bengali peasantry—or, like the anticolonial nationalists, to invigorate a native, autarkic capitalism. Rather, he intended to rejuvenate rural life “in its completeness” (*SWoEaN* 135), a project that included both the introduction of co-operative scientific agriculture and the practice of creative expression on the part of villagers themselves (“Tagore's Ideas of Social Action and the Sriniketan Experiment of Rural Reconstruction, 1922–41” 993). Both elements, in articulation with the work at Visva-Bharati at Shantiniketan, were necessary components of Tagore's global, universal vision—as well as, vitally, of his understanding of India's place within this vision.

Tagore bemoans the reduction of agriculture to brute, animalistic labor, a reduction that he describes in mechanical terms and associates with the Nation. The poet repeatedly emphasizes agriculture's role in making possible human interconnection on a large scale, as well as its potential to be a creative act in itself (“Appendix I” 166–167; *The Co-Operative Principle* 22–23; *Nationalism* 119; *SWoEaN* 145). As to the former, Tagore points to the ways in which the discovery of agriculture made possible human settlement as such: the “regularized production of a sufficiency of food made it possible for the many to live together” (*The Co-Operative Principle* 22–23), thereby knowing their union with one another and allowing man to “realiz[e] his truth on a larger scale” (22). In short, agriculture functions as the very foundation of society, “rais[ing] the piecemeal individual life of man into the coherence of a large and systematized society” (23).

And yet the poet does not allow this foundation to remain lowly, crushed beneath the weight of urban elites. Rather, emphasizing the way in which the discovery of agriculture also “let the light into many an obscure chamber of [man's] mind” (“Sriniketan (1928)” 403), he recalls the mythic King Janaka, in whom “were combined the two different currents of civilization—supplying food and wisdom, agriculture and the culture of the spirit,—that is to

say, economic and transcendental” (*The Co-Operative Principle* 23). It is to this combination that Tagore’s work at Sriniketan aspires. Per Sudhir Sen, Tagore’s contemporary and an economist who spent time working at Sriniketan, the poet believed that “life in the villages must be made more attractive, *work and joy must be combined and an aesthetic sense should be developed*” (Sen 101, emphasis mine). As Tagore put it in advocating for the principles of Sriniketan, when “thinkers and intellectuals... take agricultural activities under their responsibility, the schism that at present exists between the hand and the brain for a large section of our population, will vanish” (“Appendix I” 167).

This taking responsibility on the part of a cultural elite consisted not just in efforts to maximize production via scientific agriculture, not just in attempts to introduce co-operative labor in order to build power amongst small-holder agriculturalists, but also, and perhaps most importantly, to provide the opportunity, especially to the children of the villages, for “the joy of play that is work... of work that is play” (*SWoEaN* 145). This included, for example, the composition of songs that emphasized the aesthetic experience of labor: “The sun shines, the rain pours down in showers,/the leaves glisten in the bamboo grove,/the smell of the newly tilled earth fills the air,/Our hands are strong, our hearts glad,/as we toil from morning till night to plough the land” (Sen 69). There was also recourse to forms of theater and music into rural life more generally, not just in relation to labor but as forms of folk education and folk entertainment (“Appendix II” 170).

At the same time, students attending Visva-Bharati at nearby Shantiniketan were to play an important part in the labor of the villagers, joining them in agricultural production. Since his Swadeshi days, Tagore had advocated for a form of education based upon the *tapōban*, the forest hermitage that he associated primarily with precolonial India. In these indigenous educational institutions, claims Tagore, masters and students did not merely cultivate their spiritual and intellectual capacities but also crops and livestock, and thus their capacity to labor (*Creative Unity* 192-193; *Personality* 127-128, 135-138; “ShikShāsamasyā” 566). Such a relationship of labor, however, was not merely propelled by necessity: “For us the highest purpose of this world is not merely living in it, knowing it and making use of it, but realising our own selves in it through expansion of sympathy” (*Creative Unity* 47). Thus Tagore’s program of education was animated in no small part by the cultivation of non-productive, creative relations with the nonhuman world—non-productive, creative relations that lingered even within labor that produced life’s necessities.

These two projects—rural reconstruction and holistic, ecological education—in fact fuse into one. Writing of his educational ideal, Tagore stresses that

Its very existence should depend upon the success of its industrial activities carried out on the co-operative principle, which will unite the teachers and students and villagers of the neighbourhood in a living and active bond of necessity. This will give us also a practical industrial training, whose motive force is not the greed of profit... there should be some common sharing of life with the tillers of the soil and the humble workers in the neighbouring villages... and in our intercourse we should be guided, not by moral maxims or the condescension of social superiority, but by natural sympathy of life for life, and by the sheer necessity of love's sacrifice for its own sake. In such an atmosphere students would learn to understand that humanity is a divine harp of many strings, waiting for its one grand music. Those who realise this unity are made ready for the pilgrimage through the night of suffering, and along the path of sacrifice, to the great meeting of Man in the future, for which the call comes to us across the darkness. (192-

Here, the complex contours of agriculture within Tagorean society come into view. Intellectuals and dedicated agriculturalists share in labor, labor motivated not by “greed of profit” but rather by “a living and active bond of necessity” (192-193). While this reference to necessity might seem to contradict the ultimate ideal of Tagorean society—the creative use of the surplus in man, that which exceeds necessity—Tagore is quick to add that all is in service of “the deliverance of man's soul from the grip of self, its communion with the Infinite Soul through its union in *ânanda* with the universe,” which is only possible “by making provision for students to live in intimate touch with nature, daily to grow in an atmosphere of service offered to all creatures, tending trees, feeding birds and animals, learning to feel the immense mystery of the soil and water and air” (193). Put differently, the coordination of labor between students and villagers not only fulfills the necessities of phenomenal existence but also tends toward unity with the universe and with all of mankind. This coordination simultaneously injects joy into the labor of the villagers, such that this labor is well-positioned to take its place at the base of creative expression, literature in particular—or even to function as a form of creative expression in and of itself.

At the same time, a relationship was to be established between Shantiniketan and Sriniketan in which the labor of the latter functioned as an aesthetic object to be actualized in creative products by the artists of the former: that is, a sort of formalized version of the metaphorical tree by which Tagore describes the relationship between rural life and universal literature. Elmhirst, the director at Sriniketan, puts things in the same terms in a 1924 letter to Tagore:

But how to kindle the rich of vision so that ‘our different works may be luminous,’ so that ‘Sriniketan may not only have shape, but also light,’ ... that ‘our dreams may shine across the boundaries of practical achievements’?... So far we have been content that Santiniketan should have a monopoly in the creation of beauty whilst we strove to establish our roots, but roots and flower must grow together, in beauty and harmony, to be true. We shall still have to toil and spin, and we shall have to ask you to keep an eye on us and tell us when we are becoming too concerned about practical results and forgetful of whether our lamp is lit. We shall need all the help Nandalal can give us.” (Elmhirst 7-8)

Similarly, Arthur Geddes, writing of his time at Sriniketan, made note of the direct relationship that developed between artists at Shantiniketan—particularly Nandalal Bose, the well-known painter, whom Elmhirst references as well—and the labor that occurred at Sriniketan. Describing a scene in which a set of boys clears a tank of weeds, Geddes writes,

To have seen the boys up to the waist in the water as they cut the weeds and dragged them to the shore, singing the refrain of one of Tagore's working songs (and adding variations of their own telling of their work in the water),—to have seen them that morning would have gladdened any heart. The bend of the older lads, cutting under water, the water shining on their bronzed bodies, the long pull of the little ones tugging the loose green to the shore—varied as they plashed in again for more, made a rhythmic [sic] movement of its own, and might yet make a motif new to art: and Nanda Lal Bose, who witnessed it, was delighted by the sheer beauty of the swinging motion,—too rare a

sight because too rare a spirit since country labour became a monotonous round of lonely toil, but ready in the heart of boyhood to spring up again. But more than even picture making, music or literature for its own sake is the sharing of mutual aid, and common endeavour is the sauce of life for service... Whatever walk in life they follow the 'old boys' of Santiniketan, its teachers, artists and scholars too, will work the better, will live as citizens more truly, for the opportunity of witnessing and sharing in the work of reconstruction and revivance, and will seek to create such opportunities elsewhere. This is I think one of the meanings of Sriniketan,—one of the purposes for which it was created, and which it is fulfilling. (A. Geddes 6-7)

Geddes shies away from “picture making, music or literature for its own sake” (7), imagining these activities primarily in relation to their political utility. Nevertheless, he makes clear the way in which rural labor at Sriniketan takes on an aesthetic, *rhythmic* quality, a quality born of “men and women united in a common movement, a common task, a single rythm [sic]” rather than “individualised and lifeless toil” (5). Because of the direct involvement of the artists of Shantiniketan, this labor, creative in itself, immediately enters into creative production in the more typical sense, the production of art and literature.

That artists potentially engaged in the production of universal literature and art are in direct contact with rural life, however, does not mean that rural artists are neglected. Rather, Tagore repeatedly emphasizes the importance of revitalizing rural crafts, both for material reasons—the diversification of sources of income—and for the creative, spiritual reasons that preoccupy him elsewhere. Tagore describes the way in which his “aim has been to assist in bringing the flood-tide of life's joy to the arid villages, urging them towards diverse self-expression. Creative work is undertaken, not for mere affluence but for self-attainment” (“Sriniketan (1939)” 60). The aridity to which he refers is not born of a fundamental failing on the part of rural peoples—who have in the past produced “[f]olk literature, folk art, folk song and folk dance” (60)—but rather to the polluting effect of the Nation on the countryside. Thus Tagore’s rural reconstruction would restore as well this middle level, this connection between rural, everyday life and universal literature.<sup>27</sup>

Turning back to the land, it would seem that Tagore’s rural reconstruction was intended to create, through its vision of rural production and its recalibration of the relations between this production, the rural arts, and the so-called high arts, a social organism that could *read the land as the text of life*, the text to which Tagore refers in “BṛkShabandanā”: a social organism, that is, that could move in time with the beat of the world-verse. If both the colonial state and the anticolonial Indian nationalist movement attempted to render the land, conceived of via data as its productive capacity, legible, to thereby progress through universal, rectilinear history—thus effecting a spatiotemporal displacement of the land—then Tagore’s rural reconstruction sought to give rise to an organism that apprehended the land through labor and creative expression, that encountered it in its immediacy, and in so doing advanced—or danced to—the progress of life itself.

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<sup>27</sup> In this sense, Tagore’s project can be taken as a sort of inversion of Franz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral’s visions of the role of the colonized intellectual in the anticolonial struggle. For both Fanon and Cabral the colonized intellectual must return to the source, to the vital energies and indigenous cultures kept alive amongst the rural peoples, particularly the peasantry (Cabral 60-64; *The Wretched of the Earth* 155-159). For Tagore, on the other hand, life has in fact become *weakest* in the villages, and it is the task of the elite to revitalize these villages so that said elites may, in turn, draw from the rural arts once again.

*An Anticolonialism beyond the Nation-State*

Tagore's new social organism was not, in itself, an explicit challenge to the authority of the colonial state. The poet sometimes went so far as to claim that the Indian people, having left their social issues unaddressed, were not ready for independence, placing them once again in the waiting room of history (*Nationalism* 92, 113-116). And yet if, as so many have argued, the postcolonial nation-state has maintained a disturbing degree of continuity with its colonial predecessor, Tagore's vision has the merit of imagining India otherwise, both in itself and in relation to a global community. I conclude with a brief sketch of this otherwise, with special attention to the place of the land at its base.

Shirking the territorial conception of India proper to the nationalist movement, Tagore insists that India is "an Idea and not a geographical expression" (*Letters to a Friend* 145). The idea of India to which Tagore here refers is perhaps best encapsulated in his conception of *dēsh*. Whereas in Bankim's *Ānandamāth* *dēsh* functions as a synonym for the territorial expression of the land of the nation, Tagore offers the concept in a different guise. The poet claims that "Those who think that the country is theirs simply because they have been born in it are creatures besotted by the external things of the world"; rather, "only that country can be one's *svades* [Chatterjee's transliteration of *svadēsh*] that is created by one's own knowledge, intelligence, love and effort" (Tagore quoted in *Lineages of Political Society* 104). Thus Tagore seems to believe that even the spatial extension of one's own country—the country of one's society—is a product of effort, of labor and, vitally, creative expression. Tagore is clear as to the importance of the latter, noting that the heart is unsatisfied with simply "soil, water, and sky," but "is happy if that *dēsh* expresses itself maternally in the life-giving form of the divine" ("Bishvasāhitya" 62).

Thus for Tagore India can perhaps only manifest in those places in which rural life, rural art, and the creative impulse more broadly are united: that is, in those places in which the social organism can metabolize the land not only as an element of production, but also as a manifestation of the world-verse, as one of the primary sources—if not *the* primary source—of the creative impulse in human beings. Understood thus, Tagore's efforts at Shantiniketan and Sriniketan functioned as an *attempt to constitute India*: to make India not as a Nation, but as an Idea on the stage of the global and, consequently, the universal. With this in mind, it is possible to make sense of Tagore's otherwise perplexing statement in describing his work at Sriniketan: "If I can free only one or two villages from the bonds of ignorance and weakness, there will be built on a tiny scale, an ideal for the whole of India... Fulfil this ideal in a few villages only, and I will say that *these few villages are my India*. And only if that is done, will India be truly ours" ("The History and Ideals of Sriniketan" 435-436, emphasis mine).

But Tagore is clear as well that this India—this healthy, creative social organism—cannot thrive on the inter-National stage. This stage, as Tagore conceives it, is defined by geopolitical competition between rapacious, self-centered political entities and by the greed and destruction born of the global capitalist market. He writes,

Though in the province of politics and economics, and still more in that of self-interest, we also have a world-wide system of interdependence, it remains here as a mere external fact; and the inner ideal of human unity, which is moral, not utilitarian in character, hardly finds credence; on the contrary it is brutally violated at every step. (*The Co-Operative Principle* 47)

This world-wide system promotes not unity but rather “a constant competition in mutual cheating and other hideous crimes” (47). Nor can an inter-National system, such as the League of Nations, control these impulses: as Tagore put it in a 1931 address in London, relying on such a league “is like a band of robbers being asked to organize the police department” (“International Goodwill” 646).

Against the inter-National order, Tagore poses a global vision based on the exchange between individual peoples. Even amongst agriculturalists, Tagore advocates trade between co-operatives and villages such that “these farmers and dairymen realize their close kinship with the peoples of the world, and their minds... become enriched with understanding and knowledge” (*The Co-Operative Principle* 13), as a result of which they have the capacity to “feel that they are part of a *world society*” and “their efforts... [are] co-ordinated to the efforts of men elsewhere” (14, emphasis mine). This world society, however, reaches its pinnacle in the exchange of creative products. This is the aforementioned transplantation of the seedlings—creative products—into open fields—the new world society. This world society is to function through “the co-ordination of the cultures of the world, where each will give to and take from the other; where each will have to be studied through the growth of its stages of history” (“The Centre of Indian Culture” 485). It will take place, then, in global universities such as Visva-Bharati, in places such as Shantiniketan, through “co-ordinated study” (487) of the cultures both South Asian and European, including folk arts as well—as well, of course, as through interaction with local rural populations, through the creation of universal works of art born of contact with rural life. Healthy, creative social organisms will grow and interact with one another; and together they will form world society, a larger organism or, perhaps, ecosystem of cultural exchange.

It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that Tagore’s vision makes no space for the actual political work of undoing the British colonial state; that it does not account for the pre-existing prevalence of the Nation form throughout the world, and its already-apparent appeal to colonized peoples; that, in blunt terms, it is politically infeasible. And yet where the specifics of the poet’s project perhaps fall flat, there is much to be gained from the way in which Tagore poses the question of reading the land. How might we now envision a mode of agricultural production and rural life—of social organization more broadly—based upon an apprehension of the land in its immediacy, the formation of bonds through aesthetic appreciation and production, and an attention to its “polyphonic” (Tsing 24)—to borrow Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s term—rhythms? What might it mean to approach the land not as a set of statistics to be deciphered but as a text to be pleurably read, a song to which we might dance? And how might these questions lead, in turn, to a re-centering of agricultural life and labor, a recognition of its foundational place in our society, thereby lending power both political and cultural to those people who “sustain[] all civilizations and bear[] their burdens” (*Letters to a Friend* 64)?

While my engagement with Tagore ends here, the remaining chapters of this dissertation pose answers to these questions—or, perhaps more accurately, pose similar questions, questions that similarly orient themselves beyond the strictures of a narrow vision of development. In the next chapter, I examine an event that occurred shortly after Tagore’s death in 1941, that forced the fragility of the countryside—the fragility that had so terrified the poet, that represented a rot in the roots of humanity—into the public eye: the 1943 Bengal famine.

## Chapter 2: In the Kingdom of Hunger

O great life, no more of this poetry,  
This time bring the hard, harsh prose,  
Let beautiful, humming words be obliterated,  
Today strike with the rough hammer of prose!  
No need for poetry's sweetness—  
Poetry, today I sent you on holiday,  
In the kingdom of hunger (*kShudhār rājyē*) the world is prosaic,  
The full moon is like a piece of scorched bread.

- Sukanta Bhattacharya, "O Great Life [Hē Mahājīban]"

Reality was hunger, and there was no gainsaying that.

- John Banville, *Birchwood*, p. 140

In a particularly haunting scene of Mrinal Sen's 1980 film *Ākālēr Sandhānē* (*In Search of Famine*), a film crew sits examining photographs of famine victims. The crew, which has come to a remote Bengali village in order to shoot a film set during the 1943 Bengal famine, is playing a game. Smita, an actress, shows a series of pictures, and the crew members take turns guessing whether a particular image was taken of their subject matter or, alternatively, of one of the many other episodes of mass starvation that have occurred in recent memory. They pass between 1943, a "mini-famine"<sup>1</sup> in 1959, and the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war, chuckling at their mistakes. Finally, Smita shows a photograph that is entirely black, lacking any image. "*Load shedding! Power failure!*" one crew-member cries, laughing. "*Darkness at noon,*" ventures another. Finally, after a dramatic pause, Smita says with a grin, "*Past... present... and future*" (*Ākālēr Sandhānē*).

This scene captures in a few brief frames a larger idea animating Sen's film: that famine, while relegated to specific, past events in the minds of the urban bourgeoisie, is in fact an ongoing reality. This reality does not merely manifest in the events the images of which Smita shows, but rather in the structural conditions of the Bengali countryside. The village to which the film crew comes exists in a state of perpetual lack, and, as the crew starts to recreate their chosen famine, they do not just bring up memories of the famine in villagers—even those too young to have experienced the events of 1943-1944—but, too, begin to exacerbate the village's constant experience of dearth by consuming already-limited local resources. Sen's film finds in famine a breach in the boundary between past and present, event and structure, the world-historical and the irreducibly local.

In this chapter, I delve into this destabilizing force of famine, plumbing its depths and describing what emerges. Famine, I claim, does not merely shatter the solidity of the present by drawing our attention to past and potential future events or to the enduring, underlying political economic structures out of which these events cohere. Rather, famine presents us with a more fundamental undoing, offering up a vision of humans beings whose bodies, fallen below even bare subsistence, have begun to consume themselves: of a radical, autophagic self-alienation

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<sup>1</sup> All italics in quotations from *Ākālēr Sandhānē* refer to words spoken in English (rather than Bangla) in the film.

playing out on a massive scale. Alongside this vision there erupts into the present an imagined primeval past, a state of nature at which Hobbes would blush; and, too, a spectral visitation by the merely-biological being so foundational to and yet so often forgotten by accountings of the so-called human condition.

In part because of this horror, this derangement of the very borders of humanity and human society, famine and food security were central to the project of Indian nationalism. While the late colonial period saw a number of competing visions for the postcolonial nation-state—broadly split between Nehruvian modernizers and advocates of a Gandhian vision of self-sufficient village republics—all were invested in the conquest of hunger, the assurance of sustenance for all citizens as a central pillar of independent India. In the aftermath of the persistent famines under the British, the 1943 Bengal famine in particular, the quest for food security was vital to conceptions of Indian nationhood, whether those of its rulers or its citizenry. This quest reached a turning point, finally, with the arrival of Green Revolution agricultural technologies of the late 1960s, and, alongside them, a turn away from government commitments to equity and toward the targeted shaping of both human and nonhuman beings into forms amenable to scientized commodity production (Siegel 5-6, 12-14, 79-82).

In retrospect, it is tempting to take this turn toward input-intensive agricultural commodity production as an inevitable response to the threat of famine under the conditions of a capitalist global economy. And yet famine need not merely justify the cultivation of *homo economicus* and the instrumentalization of nonhuman nature in the service of the postcolonial developmental state; rather, famine contains as well the seeds of alternative conceptions of human beings, human-nonhuman relation, and political community, as is perhaps evident in the “fleeting moment of creative postcolonial planning” (53) that Benjamin Robert Siegel locates between the 1943 famine and India’s first Five-Year Plan in 1951. This is to say that famine makes its own terrible, conflicted poetry. Thus the ironic turns of Sukanta Bhattacharya’s “Hē Mahājīban,” with which this chapter begins and from which it takes its title: the self-described “poet of famine” (“Rabindranāthēr Prati [To Rabindranath]” 11) concludes his verse by describing the prosifying effects of mass starvation with a strikingly poetic image, full moon as scorched bread. The starving body enlivens the world with the strength of its desperation.

It is perhaps because of its singularly horrific poetry that famine has historically given rise to various artistic innovations. Such is certainly true of the 1943 Bengal famine, in which an estimated three million people died.<sup>2</sup> As Nikhil Sarkar puts it, “[i]t would be hard to find a writer in Bengali from those times who had not written a story against the setting of the famine” (N. Sarkar 22). New aesthetic forms stepped forth from the breach: the revolutionary aesthetics of the Communist Party of India (CPI)-aligned Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) and artist-cadres like Chittaprosad Bhattacharya and Somnath Hore, for example, or the combination

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<sup>2</sup> It is not my purpose in this chapter to attend to the history of the famine. For helpful works in this regard, see in particular Janam Mukherjee’s *Hungry Bengal* (2015). For other histories of the famine, see Sugata Bose’s “Starvation amidst Plenty: The Making of Famine in Bengal, Honan, and Tonkin, 1942-1945” (1990); Paul Greenough’s *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944* (1982); Iftekar Iqbal’s *The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State and Social Change, 1840-1943* (2010), especially chapter 8; Madhusree Mukerjee’s *Churchill’s Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (2011); Amartya Sen’s *Poverty and Famines* (1981); and M.S. Venkataraman’s *Bengal Famine of 1943: The American Response* (1973). There were also an extraordinary number of contemporary analyses: see, for instance: Freda Bedi’s *Bengal Lamenting* (1944); Tarakchandra Das’s *Bengal Famine (1943): As Revealed in a Survey of Destitutes in Calcutta* (1949); T.K. Dutt’s *Hungry Bengal* (1944); Kali Charan Ghosh’s *Famines in Bengal, 1770-1943* (1944); and T.G. Narayan’s *Famine over Bengal* (1944).



and collision of modernism and social realism in the work of Calcutta Group artists like Pradosh Dasgupta, Nirode Mazumdar, and Gopal Ghose. Fiction tended toward realism: Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's 1944 famine novel *Manbantar*, for example, was his first in *calita bhāShā*, colloquial Bengali, rather than *sādhu bhāShā*, the chaste form of the language, the author "choosing it deliberately as the proper vehicle for the subject matter" (T. Bandyopadhyay quoted in N. Sarkar 22).<sup>3</sup>

Studies of these aesthetic developments have tended to emphasize the way in which the 1943 famine functioned as a galvanizing or more broadly transformative politicizing force.<sup>4</sup> Less focus, however, has been paid to famine in its specificity: that is, the way in which the 1943 famine *qua* famine offers a site for aesthetic production to launch highly specific critiques of the colonial state, colonial capital, and the colonized bourgeoisie: and, in turn, of capitalist modernity itself.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I read Bhabani Bhattacharya's 1947 novel *So Many Hungers!* in order to think with the particularity of famine, its violent destabilizations and its haunting poetry. Of the many novels, plays, and paintings confronting the 1943 famine, Bhattacharya's text is notable for its incorporation of the famine into an explicitly nationalist narrative, one defined by a rigorous and idiosyncratic social realism. Like many of its social realist contemporaries, the novel not only endorses the Indian nationalist movement as it manifested under the dual leadership of Gandhi and Nehru but, too, bodies forth the nation in its mapping of social space, its assumption of empty, homogenous time, and its "allegorizing of individual subject and nation form" (Esty and Lye 282). And yet, as I will demonstrate, *So Many Hungers!*, by founding its vision of the nation in famine and the starving body, repeatedly fractures this vision.<sup>6</sup> Out of these fractures there emerges the outline of a different notion of political community, one structured around *metabolism*—not, as in earlier organismic nationalisms, the *metaphor* of metabolism, but metabolism as a *concrete biological phenomenon* and, too, an unavoidable, fundamental otherness that both lurks within and constitutes the human. The novel dwells in the kingdom of hunger, articulates its unsettling power, and, in doing so, offers up an alternate set of principles from which to think the nation.

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<sup>3</sup> A partial list of other contemporary works: for novels, see Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Ashani Sankēt* [*Distant Thunder*] ([1944-1946] 2015), as well as Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!* ([1947] 1964) and *He Who Rides a Tiger* ([1954] 1977). For short stories, see Manik Bandyopadhyay's "Āj Kāl Parshur Galpa [A Story of Today, Tomorrow, and the Day After]" ([1946] 2017) and "Chiniyē Khāyṇi Kēna [Why Didn't They Steal and Eat?]" ([1947] 1952), and Ela Sen's collection *Darkening Days, Being a Narrative of Famine-Stricken Bengal* (1944). For poems, see in particular Sukanta Bhattacharya's edited collection *Ākāl* [*Famine*] (1944). For plays, see in particular Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabānna* (*Rice Festival*) (1944). For travelogues, see Chittaprosad Bhattacharya's *Hungry Bengal: A Tour through Midnapur District in November 1943* ([1944] 2011).

<sup>4</sup> See Sanjukta Sunderason's *Partisan Aesthetics* (2020), pp. 9-10, on this point in the visual arts.

<sup>5</sup> For two exceptions, albeit ones in which famine remains tied to more general concepts of violence and catastrophe, see Margaret Kelleher's *The Feminization of Famine* (1997), the fourth chapter of which deals with the Bengal famine of 1943, and Sourit Bhattacharya's *Postcolonial Modernity and the Indian Novel* (2020), especially chapter 2.

<sup>6</sup> My exploration of the ways in which Bhattacharya reimagines the social realist novel is indebted to a number of recent studies demonstrating the ways in which realisms as manifest in the (former) colonies often revise the assumptions of their European counterpart and, in doing so, articulate radically different literary and political visions. See, in particular, Ulka Anjaria's *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel* (2012); Toral Jatin Gajarawala's *Untouchable Fictions* (2013); and Eli Park Sorensen's *Postcolonial Realism and the Concept of the Political* (2021).

## 1: The Body as an Other

Famine's destabilizing violence emerges in the images most commonly invoked to describe its victims<sup>7</sup>: ghosts, specters, wraiths, and, often in the same breath, various species of wild animals. Such imagery stretches across centuries and continents, from Edmund Spenser's 1596 pamphlet *A View of the Present State of Irelande* to recent works from Mahasweta Devi like her 1979 short story "Shishu ["Little Ones"] and 1982 novella *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha*.<sup>8</sup> Famine, it seems, does not merely kill; rather, it fundamentally transforms those experiencing its deprivations.

As Jacques Derrida has shown us, specters give the lie to the presence of the present. They "*begin[] by coming back*" (Derrida 11, emphasis Derrida's); they gesture at future returns; they reveal the way in which time is always out of joint. The spectrality of the famine victim emerges in the way in which this starving human being reveals the foundational otherness that haunts the human itself. Writing on the Great Irish Famine of 1845-1852 and drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Stuart McLean describes the way in which the famine victim brings into the present a fantasized prehistoric realm of formlessness and irrationality out of which rational subjectivity emerges and which nevertheless exceeds such subjectivity (McLean 120-121, 125-126). Central here is the body of the famine victim, which violently evokes a "material-organic substratum" that troubles the Enlightenment's imagined "subject-agent of historical cognition" (128). To extend McLean's claims, the famine victim reveals the way in which perhaps the most fundamental operation of the organic body—its need to metabolically subsist—inscribes in this body the possibility of radical self-alienation, an immanent alterity. When it is deprived of nonhuman beings upon which it can subsist, the human body will consume itself as if it were a nonhuman other. Thus one possible reading of the combination of spectral and animal imagery with which famine victims are described: the starving body fractures the self-identity of the human by revealing within it the nonhuman animal that it might consume.

The destabilizing force of the famine victim is felt not only by this victim but, too, by those who witness their suffering. This witnessing has its own dynamics: David Lloyd notes the ways in which observers of the Great Irish Famine, when confronted with starving Irish peasants, described a dissolution of the boundaries between the observing subject and the famine-victim-rendered-object-by-starvation, thereby threatening the integrity of the former's selfhood.<sup>9</sup> For Lloyd, the famine victim "becomes the index of the always imminent and immanent lapse of the subject into object, of the autonomous spirit into the dependence of corporeal existence"; the witness is thereby pushed to "the boundary that marks the division between the human and the nonhuman within the human" (Lloyd 163). Once again, one can extend these claims by recalling another figure often invoked by these witnesses: the corpse. Perhaps even more often than specters or ghosts, famine victims enter representation as skeletons, walking cadavers. The famine-victim-as-living-corpse, as "the utmost of abjection... death infecting life" (Kristeva 4), does not merely recall the other that the human carries within itself. Rather, it reveals as well the way in which this other is fundamentally oriented toward death-by-self-consumption. The

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<sup>7</sup> I use the terminology of "famine victim" to refer to those who suffer from famine-scarcity but remain alive.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 3 of Parama Roy's *Alimentary Tracts* (2010) for readings of these Devi stories through the lens of famine.

<sup>9</sup> Writing on anorexia and hunger strikes, Maud Ellman makes a similar point about encounters with hunger more generally, describing the way in which such an encounter "deranges the distinction between self and other" (Ellman 54).

dissolution of the boundary between self and other, occurring both inter- and intrapersonally, thus forces even the well-fed to face their own finitude. In this context, hunger itself transforms. The somatic experience of hunger, its pangs and rumblings, comes to signify the possibility of self-devouring and, in turn, the fact of our foundational alterity and our ever-present potential for self-alienation. To hunger in the face of the famine victim is to confront our body as at once our own and an other that we might consume, as an entity that, in its drive to subsist, its necessary reliance on metabolic processes, can undo the self itself.

Such confrontations are common in the literature of the 1943 Bengal famine. Chittaprosad Bhattacharya's 1943 illustrated travelogue *Hungry Bengal: A Tour through Midnapur District in November 1943*, for instance, not only refers to "living skeletons" (C. Bhattacharya 1) and "*HUMANITY DEHUMANISED*" (3, 5, 39, 45, 47, 49, emphasis Bhattacharya's), but also the temporal displacement that encounters with these beings bring: "this naked man amidst the shrubs reminded me of very primitive times. This was as if a foretaste of the things that were yet to come, just an aspect of the rapid disintegration of society" (15). Other texts invoke the specter more explicitly. Ela Sen's 1944 *Darkening Days*, a collection of stories responding to the 1943 famine, refers to the passivity of "the spirit of this spectral population of Bengal" (E. Sen 10), describing this population as "[l]eaderless and lost, all thoughts of nation or country drowned in the *vital*, gnawing, *primeval* pains of hunger" (12, emphases mine). Perhaps most direct is Nabendu Ray's 1943 poem "Narak [Hell]": "More terrible even than [the hell of humanity's brutal childhood]/Is this hell manifest in my own country [*swadēsh*]!" (Ray 18), the poet laments, going on to declare that "the horror/of a prehistoric hell [*prāgaitihāsik narak*]/haunts [*hānā dēy*] our terror-stricken sight" (19).

Each of these texts draws a clear connection between, on the one hand, the spectrality of famine victims, and, on the other, the eruption of prehistory into the present, the undoing of linear historical time. At the same time, these works gesture at one of the defining features of famine: its scale. Famine is not merely a single starving person. Rather, a famine only earns its name by affecting a large swath of people. Thus the references to society, population, and country: famine victims are necessarily synecdochical, gesturing at the essentially unrepresentable—perhaps unimaginable—famine in which they are caught and, as a result, requiring recourse to some larger unit of social organization through which the scale of famine can be thought. Thus just as the famine victim reveals the human being's foundational alterity, famine itself comes to serve a similar role with regard to the mode of social organization within which it is occurring. This is to say that the intrusion of a fantasized prehistory and the derangement of subjecthood occur on a societal or national scale—or, rather, *to these entities themselves*. For a phenomenon as ostensibly self-subsistent as the nation, this eruption of the other, this temporal instability, is not easily brooked.

### *Famine Nationalism*

It is perhaps for this reason that Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's 1882 nationalist novel *Ānandamath*, set during the colossal Bengal famine of 1770, evokes the spectral famine victim as that against which the emerging Indian nation is posed, the signifier for the colonial violence out of which this nation emerges. However, Bankim's famine specters are not, as in so many cases, pathetic women and children; rather, they are dacoits who rob Kalyani, the chaste wife of the zamindar Mahendra, after which they move to kill and eat their leader, then Kalyani's daughter.

The text's language is almost confrontationally spectral: the first dacoit that appears is "shadowy," "misshapenly human-like"; once other such shadows storm Kalyani's room, it is like "a cremation ground at night" filled with "ghostly [*prēibat*] forms" (Chatterji 134). In the forest, they are "gaunt, black ghostly [*prēibat*] forms" (135, translation altered). Bankim's narrator puts it starkly: "In certain circumstances, human beings are nothing but ravening beasts" (135).

These ravening beasts oppose the Indian nation in their pursuit of Kalyani and her child—the mother, for Bankim, functioning as an allegorical stand-in for the nation<sup>10</sup>—and, in more literal terms, signify the degradation of this nation in that they have descended into animality because of famine born of a foreign ruler, here figured as a Muslim nawab. As I noted in my previous chapter, Bankim's conception of the Indian nation relied upon a stagist conception of rectilinear, progressive history made manifest in the state of the land itself, this state measured in relation to agricultural production. The spectral figures of the starving dacoits are associated with the frenzy of Kali, whose name they explicitly invoke; and, in much the same way, with the realm of unrestrained, irrational physicality and animality, of the barest possible subsistence, and, in the end, the final resort: cannibalism. Here, these specters serve a function that is precisely interruptive, fracturing the linearity of the nation's development.

In *Ānandamath*, then, there emerges quite clearly the synecdochical movement between famine victim and famine by way of the allegorization of the chaste Hindu mother: the spectral famine bandits conjure the teeming, hungry masses. Just as the famine victim haunts the ostensibly rational observing subject, so famine, embodied in these masses, haunts the nation. The starving bandits *qua* famine haunt the chaste Hindu wife *qua* nation not just in their recourse to cannibalism in the face of material lack, but, too, by rejecting hierarchy: before turning on Kalyani and her daughter, they first kill their own leader. This is to say nothing of their violation of the social order by attacking the wife of a zamindar. For Bankim's elitist nationalism, the irrational, animalistic frenzy of these undirected peasants-turned-dacoits, born of foreign domination and the breakdown in agricultural production, is a dangerous excess that must be subdued, controlled, by the leadership of an intellectual elite and the creation of a national religion or culture.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, however, the nation cannot exist without these desperate, hungry people. This is to say that the uncontrolled masses occupy for the nation a similar place as does the "material-organic substratum" (McLean 128) for the rational subject, a condition of possibility that must be—but cannot be—sublated by way of elite authority *and* the development of productive forces to such an extent that the threat of lack is neutralized. The narrative logic of *Ānandamath* makes this clear: the bandits carry Kalyani into the forest housing the Hindu monastery that, in the novel, functions as the source of nationalist resistance, of cultural and spiritual revival for the defiled goddess-mother, the defiled nation, the defiled land; and it is by fleeing the bandits and offering a prayer to Vishnu that Kalyani finds safety with the monastery's warrior-monks, who, in the end, take control over the masses of starving villagers in order to stage a rebellion against the Muslim overlord who brought about the famine in the first place.

Thus in *Ānandamath* the sublation of the undirected subaltern masses into the nation is successful, achieved through the devotion of a group of elite warrior-monks. The nascent,

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<sup>10</sup> For more on this point, see Sugata Bose's *The Nation as Mother and Other Visions of Nationhood* (2017), especially chapter 1.

<sup>11</sup> On the "elitism of the intelligentsia" inherent to Bankim's approach to nationalist politics, as well as his quest for a revitalized and revitalizing national culture/religion, see Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986), pp. 73-75, 79-81.

developing nation survives the ghostly intrusion of the famine victims and triumphs over both famine and foreign subjugation. This accomplishment, however, is made possible by a sleight of hand: as more than one commentator has observed, the poverty of the masses—that which gives rise to spectral banditry, that which ostensibly justified the rebellion—fades out of sight over the course of the novel.<sup>12</sup> The warrior-monks' mission in service to the glory of the goddess-mother—that is, the glory of Bankim's highly particular vision of a Hindu national religion—is seemingly sufficient not just to solve the problem of poverty, but to make it disappear. Or, rather, *almost* disappear, for famine and its manifold violences yet haunt Bankim's vision of the Indian nation, a vision that is as vibrant and terrifying today as at any point in India's history.

Bankim is able to accomplish this sleight of hand in no small part because of the generic conventions within which he writes: the historical novel largely in a style reminiscent of Walter Scott.<sup>13</sup> It is, finally, the depiction of famine in a social realist novel, Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!*, that reveals the way in which mass starvation, when it functions as the phenomenon that gives form to plot, can derange the form of the nation and, perhaps, offer something else in its place.

## 2: *So Many Hungers!*

Bhabani Bhattacharya, while lesser known than contemporaries like Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, or Mulk Raj Anand, remains a permanent fixture in discussions of late colonial and early postcolonial Indian writing in English. Still, Bhattacharya often receives little more than a nod in such discussions, particularly in the West.<sup>14</sup> What exceptions exist tend to deal primarily with *So Many Hungers!*, his first novel, published in 1947, and *He Who Rides a Tiger*, his second, published in 1954, both of which deal with the 1943 famine.<sup>15</sup> These studies typically focus on Bhattacharya as a Gandhian novelist, on the one hand, or, on the other, his ardent social realism as manifest in his portrayal of the famine and the class- and caste-exploitation that surrounds it. Rarely, however, have studies considered the way in which Bhattacharya's nationalism articulates with his portrayal of the famine, much less the way in which this

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<sup>12</sup> On this point, see Sumit Sarkar's "Nationalism and Poverty: Discourses of Development and Culture in 20th Century India" (2008), pp. 434-435, and Tanika Sarkar's "Birth of a Goddess: 'Vande Mataram', 'Anandamath', and Hindu Nationhood" (2006), pp. 3960, 3967.

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that Bankim's generic similarity to the historical novel is disputed, not least by Bankim himself, largely because of the fictionality of Bankim's material (Anjaria 102n1). Nevertheless, however, it is difficult to deny that Bankim's novel resembles Scott's work in the logics of its plot. For Scott, one need only think of Athelstane's resurrection in *Ivanhoe* (1819), for instance, to understand these logics and their general elasticity. *Anandamath* contains a number of similar—if less egregious—moments.

<sup>14</sup> By way of example, the edited volume *A History of Indian Literature in English* (2003) contains only a few passing references to Bhattacharya, with Leela Gandhi's article "Novelists of the 1930s and 1940s" offering a brief summary of *So Many Hungers!* as an example of the Gandhian fiction of the period.

<sup>15</sup> See, in particular, Sourit Bhattacharya's *Postcolonial Modernity and the Indian Novel*, pp. 50-65; a series of mentions in Margaret Kelleher's *The Feminization of Famine*, pp. 162-221; and a brief exploration in Priyamvada Gopal's *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History, and Narration* (2009), pp. 61-63. For full monographs on Bhattacharya, K.R. Chandrasekharan's *Bhabani Bhattacharya*; K.K. Sharma's *Bhabani Bhattacharya: His Vision And Themes* (1979); and Dorothy B. Shimer's *Bhabani Bhattacharya* (1975). There are also two major edited volumes: Monika Gupta (ed.), *The Novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya* (2002); and Ramesh K. Srivastava (ed.) *Perspectives on Bhabani Bhattacharya* (1982).

articulation takes shape within the formal confines of Bhattacharya's specific approach to the social realist novel. In this section, I attend to this task, reading Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!* in order to investigate the way in which the novel's idiosyncratic social realism stages the collision of famine and the nascent Indian nation.

*So Many Hungers!* is, on first glance, a straightforwardly nationalist, social realist novel. The text seems to articulate a Nehruvian Ghandism that simultaneously idealizes rural self-sufficiency and imagines a broader humanistic solidarity between the peasantry, the proletariat, and bourgeois intellectuals devoted to the cause of national freedom. Generically, the novel's social realism is most apparent in the way in which it maps the social space of the nascent Indian nation in relation to both the colonial state and global capitalism. This mapping manifests both in the text's series of typified characters—the wholesome peasant family, the class-conscious factory worker, the conflicted bourgeois intellectual turned nationalist activist, the literally rapacious monopoly capitalist—and in the way in which the novel gives rise to a vision of the Indian nation as, to use Benedict Anderson's well-known formulation, a “sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time” (*Imagined Communities* 26). This organism takes shape both through the invocation of the colonial institutions that give form to the spatial extension of the nation<sup>16</sup>—post offices, prisons, and hospitals, for example—and through the repeated appearance of newspapers and radio programs offering reports from other parts of India, giving flesh to the Andersonian “meanwhile.” Indeed, the novel represents the arrival of the 1943 famine through a news report of an incident in which “a lone straggler on the eastern seaboard stumbled and fell and never rose again” (*So Many Hungers!* (SMH!) 107).

A closer reading of the content of *So Many Hungers!*, however, belies this straightforward interpretation, revealing a profound conflict at the heart of the text. On the one hand, the novel attempts a sort of Lukácsian demystification of the objective reality of the laws and relationships that the twin forces of colonial oppression and capitalist exploitation produce and on which they rely: that is, a demystification of the social totality formed by the violence of colonial capital and resistance thereto. This is in keeping with Bhattacharya's own vision of art and social realism more broadly: as he puts it, “Art must teach, but unobtrusively, by its vivid interpretation of life” (“Literature and Social Reality” 4). The novel is so committed to its didactic purpose that it largely fails to live up to Bhattacharya's ideal of unobtrusive instruction, itself a version of Lukács's injunction to artistically conceal the laws and relationships a given work exposes in order to produce a new immediacy for the reader.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the novel repeatedly deploys extended descriptive pauses to explicate the political and economic causes of the 1943 famine, sometimes by way of an individual character's reflections—Rahoul, the Western-educated, bourgeois astrophysicist who, in the end, turns to nationalist politics, stops to consider economic drain theory, as well as the economic and political origins of the famine, in a degree of detail nearly comical—and sometimes by way of direct interjection from the omniscient narrator—who notes, for instance, that the trader and moneylender “was not of the people. He was a vulture feeding on the miseries of the people” (138).<sup>18</sup> Aesthetic stumbles notwithstanding,

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<sup>16</sup> See Manu Goswami's *Producing India* (2004) for an extraordinarily detailed description of the way in which the nationalist imaginary of the spatial extension of the Indian nation was in large part the product of colonial institutions, in particular their cartographic and pedagogical practices.

<sup>17</sup> See Lukács' “Realism in the Balance” ([1938] 1980) for a particularly clear articulation of his endorsement of realism as against naturalism and modernism.

<sup>18</sup> There is some debate over the extent to which these moments render Bhattacharya's writing “journalistic,” proponents of the label no doubt drawing on the endless appearances of the news media in the text, as well as the fact that Bhattacharya himself admitted to basing various scenes on newspaper reports regarding the famine. For one

however, the novel's commitment to a class-based, anticapitalist reading of the late colonial situation in India is undeniable.

On the other hand, though, the novel also seems to offer ammunition to Marxist and postcolonial critiques of both the nation and the social realist novel. The text concludes with a vision of nationalist mobilization under the leadership of bourgeois intellectuals, evoking what Partha Chatterjee has described as the Nehruvian moment of arrival in the passive revolution by which India gained its independence, in which the more radical elements of Gandhism were secularized and drawn into the rational and progressive march of history, to be actualized in the figure of the postcolonial developmental state.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the novel finds in Rahoul's plot-long entrance into the nationalist movement something like the awakening of the nation itself. In doing so, the novel seems, to use Edward Said's terms, to "reconstitute[] difference as identity" (*Culture and Imperialism* 166), although here the identity in play is not that of the Western observer *qua* transcendental subject, but rather the indigenous, largely secular elite; meanwhile, the novel's various non-elite characters are assimilated to or excluded from this elite nationalism or—as in the case of Kishore, the sole representative of the industrial proletariat—killed off.<sup>20</sup> Bhattacharya's text thus also seems to embody what critics have tended to point to as the formal limitations of the realist novel itself, its complicity with bourgeois ideology and the status quo more broadly.<sup>21</sup>

Seemingly caught between its competing commitments to anticapitalist and anticolonial demystification, on the one hand, and, on the other, to bourgeois, elitist nationalism, *So Many Hungers!* in fact produces something distinct from both. As I will demonstrate, it does so by taking seriously one of M.K. Gandhi's more radical claims: that there is a direct, spiritual link between an individual's moral and bodily well-being, on the one hand, and the well-being of the nation, on the other. It is by way of an intricate program of physical and moral self-control on the part of individuals that the nation becomes strong. This logic extends to the famine as well: as Joseph Alter puts it while describing Gandhi's response to the 1911 Indian famine, "Gandhi pointed out that it was possible to treat a disease of the body politic only by first healing oneself" (Alter 23). Bhattacharya's novel incorporation of this Gandhian concept into the fabric of its social realism functions as a radical revision of Fredric Jameson's claim that realism is "a hybrid concept, in which an epistemological claim (for knowledge or truth) masquerades as an aesthetic ideal, with fatal consequences for both of these incommensurable dimensions" (Jameson 5-6): truth, both for Gandhi and, I contend, Bhattacharya's novel, is rooted in a particular relationship between the body, self-control, and political action as manifest in the nation. In the context of the

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such proponent, see Sourit Bhattacharya's *Postcolonial Modernity and the Indian Novel*, especially pp. 50-65, in which he describes the novel as deploying an "analytical-journalistic mode of writing" (59). For a countering opinion, a refusal to identify Bhabani Bhattacharya as a journalistic novelist—a refusal based, importantly, on the way in which Bhattacharya arranges his material into an artistic whole—see K. Venkata Reddy's *Major Indian Novelists: Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya* (1990), p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> See Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986), especially Chapter 5, and *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), especially Chapter 10, on this point. Bhattacharya would later make his endorsement of the marriage of Gandhism and Nehruvian developmentalism explicit in his 1966 novel *Shadow from Ladakh*.

<sup>20</sup> See as well Aamir R. Mufti's *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (2007) on this point, especially pp. 183-184.

<sup>21</sup> See in particular the work of Fredric Jameson on this point, particularly *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013), especially Part 2, Chapter 1, "The Experiments of Time: Providence and Realism." Perhaps most important here is Jameson's note that "systemic change" (Jameson 217) lies beyond the provenance of the realist novel, typically construed; there is obvious resonance here with the continuity that many critics have observed between the colonial state and postcolonial nation-state, in India and elsewhere.

nationalist social realist novel, this entails a shift away from an allegorization of protagonist and nation that exclusively emphasizes *Bildung*—that is, the way in which they are able cultivate themselves, to craft themselves in the image of an ideal. Instead, this allegorization emphasizes as well the state of the *body*, both the protagonist’s body and those of the people whom he or she encounters.

This shift, in turn, manifests in a particular way in relation to the 1943 Famine, the phenomenon at the center of Bhattacharya’s novel. The famine draws forth a particular aspect of the body: *metabolism*, which, as I have argued, is at once the basis of survival and a potential source of self-destruction. The novel places metabolism at the basis of the nation, not by metaphorizing it in relation to an ostensibly organismic political community but rather by literalizing it in the figure of the starving human body and the well-fed encounter therewith. Unlike *Ānandamath*, then, Bhattacharya’s novel does not let the effects of famine fall away by means of a sleight of hand, does not merely invoke famine as a violent interruption of the nation’s march through history—or, rather, its series of cultivation-driven metamorphoses through the stages of the goddess, land—that is easily overcome by the efforts of brave warrior-monks. Instead, *So Many Hungers!*, through its Gandhian social realism and its titular motif, interweaves the self-consuming body of the famine victim and the body of the nation itself. Out of this interweaving, the novel remaps the social space of the sociological organism that is the nascent Indian nation; out of this interweaving, the novel undermines the homogenous, empty time that is ostensibly proper to this nation; out of this interweaving, the nation itself changes form, emerging out of the catastrophe of famine, becoming bodily, rooting itself in our metabolic intercourse with nonhuman beings. The fractured, yet-enduring body of the famine victim thus contributes to the project of “resist[ing] the drive for a shallow homogenization and struggl[ing] for other, potentially richer definitions of the ‘nation’ and the future political community” (Pandey 28-29).

### *A Gandhian Social Realism*

From the very start the novel articulates its interest in what will emerge in the aftermath of colonialism, opening as Rahoul claims to his father Samarendra—who, over the course of the novel, will come to engage in war- and eventually famine-profiteering—that the Second World War, the beginning of which has just been announced on the radio, will last “[t]ill the new epoch is born” (*SMH!* 5). Freedom will spread to the colonies: “[i]n the agonies of war the soul of humankind would be cleansed. Humankind after the War would not be the humankind of before” (9). And yet over the course of the novel it becomes clear that this statement is ironic. The new birth will occur not, as Rahoul initially imagines, because the war will force the Allies to live up to their liberatory rhetoric and include the colonies within a global liberal order, but rather by way of famine and nationalist struggle.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the novel is bookended by Rahoul’s naïveté, at the start, and, in the end, his irrevocable entry into the freedom movement, as he is arrested after a full-throated public endorsement of the Quit India campaign.

It is vital, then, that Rahoul’s awakening is in the final equation a product of the 1943 famine:

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<sup>22</sup> There is of course some resonance here with Frantz Fanon’s claim that decolonization, successfully pursued, will lead “humanity to take one step forward,” will “create a new man” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 239). However, as I will demonstrate, the novel’s engagement with famine leads this broader desire in a rather different direction.



This War, he had said, was just a repetition of other wars in history. The Four Freedoms<sup>23</sup> did not include the freedom to be free—not for Asians. This famine, this brutal doom, was the fulfilment of alien rule. The final commentary. Imagine two million Englishmen dying of hunger that was preventable, and the Government unaffected, unrepentant, smug as ever! “Quit India!” cried the two million dead of Bengal... “Quit!” cried all India. “You have done us some good along with much evil. For the good you’ve done you have been paid in full. The accounts have been settled. Now, for God’s sake, quit!” (212)

Within the allegorization of individual and nation, Rahoul and India, famine forms the principle crucible through which the people must pass in order to assume the nation-form: the movement, manifest in this passage, between “the two million dead of Bengal” and “all India.” Likewise, Bengal’s descent into famine structures the novel’s narrative. Insofar as the novel not only articulates an endorsement of the nation but, rather, attempts to map it as a social totality, the famine is thus incorporated into the very fabric of the nation itself.

The result of this incorporation is a series of seeming breaks in the novel’s social realism. One such break—of particular consequence insofar as it deals with the assimilation of non-elite characters into the nation—emerges in relation to the novel’s titular conceit: the idea of hunger as a metaphor for desire. While the text occasionally indicates that hunger can be turned to noble ends—Rahoul has “hunger for a happier life for the common man” (176) and feels the people’s “hunger for... freedom” (111)—it nevertheless remains for the most part an atomizing phenomenon. Prior to his full-fledged awakening, Rahoul primarily hungers to “escape from the oppressive darkness of Bengal far into cosmic light” (111), attending to his research and leaving his people in the lurch; his father Samarendra, who takes the war and subsequent famine as opportunities for speculation in the stock market, hungers “to be richer” (184) even at the expense of the starving poor; and, of course, there is the hunger of the famine-stricken peasants, which subjects them to violence ranging from jackal attacks, to rape, to derangement so intense that a mother attempts to bury her infant child alive.

A tension arises here between the metaphorical hunger of the bourgeois, urban elites and the literal, bodily hunger of the peasantry: whereas the novel is explicit that Rahoul and his father’s desires are born of their social milieus, the hunger of the famine-stricken peasantry is somatic and, as I have claimed, a signifier of a foundational alterity, their starving self-devouring.<sup>24</sup> As regards the former sense, hunger seems to stand-in for the alienating force of modernity itself—to draw on a different period of Lukács’ thought, a product of transcendental homelessness (*Theory of the Novel* 41). But if transcendental homelessness is premised on the idea of the alienation of the self from the world, famine-hunger turns inward, toward one’s own body.

The novel resolves this tension by way of its Gandhian social realism. As in many nationalist novels, the detrimental effects of colonial modernity can only be overcome by a turn

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<sup>23</sup> The four freedoms, as articulated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a speech on January 6, 1941, were freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. FDR intended the speech as an argument for U.S. involvement in WWII.

<sup>24</sup> K.K. Sharma has noted the similarity between Bhattacharya’s understanding of hunger and Freud’s, as both locate hunger as “the most fundamental reality of human life” (Sharma 43). While there is certainly a resemblance here, Bhattacharya’s conception of hunger, at least within the figurative logics of *So Many Hungers!*, as the product of social forces, would seem to depart from Freud’s hunger-rooted theory of instincts. See Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* ([1905] 2000), p. 1.

toward the nation.<sup>25</sup> In *So Many Hungers!*, such a turn is inextricably tied to mastering one's personal hunger, whether metaphorical or literal. Thus Rahoul, having been spurred by the famine to shed his desire for scientific achievement and harness his hunger for the betterment of his people, is at the close of the text "completely self-possessed... What happened to him as an individual did not matter. It only mattered what happened to his people" (*SMH!* 213). This conception of hunger is, of course, fundamentally Gandhian: "[t]he route leading to *swaraj* is self-control" (Gandhi quoted in Alter 36). The renunciation of one's personal desires, the acceptance of the suffering that results, is a means not only of personal development but, too, of serving the nation. And, in confirmation of such a reading, the relationship between hunger and nationalism finds its clearest expression in Devesh, also known as Devata,<sup>26</sup> Rahoul's grandfather and a clear stand-in for Gandhi. Arrested for his role in nationalist agitation early in the novel, well before the famine begins, Devesh reappears near the close of the text by way of a newspaper report: he has begun a hunger strike, "wielding his body's hunger as a sword, strong as ever and true and deathless" (*SMH!* 205). Here a connection arises between bodily hunger and a somewhat traditional manifestation of the nation: that which offers the possibility of deathlessness, the overcoming of finitude by way of an embrace of a community that exceeds one's individual, mortal frame.

While Devesh seems to maintain this ability to master his bodily hunger in service of the nation from the beginning of the novel, other characters must undergo a sort of education. I have shown the way in which Rahoul is able to overcome his personal, metaphorical hungers and turn fully toward the nation by way of his encounters with famine victims; a bourgeois intellectual, he himself never experiences acute physical hunger. The same cannot be said of Kajoli, the young peasant girl who serves beside Rahoul as the novel's foremost focalizer and who is also Devesh's granddaughter by a different wife. Like Rahoul, Kajoli enters the nationalist movement at the close of the novel; however, the hunger that she overcomes in order to do so is material, as both she and her family, famine-stricken, having fled their village for Calcutta, are on the verge of starvation. The final chapter finds Kajoli selling herself into prostitution in order to save her mother, who is on the point of death. Just before Kajoli enters the brothel, though, she encounters the newspaper report announcing Devesh's hunger strike. Confronted with Devesh's mastery of bodily hunger, Kajoli reflects on the way she has fallen due to the famine:

Had she not yielded to her fate without a struggle? Become one with the mass of mindless destitutes? Feeding at the free kitchen. Picking from muck-heaps. No grit. A mere beggar-woman. And soon to die, die a thousand deaths. (205-206)

Inspired by her grandfather, Kajoli rejects the brothel, deciding instead to enter the nationalist movement by taking a job at the *Hindustan* newspaper—the same newspaper that has just announced Devesh's hunger strike. In turning away from this fate, her submersion in the sea of famine victims, Kajoli thus seizes her bodily autonomy twice over: first, in her turn away from necessity-forced sex work; and, second and more importantly, in overcoming her bodily hunger by way of "grit" (206), by being a "fighter" (205).

Just as Rahoul overcomes his metaphorical hunger by shedding his personal aspirations, Kajoli overcomes her literal, bodily hunger, her starving self-consumption, by taking inspiration from Devesh's hunger strike. As Leela Gandhi points out, Kajoli here "assume[s] the persona of

<sup>25</sup> On this point, see Pheng Cheah's *Spectral Nationality* (2003), especially Chapter 5, especially pp. 242-243.

<sup>26</sup> Devata translates to "god" or "deity" in Bangla.

the Gandhian ‘new woman’” (Gandhi 170), at least insofar as she is involved in the nationalist movement, spreading national consciousness. While this shift is ideologically consistent with Rahoul’s—in that each character’s transformation figures commitment to the cause of the nation as a vitalizing force, a source of spiritual sustenance—it nevertheless performs a sleight of hand that does not seem entirely different from Bankim’s in *Anandamath*. Whereas the latter simply stops attending to the poverty of the masses, however, *So Many Hungers!* attempts, on the one hand, to assimilate the material hunger of the famine victim to the self-serving desire for fame or wealth, such that this material hunger, too, can be overcome by the power of nationalism, of national culture; and, on the other, to depict in extraordinary detail the impact of hunger and lack of food on the body.

Thus, under the pressure to do justice to its central conceit and to weave its various strands into a sort of unblemished totality under the heading of the nation, the novel’s social realism breaks down—or, rather, is reimagined. This reimagining is already subtly apparent in the narrator’s description of Kajoli’s conversion to the nationalist cause. When Kajoli learns of Devesh’s hunger strike, her subsequent experience assumes a highly visual form:

Then, in a flash, Kajoli *saw* him... He stands there, the tall, white-clad figure, with uplifted handcuffed arms, and the pale silver of his hair and the pale silver of his flowing beard are touched with *a light that is not of the sun alone*... She saw him in jail-house in the garb of a convict... (*SMH!* 204-205, emphases mine)

Kajoli overcomes her bodily infirmity by way of an encounter with the imagined spectacle of this Gandhian figure.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, Kajoli’s reaction is a moment of cultural education, an encounter with the hunger-strike-as-bourgeois-cultural-production—by way of a newspaper report, no less—that awakens Kajoli to the requirements of the nationalist struggle; in this sense, the moment mimics the social function of the novel itself. On the other, though, Kajoli’s vision of Devesh more resembles a moment of *darshan*, the divine sight of an idol, in which the subject-object distinction is undone, the worshipper experiencing something like the shock of the uncanny and, in turn, a sort of self-recognition.<sup>28</sup>

Kajoli’s experience of Devesh as a saintly figure—a figure emitting his own light—mimics other invocations of Gandhi in late-colonial nationalist Indian realism: as Ulka Anjaria notes by way of readings of Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand, and Raja Rao, Gandhi and Gandhian stand-ins often take on an overdetermining, allegorizing function, “produc[ing] their own narratological force fields... which preclude other characters in their proximity from acting independently of them” (Anjaria 65). This function in itself is something of a departure from the contingency of classical realism typically understood, with its emphasis on psychological motivation as the fundamental cause of character behavior. That Kajoli’s experience of Devesh takes such an ambivalent form, caught between education and *darshan*, functions as a further complication, particularly insofar as the novel depicts this experience in bodily terms:

Released from the deadening shock that had snared her into surrender, Kajoli felt a great tide of shame overwhelm her, so that her skin tingled and sweat broke out on her palms. And the hundred words of the woman, as she recalled them, crawled upon her flesh like a

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<sup>27</sup> It is perhaps worthy of passing observation that, physically, Devesh in fact more closely resembles Rabindranath Tagore than Mohandas Gandhi.

<sup>28</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty describes the ambivalent place of *darshan* within Indian nationalism in *Provincializing Europe* (2000), pp. 172-179.

hundred scorpions. (*SMH!* 206)

The novel thus commits itself to a realism in which a turn toward the nation, couched in semi-religious terms, maintains a *vitalizing* power. This seeming break in the novel's social realism, however, becomes legible as an alternate realism—a realism couched in a different form of truth—when one considers that these semi-religious terms are tied to a Gandhian figure. This moment functions a reversal of Gandhi's claim that one "can serve the country only with this body" (Gandhi quoted in Anjaria 60): here, *the nation vitalizes the body*, an instance of what I have called the novel's Gandhian social realism.

This generic transformation also manifests in the death of Samarendra, albeit in an altered form. Immediately after learning that Rahoul has been arrested and that his other son Kunal, a soldier serving with the Allied forces in North Africa, is missing in action, Samarendra hears on the radio that he has been named a Companion of the Indian Empire (CIE). This combination of events—again, imparted by way of a combination of mail, phone calls, and radio reports—hurls Samarendra into a profound despair:

Companion of the Indian Empire. The Empire that had claimed both his sons... When the bliss for which he had hungered for so many years came to him at last, it hit him like a curse, an evil thing! (*SMH!* 211)

Samarendra is on the brink of death; and, although he receives a phone call from his rice-profiteering corporation that nearly rejuvenates him, that nearly allows him to "slip back from his tormented individual self and become once more a submerged will, a tiny piston-ring of the massive social engine of his class" (211), in the end he merely slips away. No cause is given—at least no cause recognizable within the confines of literary realism, classically construed. Rather, Samarendra's death seems to function as the mirror-image of Kajoli's conversion. Whereas Kajoli's body receives an infusion of energy from her turn toward the nation, the combination of Samarendra's realization of the evils of colonialism and his newly tangible association with the colonial state result in a *devitalization*: his hand is "lifeless" and then "limp," his eyes "weary" (211). Whereas, for Kajoli, the nation transforms material hunger into a figurative hunger, a weakness that it is possible to overcome by way of the nation's sustenance, for Samarendra, the *sating* of a figurative hunger for recognition from the colonial state manifests in the body, robbing it of its vital "spark" (211). Once again, then, the novel erases the line between the material and figurative, the bodily and the psychological.

The novel's Gandhian social realism has profound consequences for the way in which it imagines the nation. Just as Rahoul's transformation occurs by way of his experience of witnessing the famine, so too does the famine, in all its bodily violence, transform the way in which the novel bodies forth the nation. Just as the novel represents the nation as capable of exerting a (de)vivifying influence upon the body, so too does the starving body of the famine victim shape the novel's vision of the nation as a political community producing a specific social space, tied to a specific conception of time. The novel thus limns an alternate political community, one that emerges out of the ostensibly irrational masses; the starving subalterns; the self-devouring, yet-enduring body.

## *The Country and the City*

This community emerges most clearly through the interplay between the novel's formal qualities and the various forms that it depicts: that is, the ways in which it composes a world defined by particular relations in social space—the rural-urban divide in particular—and temporal experience—the alternate rhythms of the global marketplace, rural production oriented toward subsistence, and the starving human body, the latter two of which add texture to the ostensibly homogenous, empty time of the nation-state and development.<sup>29</sup> Here, I draw on the work of Anna Kornbluh, who has recently pointed to the capacity of realist fiction not merely to *map* social space by way of referentiality, but, too, to *model* social spaces and forms of sociality, to “design[] and erect[] socialities, imagine[] the grounds of collectivities, probe[] the mystique of materialities, modulate[] institutions and productions beyond the scope of the given” (Kornbluh 16). In *So Many Hungers!*, this modeling emerges out of the catastrophe of famine, ironically producing something quite different from the postcolonial developmental state that so vociferously declared its commitment to food security.

The model of social space that the novel puts forth is, as with so many literary works of the late colonial period in India, founded on a fundamental distinction between rural and urban. As many have observed, the former constituted a complex challenge for the Indian nationalist movement. On the one hand, many nationalists understood the village to represent the very essence of India, an attitude that found its most well-known proponent in Gandhi. And yet proponents of modernization struggled with the seeming recalcitrance of the peasantry, its reluctance to embrace new technologies and social mores. *So Many Hungers!*, at least on its face, sits comfortably in the former camp, even despite certain Nehruvian gestures toward the importance of village modernization as a nationalist priority (*SMH!* 24). For the most part, the novel puts forth an almost utopian vision of the village, and in precisely Gandhian terms: Devesh, in describing the people of his village, claims that they are “good people. Centuries of hardship and strain have no destroyed their faith in human values” (22). Elsewhere, he claims that Kajoli, as “a well-bred peasant girl,” has “a legacy of manners as old as India” (25). Caste finds almost no mention, and class is smoothed over: in the scene in which it is revealed that Kajoli's family is wealthy enough to hire kisans, agricultural wage laborers, Kajoli evinces a familial concern for their welfare, and the narrator emphasizes that Kajoli refers to them as uncles (79-80).

An important aspect of this idealized depiction of rural life is an identification between villagers and the land. As to the former, Kajoli, in particular, is repeatedly figured as a part of the land: the narrator notes that she is “like a thing of brown Bengal earth” (86) and, later, through the focalization of her soon-to-be-husband Kishore, identifies her as “a daughter of the earth, with the earth's mellowness, the earth's exuberance and rich yielding” (92). Rahoul reflects on the way in which “in the village you cast off your intellectual snobbery without strain, you felt yourself as of one clay with the common people of the soil” (102). This shared essence is tied within the text to a familial intimacy between human and nonhuman beings, an intimacy that emerges out of a combination of labor and domestic inclusion. Kishore's vision of Kajoli as earth-daughter, for instance, comes as he “stooped, swinging the sickle in a near stroke, and

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<sup>29</sup> As Partha Chatterjee has argued, homogenous empty time is always merely “the *utopian* time of capital” (“The Nation in Heterogenous Time” 36, emphasis mine) and, in turn, the postcolonial developmental state. See as well Homi Bhabha's classic “DissemiNation” (1990), in particular p. 297, on the way in which the time of the nation is always split between its pedagogic and performative dimensions.

lifted the fallen paddy like a banner” (92); and, later, as Kajoli tries desperately to cultivate eggplants in the early days of the famine, the narrator emphasizes that she “knew the secret ways of egg-plants, and her crops had always been plentiful,” before turning, in a moment of free indirect discourse, to Kajoli’s reflection that it is “[s]trange that a plant, like an animal, had its own secret individual way, and would never look well and become rich with fruit unless it could fulfil itself” (113). Most obvious, however, is the example of Mangala, Kajoli’s family’s milch-cow, whom Devesh introduces to Rahoul as a member of the family and who, in a moment of particularly acute anthropomorphization, seems to offer her own cowbells up to be sold, so as to hold the family over slightly longer (24, 124). Vitaly, all of these instances of intimacy occur in the context of labor oriented toward eventual metabolization, whether of crops or milk.

I emphasize the *intimacy* of the human-nonhuman relations born of labor oriented toward metabolization because, as the narrator emphasizes, this relation often manifests in terms that are illegible to the instrumental rationality of, for example, the predatory traders who try to part peasants from their grain in the lead-up to the famine (122). The latter is a product of the corruption of village life by the intertwined forces of capital and the colonial state. The narrator notes explicitly that “[f]or centuries the grocery store had been a link between the peasant and the market-place” (59). However, whereas the novel projects a relatively harmonious vision of these centuries—past traders “had pursued the calling contentedly, happy to make a subsistence”—a break has occurred: Girish, the current village grocer “had an itch to get on in the world. A man of ambition; *an augury of the new times!*” (59, emphasis mine). Girish, a particularly obvious manifestation of the novel’s realist embrace of a social typology, is straightforwardly obsessed with the accumulation of capital, with the eventual goal of a “store in town” (59). The narrator offers this description of Girish in the days just before the famine, in the midst of the “Denial Scheme” intended to deprive a potential Japanese invasion of means of transportation, through the destruction of boats, and of food, through the confiscation of all surplus crops (54-63).<sup>30</sup> Thus that Girish is an augury of the new times implies yet again that the famine is a break of sorts: in this case, the violent introduction of market imperatives into the subsistence economy of the village.

Such imperatives, in the novel, impose an extraordinarily different relation to nonhuman beings: after the famine begins, the narrator claims that the trader, who is attempting to purchase the land and possessions the famine victims have left behind as they flee toward the city, “had caught Mother Earth in a snare and held her in strong chains” (138). In the trader’s attitude there emerges something resembling the reduction of the land to its productive capacities, with the concomitant temporal and spatial displacements—the projection of the land, now a set of natural resources, into a future elsewhere in which it will be realized as exchange-value. This is to say that Girish’s goal is at odds with the forms of identification between peasants and nonhuman beings that emerge out of a straightforwardly metabolic, subsistence-centric relation.

Girish’s attitude is, in the novel, largely associated with the city. Indeed, Girish, as a trader representative of the “new times,” is only able to pursue his desires because of the violence of the colonial state—which, by destroying boats, robs the peasants of their ability to dispose of their surplus grain and thereby obtain the clothing and other necessities necessary to subsist—and businesspeople who, when appearing in the village, almost always attempt to exploit the peasantry by drawing them into a market economy quite different from the village *hāt* to which Girish’s ancestors provided access. Both of these forces are typically identified by way

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<sup>30</sup> For a helpful description of the Denial Scheme, see Janam Mukherjee’s *Hungry Bengal* (2015), especially Chapter 2.

of their allegiance to the city: it is a “man from the city” who represents the colonial state in encouraging the peasants to sell their food to the government so that it will not fall into Japanese hands; it is a “city man” (61) who, separately but with an “understanding” (62) with the government, enlists Girish to buy up rice that it might be sold on the black market; and it is “city people” (130) who come to the village and attempt to purchase Kajoli as a sex worker.

The collision between the villagers and these rapacious city-dwellers bent on exploiting them is repeatedly expressed as the collision between, respectively, an affectively-charged subsistence economy and a marketplace that is at once highly calculable and highly volatile. The latter finds its ultimate expression in Samarendra, who at the beginning of the novel makes the decision to invest in war materials and, eventually, contribute to the War Fund as “if it were more of a speculation than the share market” (32). For Samarendra, the stock market operates as an impersonal force that determines his fortunes; the state of the market, in turn, is at this particular moment largely determined by the Second World War, rising at Allied victories and crashing at defeats. In this way, Samarendra subjects himself to the intertwined and truly global forces of capital and empire, made manifest in the Clive Street Stock Exchange in Calcutta. Vitally, the Stock Exchange not only mediates between the city and global capital but, too, imposes a sort of rhythm on those who use it. This rhythm, these global, impersonal forces, mark the text itself, most notably in one remarkable passage that calls for extensive quotation: the narrator’s rendering of the Stock Exchange.

Pulses pounding. The blood beating in the ears. The crowd with cash in the banks, cash to play with. Buy munitions of war—things that make guns, shells. Buy Steels. War eats steel. A ton of steel mangles a brigade. A hundred thousand tons mangle a city. A million tons mangle the earth. Buy Coals. Coal to keep the limbs of war warm. Man digging deeper than any animal, tearing the earth’s bowels with iron claws. Buy aluminum—wings of planes need aluminum. Railways, buy Railways. Heavy traffic on wheels, traffic into cash. This is a war on wheels: steel wheels, rubber wheels. Buy Rubbers from Malaysia. No rubber shares in this market? A telegram to Singapore does the trick. Send fast telegrams to Singapore. Shape up Singapore. Calcutta buying. Rubber for trucks, armoured cars, wheels, wheels. Buy Burma oils. War swims in a sea of oil.

High premium? Buy at a high premium. See it go higher, higher. Thirty per cent. Fifty per cent. Hundred per cent dividend. Dividend to make death machine. Scrap-iron hurled from projectiles, a million tons a month. A million deaths a month. Death into dividend. Death into dividend.

SELL! Cash in your profits. This isn’t like the last War. Going to be short. Only a blitz. Peace in a year. They don’t want war. Pays better to share spoils. The Nazis to get East Africa. The Nazis have the Negroes to swallow—a bellyful. Negroes grow like berries out in East Africa. Peace round the corner. Market crashing. Sell now for high premium. Sell Tata Steel. Can’t compete with American steel. Slump round the corner. SELL!

BUY! Cotton of the Army. Troops to be sheathed in uniform. Ten million uniforms. Uniforms wasted on dead bodies. Boots. Woollens. Indian troops need to be warm overseas. Lalimli woolens. (15-16)

While many parts of this extraordinary passage bear greater emphasis, two observations are particularly germane to my claims in this chapter. First, as Sourit Bhattacharya has observed, the jagged, disconnected strings of short sentences of which the passage is composed, its “staccato rhythm” (So. Bhattacharya 55), mimic the rapid flow of information from around the globe. Second, this passage is notable in the novel for its utter lack of focalization—indeed, for its utter lack of engagement with human individuals—as well as its deployment of second-person address and imperatives. The stock market intrudes on the novel as an utterly impersonal phenomenon that nonetheless exerts a profound subjectifying influence—at the conclusion of the passage, the narrator notes that an encounter with the market leads to “the heart tapping a quick rhythm: Too late, too late; too late, too late” (*SMH!* 17). This is to say that the stock market, a phenomenon utterly opposed to the nation within the logics of the text, exerts a similar effect on the material body of those who fall under its spell, subjecting the body to a “rhythm” determined by the intertwined forces of capital and the Allied war effort.

With this initial rural-urban mapping in mind—this division between a life centered around metabolism and the affective relations it produces, on the one hand, and a sort of rapacious subordination to the market, on the other—it is possible to redefine the novel in relation to a reciprocal movement between the two spheres, a breaking of boundaries that first brings famine to the countryside and, in turn, draws it back into the city. I have already shown the two-pronged way in which the former movement takes place: first, through the violence of the colonial state, the Denial Scheme in particular; and, second, through the efforts of the village grocer, now made an agent of corporate interests whose relation to rice—to nonhuman beings more broadly—is predicated on the same logics by which Samarendra relates to the stock market. Thus the famine is brought about by way of the articulation of the interests of the wartime colonial state and colonized capitalists. It is also important to point to the way in which these intertwined interests subordinate rural life to a temporal structure tied to wartime markets. Samarendra articulates this structure precisely in the moment that he decides to become a rice profiteer:

It was a grand vision. India must mobilize for defence. Bengal would grow into a great military bastion. A million soldiers would be needed to hold the thousand-mile Eastern Front. They would eat their fill. Millions would be engaged in war production, and they, too, would eat their fill. The grain supply from Burma was now lost. If a fraction of Bengal’s rice-yield could be cornered—stupendous task! Anyhow, huge stocks could be purchased at the next harvest, *laid up, frozen*, till demand exceeded supply and the price level rose (*one must eat, whatever the price*); then the stocks could be slowly released at a huge profit. (38, emphases mine)

Thus the extension of famine to the countryside proceeds through the imposition of a particular temporal logic, the subordination of rural bodies—“one must eat, whatever the price”—to the logics of the market. More accurately, it proceeds through the articulation of the logics of the market with the biological reality of the human body, its need to metabolize nonhuman nature. It is not enough to say that the intertwined forces of the colonial state and colonized capitalists impose the logics of the market on the countryside; rather, these logics, while primarily tied to the conditions of war on the British Empire’s eastern front, are also themselves the products of the materiality of the human body—or, more specifically, of the human body *incapable of feeding itself*.



First, however, these bodies must be created. They emerge out of the interplay of the actions of the British colonial state and the market mechanisms that step into the breach. First, the Denial Scheme and the wartime efforts of the British state effects a sort of primitive accumulation, as the state seizes the means of production from peasants and fishermen: land from the former, boats from the latter. And yet the terminology of primitive accumulation is insufficient to the violence of this seizure. Rather, the novel presents the initial destruction of fishermen's boats as a form of amputation. As one fisherman puts it as he discusses the Denial Scheme:

Boats. Boats are the limbs of us folk. They are our legs, for without them we are lamed, we cannot move over the river highways from village to village or from islet to islet. They are our arms, for with them we reap the fish; and some fish we eat and some we give for rice and salt and things on offer at the market-place. Boats are more than limbs for us folk: they are our blood and bone and heart and soul and all. (53)

This instance of deprivation does not merely produce "free, unprotected, and rightless proletarians" (*Capital Vol. 1* 876); rather, it produces a particular form of *isolation* or *disentanglement*, the human body as *only* a human body: to use the terminology of the young Marx, this deprivation severs the human being from its inorganic body. And yet this severance is not just metabolic—the human no longer able to "maintain a continuing dialogue" (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* 328) with nonhuman nature—but affective as well: "heart and soul and all" (*SMH!* 53). As Kanu, a young peasant, puts it in his response to the fisherman: "It is as though the fish hide your naked body" (53). In place of their tools, the peasants and fishermen are given money, thereby rendering them utterly reliant on the marketplace for their survival.

Thus the extension of market logics to the countryside occurs in the context of a population that has already been denuded of its capacity to feed itself, whose metabolic and affective ties with nonhuman beings have begun to be severed. This extension, in turn, rapidly accelerates this severing: starving peasants sell their "ploughshares, axes, picks and shovels, petty trinkets, kitchen brass" (115); they sell their cattle and land. Market logics mobilize the biological need to subsist—which the denuded, disentangled peasant, robbed of the means of production, can no longer satisfy by their own labor—in order to produce profit. This functions as a foreclosure of the future; it instills a particular form of temporal experience. As the narrator puts it, "[w]hat good were your cattle when hunger ate you, ate your dear ones? Time was a foe of the stricken peasant" (114). Here, hunger has assumed its radical, famine-based form: it is not a mere desire but rather a sign of the foundational other that the body at once is and consumes. Temporal experience is now given form by the disentangled body's finitude, not just the inevitability of death but the finite quantity of sustenance that the body-as-other can provide itself.

This violent, foundational otherness manifests perhaps most clearly within the novel in the liminal space of the high road, among the famine victims fleeing their villages for the seeming safety of the city.

It was the high-road over which uprooted humanity dragged sore-foot towards its destiny. One of a hundred high-roads. And *the destiny was far and misty and incalculable*. You had *no yesterday, no to-morrow*. You lived from moment to moment, breath to breath. You died as you slept, and you woke to life, and you died again. For your home was the highroad which had *no visible beginning, no visible end*. You were the dust of the high-

*road, inseparable.* (137, emphases mine)

The obvious resonance between the passage's final sentence and the earlier description of Kajoli as "a thing of brown Bengal earth" (86) marks the change that has occurred. Here, human beings are reduced, not just to animals, but to an undifferentiated mass: the famine victims "seemed all of a piece, figures in a frieze" (138-139). This description—which the text repeats almost verbatim several pages on—not only obliterates the individuality of these figures, but also, in its invocation of a frieze, renders them mythic, out of human time. This is not the ostensibly salutary timelessness of the idealized Indian village, however. Rather, now that the famine victims have lost their tools and face a countryside stripped bare, they confront the most acute instance of time being perceived from within the disentangled body's biological limits: "[e]ach dragging step would take a little of their remnants of life" (140). The novel is clear that the famine victims experience this shift as a form of violence against their conceptions of Self: "people, with minds, with the capacity to feel, an inner gift that was now a curse; for the agony of spirit was even harder to bear upon hunger" (141). The famine victims march toward the city, bringing their self-devouring, Self-devouring bodies.

The arrival of these bodies in Calcutta functions as a breakdown of the boundary between rural India and the urban sphere, not as a harmonious union of India's romanticized essence and the modernizing vision of the nationalist bourgeoisie but as a violent fracturing of both. As Sanjukta Sunderason puts it,

By displacing the rural into the urban *as destitution*, the famine can be seen to represent a 'collapse of the primal shelter'—the idealized rural as the site of production and (urban) sustenance collapsing into the bare life of hunger. The famine victim assumed an allegorical role that combined the critique of colonial extraction with that of the inadequacy of a nationalist vision of the nation as an idea and an ideal (18, emphasis Sunderason's).

And yet it is clear that, at least in *So Many Hungers!*, the famine victim does not merely represent a general "critique of colonial extraction," but rather a more specific manifestation of bodily violence, a spiritual and material denuding that results in an exposure to a foundational, metabolic alterity; and, as I will show over the course of this section, the resilient famine victim does not merely critique the nationalist vision of the nation but rather offers a new vision in its place.

The novel's representation of famine victims in Calcutta, which occupies the final quarter of the text, begins with an image of Rahoul's frustrated relief efforts. The bodies of these famine victims have reached a point of extreme metabolic disturbance. They are no longer able to eat: "[a] great many were in no fit state to consume solid food. They ate and died. To give them rice was to kill them" (*SMH!* 159-160). The narrator goes on to frame the plight of these victims in terms that correspond to the idea of starvation as invoking the foundational, biological otherness that haunts the human:

Strange how much a human body could go through before life left it at last. The first few days the man suffered most. He was mad with hunger. Then he grew listless. He laid himself down. His mouth was too tired for food, and he only wanted to be left alone. His eyes died. He wasted to a skeleton, using up whatever shreds of flesh he had anywhere on his body. (160)

The fractured human is made manifest in the narrator's language: "[h]e laid himself down." Likewise, temporal experience once more takes shape from the body's self-consumption: "using up whatever shreds of flesh he had anywhere on his body." It is important to recall that the focalizer of this passage is Rahoul, whose turn toward the nation allegorizes the latter's struggle for freedom. His initial exposure to the famine victims that will eventually lead him toward his nationalism is thus a sort of helplessness, "a bitter laugh in his heart" (160).

Indeed, the city at first appears the same den of iniquity that, within the novel at least, caused the famine in the first place, that produced the human scavengers who sought out famine victims in order to exploit them. Kajoli's mother, for instance, insists that the city "is much worse than the high-road. We live worse than cattle" (185); another famine victim says that they are "less than pariah dogs" (166). Meanwhile, "[t]he restaurants bulged with food. The cinemas overflowed" (171). Nor do the famine victims face only mere indifference. Rather, they are subject as well to predation, particularly sexual predation. Once again, a woman attempts to coerce Kajoli into sex work (186-188); and Sir Abalabandhu, Samarendra's business partner and "prince of the black market" (181), describes in detail raping a famine-stricken child, then justifies his actions by saying that the "girl would have starved otherwise" (182).

Through all of this, however, the famine victims endure. As one puts it, "the spark lingers undying in my dead bones" (166). It is by way of this lingering spark and, vitally, the self-devouring body's ability—or at least attempts—to reconstitute itself in new forms of life that the novel finds the basis of its vision of the nation. The starving body maintains, if only for a time, the capacity to persevere in the face of the temporal logics that Samarendra's hoarding attempts to exploit, the idea that "one must eat, whatever the price" (38): it refuses to melt into air. These bodies, decimated and turned upon themselves after being subjected to the depredations of the colonial state and the pitiless logics of the marketplace, are drawn into the city to confront its inhabitants with an image not only of the intertwined violences of capital and the colonial state but, too, a new vision of the human—the vision to which Rahoul, at the novel's opening, believed the war would give rise.

This vision emerges most clearly in the experiences of Rahoul and his wife, Monju—a mark of the novel's continuing commitment to bourgeois politics, even as it discloses this more radical alternative. With Monju, the reader encounter the novel's main deployment of an explicit language of spectrality and animality: Monju reflects on the way in which "[h]ideous death lurked everywhere, pressing the city in its skeleton grip" (172), noting how the "destitutes became a race apart, insensitive, sub-human" (173). Her relation to the famine-stricken refugees changes, however, when she and Rahoul take in a famine victim who is in the midst of giving birth. After both the woman and her unborn child die, Monju finds her attitude transformed:

The destitute woman was revealed in her human context. Not a pauper ever whining for morsels, hanging on to a deathly life without meaning. A young expectant mother about to make new life and denied, cast out on the street till at last she could not bear the struggle... Out of the flame of travail that had consumed one woman, a glow quickened in another, an understanding, a humanizing tenderness, so that the creatures of misery were no longer a race apart, soulless and dead—men and women all. (175)

On first glance this passage seems, through its invocation of the figure of the mother, to coincide with the imagery of *Bharat Mata*, whether in Bankim's initial formation in *Ānandamāth* or

Nehru's later appropriation.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, it is this moment that seems almost solely responsible for Monju's own turn toward the nation at the conclusion of the novel (213). And yet one must note that this near-mother does not push Monju toward an embrace of the nation by delivering her child or caring for it. Rather, both die before the birth can take place. The peasant woman thus transforms the image of *Bharat Mata*: motherhood gives way to a vision of the human body still "struggl[ing]", still giving forth the "flame of travail." It is no longer the mother's service to her children that comes to the fore, nor her partaking of the divine energy of *shakti*; rather, it is her all-too-human body, ravaged by deprivation, nevertheless attempting to endure.

If Monju finds a sort of sentimental inspiration in the dying peasant woman's laborious labor, Rahoul is motivated by another transformation of the mother-image, this one lent weight by its resemblance to the sex work that the novel repeatedly frames as perhaps the famine's greatest evil. Rahoul comes upon a peasant girl who, before a crowd of white soldiers billeted in Calcutta, exposes herself in exchange for rupees. The scene, initially rife with the same tones of shame and exploitation that characterize Kajoli's multiple encounters with procurers, gives way to something quite different: the girl buys a large quantity of bread with her earnings and, returning to an alleyway filled with fellow famine victims, distributes it along with words of care and tenderness. The famine victims, upon her approach, refer to her as "The mother" and "Our own mother" (194). As soon as she has handed out the bread and sat down to eat her own portion, however, she "shed her extraordinariness. A simple village maid, like others of her kind" (194). Rahoul's focalization goes on to reject the idea that the peasant girl has committed a shameful act or "abased the body's sanctity," an interpretation that he attributes to "the convention-bound moron"; instead, the girl has demonstrated "the sanctity of the human spirit" (194). Thus if the famine has shattered the primal shelter of the eternal village, the "legacy of manners as old as India" (25) that once held sway in the countryside, it has also opened the door to new forms of near-familial community made possible squarely by way of the enduring body.

While the peasant girl subverts both the exploitative relation of forced sex work and the nation-as-goddess-mother through a reclamation of her own starving body, it is Rahoul's next encounter that points specifically to the way in which the body's capacity for endurance—not just to consume itself as another, but to *survive* while doing so—functions as an integral part of the novel's reimagining of the nation. As Rahoul mans his Relief Center, he encounters an elderly man who asks to surrender the ticket that allows him to collect his free meals, passing it on to another famine victim. When pressed as to why he would make such a choice, the elderly man says, "Father... I have eaten for two weeks. *Now I can live without food for a time*. I can move about and beg and find foodscraps and keep the bones together. Give my place to one whose need is more than mine" (195, emphasis mine). It is this man whose "bent, half-naked figure" (195) functions for Rahoul as "a signal of hope and deliverance for the hunger-stricken masses of Bengal" (196).

Taken together, these three figures—the dying near-mother, the peasant-girl-as-mother, and the self-denying skeleton, all torn from the countryside and resituated in the city—offer up a new vision of the human and, as well, the nation, one that is born not of the conflagration of battle but rather from a very different theater of the Second World War: the belly of famine; the kingdom of hunger. The importance of this vision becomes clear when it is taken in the context of what I have called the novel's Gandhian social realism: if, within such realism, the unhealthy body—and, in particular, the famine-stricken, self-consuming body—would seem to function as a signifier of national decay, then *So Many Hungers!*, by instead *founding* its vision of the nation

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<sup>31</sup> See Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

in the *enduring bodies* of famine victims, proffers new possibilities on which to found the political community that is the nation.

*(Re)Making a Nation in the Kingdom of Hunger*

I conclude with a sketch of these possibilities, with particular focus on those elements that depart from the postcolonial nation-states that emerged in the wake of Indian and Pakistani independence and that, vitally, took famine as an impetus toward a particular form of what is now understood as “development.” It is important to note that one need not be satisfied with the *specific* images the novel provides as grounds for this alternate form of political community: the novel nevertheless presents us with an alternate foundation from which to reimagine the nation.

This foundation is born of a shift toward subsistence. First, in basing the nation in the starving body—that is, the body as at once isolated and self-alienated, consuming itself as another—the novel creates a profound disjuncture in the idea of the nation as that which allows the individuals that comprise it to transcend their finitude, an idea that emerges in Devesh’s “deathless” (205) hunger strike and, more broadly, in the anticolonial nationalisms of the era.<sup>32</sup> The starving body confronts its finitude concretely. Death now lies at the end of a highly linear process and wears a specific face: it will come when the body has finished consuming its remaining reserves, “using up whatever shreds of flesh” (160) it has at its disposal; it will result from inanition, from starvation and its associated complications. For the starving individual, then, the transcendence of finitude takes a back seat to a reclamation of the *indeterminacy* of finitude—the uncertainty of the when and how of death—by way of a disalienating reclamation of the capacity to literally subsist. At the same time, however, the abject figures who inspire Rahoul and Monju’s turn toward the nation do so by way of their (attempts at) *endurance* in the face of starvation, their *capacity* to reestablish alternate metabolic and affective relations with human and nonhuman beings alike. Thus this nation takes its form from the efforts of the people to provide for their own and one another’s necessities, food in particular, even as it remains rooted in the possibility of the failure of subsistence.

Atop this foundation, several more tangible aspects of the novel’s nation come forth. First, as I have made clear, *So Many Hungers!* offers up a vision of the *social space* of the nation in which a typically Gandhian distinction between rural and urban breaks down: the countryside collapses into the city, the primal shelter shattered. At one level, this is a clear critique of urban exploitation of the rural. Starving peasants flee the countryside certain that they will receive succor in no small part because “[t]he city had never grown a blade of corn. The city had eaten out of the green bowl of the peasant’s fields” (114). And yet perhaps more fundamental, more deranging of typical conceptions of the nation, is the way in which the novel depicts the passage of famine victims along—and the transformation of famine victims *into*—the *high road*, the liminal space connecting the village and the city.

The importance of this depiction comes into focus in relation to Benedict Anderson’s claim as to the way in which nationalism in the colonies emerged in no small part in relation to the movement of crowds throughout the space of the colony on “railways and steamships in the last century, motor transport and aviation in this” (*Imagined Communities* 115). The railroad played a particularly important role in India, where it was instrumental in producing a unified

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<sup>32</sup> See Pheng Cheah’s *Spectral Nationality*, p. 223, for this point in the work of Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral, for instance.

colonial space, whether as a homogenized single market oriented toward but denied economic development—the economic nationalist understanding—or, alternatively, as a space riven by differentiations of race, class, and caste. *So Many Hungers!* seems to take the latter view: in keeping with its broad Gandhism, the railroad violates the sanctity of the previously self-sustaining, timeless Indian village (Goswami 128-129). The novel invokes railways primarily as sites of intensification of class-hierarchy and colonial exploitation. This hierarchy emerges in more mundane ways—for instance, the fact that trains passing Kajoli’s village only “stop at the sub-station...for higher-class passengers at their bidding” (*SMH!* 18)—to more extreme forms of violence—Kishore, Kajoli’s husband-to-be, is killed just before the onset of the famine by a guard set on the railway to safeguard the special train of “His Excellency” (106). Private railway companies are likewise implicated in the famine itself, as one of the pastures closed to village cattle is “owned perhaps by the Railway Company” (123). The railway thus effects the clear separation of city and village, a sort of portal that connects two clearly delineated social spaces while imparting upon these spaces a clear hierarchization. At the same time, the railway is clearly associated with the exploitative logics of colonial capital.

The mass migration of famine victims along the high road toward Calcutta provides a drastically different vision of the interconnection of rural and urban, village and city. Against a social space constituted in relation to the demands of the intertwined forces of the colonial state and the marketplace, the novel’s depiction of the famine reconfigures national space in relation to the starving body. The unity of this space is constituted not by the logics of the marketplace but rather by the endurance of the starving body, which, by consuming itself as another, by confronting its foundational alterity, is pushed toward the city and, there, constitutes alternative forms of community. National space is made bodily, not in the sense of a metaphorical organism but rather in that it is drawn together by the need for subsistence, for reconnection with an inorganic body, on the part of literal human bodies.

At the same time, the starving, self-devouring body of the famine victim confronts us with, at once, the collapse of the present into an imagined primeval past and an experience of time structured by the limits of this body’s capacity to subsist upon itself. Each undermines the conception of empty, homogenous time proper to the nation-state and the idea of development. As to the former, the “prehistoric hell” (Ray 19) of famine is revealed as always immanent to modernity, a timeless lack lurking within any historical progress—lurking, haunting, so long as human beings inhabit biological bodies that can turn on and devour themselves. As to the latter, for the famine victim and the well-fed witness, the experience of time takes its shape by way of a death inexorably approaching. Within this world—this world in which “[t]ime was a foe” (*SMH!* 114)—events assume meaning in relation to this highly concrete vision of death, whether by hurrying its approach, warding it off, or instantiating forms of community that make possible sustained metabolic entanglement with the extra-bodily world, with human and nonhuman beings alike. Put in terms of historical time, this offers a marked shift from a model of the postcolonial nation that strives after an inevitably deferred<sup>33</sup> contemporaneity with the West by way of state-directed economic development. Instead, the progress of the nation through historical time is defined by the way in which it fosters the *capacity* of those who comprise it to pursue forms of social and political community that open them first and foremost to—quite

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<sup>33</sup> I will attend to this deferral in more detail in the next chapter.

literally—a sustainable, well-regulated metabolic relationship with their nonhuman surroundings.<sup>34</sup>

Such communities would by necessity reject the temporal logics of the marketplace, which both rely upon and exacerbate the human body's metabolic and affective disentanglement from its nonhuman surroundings such that these bodies and surroundings can be manipulated toward maximum profit. Instead, they would tend toward the conception and organization of time in relation to the demands of bodily satisfaction: to what capital and the colonial state so disparagingly call bare or brute subsistence. In one sense, this would function as a reversal of primitive accumulation, pursued not as a means of incorporating former peasants into capitalist modernity by encouraging them to produce for the market, but rather by creating the conditions of possibility for communities to pursue their own subsistence.<sup>35</sup> Vitality, this “reversal” need not—indeed, must not—mean a mere turning-back of the clock, a return to precolonial or precapitalist modes of life. Rather, the violence of famine must prove dialectical<sup>36</sup>: here there comes to mind the peasant-girl-as-mother, whom only “the convention-bound moron would... decry” (194); likewise, Tagore, who embraced scientific agriculture—so long, of course, as the techniques of such agriculture always remained subordinate to the demands of the human beings who worked the land.

I do not want to overstate the case as regards the novel. The figures that *So Many Hungers!* offers us as the basis for the post-famine nation do not immediately lend themselves to non-hierarchical, anti-caste, or anti-patriarchal forms of community. Still, the text images the nascent Indian nation from an alternate foundation—the starving, self-devouring, nevertheless enduring body—and, in doing so, poses the question of what other forms of nationhood and political community more broadly such a foundation might support. Needless to say, the Indian nation-state as it came into existence in 1947, in the wake of the famine, took a very different form. It is to this form—and, in particular, its peculiar, constraining qualities—that I now turn.

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<sup>34</sup> It is perhaps worth noting in passing some degree of similarity—although by no means a precise coincidence—between this measure of historical progress and Amartya Sen's conception of development as the expansion of capabilities (rather than human capital). See Sen's “Development as Capability Expansion” (2003).

<sup>35</sup> The economist Kalyan Sanyal, in his *Rethinking Capitalist Development* (2007), in fact argues that the reversal of primitive accumulation is precisely the function of development as it operates today; however, he claims that this reversal does not produce liberatory subsistence-centric communities but rather creates a “need economy” (Sanyal 65) for those people whom capitalism has “dispossessed... left only with labour power” (53). In turn, this need economy “is the post-colonial space of confinement” (65), a space that is necessary for the postcolonial capitalist economy to rejuvenate itself and that is easily governable by the postcolonial state. While Sanyal's claim that development consistently reverses primitive accumulation is dubious (see Vinay Gidwani and Joel Wainwright's careful, tender critique of Sanyal's work in “On Capital, Non-Capital, and Development” (2014)), it is worth noting that any nation-state that sought to provide its citizens the means to pursue their own subsistence would need also to protect them from the depredations of capital—and from the state itself.

<sup>36</sup> Here, Fanon's description of the effect of anticolonial struggle on indigenous culture in *A Dying Colonialism* ([1959] 1965) comes to mind as a potential point of comparison.

### Chapter 3: Beyond Debt

Between the 1980s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, perhaps the most lauded development in development practice was the increasing prominence of microcredit: extremely small loans to poor borrowers, typically in the so-called Global South, who are often unable to obtain a loan by typical means. Enthusiasm for microcredit reached a fever pitch, culminating with the United Nations proclaiming 2005 the International Year of Microcredit and, in 2006, the Nobel Peace Prize being awarded to the Bangladeshi economist Mohammad Yusuf and the Grameen Bank, the microcredit organization that Yusuf started and that is often credited with having inaugurated modern microcredit. The idea, in short, was that microcredit would allow its recipients to break out of their endless cycles of impoverishment—often perpetuated by predatory moneylenders—on the back of their own entrepreneurial spirit: they would lift themselves up on bootstraps borrowed at reasonable rates of interest. Microcredit, it was argued, would effect an extraordinary decrease in global poverty and allow the poor to assert themselves on the global stage (Cons and Paprocki 638; Dichter 2-3).

Recent years have seen a reevaluation of microcredit's potential.<sup>1</sup> It is not my purpose to contribute to this reevaluation, or even to discuss microcredit in and of itself. Rather, the enthusiasm for microcredit as a means of development raises a more fundamental question: the relationship between credit and debt, on the one hand, and development, on the other. This relationship is in some ways relatively obvious. At a very different scale from microcredit, public borrowing has long been central to development efforts in previously colonized countries. Likewise, since the early 1980s, around the same time that the Grameen Bank was founded, the imposition of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) as a condition for receiving loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—loans necessary to avert economic crises that were themselves often born of earlier borrowing—has been understood as a central aspect of drawing countries in the Global South into conditions ostensibly oriented toward economic growth. The critiques of such borrowing, and particularly of SAPs—their deleterious impacts on sovereignty, local industry, and the poorest of the poor through austerity measures in the form of rampant privatization and cutbacks to public programs, as well as free-market reforms that leave these countries vulnerable to competition with Western, multinational corporations—are likewise well known.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, however, I am less interested in these manifestations of literal indebtedness—whether public or individual, macro or micro—than with a more foundational problem: the formal resemblance between indebtedness and the developmental commitments of the newly-independent postcolonial nation-state. By this I mean to suggest that these two phenomena bring the elements of which they are composed into arrangements, modes of relation, that bear an uncanny resemblance to one another; and, in turn, they exert a similar force on these elements, shaping them in highly specific ways. In particular, as I will show, both phenomena

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<sup>1</sup> This reevaluation has ranged from claims that the effects of microcredit, while broadly positive, are far smaller than initially believed, to claims that microcredit was actively harmful, trapping the poor in debt spirals. For a representative example of the former, see David Roodman's *Due Diligence: An Impertinent Inquiry into Microfinance* (2012); for the latter, see Milford Bateman's *Why Doesn't Microfinance Work?: The Destructive Rise of Local Neoliberalism* (2010), as well as Tom Heinemann's 2011 documentary *The Micro Debt*.

<sup>2</sup> See, in particular, Cheryl Payer's *Lent and Lost: Foreign Credit and Third World Development* (1991) and Susan George's *A Fate Worse than Debt* (1989); for a more moderate but also far more influential critique of the World Bank and the IMF's reliance on SAPs, see Joseph E. Stiglitz's *Globalization and Its Discontents* (2002).



exert a profound and profoundly similar effect on the way in which the entities involved act and, perhaps more importantly, in which they narrativize their experience: the ways in which they make sense of, impose legible order upon, the teeming chaos of their realities. My concern here is to explicate these forms and their effects, as well as to suggest the ways in which, particularly as regards the postcolonial developmental nation-state, these effects are always incomplete: indeed, they produce their own ever-shifting lacks.

I come to this argument through an extended reading of Neel Mukherjee's 2014 novel *The Lives of Others*. Mukherjee's text depicts the rise and fall of a middle-class Bengali family, focusing primarily on its slow, debt-ridden collapse during the tumult of West Bengal's Naxalite Revolt in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which primarily adivasi<sup>3</sup> peasants took control of Naxalbari, a collection of villages in the foothills of the Himalayas, in conjunction with—and with coordination from—a Maoist splinter group within the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)).<sup>4</sup> Published two decades after India's own IMF-imposed structural adjustment, it would be easy enough to read *The Lives of Others* as a product and critique of these economic reforms, a response to the violently atomizing, even dehumanizing impact of inhabiting a society primarily structured by the profit motive. To do so, however, would be to miss a more illuminating—and certainly more interesting—reading of the novel as hearkening back to an earlier moment in India's history: both to the aforementioned formal alignment between the developmental commitments of the nation-state and endless debt, on the one hand, and, on the other, to the Naxalite Revolt as one of the greatest challenges this alignment has faced, at least in South Asia.

One of the reasons that this reading is particularly compelling is the singular nature of the Naxalite Revolt itself. The Naxalite movement is typically associated with a broadly Maoist ideology and all its concomitants, including the dialectical, teleological progression of history. Indeed, Charu Mazumdar, the Naxalites' chief ideologue and one of the eventual founders of the Maoist-inflected Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI(ML)), was clear in 1968—one year after Naxalbari—that he believed the movement was driving forward this progression: “the revolutionary era has been ushered in, and this is the first year of that era” (“One Year of Naxalbari Struggle”). And yet as Sanjay Seth notes, the Naxalite Revolt was peculiar in that it saw “an insurgent peasant consciousness... [leave] its imprint not only on communist practice, but also on communist theoretical categories” (Seth 485-486), in particular in the former's “emphasis on the symbolic and existential dimensions of violence” (493). Put differently, the Naxalites incorporated into their efforts one of the fundamental aims of peasant revolt: in Ranajit Guha's well-known formulation, to turn the world upside down, to “*disrupt and desecrate*” the “political and moral order of society” (*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* 36, emphases Guha's). As with peasant revolts the world over, an important aspect of this mission was the destruction of all records of debt (Graeber 8, 217; *Elementary Aspects* 51).

Mukherjee's novel engages with the Naxalite Revolt in order to effect a similarly heterodox assault on the postcolonial nation-state. *The Lives of Others*, I argue, belongs to that

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<sup>3</sup> A broad term for South Asian indigenous peoples.

<sup>4</sup> For histories of Naxalbari and its aftermath, see Sumanta Banerjee's *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising* (1984), Biplab Dasgupta's *The Naxalite Movement* (1974), Ramachandra Guha's "Adivasis, Naxalites and Indian Democracy" (2007), and Manoranjan Mohanty's *Revolutionary Violence: A Study of the Maoist Movement in India* (1977). In literature, perhaps the most famous Bangla-language depiction of the Naxalite movement is Mahasweta Devi's *Hājār Curāshir Mā* [*Mother of 1084*] (1974). In English, the primary other depiction of the movement beyond *The Lives of Others* is Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013), where the movement is largely reduced to a background for a drama that plays out primarily in the United States.

class of narratives for which narrative itself is an issue. It is not, however, a mere literary exercise, a postmodern novel given over to apolitical navel gazing. Instead, Mukherjee's text, by way of its depiction of the Naxalite Revolt alongside a multigenerational national allegory, draws into composed tension the formal logics that both define and haunt the postcolonial developmental nation-state: on the one hand, the aforementioned debt-like form born of the commitment to a particular vision of development; and, on the other, the Naxalite Revolt, not just as a violent revolution but rather as manifesting a complex, palimpsestic history of indigenous ways of knowing, non-industrial agricultural labor, and Maoist revolutionary practice. It is out of this tension that the novel articulates the way in which the nation-state, almost by necessity, holds within itself the possibility of futures defined neither by capitalist modernity nor, indeed, by any single *telos*, but rather by a fundamental openness tied to, emerging out of, a concrete, practice-based shaping of temporal experience and human-nonhuman relation.

### The Debt Form

These claims are based on an understanding of debt which takes as its basis the anthropologist David Graeber's definition: a debt is "an exchange that has not been brought to completion" (Graeber 121). As Graeber notes, such a suspended exchange is predicated on a principle of reciprocity and implies that the two parties involved are at least theoretically equals—that is, not "fundamentally different sorts of being" (120). These parties are also theoretically distinct, related primarily through the exchange itself, such that "when the debt is cancelled... both parties can walk away and have nothing further to do with each other" (122). Debt, then, is the temporally-bounded suspension of this equality and separation, a hierarchical tying-together of debtor and creditor that continues so long as the debt is outstanding. Vitality, debts are also quantifiable; they are, at a fundamental level, intertwined with the concept of money (21). This definition of debt is helpful in no small part because it is precise enough to avoid a transhistorical subsumption of all human interactions into forms of exchange; it also, importantly, excludes primordial, theological "debts," such as debts to the ancestors or the gods (56-57, 67-69, 122).

On the other hand, Graeber's definition is broad enough to account for a number of different manifestations of the debt relation, as well as to point to the way in which debt can be a helpful manner of making sense of phenomena the debt-character of which is not intuitive or readily apparent. Indeed, Graeber's understanding of debt is, I contend, *formal*: that is to say, it describes a particular arrangement or composition—a grasping-together, not always firm—of entities and phenomena, in this case by the simultaneous actions of borrowing and lending. The contents of this form, however—and, in turn, the specific ways in which the form manifests—are extraordinarily variable, the product of historical circumstances.

Despite this variability, it is possible to say a few words as to the debt form's impact on the debtor. I am concerned with the way in which the debt form gives shape to both the debtor's actions and, just as importantly, the manner in which they make sense of these actions: that is, the way in which they *narrativize* these actions and, more broadly, the experiences they undergo. This is to say that I am concerned with the subjectifying force of the debt form, particularly insofar as this form is fundamentally durative. Here, Nietzsche is instructive: in the second essay

of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he finds in debt a sort of foundational subjectification, describing the way that debt molds the human being into a subject endowed with *memory* and thus with responsibility and conscience, guilt and personal obligation (Nietzsche 58-70). This memory, however, is not mere nostalgia but rather a “*memory of the will*” (58, emphasis Nietzsche’s), a memory that is aimed at the fulfillment of a previous desire: as Deleuze and Guattari describe it in their discussion of the *Genealogy*, it is a “memory straining toward the future” (Deleuze and Guattari 190). Indebtedness provokes in the borrower an ongoing *proleptic analepsis*: an evocation of a past event—the act of borrowing—that itself looks forward to an event to come—the act of repayment and, ostensibly, the return of equality between the contracting parties.<sup>5</sup>

This proleptic analepsis, in turn, profoundly shapes the debtor’s experience of the period of indebtedness. This shaping takes two forms. First, following Nietzsche once again, the borrower must be able “to distinguish necessary events from chance ones, to think causally, to see and anticipate distant eventualities as if they belonged to the present, to decide with certainty what is the goal and what the means to it, and in general be able to calculate and compute” (Nietzsche 58). The uncertainty of the period between borrowing and repayment must be suspended as much as possible, subordinated to the logic of repayment: as Maurizio Lazzarato puts it, “[w]hat is expropriated by credit/debt is not only wealth, knowledge, and the ‘future,’ but more fundamentally the possible” (Lazzarato 23). Second, events related to the debt—which, depending on the specific content of a given manifestation of the debt form, might well mean *all* events—take on their meaning only in relation to the proleptic analepsis, the memory straining toward the future, and the narrative order that it composes. More radically, the narrative order born of the debt form is itself—to various degrees, depending on the intensity of the debt—productive of the experience of such events *qua* events over the course of its duration.

The shape of these events is yoked to the fact that debt can necessarily be quantified. Graeber is once again helpful in understanding the *particular* effect of debt’s expropriation of the possible, its ordering or production of events in relation to itself. For the debtor, the world is reduced “to a collection of potential dangers, potential tools, and potential merchandise. Even human relations become a matter of cost-benefit calculation” (Graeber 319). Here, once again, is the calculative dimension of indebtedness. Money, as a pure, abstract medium of exchange, as that which can—and, in a market economy defined by the saturation of the commodity form, does—transubstantiate all use-values into exchange-value and make all objects potentially quantitatively commensurable, allows debt to colonize every part of the debtor’s world, incorporating the debtor into its impersonal arithmetic.

This effect—which bears a striking resemblance to Horkheimer and Adorno’s conception of instrumental reason (Horkheimer 3-5, 14-16, 63-67; Horkheimer and Adorno 4, 25, 29-30, 90)—is thus productive of a generalized alienation in two senses: first, in the young Marx’s sense of alienation from species-being, as debtors are no longer able to recognize or contemplate themselves and their activity in the external world, but rather confront means or obstacles in the repayment of their debts (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* 327-330); and, second, in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s idiosyncratic, more-than-human understanding of the term as referring to the moment in which, “[i]n capitalist logics of commodification, things are torn from their life-worlds to become objects of exchange” (Tsing 121), as debtors are forced to

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<sup>5</sup> Various thinkers have articulated the temporal orientation of indebtedness in terms resembling those I use here: see, for instance, Gustav Peebles’ “The Anthropology of Credit and Debt” (2010), p. 230 and, albeit in a different register, Arjun Appadurai’s “Life After Debt” (2020), pp. 26-27.

disregard the life-worlds of other beings and, indeed, their own as well, all in the service of servicing or satisfying their debts. Tsing's conception of alienation is particularly helpful insofar as it allows us to think debt ecologically, as the alienating force of the debt form is not confined to the debtor, but rather acts into the entangled mass of relationships between human beings and their nonhuman surroundings. Debt is radically atomizing, and not only for human beings. This two-fold, generalized alienation, in turn, can only exacerbate debt's influence on the way in which the debtor makes narrative sense of their experience of the period of indebtedness. As the many beings that play a role in the debtor's life are reconceptualized in relation to the debt, they shed their own rhythmic affordances, their own potential narrative logics, and become figures in the narrative emerging out of the debt form.

I have dwelt on the narrativizing force of the debt form for several reasons. First, it is at the level of narrative that *The Lives of Others* draws out the foundational indebtedness of the Indian developmental nation-state. This is to say that this indebtedness does not manifest only or even primarily in the literal sense of money owed to foreign creditors—although this sense should not be discounted—but rather in the way in which the nation-state conceptualizes its own history and narrativizes both its strivings and the events it undergoes. Put differently, the text would seem to suggest that the monetary debts of the Indian Central and State Governments are only the concrete manifestations of an underlying relation, of a previous, peculiar instance of the debt form; the latter would persist in the absence of the former. Second, it is by way of its own literary form that *The Lives of Others* is able to articulate a relationship between this national indebtedness and the Naxalite Revolt of the late 1960s and early 1970s and, in doing so, to demonstrate the way in which the developmental nation-state contains—even creates—forms of life which escape or exceed the constrained horizons of capitalist modernity.

## **The Foundational Debt of the Postcolonial Developmental Nation-State**

### *Allegorizing the Indebted Nation-State*

*The Lives of Others* is composed of three intertwined narrative threads, all of which meld into a single strand in the final few chapters. In each of these three threads, members of the Ghosh family, a bourgeois, Calcutta-based Bengali family that operates a series of paper mills, function as the primary focalizers and, in the case of the third, the first-person narrator as well. The novel offers its vision of the foundational debt of the Indian developmental nation-state in what I will refer to as the first and second threads, and it is here that I will begin my analysis. As I do so, though, it is important to keep in mind that one of the novel's primary suggestions is that it is impossible to disentangle these two threads from the third, in which Supratik, the Ghosh family's eldest grandson and a Naxalite organizer, describes his voyage to the countryside to organize villagers toward a Maoist revolution. However, my provisionally schematic reading is necessary in order to draw forth precisely the collisions and inflections that make Mukherjee's text so valuable.

The novel's first thread—that is, the first of the threads that the reader encounters—is narrated chronologically in the present tense, save for a few sparse flashbacks. It relates the lives of the Ghosh family between 1967 and 1970, the years of Naxalbari and its immediate aftermath.

This thread is focalized by various members the family—all save Supratik—including as well two math educators who mentor Sona, one of the grandchildren of the family and a mathematical savant. While the first thread takes place during the Naxalite movement, it is largely removed from the events of the struggle, dealing instead with the often petty conflicts of a middle-class family. Crucially, the Ghosh family's struggles are largely due to their imminent financial ruin, a situation born of ill-advised loans taken out in order to purchase foreign machinery for their paper factories, as well as their subsequent antagonization of organized labor in these factories.

The second thread describes, in past tense and largely chronological order, the history of the family, from the childhood of its patriarch, Prafullanath, up to the events of the first thread. Some parts of the second thread occur in the midst of chapters otherwise dedicated to the first; the majority take place in their own chapters. This thread is an external, complete analepsis: a recounting of events that occurred prior to the main narrative, leading all the way up to the beginning of the main narrative. Generically, this second thread takes the familiar form of a multi-generational national allegory, in which the temporal progression of the family evokes that of the nation itself and, in turn, is tied to national historical events. Here, these events include Indian and Pakistani independence and Partition, the all-Indian football club Mohun Bagan AC's victory over the East Yorkshire Regiment in the 1911 IFA Shield match, the 1943 Bengal famine, the bombing of Calcutta in the Second World War, the emergence of certain popular Bengali writers like Sunil Gangopadhyay, and, of course, the Naxalite movement itself. The novel self-consciously embraces this generic identity, going so far as to include an allusion to the first line of Gabriel García Márquez's *100 Years of Solitude*, still the paradigmatic multi-generational national allegory: "Many years later, as he faced his own dissolution, Prafullanath was to remember a distant afternoon when his father took him to see the Elphinstone Bioscope in an enormous tent on the Maidan" (N. Mukherjee 179).<sup>6</sup>

However, unlike *100 Years of Solitude* or Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*—where the solidity of the national community, and in particular the ostensibly simple, linear temporality of the nation's history, is fractured, even dissolved, by the magical, recursive, self-conscious nature of the text—*The Lives of Others* is an unflinchingly realist novel. In this sense, its second thread bears resemblance to Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!*, which I explored in the previous chapter, as well as the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century novels that Benedict Anderson describes in *Imagined Communities* and again in *The Spectre of Comparisons*: novels that "represent synchronically this bounded, intrahistorical society-with-a-future" (*The Spectre of Comparisons* 334). And yet *The Lives of Others* is not reducible to its second thread; and, in its first thread, there emerges not a boundless future, not the untapped potential of the allegorized, finally-come-of-age-and-reconciled-with-society subject of the nationalist *Bildungsroman*, but rather a family on the brink of total collapse, its members mired in addiction, despair, and—as is so often the case for the pessimistic postcolonial novel—incest.

Indeed, the novel's first thread is largely consumed by members of the Ghosh family casting about, through a myriad of epistemological frameworks, for an explanation of their current financial straits. Prafullanath attributes his family's situation to ancestry (N. Mukherjee 287, 350); Priyo, Prafullanath's second son, to the family's decision to hire Dulal, son of the long-tenured family servant Madan, to work in one of their factories, where Dulal becomes a labor organizer for the CPI (M) (81). The proximate cause of the family's impending collapse,

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<sup>6</sup> "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice" (Márquez 1). It is worth noting that this line, as well as Mukherjee's, is an example of a analeptic prolepsis, and in this sense an inversion of the narrative ordering of the debt form.

however, is the aforementioned debt tied to imported paper machines. The family experiences this debt in terms that recall the typical proleptic analepsis born of the debt form. Adinath, one of the Ghosh uncles and Supratik's father, reflects:

The botched modernisation of technology at one of the factories, all that high-risk borrowing against capital - what enormous reach they had into the future, like those she-ghosts in the stories they were told when they were little, ghosts with nasal voices and long arms that could traverse fields and houses and ponds and grab your neck. (10)

The second thread, then, insofar as its purely analeptic nature renders it beholden to the first, thus comes to function as the complex memory of an incurred debt. The events of the second thread—not just those in the life of the Ghosh family, but, too, those comprising the history of the Indian nation—take on meaning in relation to the coming tribulations of indebtedness: they are transformed into the circumstances that lead to and result from these tribulations.

Nor just any indebtedness; nor just any tribulations. From the initial incurring of the debt, Adinath confronts the fact that it will not be repaid “even in Baba's [Prafullanath's] lifetime, perhaps not even in his [Adinath's] and Priyo's” (254); and, in fact, the situation grows far worse, becoming “a slow erosion,” as factories close and the Ghosh family cannot “honor their debts” (255). The family has, in brief, fallen into a *debt spiral*: a debt that, by way of its unmanageable interest, reproduces itself entirely or even expands, deferring its own repayment. Thus the utter foreclosure of the family's future and, in turn, an alteration of the narrativizing force of the debt form: instead of a memory straining toward a constrained, definite future of repayment, the memory—here, comprising the history of the Indian nation—is stripped of a future; it is an analepsis oriented toward eternity, a fatality infinitely deferred. Adinath's comparison of debt to a “she-ghost[]” (10) is telling: this figure does not merely gesture toward the consistent repetition of debt's reappearance but, too, an entrance into an order of temporal progression defined not by the passage of generations—the gendering of the ghost is notable here—but rather by a spectral persistence beyond death, the putting off of any end, even as reality is strangled, utterly constrained.<sup>7</sup>

The novel expresses the desperate absurdity of this endless constraint with a vision of Adinath drunkenly calculating the family's mills' productive capacity, all while resisting the urge to urinate: he “tumbles over into superstitious territory: if he can solve the equations mentally, it will signify that he will be saved, that the Ghoshes will not be ruined; if he cannot do it before he has to go to the toilet, well... defeat” (256). The scene seems to end with Adinath hammering on the locked bathroom door, as his heroin-addicted younger son, Suranjan, passes out inside; it is only revealed almost two hundred pages later and highly indirectly that, in the end, Adinath breaks in and finds Suranjan unconscious, misrecognizing the latter's opiate-induced stupor as drunkenness. The calculative, ends-oriented character of the debtor in the debt form is made farce; instrumental reason collapses into superstition; the family's forms of addiction intensify even beyond the older generation's capacity to recognize this intensification.

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<sup>7</sup> Frederik Tygstrup has recently described a similar shift in literary depictions of debt more broadly. Whereas in the classical realist novel debt appeared as “a tight, agonistic bolt between credit and solvency, amortization and self-realization,” Tygstrup notes that “[i]n the age of financialization... the fatal logic of amortization gives way to a perennial servicing of rolled-over debt... a spacetime of spectrality and reversibility” (40). Following Mukherjee, though, it would seem that this spectral spacetime in fact emerges well before the era of financialization in which we are currently mired.

It is this specific, spiraling manifestation of the debt form that exerts its force over the vision of the Indian nation that the novel bodies forth. Tellingly, the Ghosh family debt emerges out of “botched modernisation” (10), out of Prafullanath’s desire to upgrade the machinery in his paper factories beyond local technological capacities, a move that, given the “thriving market in second-hand parts and units for existing technology... seemed criminally profligate” (254). As Susan George points out, this desire for increased industrial capacity and the willingness to commit to “ill-considered, ill-conceived projects, many involving bloated capital costs and healthy doses of graft” (George 16) was a central driver of debt accumulation for newly independent countries in the Global South.

This desire operates according to a temporal orientation that emerges in an Adinath-focalized description of Prajwal Sarkar, the head of Research and Development for the Ghosh family business:

Prajwal Sarkar was a man of the past; manufacturing parts belonging to machines he had dealt with for three decades was an activity that belonged to the backward past. How could he bring that same inventiveness to the latest technology from Germany and England, to the objects of the future, in what he affectionately called his ‘machine kitchen’? (N. Mukherjee 254-255)

There are echoes here of Jawaharlal Nehru’s claim that “We in India do not have to go abroad in search of the Past and the Distant. We have them here in abundance. If we go to foreign countries it is in search of the Present” (Nehru 690).<sup>8</sup> There emerges here as well a broad structural homology with the proleptic analepsis of the Ghosh family’s debt: a looking-back-to-look-forward, a recalcitrant past that asserts itself in the present, straining toward a receding future. Insofar as the Ghosh family serves as an allegory for the Indian nation, then, Mukherjee’s novel seems, first, to offer a conception of the Indian nation as fundamentally shaped by—or, more radically, *a product of*—the debt form; and second, to tie this debt to the imperative to modernize—here, in the specific sense of maximizing capacities for commodity production.

### *Modernity on Loan*

As I will demonstrate, *The Lives of Others* disrupts any too-simple theorization of the Indian nation, refusing the relatively straightforward logics that my intentionally partial, schematic reading seems to reveal. Nevertheless, it is worth pausing in order to take seriously this formulation of the Indian nation-state as caught within—formed by—a particular manifestation of the debt form. Through its invocation of debt, the novel suggests that the imperative to modernize, inextricably intertwined with the profit motive as operative within a market economy, fundamentally constrains the future and, too, forces a narrativization of events both past and present in relation to this imperative. The newly-independent Indian nation-state’s self-understanding as having stepped out of the waiting-room of history *and* as being composed of a largely non-modern populace, and, in turn, its foundational commitment to reconciling this split through some form of development, whether state-run or otherwise<sup>9</sup>—these dilemmas lock

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

<sup>9</sup> On this point, see Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000), especially pp. 9, 14, as well as Partha Chatterjee’s *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986), *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), and “The

the Indian nation-state into a set of competing obligations that resembles a manifestation of the debt form, and, in particular, the Ghosh family's debt spiral. What is "loaned," it would seem, is modernity itself—here, manifest in the very being of the independent Indian nation-state as part of an international order and a global marketplace coordinated primarily by the dynamics of the Cold War and, eventually, an entirely dominant West. And yet the modernity of the Indian nation-state is predicated on the idea that this nation-state will, over time, transform itself in the image of that which it has borrowed: as Vinay Gidwani puts it, Nehru's technocratic governance in the wake of independence sought to "pull a backward nation into the historical present no longer out-of-joint with time. The telos of this thought was the Time of History—and more precisely, capitalist development—inhabited by the West" (Gidwani 83).

That the drive to modernize is productive of a particular—and highly constrained—conception of what is possible and desirable for the fledgling nation-states of the so-called Global South is not a new observation: critics of development discourse and Western modernity more broadly have long offered up versions of this claim.<sup>10</sup> Still it seems to me that the allegorical invocation of the debt form in Mukherjee's novel also guides us toward several elements of this claim that are worthy of further emphasis and elaboration. First, it draws our attention toward the uncanny duality of India's non-elite—and, in particular, rural, agrarian—population in the context of development. Insofar as the nation-state *qua* modernity is borrowed, this non-elite population is at some level the recipient of the loan: they are now rights-bearing citizens of an independent nation-state, their standards of living ostensibly set to improve as the developmental state reverses the consequences of the economic exploitation that colonial rule had perpetrated. And yet part of the repayment of this loan, arguably the central part, is the fundamental transformation of these same non-elites into rational, modern subjects: this is to say *the borrowers are also themselves the debt to be repaid*.

This duality becomes clearer when one notes the way in which assuming responsibility for development serves the very Nietzschean function of consolidating the Indian nation-state as a particular type of unified subject. As Partha Chatterjee observes, the promise of economic development at once supplied the legitimacy of the newly-independent Indian nation-state and assumed the idea of a single, rational consciousness, embodied in state economic planning. And yet an immediate contradiction appears insofar as the state also derives its political sovereignty from that of the nation, the people: it must therefore contend with the multiplicity of demands on the part of the latter (*The Nation and Its Fragments* 203-205). Because civil society contains an array of desires that will inevitably come into conflict with one another, to pursue "the well-being of the people as a whole" (205), however this well-being is defined, is necessarily a hubristic project, and one that will require a certain amount of coercive action. The nation-state, ostensibly constituted as a singular subject by way of its commitment to state-run development, must always remain riven with difference, a subject split many times over: in particular, nation and state are both cobbled together and fractured by the developmental mission, the modernizing imperative which demands that the latter transform the former. Indeed, the difficulties posed by this fractured, unclear identity emerge in relation to public debt, which, as Odette Lienau points

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Nation in Heterogenous Time" (2003). See as well Homi Bhabha's well-known distinction between the pedagogical and performative aspects of nation in "DissemiNation" (1990), especially p. 297.

<sup>10</sup> For classic instances, see: Talal Asad's "Conscripts of Western Civilization" (1992); Arturo Escobar's *Encountering Development* (1995); James Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994); and Akhil Gupta's *Postcolonial Developments* (1998).



out, poses acutely the question of who is responsible for international debts incurred by the sovereign state (Lienau 171-175).

To push both this point and the metaphor of debt further, insofar as the developmental nation-state strives to produce not only “benefits” in the sense of increased economic production and improved standards of living for certain groups but, too, allocates the costs of these benefits to other groups, it is, like the Ghosh family, straining fruitlessly toward an infinitely deferred future in which ubiquitous modernity will be achieved. It repeatedly confronts the ways in which any attempts to honor its initial commitment not only strain against the difficulty of doing so but in fact *reproduce* the distance that separates certain groups from the promise of modernity, as well as the way in which modernity itself, insofar as it is defined by contemporaneity with the West, is a moving target. The past, the moment of commitment to capitalist modernity, chokes the developmental nation-state forever, not in linear progression into a boundless future but in the endless recursion of the vengeful she-ghost.

The novel’s invocation of debt also draws our attention to the way in which the developmental nation-state’s pursuit of modernity is predicated, as I have argued in the first chapter of this dissertation, on maximizing the productive capacities of the land—and, more broadly, according to the Nehruvian vision of socialism dominant at the moment of India’s independence, the state’s “rational management of productive resources” (*Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* 160). This approach immediately recalls the calculative, doubly-alienating ecological dimension of indebtedness, the way that it forces the debtor to apprehend the world in terms of potential exchange-value; here, though, the world is apprehended according to resource logics that evaluate nonhuman beings in relation to their capacity to advance the nation-state’s linear historical progress toward modernity.<sup>11</sup> What is more, many of the projects of the developmental nation-state are intended not only to render nonhuman beings maximally productive, but also to encourage human subjects to exercise “*an instrumental reason that is disposed to exchange-value production*” (Gidwani 100, emphasis Gidwani’s): that is, to encourage the population to assume toward nonhuman beings an attitude of calculating mastery—an attitude that resembles that born of indebtedness. However, the manifestations of this approach—in particular, large-scale projects like megadams, mines, and refineries—reproduce the endless deferral of modernity by creating, for instance, developmental refugees who absorb the costs of development through displacement and subsequent declines in quality of life (Nixon 152).

At the same time, the novel’s allegorical invocation of debt draws our attention to the way in which literal debt has served as an important means of papering over the split subject of the postcolonial developmental nation-state and furthering the modernizing projects that the state pursues. This is to say that not only has debt functioned as a central means of incorporating peasants into capitalist markets<sup>12</sup>—and, in turn, supporting the developmental nation-state’s

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<sup>11</sup> I borrow the term “resource logics” from Jennifer Wenzel, in particular her *The Disposition of Nature* (2020), where she defines them as “habits of mind that understand nature as other than human, disposed as a resource for human use, and subject to human control” (42).

<sup>12</sup> Debt served as a primary means of surplus extraction in rural areas from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, continuing, in the aftermath of debtor protection policies, in various altered forms—for example, the use by landlords and moneylenders of usufructuary mortgages to gain direct access to the land as a means of production—until at least the 1990s (*Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital* 87, 122-123, 131, 135). Nor was debt’s function merely domestic; rather, it connected peasants to circuits of exchange that ranged far afield from their immediate surroundings, situating smallholders in a global countryside that provided raw materials for Britain- and then America-centric global food regimes (Ali 3-8; Banaji 1384-1385; “Introduction” 20; *Peasant Labour* 45, 80; McMichael 141).

project of subsuming these peasants into a regime of instrumental reason—but, too, has served the important purpose of making pre-colonial hierarchies and power relations legible to the juridical and economic practices of colonial liberalism and bourgeois political economy, practices that the postcolonial state largely adopted. Gyan Prakash has convincingly argued, for instance, that the concept of debt-bondage in Bihar was in fact a colonial misrecognition of a precolonial hierarchical relationship between agricultural laborers and lords of the land (*Bonded Histories* 140-142); this misrecognition was only possible because the colonial state had naturalized the claim that “freedom constitutes humanity’s natural being” and the idea that “money forms the basis for social relations” (3).

Perhaps most notable, though, is the way in which indebtedness came to function as both a means of identifying and defining certain human beings as “primitive” and, at the same time, suturing them to the progressive historical movement of the colonial state, Bengali middle-class society, and Indian anticolonial nationalism. Prathama Banerjee has demonstrated the way in which, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both the Bengali middle classes and the colonial state came to represent adivasis—specifically, Santals—as “inherently body-centric and non-cerebral, incapable of imagining time in the abstract and therefore incapable of imagining a future which could not be apprehended in the mode of the present” (*Politics of Time* 132). This led to “the colonial practice of first excluding the Santals from mainstream society and then insisting that Santals enter the market in order to engage in exchange with ‘civilized’ peoples” (129): money and exchange were to serve as the sole mediators between these two historically non-contemporaneous worlds (130). However, even as these phenomena were intended to instill in these so-called primitives a properly modern sense of time—time as abstract, quantifiable, and always potentially productive of value—they in fact gave rise to a state of near-perpetual indebtedness that was taken as further proof of the Santals’ primitivity (139-140, 144-145). Thus the colonial state produced a “temporal hierarchization of communities, which were then replaced, post-facto, in monetary contiguity, defined as the only valid relationship between non-contemporaries” (150). The (literal) debt of the Santals came to stand as both evidence of their backwardness and the means by which they could be incorporated, from within this backwardness, into the administrative grid of the colonial state and, in turn, into the postcolonial nation-state.

For the Santals themselves, however, money and indebtedness were experienced as the cruel imposition of a notion of time belonging to a powerful, newly antagonistic exploiter: more radically, “time itself... emerge[d] before the ‘primitive in modernity’ as a threatening and unrelenting other” (137). Time came to be marked entirely by money, to appear “in the infinite generative mode of money-interest” (139)—this latter taken to coincide with the conception of time proper to the nation, the time of “infinite seriality and accumulation” (146). Indeed, Banerjee claims that the 1855 Santal *hul*<sup>13</sup> was fundamentally an attempt “to repossess time itself” (169): to take back the experience of time from its newly abstract, rationalized, linear state, born of the threatening world of money, debt, and interest.

As I will demonstrate, *The Lives of Others* takes on a similar task, launching an assault on the formal indebtedness of the postcolonial developmental nation-state, as well as on the concomitants of this form: a constrained future, an abstracted conception of time, and an alienated and alienating relation to nonhuman beings. The very elements of Indian society who

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<sup>13</sup> The *hul* was a six-month rebellion by the Santal against the then-governing East India Company, from 1855 to early 1856. The classic account of the *hul* is Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983). See as well Peter B. Anderson’s recent *The Santal Rebellion 1855-1856* (2023).

stand at once as borrowers and debt continually haunt the Ghosh family throughout the novel: servants, industrial workers, peasants, and, vitally, the ostensibly irreconcilably primitive Santal, now engaged in the Naxalite Revolt of the late 1960s. This is to say that the novel deforms the fragile, fractured, debt-sutured form of the Indian nation-state, articulating the perhaps-unassimilable modes of life and narrative logic—based in a complex configuration of Santal knowledges, non-industrial agricultural practice, and anti-state revolutionary violence—that lurk within it.

## Deforming Debt, Deforming Development

### *Developmental Landscapes*

This deformation emerges most clearly in relation to the novel's third thread. To understand the scope of this deformation, as well as the terms in which the novel articulates it, however, it is necessary to turn to the section of the novel that is directly counterposed to this third thread. This is the final chapter of the second, analeptic thread, just before the three threads of the novel interweave, in which the occasionally referenced family "tragedy" (N. Mukherjee 253) is revealed. Somnath, one of Supratik's uncles, travels with some friends to Patratu, a small mining village near Ranchi, then a part of the state of Bihar. Somnath, whom the novel has by this point established as something of a sociopath—pouring rice-water on the ground and commanding famine victims to lap it up, torturing insects and animals, groping women at every opportunity (221-225, 398-399)—largely focalizes the chapter, and, along with his friends, exhibits a sudden desire to escape from middle-class urban life and enter a premodern world of organic wholeness. The friends seek out "a place remote enough to allow them that superficial illusion, the surrounding scenic beauty providing a sufficient dosage of the untampered Nature they desired" (401), where Somnath reflects that he "feel[s] like staying in this forest forever" (403); and, just as important, they admire the local Santals, reflecting on the way in which, in their eyes, these Santals are happy *because* "[t]hey have no money, no jobs, no solid houses" (406). As one of Somnath's friends drunkenly muses in yet another farcical manifestation of calculative reason: "Santhals<sup>14</sup> = few worldly possessions = happiness. Ajit & Shekhar & Somnath = family and friends and home and expectations and responsibility = sorrow. Straightforward equation" (407).

The text foregrounds the illusory character of these impressions. The narrator emphasizes the friends' vision of nonhuman nature as a mystification, repeatedly referencing the fact that their experience of this place is in some sense unreal: the light "turned out to be an illusion"; the forest is a "kingdom of magic"; a sal flower is a "dense, intricate, miracle" (403); the moonlight "cloak[s] [buildings or shrubs or humans] in... unreality" (406). Meanwhile, the Santhals, faced with extraordinary poverty and exploitation, experience "a core of hopelessness... even perhaps of despair" (409) that the friends studiously ignore. What is more, the ostensibly untouched area is in fact under intensive development: "A big thermal power station was being constructed with Russian money" (400), and the village will soon experience an influx of workers and tourists, for which it is currently receiving "a lick of developmental paint" (401). The utter absurdity of the

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<sup>14</sup> A common alternate spelling of Santal.

friends' attitudes is not just blackly, bleakly comical, but rather has deadly consequences: the trip ends as Somnath attempts to rape a Santal woman and is beaten to death by her community.

Far from a mere—and immediately dismissed—flight from the imperative to modernize, Somnath and his friends' puerile, sinister vision of romantic return in fact represents the apogee of this imperative and, in turn, of the foundational debt of the postcolonial developmental nation-state more broadly. The development of the region makes it available to Somnath and his friends for a particular type of leisurely consumption, and the friends' conceptions of their surroundings collapse these surroundings into what might be termed a *landscape*: that is, nature as distinct and distant from the observing, contemplating subject. Here, various beings are brought together not by way of material, ecological entanglement but the subject's unifying, representing gaze, such that these beings are rendered abstract, reified, and available for incorporation as natural resources into processes of production or consumption; at the same time, any laboring bodies are either disappeared or made amenable to the unity of the landscape itself by merging with their surroundings.<sup>15</sup> This particular mode of apprehending and representing one's nonhuman surroundings functions as one aesthetic correlate of indebtedness in its ecological aspect: these surroundings are torn from their lifeworlds and incorporated into that of the observing subject. This attitude is also incorporated into a nationalist, middle-class imaginary by its repeated association with the songs of Rabindranath Tagore.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, the local Santals sink deeper into immiseration. Even as Somnath and his friends figuratively incorporate them into the landscape as natural resources—the women's breasts are “exactly like ripe fruit” (398), available to be mastered and consumed—the travelers also render the adivasis they encounter as precisely the “primitives” of the colonial and Bengali middle-class imaginary: the friends discuss the way the Santals are “closer to the pure state of mankind... less corrupted, more noble” (407), noting that they “lacked the discipline of works and days” (404). This final quotation implies, by way of its reference to Hesiod's didactic poem,<sup>17</sup> that the Santals are not properly productive subjects and, in particular, that they are unable to plan for the future in the way that agriculture requires. This inability was precisely the problem that their incorporation into circuits of exchange—which, in turn, transformed them into the very figure of indebtedness—was intended to solve.

Even as it comes well into the text and functions as a final act of interweaving between the novel's three threads, the Santal response to Somnath's literally rapacious violence follows, chronologically, immediately on the heels of Prafullanath's incurring of the fateful debt. Somnath's death precipitates a health crisis for the Ghosh family's patriarch, massively intensifying the scope of the family's problems, both its capacity to respond to its debt and the

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<sup>15</sup> My use of *landscape* here is indebted to John Barrell's *The Dark Side of Landscape* (1980); Georg Lukács' claims in *History and Class Consciousness* ([1923] 1971), especially pp. 157-158; W.J.T. Mitchell's “Imperial Landscape” ([1994] 2002), especially pp. 14-15; and Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973), especially p. 120. It is important to note that there are various very different understandings of landscape, in particular from J.B. Jackson—see *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (1984)—and Tim Ingold in *The Perception of the Environment* (2000), especially Chapter 11.

<sup>16</sup> Following the first chapter of this dissertation, it is tempting to attempt to invert the seeming implications of the novel's invocations of Tagore, who, both here and in the novel's third thread, is repeatedly associated primarily with an educated, bourgeois, and, vitally, purely aesthetic relation with nonhuman beings. However, it is clear that within the logics of the text, Tagore is identified with the form of human-nonhuman relation proper to the formally indebted developmental nation-state.

<sup>17</sup> Hesiod's *Works and Days*, written around 700 BC, outlines the mythic origins of the necessity of human toil and valorizes labor, agricultural labor in particular, as fundamental intertwined with both prosperity and justice. It includes extensive practical advice for effective farming.

bonds that hold the family together (253). This act of subaltern resistance thus augments the debt form that gives form to the novel's first and second threads—and, according to the allegorical logics of these threads, the foundational indebtedness of the postcolonial developmental nation-state.

### *Cultivating Revolutionary Violence*

At the same time, though, this resistance stands at the junction at which these two threads interweave with the third: with Supratik's violent resistance in the countryside. It is this third thread that, more than any other aspect of the novel, functions as a deformation of, an assault upon, indebtedness. This vision is not, however, any straightforward celebration of the rigidly Maoist project to which the Naxalite movement was indebted: this project relied upon a progressive historicism in many ways similar to that of the developmental nation-state, even if its vision of the ultimate *telos* of historical progress was radically different. For instance, after Supratik, near the novel's close, frames the long-tenured family servant, Madan, for the theft of jewelry that the former sells in order to finance a bombing, the young Naxalite comes to realize that his decision "had been *strictly mathematical* – if one have-not had to be sacrificed so that fifty have-nots could be benefited, nothing trivial such as emotions could stand in the way" (477, emphasis mine). This "soul-crushing arithmetic" (477) would seem to suggest that Supratik has not escaped the influence of the debt form: he, too, attempts to mobilize the peasantry toward a promised future, offers this future on the condition of the transformation—or, here, the revolutionary risks and sacrifices—of the "have-nots" (477) themselves. Madan is not the only subaltern subject to suffer for Supratik's largely ineffective actions: the villagers whom he organizes are arrested *en masse*.

However, the novel's third thread does not merely recount the violence of the Naxalite movement. Instead, most of the thread relates Supratik's day-to-day life among the largely Santal villagers whom he has come to organize, in particular his participation in one cycle of rice production. The thread only turns to violence in the tenth of its thirteen sections. The early, labor-centric sections of this thread are not mere exercises in building tension. Rather, they enter into a dialogue with both the revolutionary actions of the later sections and Supratik's urban, bourgeois background and, in doing so, proffer a particularly potent deformation of the debt form of the novel's first two threads.

Prior even to these descriptions of labor, though, the third thread—indeed, the text as a whole—is positioned as a sort of response to the novel's prologue, focalized by the starving peasant Nitai Das. Nitai, unable to pay the interest on loans from his landlord and unable to feed his family in the face of a multi-year drought, kills his wife and children before drinking pesticide. The novel's third thread is explicitly tied to this murder-suicide. Supratik, aware of the incident even before leaving Calcutta, meets Nitai's neighbors, who explain the way in which Nitai fell into a debt spiral:

That was the time-honoured way they got Nitai. He couldn't pay the interest on the loans he took out in desperate times, loans of money and rice, and had to sell that scrap of land of his, the land that could have kept his family just about surviving until times improved. The interest accumulated. Nitai had to service it with labor on the land the moneylenders owned, but this time it was labour for which there were no wages, not even, sometimes, the subsistence meal given to the daily labourer working someone else's land. (125)

When Supratik and his comrades do take revolutionary action, they quickly target Bankim Barui,<sup>18</sup> Nitai Das's old boss and—perhaps—the landlord who refuses Nitai's request for aid in the novel's prologue, thereby precipitating the latter's choice to kill his family and himself. Reflecting on the choice, Supratik writes, "all of us knew that there was an inevitability about picking on Bankim. We went through so many planning sessions to settle on the most appropriate person to attack, but that choice had already been made for us by history" (308). In this sense, the entire third thread—including both Supratik's agricultural labor and eventual revolutionary action—are a response to Nitai's indebtedness and, in turn, the formal indebtedness of the developmental nation-state that has failed or even condemned the former peasant.

Nor is Nitai alone. Rather, the peasants and agricultural wage-laborers with whom Supratik labors inhabit a world fundamentally structured by indebtedness. Supratik meets farmers "who had no money to buy seeds for the next season, but without planting they would die, so they got deeper into debt" (172); he describes starving villagers "drowned in debt without any hope of ever surfacing; their unborn generations bonded to service those debts" (173). He tells the story of Shankar Soren, who takes out a loan from his landlord in order to buy food and medicine for his wife, takes out another in order to grow the crops necessary to service the interest on the first loan, and, upon realizing he will never be free, beats his wife in order to vent his anger and frustration at the situation. She commits suicide by throwing herself down a well (243-244). It is in this world of debt that Supratik's hosts are condemned to labor.

Supratik's participation in this labor, understood as an integral part of his revolutionary efforts, serves as perhaps the clearest entry point into the various modes of practice that shape both the form and content of the third thread. These modes—Santal ways of relating to the forest, the small-holder agriculture into which the villagers have been forced, and the anti-state revolutionary practice that Supratik and his hosts undertake—cannot be clearly disarticulated but rather exist in a complex, historically-mediated relationship with one another, which emerges in the very form of Supratik's narrative. Vitrally, each of these modes of practice emerges in interplay with—out of, through, upon—the land and the nonhuman beings who comprise it, which suddenly assert themselves not in their debt-formed, Tsingian alienation but, instead, through their affordances and limitations, their complex entanglement with forms of life, labor, and revolt, which, in turn, provide the grounds for Supratik's narrativization of his own experience.

These modes of practice and their entanglements with the nonhuman beings that comprise the land enter the text in a chaotic *mélange* that immediately collides with Supratik's urban, comfortably middle class upbringing. In his second letter, Supratik draws upon his still essentially theoretical understanding of rural revolutionary practice, noting that "[t]he jungle provided protection, obviously. In our line of work, the ability to go into hiding quickly was a matter of life and death. Literally" (62). Almost immediately, however, Supratik falls back into a more traditional landscape description, cataloguing the ways in which "Nature" changed as he and his Naxalite comrades made their way into the countryside; what is more, Supratik has no relationship with this landscape, does not know it or understand it, and one of his comrades goes so far as to remark, "We're going to be living with peasants and you'll stick out like a pylon in a flat, empty field and embarrass us all" (63). In his next letter, Supratik enters a Tagorean register

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<sup>18</sup> The name Bankim invokes Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (see chapter 1 of this dissertation), thereby aligning the target of the killing with a particular conception of the nation—a conception which, as I showed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, is intimately tied to developmental thinking.

that recalls his uncle Somnath and his companions: “The fields were parcels of straw-coloured gold where the paddy was almost ripe” (101). In Bengali literature, the comparison of ripe paddy to gold is by no means unique to Tagore; however, Supratik then notices “children, entirely hidden by the crop, running around inside” (101), and feels the overwhelming urge to go join them. This urge recalls Tagore’s line in “Āmār Sonār Bānlā” [“My Golden Bengal”], in which the poet describes the “playhouse [*khēlāghar*]” of Mother Bengal, who is herself made manifest in the ripe paddy, in the land itself (Tagore).<sup>19</sup> Supratik feels the tension between this Tagorian orientation and his mission in the countryside acutely: as Dhiren, one of his comrades, begins to hum Tagore while they contemplate “[t]he effect of moonlight on the trees and fields,” Supratik exclaims, “For god’s sake, Mao by day and Tagore by moonlight?” (N. Mukherjee 103).

Beginning in his fifth text, though, Supratik joins his hosts in labor. In these entries, Supratik offers passage after passage detailing the process of cultivating and harvesting rice, the effects of that labor on his body, and his relationship to his nonhuman surroundings. For instance, he describes the way in which

When you look at a field full of ripened grain ready to be harvested it’s a uniform brown-sand-gold colour. But as you cut with your sickle you notice that there’s still some green hiding inside, hiding within the larger brown, a few long partially green leaves, a little green fraction of a stalk. And as you cut these down, a tiny cloud of insects hiding in their massed density flies out; some wriggle away into the thickets not yet harvested, some scurry into the grass and sheaves and earth around you. And yet another thing: the sound of the paddy plants as you enter the thicket and cut them down. That rustle and rattle, much louder now, accompanied by something between the snap of an almost dry stalk and the wet snip of cutting through a twig that’s still partly green. (145-146)

This passage is particularly illustrative insofar as it directly compares the field as it is looked upon from a distance—a view that aligns with the landscape-descriptions of Somnath and his friends, as well as Supratik’s earlier impressions—to that same field encountered in the process of agricultural labor, of harvesting rice; however, it is by no means unique. Supratik goes on to describe “beating the sheaves [of rice stalks] against a sizable boulder” (146); “churning those enormous clods [of upturned earth] into looser, smaller pieces of soil” (195); and “that loamy-fresh-rotting smell” (196) that rises from the soil once the rains arrive and the feeling of the fresh mud on his feet.

The tension between this practical relationship with the land and the contemplative orientation toward the land-as-landscape by no means vanishes: describing the moment at which he sees the paddy saplings he has helped plant, Supratik writes, “I too felt like reciting the lines [of Tagore and Jibanananda Das] that had Samir’s heart, but I restrained myself. It was enough that I knew that my soul sang, I didn’t have to break into minstrelsy” (217). And yet the collision between of labor and land, on the one hand, and landscape, on the other, quickly begins to draw the two into a hybridized relationship.<sup>20</sup> Immediately after this exercise of restraint, for instance, while watching the transplanting of paddy—a process he cannot learn hands-on because there is

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<sup>19</sup> See footnote 16. The allusion to “Āmār Sonār Bānlā,”—Bangladesh’s national anthem and a hymn written during Tagore’s nationalist phase, in service of the Swadeshi movement—cements Tagore’s association with the nation-state within *The Lives of Others*.

<sup>20</sup> I am here drawing on M.M. Bakhtin’s definition of a hybrid utterance as one “that belongs... to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two ‘languages,’ two semantic and axiological belief systems” (Bakhtin 304).

no margin for error—Supratik lapses into a relationship to the transplanting women the language of which recalls landscape description: “The women worked with speed, precision and what I could only call a kind of *choreography*—the whole thing looked like a *disciplined dance*” (218, emphases mine). Labor, too, takes on the aspect of an aesthetic object to be contemplated, observed—but then, the very next sentence, “it struck me that it was probably as physically trying, bending down so that your top half made, at the waist, a variable angle between forty-five and sixty degrees with your bottom half” (218). This shift—in which Supratik seems to speak of and relate to agricultural labor and the land itself as one for whom it is simultaneously aesthetic and a lived reality—is only possible now that Supratik has engaged in agricultural labor. It is a hybridization born of practice; and in some sense, the texts of the third thread thus far come to function as a narrativization of Supratik’s shifting relations to the land, from a relation defined by the unifying, contemplative gaze of the mastering subject to one shaped as well—perhaps primarily—by the interplay of land and body.

This latter relation far exceeds a mere accounting of the physical demands of agricultural labor. Rather, this labor, as well as everyday life in the village, comes to shape Supratik’s experience in more fundamental ways. He notes, for instance, that his experience of time has been altered by his work on the land and the other activities that he and his hosts perform in order to survive. He refers to “the solid weight of time” (241): “when you let yourself down into this different stream of time, you had no choice but to align yourself to its flow” (242). This flow—which is accompanied by an alternative form of spatial reckoning—depart from abstract, calendrical time and the abstract space of cartography, emerging instead out of practical and bodily measures: time is marked with the smoking of bidis, space with paces, hands, and fingers.

There emerges here Supratik’s inculcation into what the anthropologist Tim Ingold refers to as *task-orientation*, “an orientation in which both work and time are intrinsic to the conduct of life itself, and cannot be separated or abstracted from it” (Ingold 324): in which, that is, “the experience of time is intrinsic to the performance of skilled activity” (329), such activities necessarily being social—intertwined with the presence of other living, working human beings—and ecological—entangled with and dependent upon the affordances and limitations of nonhuman beings and environments.<sup>21</sup> This latter, ecological dimension of task-orientation—which seems to correspond as well with Supratik’s newly bodily-informed relation to the land—is particularly acute in the realm of non-industrial agricultural production, in which, as Ingold puts it, “the world *opens itself out* to the traditional... farmer, in both its form and its temporal rhythms, through his or her action in it” (326, emphasis Ingold’s). This point bears emphasis: to engage in agricultural production is, by necessity, perhaps more than in any other realm of production, to rely upon and shape one’s actions in relation to the nonhuman beings and environments that make this production possible.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> A classic example of notions of time emerging in the context of action, of practice—cited by theorists such as E.P. Thompson (Thompson 58), Reinhart Koselleck (Koselleck 82-83), and Ingold himself (Ingold 325)—comes from Martin Nilsson’s work in Madagascar, which claims rice-cooking and grasshopper-frying as activities the durations of which function as units of time more generally applied (Nilsson 42). Thompson gives a number of other helpful examples as well (Thompson 58-60). For the paradigmatic discussion of the relationship between practice and the experience and conception of time—one that is foundational for Ingold—see Pierre Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* ([1972] 1977), pp. 7, 90, 105, 163-164.

<sup>22</sup> See here in particular John Berger’s “Historical Afterword to the *Into Their Labours* Trilogy” ([1992] 2016). This point has also been made repeatedly in agricultural sociology: see Susan A. Mann and James M. Dickinson’s classic “Obstacles to the Development of a Capitalist Agriculture” (1978), Nola Reinhardt and Peggy Bartlett’s “The Persistence of Family Farms in United States Agriculture” (1989), and, for this point in the South Asian context—



Task-orientation and the social experience of time to which it is tied are often understood as belonging to a pre-modern way of being opposed to—and, at least within the realm of production, largely eradicated by—the regular, abstract time of the clock, which came to govern production under industrial capitalism, just as the worker ostensibly came to be a mere appendage of industrial machinery.<sup>23</sup> While this view is perhaps overly simplistic,<sup>24</sup> task-orientation would seem to be fundamentally opposed to the abstract time of indebtedness, in which time is given form by money itself. Indeed, returning to Prathama Banerjee’s claims regarding the attempt to suture the ostensibly primitive Santals to both Bengali society and the nascent Indian nation, it was precisely an understanding of time based in—indeed, *created by*—everyday practice, by modes of both labor and storytelling, that the colonial state hoped to undermine in Santals by exposing them to exchange, money, and credit (*Politics of Time* 146-148, 184-186). Supratik’s transformation moves in the opposite direction: the abstract temporal experience of indebtedness, of his middle-class upbringing, enters into a hybridized relation with task-orientation, the temporal accompaniment to his newly bodily, practical relation to the land.

It is important to note that this is no romantic return to a world of pre-contact indigenous flourishing.<sup>25</sup> Supratik does not straightforwardly embrace the labor in which he is engaged, nor the shift in his experience of time, but rather represents it as a sort of violence. This is not only because of its difference from his upbringing, but, too, because the world that the Santal inhabit is defined by extraordinary scarcity and exploitation, transformed as it has been by their incorporation into the colonial and then postcolonial economies. Nevertheless, Supratik’s transformation lays the groundwork for his later revolutionary efforts. When Supratik and his comrades begin to take violent action, the figurative language that he uses to represent this action is revealing:

I was thinking how wrong I had been to believe that taking a man out was a matter of *swift* action, *impulsive*, done on the crest of a wave of great passion. And there I was, stalking someone, and *it felt like the growing of paddy from seed to harvest*. (N. Mukherjee 280, emphases mine)

Here, Supratik’s practical engagement with rice production bleeds into his revolutionary actions, such that he articulates the latter in the terms of the former. This figuration seems to account for both the skill required for and the temporal experience of stalking the potential target: time once again takes form in relation to the task at hand, which is made sense of in its relation to the experience of cultivation—not merely the latter’s duration or rhythms but, too, its experiential quality. Put differently, when Supratik compares stalking a target to the growing of paddy from seed to harvest, he is not merely invoking the calendrical period of such growing, but also the various tasks, intertwined with nonhuman beings, that give this period its experiential shape.

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one that gets at the way in which moneylenders often take advantage of the inherent rhythms of (peasant) agriculture—see Shahid Amin’s “Small Peasant Commodity Production and Rural Indebtedness” (1994).

<sup>23</sup> For the classic account of this process, see E.P. Thompson’s “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” (1967). For the domination of abstract time over human life as a defining feature of capitalism, see Moishe Postone’s *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (1993).

<sup>24</sup> See Ingold’s *Perception of the Environment* (2000), pp. 331-333. For work of direct relevance to my claims here, see Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000), as well as his earlier *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (1989).

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Banerjee notes that even the Santals themselves understood and “acknowledged that their past lands, their ancestral wisdom, and their earlier truthfulness were lost” (*Politics of Time* 177).

Supratik's revolutionary activities are not merely informed by his experience of cultivation, but are also take form in relation to Santal ways of relating to and dwelling in the forest. After Supratik and his comrades take action—attacking landlord-moneylenders, setting fire to “loan documents, stamp paper, lease deeds, deeds of sale” (311)—they flee into the forest, a move recalling Supratik's earlier invocation of the jungle as a source of protection. There, however, they are utterly unequipped to survive, a problem that Supratik frames in terms of time: “This is slow, concentrated time, a huge dose of the poison in one go. It'll kill us all soon” (335). Later, though, Supratik's Santal comrades teach him how to make his way in the forest, including methods of navigation, first aid, and evasion (360). While this is not enough to entirely change Supratik's now-directionless experience of time, it explicitly comes to inform his conception of the relationship between revolutionary action and forest cover.<sup>26</sup> By the time that he returns, defeated, to Calcutta, Supratik has recorded a remarkable transformation, drawing both his Santal hosts and his nonhuman surroundings into the narrative of his assault on the state and on debt both formal and literal.

### *The Nation-State on Shifting Soil*

It is in this recording, this narrating, that Mukherjee's novel offers its most effective critique of postcolonial developmental nation-state. Put differently, the novel's invocation of Supratik's transformation is not restricted to the content of his writings; rather, it also emerges in the formal qualities of the third thread, in the relationship between this thread and the first two, and in the relationship between this thread and the novel as a whole. Supratik's invocation of “the growing of paddy from seed to harvest” (280) does not merely describe his experience, but, too, the way in which it is narrativized, given (literary) form: by deferring his description of his revolutionary action, situating it as the climax of his involvement in a cycle of rice production, Supratik frames this action as the fruit of literal cultivation. Put differently, Supratik's narrative takes on a form born of a hybridization of complex, labor-mediated entanglement of human and nonhuman beings joined together in small-holder rice production, Santal knowledge of the forest, and Supratik's own transformed revolutionary actions; it is a concrete narrative response to the abstract, debt-formed narratives of the first and second threads.

Supratik's texts do not merely stand as a stable alternative interrupting the debt-saddled national narrative of the novel's first two threads, however. Rather, they are more fundamentally destabilizing, their status shifting over the course of the novel. Whereas upon their initial appearance they appear to be letters—addressed to an unknown recipient who is slowly revealed to be Purba, Somnath's widow and Supratik's aunt and love interest—by the fifth text Supratik states that he will not send the letters for risk of incrimination. And yet he does not stop writing, and at this point the letters take on a diaristic quality, albeit while still addressed toward a never-explicitly-identified Purba. Supratik later clarifies that he wrote this fifth text and those that follow—those that detail his agricultural labor and his revolutionary actions—after all of the others: while the first four were written at the time of the events they describe, those that follow are written retrospectively, in the aftermath of Supratik's flight from the villages in which he had worked, a decision that emphasizes his understanding of the fundamental connection between his

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<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the most well-known fictional representation of the relationship between Santals, forests, and revolutionary action is Mahasweta Devi's “Draupadi” (1978), widely recognized in the West after the publication of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1981 translation for *Critical Inquiry*, later republished in *In Other Worlds* (1987).

agricultural labor and his revolutionary action. Finally, in the days before Supratik's arrest, he fears that the letters might function as potential evidence, particularly insofar as they imply Purba's knowledge of his actions; and, suddenly, the reader is confronted with the fact that Supratik's writings are objects on the diegetic level of the text.

This metaleptic moment extends the interaction between the novel's practice-formed third thread and its debt-formed first and second threads beyond mere interruption and juxtaposition, drawing the countryside into the world of middle-class Calcutta. Supratik's writings function as a constituent part of the world of the text that could, at any time, undermine this world with their vision of intertwined agricultural and revolutionary practice unavoidably entangled with a scape-less land: that could, if they were to come to light, expose the fractures in the seemingly unified vision of the modern, developmental nation-state by provoking it into an orgy of state violence that lays bare its fundamental failings. This is to say that Supratik's writings at once represent—in both senses of that word—that part of the population whose incorporation into the modernizing project of the developmental nation-state forever reproduces that nation-state's distance from modernity *and* demonstrate the way in which this same part maintains the possibility of articulating and agonistically asserting alternative modes of being. These alternatives are not, however, simple, unchanging, premodern or indigenous lifeworlds but, rather, are ever-shifting, complex articulations of everyday life, labor, and revolutionary struggle—articulations that are, in some sense, produced by the efforts of the developmental nation-state itself.

And yet even though in the end Supratik is arrested, confronted with the extensive knowledge the police have long had of his movements and activities, tortured, and, finally, summarily executed, it is clear that the writings themselves are never discovered. The hybridization of Santal knowledge, agricultural practice, and revolutionary violence remains a potent and potentially disruptive force. Supratik offers an articulation of this force as he faces his death:

Now he has a gratuitous vision, no longer yoked to the dry words of propaganda, but something akin to a thing half-dreamed, half-experienced in the raggedy borders between sleep and waking – a vision of a near future, maybe fifty years, maybe seventy-five, a hundred, when the seeds that he and his kind have been busy sowing have grown, hidden from the human eye, or denied until unignorable, into forest cover for most of the country. It brings tears to his eyes and, for the first time in his life, he cries moved by the possibility of fulfilment; not tears of joy, but a kind of proleptic hopefulness. (489)

This passage, and particularly its reference to “seeds” and “sowing,” must be read with Supratik's hybrid revolutionary practice in mind. One might note, for instance, the description of revolutionary action as sowing the seeds of a forest—a somewhat peculiar inflection of more common depictions of revolutionary action as sowing the seeds of food crops.<sup>27</sup> For all Supratik's regression upon his return to Calcutta—most significantly, his collapse back into the calculative rationality of the debt form in his choice to frame Madan—the passage contains no straightforward Maoist vision, does not simply picture the fall of the state or the encirclement of the cities by revolutionary peasants, but rather calls to mind a revolution at the heart of which lie the practice of small-scale agriculture and the forest-reading practices of the Santal: a dwelling in

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<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's classic *A Grain of Wheat* ([1967] 2012).

the land. More importantly, Supratik's "proleptic hopefulness," whatever vision it encompasses, points beyond the constraints of development: beyond the debt-form itself.

The novel does not merely point to the source of this proleptic hopefulness: rather, as stated, it *relies on this source for its very being*. This is to say that the interruptive, destabilizing force of Supratik's writings, their metaleptic entrance into the world born of the novel's climactic interweaving of its three threads, cannot be disentangled from the text as a unified aesthetic object. The formally indebted postcolonial developmental nation-state does not merely defer, repeatedly, its attainment of modernity: its very existence relies upon this deferral and the possibilities it inadvertently creates. These possibilities manifest in modes of being and, in turn, modes of narrativization that are all the more open to alternate futures—futures that are not determined by the calculated, reasoned approach toward the most efficient means of paying off the loan of modernity—because they are intertwined with concretized forms of temporal experience and human-nonhuman relation.

It is important to emphasize, again, that I am not advocating a return to or idealization of peasant agriculture, which by all accounts has historically been defined by back-breaking and often mind-numbing labor. There is also reason to be suspicious of any attempt to mobilize the Santal as, as Prathama Banerjee puts it, the ostensible "perfect agent" (*Politics of Time* vii) for militant or anti-state struggle. There are, finally, many reasons to be leery of the Naxalite Revolt and the broader Naxalite movement, including the aforementioned mobilization of Santals and adivasis more generally for goals that these groups often did not and do not share ("Adivasis, Naxalites and Indian Democracy" 3309). Still, it seems to me that the Naxalite movement, at least as made manifest in Mukherjee's novel, seems to offer a sort of edge case for two broader phenomena: the way in which the formal borrowing of modernity and the ostensibly unified subject of the Indian nation-state produce their own alternatives, alternatives that often manifest in far more modest forms of intervention than the yet-ongoing activity of Maoist guerrillas<sup>28</sup>; and, vitally, the way in which these alternatives emerge in relation to the irrepressible materiality of (non)human beings, which often assert themselves, in their very modes of being, against any attempt to subordinate reality to the exigencies of economic development as directed toward capitalist modernity.

This latter move, of course, continues the project of the first two chapters of this dissertation, in which Rabindranath Tagore and Bhabani Bhattacharya proffered similar reimaginings based in the rhythms of the land and the self-consuming, enduring human body, respectively. However, whereas these earlier chapters, in part because of their focus on the period prior to independence, posited this materiality, these beings, as a source of political community that might have stood in the place of the developmental nation-state, I have turned in this chapter to those forms of community that inhere within this nation-state. I will continue this project in the next chapter, where I turn at last to the question of the agricultural production process itself.

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<sup>28</sup> For an excellent recent exploration of the war between the Indian state and these guerrillas, see Nandini Sundar's *The Burning Forest* (2016).

## Chapter 4: Notes on Decomposition

He says, “How did this papaya tree get so tall? Huh, Babu?”

The BDO smiles in deep self-satisfaction. He says, “We got that area in the office compound later. During the summer they killed mad dogs and dumped them in a hole there. If they get fertilizer made of rotten bones and flesh [*pacā hār mānsēr sār*], won’t trees get big?”

“Is that good fertilizer?”

“Very good. Don’t flowers jump up on the fresh graves of poor Muslims?”

- Mahasweta Devi, “Bichan [Seed],” p. 148

In the summer of 1965, ecstatic at the early success of the new high-yielding wheat he had developed in Mexico, Norman Borlaug touted his ambitions for Indian agriculture. The soon-to-be father of the Green Revolution<sup>1</sup> wrote to J.A. Pelissier, the Head of the Product Research Division of the ESSO Research and Engineering Company, declaring, “We want to kill old ideas and methods and substitute dynamic new methods in one stroke. We want these first semi-commercial demonstrations to be so shocking that they will destroy old ideas of wheat production at one sweep.” This “real revolution” was to come not just by way of the seeds that Borlaug had developed but also through “the application of fertilizer on an enormous scale,” resulting in such massively increased yields that Third World farmers would soon be “clamoring for fertilizers” (Borlaug quoted in M. Saha 146-147). These new technologies—high-yielding seed varieties (HYVs) in coordination with chemical fertilizers and pesticides, irrigation, and machinery—would eliminate hunger, lessen inequality, and remake the very face of the earth.<sup>2</sup>

Implicit in Borlaug’s claim was a belief in the capacity of seed technologies and their concomitants to transform the people who used them. Indian cultivators—figured from the colonial period as backward, traditional, and resistant to change—would, upon witnessing the sheer productive power of these technologies, realize the error of their previous ways and embrace a rational, capital-intensive form of agricultural production. Borlaug’s attitude was widely shared amongst Indian technocratic elites who, less sanguine about cultivators’ receptivity to the new technologies, emphasized the importance of agricultural extension as a means to overcome reservations. The combination of technological spectacle and patient, top-down education, they reasoned, would produce farmers enthusiastic not just about the benefits of scientific agriculture but also about a model of production centered on commodities rather than subsistence (Parayil 738, 753; Saha and Schmalzer 159-161).<sup>3</sup>

Thus both Borlaug and his Indian counterparts imagined a way in which new agricultural technologies would raise up the seed of rationality that lay dormant in Indian cultivators, giving rise to something like *homo economicus*: calculating, self-interested man. Vinay Gidwani, writing about large-scale irrigation projects in Gujarat, describes the way in which development interests attempt to instantiate this form of subjectivity by putting in place “an infrastructure—a

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<sup>1</sup> By *Green Revolution*, I am referring to the spread of high-yielding seed varieties, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, improved irrigation, and mechanization in the so-called Third World in the late 1960s.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of the extraordinary ambitions of the Green Revolution, see Norman Borlaug’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, “The Green Revolution, Peace, and Humanity” ([1970] 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Even M.S. Swaminathan, one of the primary architects of the Green Revolution in India, later implied that the efforts of the late 1960s and early 1970s had been commodity-centered to a fault (Swaminathan 16).

networked collective of humans and nonhumans—within which certain kinds of *economic* conducts now become intelligible, and compelling” (Gidwani 100, emphasis Gidwani’s). During the Green Revolution, this infrastructure took the form of what I will call, following James C. Scott, high-modernist agricultural commodity production.<sup>4</sup> By providing cultivators with imported technologies intended to displace, as much as possible, the preexisting, local conditions of the cultivation process, as well as with highly regulated expert advice as to how to implement these technologies, the Indian state and its U.S. American benefactors would shape these cultivators into “real” farmers, thereby extending the commodity form and the capitalist mode of production more broadly into the hitherto recalcitrant Indian countryside.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I will turn to moments in which this process skews in unexpected directions: that is, to the peculiar possibilities that emerge in the face of high-modernist agricultural commodity production. Despite the Green Revolution’s productive success, many observers have pointed out its necessarily incomplete transformation of cultivators’ attitudes toward their profession and their place in broader economic and social structures.<sup>6</sup> This is to say nothing of the various forms of resistance to the new technologies, whether on the part of agriculturalists or socially- and ecologically-minded critics.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the novel technologies enabled forms of political action on the part of newly empowered well-off peasants who, perhaps counterintuitively, articulated alternative conceptions of development and modernity.<sup>8</sup> Here, I approach these questions from an alternative angle: form. As I will demonstrate, high-modernist agricultural commodity production is typified by a grasping-together of elements into a bounded, meaningfully ordered spatial and temporal whole: it is a form animated by its anticipated actualization in a product or products intended for money-mediated exchange. This form is particularly fraught, however, insofar as the elements whose relations it composes include not only potentially recalcitrant human laborers but also a complex mix of local nonhuman organic beings and processes, as well as imported industrial inputs meant to replace these beings and processes. This is to say that high-modernist agricultural commodity production, while it mimics industrial commodity production in its normative and formal ambitions, is significantly more vulnerable to cracks, fractures, the breaking of bonds—and, in turn, to the generation of

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<sup>4</sup> See Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* (1998), where he describes such agriculture as being based upon “the administrative ordering of nature and society” (88) and the subsequent “*radical* simplification” (262, emphasis Scott’s) of the complexities of local conditions.

<sup>5</sup> There is a resonance between this drive and the current rhetoric glorifying entrepreneurship in India, albeit with certain interesting slippages that are the subject of a different paper. For an illuminating study of this rhetoric and its connection to development practice, see Lilly Irani’s *Chasing Innovation* (2019).

<sup>6</sup> For perhaps the best-known example of such work, see Akhil Gupta’s *Postcolonial Developments* (1998), especially the introduction and chapters 3 and 4. For broader claims regarding the necessarily incomplete incorporation of workers into a regime of abstract labor—and the contentious and ongoing presence of modes of being that are not incorporated into the logic of capitalist production—see Dipesh Chakrabarty’s work, both his earlier *Rethinking Working-Class History* (1989), p. 69, and *Provincializing Europe* (2000), pp. 66-71; Vinay Gidwani’s *Capital, Interrupted* (2008), pp. 108-109, 132, 135-136; and, for a compelling critique of Chakrabarty that nevertheless maintains the impossibility of real subsumption, Harry Harootunian’s *Marx after Marx* (2015), especially pp. 227-234.

<sup>7</sup> On the part of agriculturalists, this resistance most famously took the everyday forms that James C. Scott describes in *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), especially chapters 2 and 3. As to social and environmental thinkers, the examples are legion. Insofar as these strands can be differentiated, see, for the former, the work of Biplab Dasgupta, especially *Agrarian Change and the New Technology in India* (1977); for the latter, Vandana Shiva’s *The Violence of the Green Revolution* ([1989] 2016) is perhaps the best-known example.

<sup>8</sup> See Gupta’s *Postcolonial Developments*, pp. 74-91.

alternative formal arrangements animated by radically different ends. This vulnerability is all the more acute when such production enters into situations the power dynamics of which are determined not merely by access to resources, as so many of the proponents of the Green Revolution seemed to believe, but rather by firmly entrenched hierarchies based on caste, class, and religion. And yet this vulnerability also enfolds various potentials, offering up strange visions of agricultural production—and, here, of labor, of nonhuman entities and processes, of the future and of death.

I come to these visions by way of a reading of Mahasweta Devi's remarkable 1979 short story "Bichan [Seed]." In recent years, Devi's work has become an important touchstone for the emerging field of postcolonial ecocriticism<sup>9</sup>; "Bichan," however, has largely escaped notice.<sup>10</sup> And yet the story, which on its face deals primarily with the dispute between Dulan, a low-caste adivasi<sup>11</sup> laborer, and Lachman Siñ, a local landlord, turns our attention to the production process itself. After Lachman forces upon Dulan a gift of infertile land, the latter, despite the fact that he cannot cultivate his new plot, uses his ownership to wrangle money, fertilizer, and seeds from the local Block Development Officer (BDO). He then sells the fertilizer and eats the seeds. Meanwhile, Lachman uses Dulan's land to bury the bodies of agricultural laborers whom he has murdered after they agitated for higher wages. Eventually, Lachman kills Dulan's son, Dhātuṃya; grief-stricken, Dulan sows his corpse-fertilized field, killing Lachman when the latter arrives to complain. Dulan then offers his crop to his community on the condition that it is used entirely as seed, such that Dhātuṃya and the others will live on. As Dulan puts it in the story's ambiguous final lines: "Seed means staying alive [*Bichan mānē bēcē thākā*]" ("Bichan" 163).

Out of this articulation of the transformative promises of development, on the one hand, and the realities of caste- and class-exploitation in the countryside, on the other, "Bichan" provides a critique of both. In his struggle to survive, Dulan makes use of the ostensibly transformative resources of agricultural development even without being able to cultivate the land; as a result, the form of high-modernist agricultural commodity production breaks down, and the elements that this form grasps together—not just labor and the means of production, but the complex, underlying social, material, and ecological relations as well—break apart, become visible.<sup>12</sup> These elements, made strange in their isolation, manifest ironically. Dulan's ownership of the plot serves as a new means by which Lachman inflicts violence on him and his

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance David Farrier's "Disaster's Gift: Anthropocene and Capitalocene Temporalities in Mahasweta Devi's Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha" (2016), as well as Jennifer Wenzel's reading of Devi's "Dhowli" in Chapter 3 of *The Disposition of Nature* (2020). For an earlier ecocritical engagement, see Lawrence Buell's mention of "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha" in *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), pp. 230-234. See as well Spivak's reading of "Pterodactyl" in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), pp. 140-146.

<sup>10</sup> Largely, but not entirely. See, for instance, Chapter 13.1 of Kamala Joyce Platt's *Environmental Justice Poetics* (2023), which thinks Devi and Vandana Shiva together, as well as Mary Louisa Cappelli's brief engagement with the story in "Haunted Landscapes" (2023), pp. 179-181.

<sup>11</sup> While Dulan is an adivasi, he consistently identifies himself by way of his caste—"I'm low caste [*chota jāī*]" ("Bichan" 138)—which he and the other characters understand as aligned with the Dalits amongst whom he lives. Likewise, the struggles that the story describes are articulated primarily in terms of caste, which is why the current chapter proceeds with its focus on the effects of caste hierarchy. This haziness is the product of the complex relationship between caste and tribal status in South Asia, the boundary between which, as Prathama Banerjee notes, is shifting and porous, although it has nevertheless been highly consequential for the different forms of political action that Dalits and adivasis have pursued ("Writing the Adivasi" 134-140).

<sup>12</sup> Here I am thinking with Marx's concept of commodity fetishism—see *Capital Volume I* ([1867] 1976), pp. 163-177. There is a sense in which one could take "Bichan" as a de-fetishization of the agricultural commodity in the specific context of southeast Bihar (current-day Jharkhand) in the late 1970s. As I will demonstrate, however, Devi's story offers far more than any mere shedding of light.

community; unable to cultivate his plot, Dulan must use it to bury his slain kinsmen and then pass his nights keeping watch over their bodies; technical inputs, despite being decoupled from their place in the production process, nevertheless provide means of subsistence for Dulan's family. In short, the plot of land, divorced from its productive function, becomes both a source of resources, of life, and a site for the concealment of dead bodies, of "rotting bones and flesh" (148): at once development's dream and its nightmare.

By way of its ironic inversions, then, "Bichan" stages the *decomposition* of the transformed processes of cultivation that the Green Revolution envisioned. Confronting forms of violence and hierarchy, as well as attitudes toward labor and subsistence, that are not amenable to its goals of commodity production and exchange, high-modernist agricultural commodity production quickly goes to rot. This decomposition proceeds not only spatially—decoupling the various parts of the cultivation process—but temporally as well. That is to say, Devi's text likewise stages the decomposition of the grasping-together, the composition, that gathers high-modernist agricultural commodity production into an ostensibly unblemished temporal unity. This mode of decomposition, manifest in the narrative of "Bichan" itself, finds expression both in Dulan's two uses of seeds and in the land itself, in Dulan's plot: as high-modernist agriculture decomposes, it is the materiality of the land—or, more accurately, the decomposing human bodies hidden within it—that keeps time, striving with time as marked by the actions of the Indian state and by the capitalist production of Lachman Singh. The plot—Dulan's land, but, too, the emplotment<sup>13</sup> of events in "Bichan"—records past violence and, in the end, strains toward a boundless future.

Indeed, for my reading, as for "Bichan," decomposition is not the end. The corpse of high-modernist agricultural commodity production leaves us with very good fertilizer.<sup>14</sup> Put differently, Devi's text stages not only decomposition but, too, a re-enlivening, a new vision for the place of cultivation within and against the conditions of the post-Green Revolution Indian countryside. Dulan's actions, in large part born of the violence he faces from the Brahmanical order, push the Marxist categories by which I undertake my initial critique to their limits—and, perhaps, beyond.<sup>15</sup> The bodies of the oppressed—of "mad dogs" and "poor Muslims" (148), and, most importantly, of the murdered Dalit and adivasi laborers whom Lachman buries in Dulan's plot—become entangled with nonhuman entities, erupt through the gaps in the high-modernist production process and, in the end, form the literal ground for new conceptions of labor, new relations with nonhuman entities, and a new understanding of what agriculture can be in the life of an oppressed community.

I begin with a discussion of the story's representation of the (non-)production process, with special attention to the way in which the seeming gifts of development, in encountering the

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<sup>13</sup> I borrow this term from Paul Ricoeur, who bases it on a reading of Aristotle's *muthos*: emplotment, for Ricoeur, is "the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession," organizing events into "an intelligible whole, of a sort such that we can always ask what is the 'thought' of this story" (Ricoeur 65). There is obvious resonance here with the work of Frank Kermode, which I discussed in my introduction and to which I will return shortly; indeed, Ricoeur is explicitly in conversation with Kermode here (67).

<sup>14</sup> There is perhaps a resemblance here to the methods of analysis that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proposes in her well-known "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay Is about You" in *Touching Feeling* (2003): specifically, undertaking critique with the ultimate goal of restoring meaning to the text.

<sup>15</sup> In my attention to this extension of Marx's thought I am drawing, albeit obliquely, on recent Afropessimist work—for example, Frank Wilderson III's exploration of the insufficiency of Gramsci's conception of hegemony in his essay "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" (2003).



sheer violence of caste-hierarchy, result in an intensification of alienation beyond the boundaries of the category itself. This intensification lays the basis for my investigation of the way in which “Bichan” decomposes the form of high-modernist agricultural commodity production, to which I turn next. I pay close attention to Dulan’s choice to use seeds as means of consumption and then reincarnation rather than in their typical function within the sociotechnical systems upon which high-modernist agricultural commodity production relies. Here, I outline the new visions of the future and death that arise from Dulan’s actions. I conclude with scattered thoughts on the way in which Devi’s text offers an opportunity to reexamine the relationship between labor and political action.

### Crack-Up

“...if agriculture itself rests on scientific activities – if it requires machinery, chemical fertilizer acquired through exchange, seeds from distant countries etc., and if rural, patriarchal manufacture has already vanished... then the machine-making factory, external trade, crafts etc. appear as *needs* for agriculture... agriculture no longer finds the natural conditions of its own production within itself, naturally, arisen, spontaneous, and ready to hand, but these exist as an independent industry separate from it – and, with this separateness the whole complex set of interconnections in which this industry exists is drawn into the sphere of the conditions of agricultural production...”

- Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 527, emphasis Marx’s

The separation of agricultural inputs from the agricultural production process did not begin with agricultural development, whether one takes development in a narrow sense—a phenomenon that emerged in the decade after the Second World War, centered on drawing non-Western countries into capitalist modernity—or more broadly—as stretching back to the early days of the colonial encounter.<sup>16</sup> However, the type of scientific agriculture to which Marx refers in this section’s epigraph, in which the large-scale scientific development and industrial manufacture of inputs entangle agriculture with various external industries, is relatively recent, coming into widespread prevalence in the early- to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Kloppenburger 66-67; Mau 261-266; Russel and Williams 261-263). As Jack Ralph Kloppenburger Jr. notes, this shift functions as a form of primitive accumulation (Kloppenburger 10); it is also a somewhat peculiar form, as it is possible for cultivators to lose control over their means of production even as they—at least sometimes—keep hold over the land itself.<sup>17</sup> Inputs, available as commodities by means of the market, replace means of production previously (re)produced, at least in part, by local organic processes.

In the decades after Indian independence, this process of externalization was incorporated into the developmental mission of the postcolonial nation-state, particularly by way of rational planning processes imagined to be outside the political realm in which power—rural power in

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<sup>16</sup> For instances of the former view of development, see Arturo Escobar’s “Power and Visibility: Development and the Invention and Management of the Third World” (1988) and *Encountering Development* (1995); for the latter, see the “Visions of Development” section in the first chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>17</sup> For more on this point, see Richard Lewontin and Jean-Pierre Berlan’s “Technology, Research, and the Penetration of Capital: The Case of U.S. Agriculture” (1986).

particular—was contested (*The Nation and Its Fragments* 200-219).<sup>18</sup> Of particular note in this respect was the Intensive Agricultural District Programme (IADP), introduced in 1961 at the recommendation and with the support of the Ford Foundation. The IADP dispersed a package of seeds, fertilizers, insecticides, and extension advice to cultivators in areas with improved irrigation facilities (Desai A83).<sup>19</sup> The pursuit of increased yields, primarily intended for the market, was to proceed by way of technological change and access to expertise; at the same time, however, these increased yields were decoupled from any concerted thinking regarding power relations in the countryside, which the Indian state was at pains to avoid disturbing (*The Nation and Its Fragments* 214).

Despite its ostensible decoupling from the realm of the political, though, the IADP, as well as the Green Revolution that followed on its heels, could not help but exert an important impact on rural life and production in the areas that they reached. A number of scholars have explored the broader sociological effects of these programs, the Green Revolution in particular, and I will not continue that work here, at least not in the same idiom.<sup>20</sup> Rather, my concern in this section is with the way in which the peculiar form of primitive accumulation proper to agriculture reliant on manufactured inputs alienates agriculturalists from their species-being. This is not to say that the other forms of alienation that Marx describes in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*—alienation from the product of labor, from the labor process and thus from the laborer themselves, and from other laborers and human beings—are either absent from high-modernist agricultural commodity production or unworthy of greater attention; quite the opposite. Yet it is Marx's conception of species-being, of alienation therefrom, that plays a vital if ultimately insufficient part in my decomposition of high-modernist agricultural commodity production and, in turn, the cultivation of a new relationship to labor, to the future, to life and to death.

The young Marx conceived of human species-being in relation to man's<sup>21</sup> relationship with nature, of which, he claimed, man is a part. Specifically, man makes "the whole of nature his *inorganic* body, (1) as a direct means of life and (2) as the matter, the object and the tool of his life activity" (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (EPM)* 328, emphasis Marx's). In *Capital*, Marx uses the terminology of *metabolism* to describe this relationship: labor, he writes, "is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction [*Stoffwechsel*] between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence" (*Capital Volume I* 290). What differentiates man from animals is, firstly, the scope of his activity—he is "more universal than animals, [and] so too is the area of inorganic nature from which he lives more universal" (*EPM* 327); and, secondly, the way in which man undertakes "free conscious activity"

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<sup>18</sup> Here, one might think as well of James Ferguson's excellent *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994), which describes the way in which development work in Lesotho simultaneously expanded and entrenched state power even as it concealed its own political ramifications (Ferguson xv, 20-21). See as well Tania Murray Li's *The Will to Improve* (2007).

<sup>19</sup> The program failed to achieve its goal—increased agricultural productivity—in no small part because traditional wheat and rice varieties were not capable of handling mineral fertilizers and improved irrigation infrastructure: the tall, thin crops often lodged, tipping over under their own weight (Swaminathan 2). Avoiding this issue was one of the primary goals of the development of the dwarf varieties central to the Green Revolution.

<sup>20</sup> See, in particular, Francine Frankel's *India's Green Revolution* (1972), Keith Griffin's *The Political Economy of Agrarian Change* (1979), and Andrew Pearse's *Seeds of Plenty, Seeds of Want* (1980), as well as the aforementioned works by Biplab Dasgupta (1977), Akhil Gupta (1998), Vandana Shiva ([1989] 2016). For a more celebratory view of the social impacts of the Green Revolution, see Govindan Parayil's "The Green Revolution in India" (1992).

<sup>21</sup> I am briefly adopting the terminology of "man" here in keeping with Marx, for the purposes of a more precise exegesis.

(328), activity that transcends the mere satisfaction of needs and that transforms inorganic nature in relation to this activity, such that man recognizes and contemplates himself and his activity in the external world. When labor is commodified and transformed into a mere means of individual subsistence, when man confronts the object of his production as something that does not belong to him, he is alienated from his species-being: from “both nature and his own intellectual species-powers... from his own body, from nature as it exists outside him, from his spiritual essence, his *human* essence” (329, emphasis Marx’s).

When oriented toward commodity production, package programs effect such alienation in a profound way. This profundity is especially notable because these programs are applied in the context of agriculture, a realm of production which has historically proved resistant to the penetration of capitalist relations of production and in which human interaction with nonhuman nature is particularly visible. Package programs do not just attempt to shape cultivators into capitalist farmers and, in consolidating land and capital, drive many subsistence cultivators into agricultural wage labor; rather, they also fundamentally transform the production process itself. The rigorously prescribed forms of production proper to package programs, in which specific combinations of seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides are required and in which the expertise of extension workers replaces the practical knowledge of cultivators themselves,<sup>22</sup> create a situation in which cultivators’ relationships to their land, to their specific conditions, are made subordinate to the demands of the package. As a result, the artistry and improvisation of cultivation is reduced to a mechanical means by which the cultivator supports their individual existence.<sup>23</sup>

It is into this complex situation that Devi’s Dulan steps, an occasional laborer on Lachman’s manufactured-input-fed fields. Dulan takes this step, however, bearing the weight of the caste-hierarchy, which imposes on him a type of abjection that cannot be reduced to political economic factors. This weight, this abjection, leads Dulan into a situation in which he experiences a highly specific form of alienation, what is at first glance a hyper-intensified alienation from species-being; and, in turn, it is this situation and Dulan’s response to it that stage the decomposition of high-modernist agricultural commodity production.

From the first Dulan is caught between the promises of agricultural development and his caste- and class-positions. His land is a gift from Lachman Siñ, made at the urging of Sarvodaya activists who are part of the Bhoodan movement of voluntary land reform. This movement, particularly in its relationship with the Gramdan movement for co-operative ownership of the land, was endorsed by India’s Second Five-Year Plan as an important contribution to development of village economies (Mandal 839). However, Devi’s narrator acerbically describes the “many uses” (“Bichan” 136) of such gifting, both for the Sarvodaya leaders—avoiding mockery—and for exploitative landlords—demonstrating their beneficence both to the

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<sup>22</sup> For James C. Scott’s illuminating exploration of this latter shift, see Chapter 9 of *Seeing Like a State*. Here, Scott frames the collision as between “the necessarily thin, schematic model of social organization and production animating... planning” (*Seeing* 310), on the one hand, and *mētis*, “practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment” (313), on the other. See as well Timothy Mitchell’s excellent *Colonising Egypt* (1988) for a theoretical discussion of this dynamic in the (post)colonial context.

<sup>23</sup> It is important to stress that I am here describing a *possibility* or *tendency* for package programs to bring this new element to alienation in agricultural production. Returning once again to Gupta (1998), cultivators rarely if ever applied package programs mechanically or unthinkingly. Rather, practical knowledge remained and remains the ghost in the machine of high-modernist agriculture.

government and their tenants.<sup>24</sup> Not only is Dulan’s new land barren, but it also quickly becomes a means by which Lachman is able to safeguard his own power in the region, hiding the bodies of those amongst his agricultural workers who are bold enough to defy him. Particularly notable is the way in which Lachman uses the land to conceal corpses when the new, idealistic, possibly “leftist [*bāmpanthī*]” (145) Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) attempts to prosecute the landlord for killing workers who demanded their legal wage: the gift of land, ostensibly a part of village development, ironically serves to arrest efforts toward the reform of power relations in the countryside. At the same time, it illustrates a broader, tacit alignment between the powers of the state and the bearers of capital and caste-privilege.

For Dulan himself, the land becomes a site of labor despite its lack of cultivability. After Lachman burns a neighborhood that houses resisting workers and for the first time forces Dulan to bury the victims in his plot, he insists that Dulan keep a nightly watch over the bodies in order to prevent wild animals from digging them up. The text frames this dynamic in specifically caste-based terms:

Sometimes one has to explain to the Harijans<sup>25</sup> and untouchables, casting fire and the screams of the dying into the sky, that laws, the appointment of officers, and constitutional proclamations are nothing—Rajputs stay Rajputs, brāhmaṇs stay brāhmaṇs, Dusād-Cāmār-Gaṅju-Dhobi stay below brāhmaṇ-kāyastha-Rajput-bhūihār-kurmi. In certain places the Rajput or brāhmaṇ or kāyastha or bhūihār or yadāb or kurmi can be as poor or ever poorer than the Harijans. But they are not thrown into the glowing flames on account of their caste [*jāt*]. (144)

Caste and economic class are made distinct, and Dulan’s trauma and subsequent labor manifest primarily as a mark of the former.<sup>26</sup> Even despite the fact that he cannot cultivate—both due to the land’s infertility and, after the first burials, because Lachman forbids it—Dulan must, as a function of his caste and Lachman’s power over him, labor over his plot. Indeed, the text insists upon both the everydayness of Dulan’s keeping-watch and emphasizes that, while much of the rest of the outcaste community is harvesting Lachman’s crop, Dulan remains with his land.

Dulan’s new-found role as gravedigger and keeper of the dead manifests as an extraordinary intensification of the alienation more typical of an agricultural wage-laborer, even beyond the boundaries of the category itself. Indeed, it is a darkened mirror of the labor of cultivation. Dulan is forced to bury the bodies of his compatriots, to feed his plot with corpses rather than manufactured inputs, all in order to help his landlord avoid prosecution. In this sense, he does not merely lack the capacity to objectify his species-life in tilled soil and crops, does not merely confront external nature, his inorganic body, as a being that is alien. Rather, Dulan is forced to labor simply to stave off the imminent threat of violence and death, even as this labor perpetuates the conditions that expose him to such violence and death: the conditions that leave

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<sup>24</sup> This type of aside is not uncommon in Devi’s work, as narrators often undertake a sort of historical and political economic analysis, especially on matters of class and caste relations. There is visible influence here from the work of Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, whom Devi openly admires. See Bandopadhyay’s novel *Pañchagrām* (1944) for an example.

<sup>25</sup> A Gandhian term for Dalits meaning “children of God.” Largely rejected amongst Dalits, in part because it subsumes them within the same Brahmanical order within which they are so despised.

<sup>26</sup> See footnote 11. The inclusion of Gaṅju—Dulan’s surname and an adivasi group—among Dusād, Cāmār, and Dhobi—all Dalits—demonstrates the way in which Dalits and adivasis are subjected to the violence of caste-hierarchy in a largely indistinguishable manner within the world of “Bichan.”

him open to the possibility of being “thrown into the glowing flames” (144) or shot down in the fields, and, perhaps, buried in this very plot. As the text puts it, Dulan buries the bodies “at the point of Lachman’s gun” and agrees to keep watch “in the urge to stay alive [*bēcē thākā*]” (143). Thus Dulan’s labor on his plot does not even rise to the level of subsistence—digging, keeping watch, he neither produces food nor earns a wage—but only to that of what I will here call *weathering*, the warding-off of the threat of death that does not address the conditions that produce this threat. Dulan’s weathering is particular ironic insofar as it participates in *reproducing* these conditions.

And yet, in the midst of this weathering, Dulan finds ways to mobilize his inability to cultivate to his own benefit. Even as his plot becomes a site of concealment for corpses, so too—once it has been abstracted into the form of private property, concealed behind “deed-documents [*dalil-pattar*]” (137)—does it become a source of resources. Dulan uses the prejudices of caste to his advantage, convincing Lachman to advocate on his behalf by telling the landlord that the new BDO is a *kāyastha* and looks down on Rajputs. Lachman’s influence, especially as manifest in his well-known capacity for violence, convinces the BDO to supply Dulan with seeds and fertilizer, as well as money to buy a plough and bullocks on installments (138-139). It is here that “Bichan” most clearly stages the spatial decomposition of high-modernist agricultural commodity production: in the absence of cultivation, seeds, fertilizers, and plough and bullocks are severed from one another. Fertilizer remains a commodity, as Dulan collects it and then sells it in the very town in which the BDO lives; the plough and bullocks are illusions, as Dulan repeatedly borrows his neighbor’s to prove that he has made the investment and then, returning them, claims that the bullock has died and he needs more money; and, most importantly, Dulan takes the seeds home and eats them, bypassing their intended productive function and consuming them instead.

Here, then, is another ironic take on development practice: if land ownership places Dulan in a position in which he at once weathers and perpetuates Lachman’s capacity to inflict violence, his inability to cultivate and his identity as a low-caste *adivasi* enable him to render his land, manifest as a few pieces of paper, useful. Indeed, Dulan resembles, at moments, the *homo economicus* of which development advocates dream. And yet Dulan does not rationally calculate his way toward profit, but rather, by way of cunning, manages to wrest a part of his subsistence from the postcolonial developmental state. Still, in the end, Dulan’s cunning cannot overcome the structural inequalities of caste and class; he cannot even obtain the barest subsistence from his grift. Here, the metaphors by which the text describes Dulan’s plot are telling. First, it is *Kāmdhēnu*, the mother of all cows and the source of all prosperity, the one “from whom all that is desired is drawn” (Biardeau 99). But the narrator’s description is mocking: “Like *Kāmdhēnu*, the land continued to give Dulan about 600 rupees per year” (“Bichan” 140). These earnings are nowhere close to enough to support Dulan’s family, and he and his sons continue to work in Lachman’s fields, to forage, and to perform various other forms of labor. At the same time, *Kāmdhēnu* is deeply associated with the Brahmanical order—that is, with caste hierarchy. The invocation of *Kāmdhēnu* thus signifies at once Dulan’s ability to invert the aligned forces of caste, capital and the state, as well as the limits of this ability, the way in which he necessarily runs up against his own subalternity.

The text also describes Dulan’s plot by reference to Dulan himself. After Dulan brings home his first haul of seeds, his wife—to whom the narrator refers as “*Dhātuṃyā*’s mother”—remarks on the amount and asks him how much land he has. Dulan responds,

“That land [*jami*] can’t be measured.”

“What?”

“Our hunger [*khidē*]. Is there a measurement of hunger? The land of the stomach [*pētēr jamin*] keeps increasing!” (139)

This shift from the land to hunger finds a parallel in the narrator’s description of the way in which Dulan “has to keep two corpses hidden under his mind. The corpses continue to rot under his mind. Planted under the soil of the land, Karañ and Bulāki slowly shed the weight of their flesh, become weightless. In the realm of Dulan’s mind the weight of the bodies increases” (144). Once again, the land’s two functions within the text as a site of concealment for bodies—of caste- and class-based violence—and as a non-productive source of income vie with one another, and the latter is insufficient to the demands of the former. Indeed, as Lachman hides more bodies, Dulan “quarrels and takes more seeds from the BD Office” (150); however, these seeds, immediately consumed, will never be enough.

Thus the dreams of development shatter on contact with power structures in the countryside. Land ownership intensifies Dulan’s abjection; and, as Dulan feeds the land dead bodies instead of fertilizer and seeds, these latter manufactured inputs break apart from one another and reveal themselves as mere commodities, mere exchange-value. In the end, though, Dulan overcomes these constraints by sowing the seeds he has received from the BDO in soil fertilized by the decomposing corpses over which he has been forced to watch. Indeed, it is in this overcoming, born of the subterranean actions of Dulan, his community, and his plot, that “Bichan” completes the decomposition of the temporal form of high-modernist agricultural commodity production, as well as the conceptions of time and the future onto which this form opens; and, in turn, it is in this overcoming that the story draws forth an alternative vision of cultivation itself.

### Games with Seeds and Death

“Bichan” does not merely stage its decomposition of high-modernist, capitalist agriculture by representing Dulan’s weathering and his wily, ultimately insufficient subversion of the promises of development. Rather, this decomposition emerges as well, first, in Dulan’s uses of seeds; and, second, in the very narrative form of Devi’s text—specifically, the way in which its emplotment of events and its arrangement of these events at the level of discourse interact with Dulan’s plot of land.<sup>27</sup> It is by way of these uses and this form that the story proffers a decomposition of the temporal form of high-modernist agricultural commodity production: of the way in which such agriculture attempts to normatively regulate the rhythms of the nonhuman organic processes on which cultivation relies, to subordinate these rhythms to a production process that is organized in relation to its anticipated end, the (fetishized) commodity. Put differently, it is *as a narrative* that “Bichan” offers its readers a temporal decomposition of high-modernist agricultural commodity production.

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<sup>27</sup> In describing the various levels of narrative, I refer to the *story* when discussing the chronological sequence of events within a narrative text, *discourse* when discussing the way in which the story is conveyed, and *narrative* when referring to the whole. See footnote 13 for *emplotment*.

It is able to do so in no small part because of the unique character of such production, which is a prime example of a temporal form. As I have described in my introduction, drawing on the work of Frank Kermode, such forms, such principles of composition, impose concordances of beginnings, middles, and ends on an otherwise chaotic reality, with ends providing the sense of meaning by which the preceding events can be understood (Kermode 17, 30-31, 45-46, 57-58). Here, I turn to Kermode to analyze the particular form of concordance that the proponents of high-modernist agriculture attempt to impose upon the process of cultivation and the organic processes at play in the agricultural plot.

This form emerges perhaps most clearly in relation to the commodity form toward which high-modernist agricultural commodity production is, by definition, oriented. As Marx notes, the commodity form—or, more specifically, the specific “value-form of the product of labour” to which widespread exchange gives rise—“stamps the bourgeois mode of production as a particular kind of social production of a historical and transitory character” (*Capital Volume 1* 174n34), a statement that does not just indicate the way in which the commodity *reveals* this character, but the way in which it *imparts* it as well, a dynamic Marx indicates elsewhere (166-167). This is to say that the commodity form, particularly once money-mediated exchange has reached a certain point of social saturation, gives rise to a particular *rendition* or *vision* of the production process, one that exists in a relationship of reciprocal influence with the material organization of this process.

Indeed, while it is important to recall that the production process remains a part of humanity’s unending reliance on nature, that it is in fact simply an aspect of capital as a way of organizing nature as a “flow of flows” (Moore 3),<sup>28</sup> the commodity form—any finished product—offers up an assignable end by which the preceding production process can be organized into a concordance of beginning, middle, and end: as Marx puts it as regards labor more broadly, the “process is extinguished in the product” (*Capital Volume 1* 287). The commodity form is a particularly distinct end insofar as this product will not be reincorporated directly into the producer’s—or the producer’s community’s—life processes, but rather is intended for (money-mediated) exchange. This alternate *telos*, in turn, coordinates the concordance of which it is a part: labor is equated, abstracted, such that the production of a given commodity seems to begin with the confrontation of commodities, the means of production and labor-power; and, between this beginning and the end that is the exchange of the commodity on the market, there is only the abstract measurement of readily quantifiable labor-time. The conception of time that corresponds to this concordance is, as so many have observed, the abstract, quantifiable time of the clock.<sup>29</sup>

This concordance, quite different from Kermode’s literary concordances (in its turn *toward* rather than *away from* abstraction—toward the “simply successive” rather than moments “charged with past and future” (46)—is both particularly peculiar and particularly acute in the realm of agriculture, which depends upon ongoing organic beings and processes that proceed in rhythms all their own. This is to say that not only is agricultural commodity production predicated on the assignation of sharp temporal boundaries for its human producers, but also in

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<sup>28</sup> See also David Harvey on this point, particularly *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (1996).

<sup>29</sup> I have explored this shift in my first chapter as part of the shift to a mechanical model of the universe, citing Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin, Reinhart Koselleck, and E.P. Thompson. For a description of the abstraction of time from human action in relation to commodity fetishism, specifically, see Michael Taussig’s *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* ([1980] 2010), p. 5, as well as Georg Lukács’s classic description in *History and Class Consciousness* ([1923] 1971), pp. 166-167, and Moishe Postone’s *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (1993), especially p. 191.

relation to various other lifeworlds for which such boundaries are an external imposition. This is especially the case in high-modernist agricultural commodity production, where the large-scale, modular use of manufactured inputs—as opposed to self-reproducing local conditions—makes the assignation of clear beginnings all the more concrete: a given cycle of production begins with the application of inputs obtained elsewhere, rather than the continuation of local processes. At the same time, the technologies of high-modernist agriculture are meant to blunt the rhythms of nonhuman organic beings and processes in other ways. Fertilizers, for example, not only increase yields by supplying crops with extra nutrients, but, in combination with improved irrigation, decrease the need for fields to lie fallow, allowing two or three annual crops where once only one was possible. Green Revolution HYV seeds not only benefited from their decreased height—which allowed them to absorb additional nutrients without lodging—but also, in many cases, from photo-insensitivity, which made them less susceptible to alterations in climate and the length of the day. In turn, these technologies were oriented toward monocultures, such that the distinct concordance of a particular production process is felt even more acutely: fields filled with a single type of crop will bloom all at once and be harvested all at once (Kosek 152-153; Shiva 45-46, 70-71, 108-109). In each instance, what these technologies made possible was an organization of the events of production in relation to the logic of production for exchange.

Green Revolution technologies, what is more, were not merely artifacts released into the void, but rather were part of broader sociotechnical systems. Central to these systems was the extension of certain forms of expertise that often delegitimized or excluded previously existing forms of knowledge, a dynamic typical to development practice. In the context of agricultural production, this shift has particularly acute temporal consequences. Agriculture, more than most other productive activities, faces an enormous amount of uncertainty due to its high degree of reliance on nonhuman organic beings and processes (Berger 193, 196; Reinhardt and Barlett 213); the agriculturalist, at least the successful one, necessarily thinks in terms of future events that largely lie outside of their control and in the face of which they must consistently improvise. The envisioned substitution of expert knowledge for local skill, then, is also an envisioned shift from a temporal structure defined by a complex interplay between future, present, and past to the abstraction of a steady drip of infinitesimal, point-like presents in which occur the unfolding of a previously determined schema—that of the package.

As I have demonstrated, however, Dulan's actions are not those of a cultivator seeking an unalienated relationship with his labor. He does not long for an imagined pre-exploitation peasant utopia in which all production is for family use<sup>30</sup>; his status as a low-caste *adivasi*—whose traditional occupation is skinning dead animals—allows him no attachment to such a vision. Rather, Dulan's two modes of relation to the materials he receives from the BDO—his initial grift, means to non-productive semi-subsistence, and his final sowing of the seeds in the corpses of his comrades—offer up an immanent critique and then a reimagining of the temporal form of high-modernist agricultural commodity production. First, Dulan's inability to cultivate his land reorients the agricultural inputs he receives toward bare subsistence, even as they are quickly revealed as insufficient to that purpose. Rather than a colliding in such a way as to produce new commodities intended for the market, these commodities stand alone, in isolation,

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<sup>30</sup> For an excellent articulation of the peasant as pursuing an imagined egalitarian past, see in particular John Berger's "Historical Afterword to the *Into Their Labours* Trilogy" ([1992] 2016), pp. 191-192. For a discussion of the orientation toward value and production in peasant communities, see both Marx's brief discussion in the first volume of *Capital*, p. 171, as well as the extraordinarily robust discussions throughout A.V. Chayanov's *The Theory of Peasant Economy* ([1925] 1966) and James C. Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976).



to be either immediately exchanged or immediately consumed. The temporal form of high-modernist agricultural commodity production collapses in on itself, is reduced to its *telos*, the exchange of commodities.

And yet this *telos* takes on new meaning in relation to Dulan's struggles, those of a low-caste adivasi threatened not just by starvation but also by extreme physical violence. Dulan's choice to eat the seeds—the one input that is not entirely reduced to exchange-value—is particularly notable in this sense. By consuming the seeds, Dulan both exposes the temporal form of high-modernist agricultural commodity production and punctures it; at the same time, he orients the agricultural inputs toward a new temporal horizon. When Dulan initially proposes eating the seeds, Dhātuṃya's mother objects.

“What'll you do?”

“Boil it, husk it, we'll eat it.”

“If you eat seeds [*bichan*], will you die?”

“Through so much we didn't die. How many rats did we eat in the famine? Will we die from eating seeds? If we die we'll know, we died eating rice. We'll go to heaven [*svarga*].”

(“Bichan” 140)

Dhātuṃya's mother's concern is notable insofar as rice, as food, is seed that has been husked. That is to say, the idea that eating rice seeds would be deadly—particularly after it has been specified that they will be husked first—reflects the incorporation of the seed into the sociotechnical system of high-modernist agricultural commodity production: Dhātuṃya's mother, and to a certain extent Dulan, conceives of the seed solely in relation to its productive function, its place within this system, rather than as an object of many uses, including consumption.

In this sense, Dulan's choice to eat the seeds undermines the system as a whole. Still, this is no triumphant rebuke but rather an acquiescence to bare subsistence, comparable to eating rats during a famine. There emerges here as well, particularly acutely, the way in which Dulan and his wife are still haunted by death, the way that their weathering continues even in subsistence: this is true especially for Dulan, at this point unable to imagine any salvation from the never-ending warding-off of death aside from heaven. It is important to note, however, that *svarga*, the heaven to which Dulan refers, is not the heaven of Christianity or Islam; rather, *svarga* is typically conceived of as a blissful yet temporary way station for those righteous individuals who have not yet achieved *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, and who will eventually return to the finite realm to be born again. Several points bear emphasis here. First, Dulan's somewhat wry orientation toward *svarga* functions as yet another ironic indictment of the Brahmanical order, as Dulan, a low-caste adivasi, is highly unlikely—if not entirely unable—to obtain access to *svarga*. In this it resembles the narrator's figuration of Dulan's land as Kāmdhēnu; and, indeed, Kāmdhēnu resides in *svarga* (Walker 183-185). At the same time, however, Dulan's reference to *svarga* reveals his ongoing implication in the hegemony of the Brahmanical order: even as he mocks this order, he is not yet prepared to put forth alternate terms.<sup>31</sup> What is more, Dulan's orientation toward *svarga* as the product of this particular gift is irreducibly individual: just as Dulan “has not given anything to the people of village in his life ”

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<sup>31</sup> This does not necessarily rob Dulan's comment of all weight. Rather, as James C. Scott notes in his critical extension of Gramsci's conception of ideology, “it is not at all necessary for subordinate classes to set foot outside the confines of the ruling ideals in order to formulate a critique of power” (*Weapons of the Weak* 338). Dulan here indicates, as is his way, his lack of acquiescence to the ruling order.

(“Bichan” 138), so too is his reckoning of the horizon of subsistence solely predicated on his own actions, his personal karmic balance.

It is against this bare, individualized, death-haunted subsistence—a subsistence that cannot escape weathering—that the import of Dulan’s eventual decision to sow the seeds becomes clear. Dulan’s two uses for the seeds frame the text’s chronological story, such that the labor struggles that comprise the majority of the “Bichan” function as points on the story arc to which these uses give rise. In this sense, Dulan’s final decision to sow the seeds—and, in turn, to kill Lachman—is the result of a transformative movement effected by these struggles, by the violence the labor organizers and villagers face as a consequence, and, vitally, by Dulan’s weathering labor, his burial of his comrades and his keeping-watch over their decomposing corpses. At the same time, returning to Kermode, it is the sown plot that imparts meaning on the events of “Bichan,” that organizes them into a cognizable whole: put differently, “Bichan” is emplotted in relation to its end, the sown plot. This sown plot thus casts “Bichan” as a text that tracks the intensification of and then movement out of a particular form of abjection articulated in terms of caste: that, to return to the introduction of this chapter, stages the decomposition of high-modernist agricultural commodity production and then presents us with the crops that spring up—or, rather, are cultivated—in its corpse. Here, these crops take the form of a reimagining of the relationship between subsistence, death, and futurity in non-Brahmanical and communal terms.

Put differently, if Dulan’s gift is primarily negative, a form of critique—if it reveals the manufactured inputs of high-modernist agricultural commodity production as mere commodities, if it orients Dulan temporally toward a sort of subsistence-as-death-in-life that cannot do more than subtly mock the Brahmanical order and its alignment with the forces of capital and the state—then his sowing of the seeds functions as its positive counterpart. At one level, Dulan seizes at least some of the means of production, and does so, what is more, for his own community: as he gives his new-grown paddy away, he asks the others to give him some as well, so that he can “sow it again and again” (163). It is notable that rather than simply holding on to a portion of the paddy, Dulan first gives the entire crop to the community, then requests a piece of it for himself: that is, he does not distribute the paddy, but tells the community that it belongs to all of them. Thus Dulan’s plot becomes a kind of commons, land that he has sown and the community will harvest.

This is no return to the past, though, no simple reversal of primitive accumulation. Rather, this commons emerges out of intertwined struggles against the violence of caste-hierarchy and the depredations of capital: it becomes fertile through and in the face of caste- and class-based violence by way of Dulan’s supposedly animalistic impulse toward survival. This fertility, in turn, opens onto a relationship with the future that is markedly different both from the endless accumulation toward which commodity production orients itself and from the death-in-life of weathering and bare subsistence, particularly insofar as Dulan’s versions of these latter ways of being remain beholden to notions of reincarnation and karmic accounting associated with the Brahmanical order. Dulan sows his corpse-fed field in order to revitalize human matter, to give life to his son and the other murdered labor activists; in so doing, he offers up a vision of agricultural production oriented toward *the overcoming of human finitude through communal labor*. Dulan’s labor, as well as that of his village, is oriented toward a future that, however tenuous, is predicated on the incorporation of the dead into the life of the community, both as means of production and, through the presence of their nutrients in the crop, as food. This incorporation is *material*, and thus quite different from any notion of metempsychotic

reincarnation; this is to say nothing of the way in which it requires the participation of the community as a whole, of the living and the dead.

Nor just humans. The new commons of Dulan's community, as well as the way in which this commons orients itself beyond death—or, rather, reorients its understanding of death, making death and its aftermath a part of the ongoing life of the community—presents a different orientation toward nonhuman entities and processes as well. Rather than attempting to master or replace these entities and processes, this new commons allows them to *act upon and into* dead human bodies: indeed, it *relies* upon such actions. Returning once more to Marx's language regarding the metabolic interaction between man and nature, it would seem that in Dulan's plot this interaction is no longer unidirectional, but rather works both ways. In this sense the metaphor of metabolism is insufficient to Dulan's situation: rather, human and nonhuman beings, insofar as they are extricable from one another, seem to function as uneasy allies in a struggle against the aligned forces of caste, capital, and state.

Still, this alliance does not simply level the distinction between human and nonhuman beings: it is not simply an embrace of kinship or becoming-with.<sup>32</sup> Agency, in the end, remains human, as Dulan explicitly rejects the state of the corpse-fed plot when it is left to its own devices. Shortly after the BDO tells him that rotting flesh makes for good fertilizer, Dulan mentally addresses the murdered, buried labor activists, whose bodies are now giving rise to wild plants:

But these putush bushes and aloe plants are of no use in anyone's work, buffaloes and goats don't eat them. You fought for our rights. Why didn't you become wheat, become corn? At least china grass? We would boil the china grass seeds, cook *ghato*, eat. (148)

The collaboration between human action and nonhuman entities and processes must, in Dulan's eyes, remain oriented toward the production of use-value, and so requires human labor. It is only thus that the dead can *flourish*, rather than merely live on. This is an important distinction: even when only putush and aloe grow on his land, Dulan still thinks to one of the activists that “even in death you didn't die” (148). Nevertheless in order to do honor to the dead Dulan explicitly aims to turn them into paddy [*dhān*]. This returns us to the question of the *seed*, about which Dulan makes his claim that “Seed means staying alive [*Bichan mānē bēcē thākā*]” (163). This seemingly straightforward statement is, in fact, quite complex. Much of this turns on the meaning of *bēcē*, which can refer to living, to surviving, to subsisting, *and* to being revived. In Dulan's claim, then, an ambiguity arises between the living community and the dead, *bēcē* referring to continuing to live for the former, revival for the later: out of this ambiguity emerges a more-than-human community, one in which the dead, opened up to bacteria and soil and seed, continue, in some sense, to live. At the same time, the use of *bēcē thākā* immediately recalls and rebukes Dulan's earlier acquiescence to Lachman, his agreeing to keep watch over the plot as a form of weathering.

Thus “Bichan” tracks, via the circumscription of its story between these two uses of seeds, a movement from Dulan's hyper-individualized, ultimately insufficient subsistence-as-the-warding-off-of-death to a form of production oriented toward the continual revival of a more-than-human community, albeit one within which human labor maintains pride of place. The text's narrative arc manifests this movement not only via Dulan's increasingly despairing

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<sup>32</sup> Such a leveling or embrace finds its best expression in recent thinking on the Anthropocene. See, in particular, Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016).

reactions to his comrades' labor struggles and subsequent deaths but also through the various ways in which the text marks the passage of time. The time of high-modernist agricultural commodity production is marked by a striving for abstract, processual time punctuated by massive monoculture blooms; Devi's story undermines this organization of time by offering alongside it the rhythm of decomposition itself, made manifest Dulan's newly fertile plot.

This alternate rhythm emerges in the narrative structure of "Bichan." If it is Dulan's new land ownership and subsequent grift that begin the story of the text, the discourse begins *in media res*, after Lachman has committed his first round of murders, after aloe and putush have started to rise uselessly on the land. Indeed, the text begins with a description of the land in which human beings are entirely absent:

North of Kuruḍā and Hēsāḍi villages the land is wavy, completely dry under the blaze of the sun. Even after the rains grass doesn't rise here. Sometimes the serpent-hoods of a jungle of cacti rise up, a few neem trees. In the midst of this scorched and undulating waste in which buffaloes do not graze there is a low-lying piece of land in the shape of a boat. The land is half a *bighā*. If you climb a high embankment then you will notice the land, and seeing the display of green you will feel the matter ghostly [*bhūturē*]. (132)

Thus, as I have argued, Dulan's plot functions as that out of which the text arises, its condition of possibility. At the same time, the description of the experience of seeing the land as "ghostly"—a word that I might also have translated as "haunted"—serves both to invoke the dead labor activists buried there and to position the land as something which haunts the text itself.

Indeed, the narrator insists on "ghostly" as they continue their description of the land: here, however, it is applied to the markers of human presence that slowly filter into the scene. First, the experience of seeing the platform [*mācā*] from which Dulan keeps watch is described as "more ghostly [*ārō bhūturē*]"; and, when Dulan himself finally appears—as yet unnamed, rapping on the aloe plants with a stick, coming, the narrator repeats, every single day—he is in turn described as "most ghostly [*sab cēyē bhūturē*]" (132). It is thus not only the land and the murdered activists that haunt the text but rather a broader assemblage, including Dulan and his daily labor.

Posed against this ghostly patch of land and its wily keeper is the text's story, the chronological unfolding of events that, as previously stated, essentially begins with Lachman's poisoned gift. Insofar as this gift is given in response to activists admired by state development interests, insofar as the land first manifests in the story as deed-documents [*dalil-pattar*], the time of the story seems to be aligned with that of the Indian state: and, indeed, the text locates itself in calendrical time by reference to the Emergency.<sup>33</sup> And yet the narrator's initial reference to the Emergency is strangely ambiguous, part of a passing anecdote about Dhātuḃa's mother: "When there was unrest in Tāmāḍi during the Emergency, the police had come to this village as well to ask questions" (133). The anecdote, which the narrator ostensibly intends to illustrate Dhātuḃa's mother's ferocious temper, ends without situating itself temporally in relation to the narrative's story: put differently, the reader is unsure whether the story is taking place after the Emergency

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<sup>33</sup> A period from 1975-1977 when Indira Gandhi, then prime minister of India, declared a state of emergency when protests erupted after she was found guilty of the misuse of government machinery during her election campaign. Basic civil liberties were suspended, political opponents were detained, and various atrocities were committed—perhaps most famously, the compulsory sterilization campaign conducted under Sanjay Gandhi, Indira's son. See Gyan Prakash's *Emergency Chronicles* (2019) for an account of the place of the Emergency in the long sweep of the modern Indian nation-state, as well as its connection to the current Modi regime.

or during it. In this sense, the story is, for over half its total length, largely unmoored from the history of the Indian state. Certain markers of calendrical time do intrude: most notably, and particularly relevant to this chapter, in the form of development efforts, of rail tracks being laid, as well as attempts to offer juridical and material relief to low-caste and adivasi villagers. These efforts, which the narrator describes as part of the way in which the region, “tries to limp toward modernity [*ādhunīk samay*—literally, ‘modern time’]” (145), only serve to make Lachman Siñ more powerful. The region remains out of joint with the state’s supposedly progressive march through history.

When the narrator does reveal that the Emergency is ongoing, they do so in relation to the aloe and putush that have sprung up on Dulan’s plot:

In India’s Emergency, in an ignored, neglected region of southeast Bihar, a few very vigorous [*satēj*, a word that can also mean ‘reinvigorated’ or ‘resuscitated’], very green aloe and putush bushes, as silent evidence [*dalil*] of the murders of field-laborers *cum* Harijans, prostrate themselves daily before the sun. (150)

This reentry into the time of the state is thus interwoven with the organic processes set in motion by the decomposition of the murdered laborers; and, in turn, these processes, fruiting in these useless plants, give rise to *dalil*—here, “evidence”—to rival the *dalil*—earlier, “deeds”—by which the land is registered by the state. The dead are not, as Dulan fears, “lost in the police files” (151). They are springing up, alive.

What is more, it is the end of the Emergency that spurs the text’s final events. By its repetition of the phrase “One day [*ēkdin*],” the text aligns this end with the ripening of Lachman’s crop, a massive monoculture bloom that follows on “two years of famine-drought-crop destruction” (152): that is, two years of Emergency. This seeming rebuke to state power by the soil itself, however, merely demonstrates the elasticity of the regime of value-extraction and caste-exploitation in the countryside. Amarnath Mishra, a former Congress Party<sup>34</sup> strongman freed from his Emergency duties, transitions seamlessly into the role of a mercenary and demands a cut of the laborers’ wages. In giving it to him, Lachman drives Dulan’s son Dhātuḃa to open defiance; and, in the ensuing labor stoppage, Lachman’s men kill Dhātuḃa. In the sudden chaos and possibility born of the Emergency’s end, Dulan clears the aloe and putush, then sows his corpse-fed field. He kills Lachman Siñ and places his body under rocks, where its face is consumed by wild animals. Thus Dulan steps into the breach, offering up his plot against Lachman’s fields, offering up his vision of community against Lachman’s relentless violence. It is in this final moment that the rhythms of Dulan’s plot move from haunting those of the aligned forces of state, capital, and caste-hierarchy to actively contesting them: it is in this final moment that the dead return to the land of the living and, in doing so, return the land to the living.

Thus the text does not just proffer a decomposition of capitalist, high-modernist agriculture, but rather draws from this newly-fertile soil a new relationship with the production process itself, one intertwined with alternate conceptions of more-than-human community and commons, as well as an alternate orientation toward the future and death. I will provisionally situate this new relationship under the heading of the *more-than-human subsistence* that, as I stated in my introduction, I seek to theorize. Such more-than-human-subsistence—which only emerges out of the collision between Dulan’s abjection, on the one hand, and, on the other, the dreams of development as manifest in high-modernist agricultural commodity production—

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<sup>34</sup> Indira Gandhi’s political party.

refuses a vision of the future as either the endless accumulation of capital or the unalienated subsistence labor of the peasant utopia. Instead, agriculture makes possible a reconception of death itself: labor no longer merely sustains life, but overcomes human finitude, extends life beyond death, albeit in a different form—both in flora and, vitally, in the life of the community.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, labor can no longer be conceived as a straightforward metabolic interaction between humans and nature-as-inorganic-body. Rather, for labor to revitalize human matter and feed it into the community from which it comes requires a mutual metabolism or, as I have called it, a sort of uneasy alliance, one built upon reciprocal offerings: one that moves in time to the rhythm of decomposition.

### Decomposition as Praxis

I would like to close this chapter by considering whether and in what ways Dulan also provides a model for an alternate conception—or at least expansion—of *praxis*: that is, of action itself. Given the scope of this endeavor, my reflections will necessarily be abbreviated and highly provisional. Nevertheless, “Bichan” seems to me to trouble typical understandings of labor, political action, and the relationship between the two. I have already shown, albeit in passing, the way in which Dulan’s situation—both his initial suffering at Lachman’s hands and his ultimate sowing of his corpse-fed field—seems to stand at an odd angle with Marx’s conception of labor as the human metabolization of nature. I contend that Dulan likewise troubles the categories of one of Marx’s great critics: Hannah Arendt. This turn to Arendt will make clear the way in which more-than-human subsistence can give rise to specific forms of political action; the way in which it might lead labor and action to merge in surprising ways; and, perhaps most radically, the way in which life itself might be made political.

Dulan complicates Arendt’s sharp distinction between labor, work, and action—between labor and action in particular.<sup>36</sup> Arendt describes labor as “the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor” (Arendt 7). Labor is fundamentally implicated in the transitory, finite nature of life itself: it creates non-durable products that reproduce life processes, products that biological organisms consume in order to stave off their inevitable deaths. Thus labor is not a uniquely human capacity, but rather belongs to a lower form of animality (84, 96-101). Work, on the other hand, is defined in no small part by its durability, by the way in which it produces a world of human artifice that stands apart from its surroundings (7, 136-139). Finally, action is the fundamental human activity, the activity without which human beings cease to be human, as well as the condition of possibility for political life: it is defined by plurality, the fact that it involves communication and coordination amongst multiple human beings, as well as by the way in which it inaugurates new

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<sup>35</sup> There is a way in which this conception of labor largely aligns with Marx’s, at least as regards its capacity to infuse its objects with life. As Pheng Cheah notes, Marx conceives of labor as doing precisely this; it is, what is more, “a form of social epigenesis” (*Spectral Nationality* 194). However, insofar as Dulan’s situation involves the revitalization of dead human matter and insofar as this revitalization relies upon the opening of the corpse to nonhuman organic processes, it seems to me to depart from Marx’s conception of labor.

<sup>36</sup> For a similar troubling of Arendt’s distinction, see Paul Virno’s *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004), pp. 50-51, where Virno claims that post-Fordist labor has taken on many of the characteristics of political action as Arendt defines it.

beginnings that both emerge from and mimic the human condition of natality. Action—words and deeds—is also in some sense the most lasting human activity insofar as it imparts meaning on the world that work makes and insofar as it gives rise to the web of human relationships, the realm of human affairs (Arendt 7-8, 176, 182-184, 204; *What Is a World?* 148, 155).

In troubling Arendt's categories, "Bichan" lays the groundwork for a more expansive understanding of action—one that accounts for both the violence and abjection of caste, on the one hand, and, on the other, that incorporates nonhuman beings, living nonhuman beings in particular, into the realm of the political. It is important to note that the form of action that Dulan undertakes is, in the end, non-Arendtian, particularly in the context of the latter shift. Nevertheless, Arendt, in first making the distinction between labor, work, and action, presents a robust point from which to consider the unique contours of Dulan's situation, to say nothing of the place of decomposition and decomposing bodies within this labor-action. Arendt's work allows a focus on the political that often escapes, or is at least downplayed by, many of the thinkers who have more recently attempted to expand notions of human *poiesis* and *praxis*, theorists and critics of the Anthropocene, Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in particular.<sup>37</sup>

Firstly, Dulan challenges the temporal distinctions that Arendt draws between labor, work, and action. Arendt is clear that agriculture, despite the fact that it produces cultivated land and thus seems to break down the boundary separating labor and work, remains within the former category insofar as humans must continually renew the land: that is, insofar as the land, still largely under the sway of nonhuman organic and climatic processes, is not reified, "there in its own durability" (Arendt 138). This remains the case at the close of "Bichan." Despite its lack of durability in the form of material substantiality, however, Dulan's plot extends the temporal horizons of the act of cultivation into the realm of action. On the one hand, the crops that grow from the labor activists' corpses function as a form of remembrance, a way of memorializing their deeds and the violence that they suffered—recall Dulan's lament, in the face of the aloe and putush, that the dead "*fought for our rights*" ("Bichan" 148, emphasis mine). This remembrance is quite different from that which Arendt describes, which is fundamentally narrative and revelatory of the unique identities of the acting human beings being remembered; here, remembrance sheds any substantial tie to narrative or identity, occurring via the incorporation of the *decomposed material bodies* of these human beings, via *nutrients*, into the life, both communal and individual, of Dulan's village. Nevertheless, that there is a resemblance, a rhyme, between this form of remembrance and Arendt's is suggested in the way in which Dulan's plot marks the time of the literary plot, the narrative, in which it is represented.

On the other hand, Dulan's sowing of his corpse-fed field also reorients life beyond its biological confines in the individual living organism: in this case, the individual human being. I

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<sup>37</sup> For the Anthropocene, see, again, Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). For OOO, see the work of Graham Harman, for which his *Object-Oriented Ontology* (2018) is a helpful introduction—here, see Chapter 3 in particular. For ANT, see Bruno Latour's classic *Reassembling the Social* (2005). My difficulty with each of these approaches is that, in their attempt to incorporate nonhuman beings into the realm of the social and/or political, they often begin to lose their grasp on questions of power, violence, and exploitation. This can lead to moments such as the one in which the anthropologist Noboru Ishikawa says, during a roundtable with Donna Haraway, Scott F. Gilbert, Kenneth Olwig, Anna L. Tsing, and Nils Bubandt, that "To me, plantations are just the slavery of plants" (Haraway et al. 556), a statement with which Tsing and Haraway immediately agree. I do not want to overstate the case: the exchange was humorous, and the discussants do refer to (enslaved) human beings at various points. Still, there is a flattening at play here, one that others have noted as well (see Davis et al., "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, ... Plantationocene?: A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises" (2019), p. 5).

have shown that his actions are a radical reimagining of subsistence, of which Arendt is so contemptuous; Dulan undertakes labor that relies on and extends the influence of nonhuman entities and processes upon and into human bodies, reincorporating these bodies back into the life—biological and social—of the community. Dulan’s tortured decision to sow is key here: it is this decision and Dulan’s subsequent labor that differentiates the reincorporation of the dead from the “over-all gigantic circle of nature herself, where no beginning and no end exist and where all natural things swing in changeless, deathless repetition” (Arendt 96). Dulan rather aligns his community with these cycles while still marking beginnings and ends: death, as end, becomes a sort of punctuation, an inflection point that, through a subsequent beginning—the sowing of seeds—marks a moment in a continual process that continually reinvests the community with life.

This alignment is only made possible by a radical extension of the boundaries of the community. This leads to the plurality of action, the fact that action necessarily involves people acting together, similar as human beings and distinct as unique individuals. Once again, Dulan’s action does not preserve the distinct uniqueness of the murdered labor activists; however, there is nevertheless a form of more-than-human collaboration at play. Specifically, there emerges here an *abnormal intimacy*, a term that Patricia Zavella uses in order to refer to those relationships that emerge in the workplace and which Sarah Besky extends to refer as well to forms of relationality that arise between human and nonhuman participants in the labor process (Besky 32). Here, this intimacy is directed toward the corpse, which, as the material marker of a unique human individual, mediates between human beings and nonhuman entities and processes. Dulan’s intimacy with these dead bodies, which live on in his mind and heart, leads him toward an intimacy with the broken borders of the individual human organism and the entry of bacteria, of soil and roots, with the dissolution of the boundaries between humans and nonhumans. Thus Dulan’s labor is a collaborative undertaking, even if not pluralistic in the strict sense.

The question remains, though, whether Dulan’s sowing of his field has the characteristic perhaps most central to Arendt’s conception of action: the capacity to begin something new. Here it is important to keep in mind Dulan’s social context: always already abject as a result of his status as low-caste *adivasi*, always already alienated from the land and nature more broadly, for Dulan to labor on behalf of his community, to undertake free, conscious activity that is directed beyond himself, is itself a revolutionary act, the start of something that, particularly in relation to the logics of the Brahmanical order, is radically new. If Arendtian action is founded on natality, Dulanian action is founded on the possibility of emergence from caste-based abjection, of entry into an alternate, non-Brahmanical order of humanity—one that, in “Bichan,” is made possible by more-than-human collaborative labor.

It is in this context, in relation to those communities that face the threat of near-unmitigated violence and exclusion from the social order—those communities, that is, that are subaltern in the most rigorous sense of that word—that I would like to venture one final claim, one that will leave Arendt far behind: *giving ourselves up to decomposition can be a form of, or at least a contribution to, praxis*, so long as it is seized upon by other human beings who act in concert with the body-breaking-down. The labor activists in “Bichan” do not choose to die, of course, nor to decompose; Lachman and his men murder them and then conceal their corpses. In this sense they are not perfect models of the praxis that I am describing. Nevertheless they are a model of what is possible. Their bodies, still lively in that they are teeming with bacteria and earthworms, do not merely surrender themselves to the erasure—or at least silence—that their oppressors desire. To decompose is for our corpses to be opened to change, to unexpected uses



and abuses, all made possible by an openness to nonhuman entities and processes: it is, vitally, to take on certain forms of potential that, while living, we lack. Rotting, we can provide our nutrients to new life, such that humans and nonhumans alike can flourish; putrefying, we can preserve the communities that we have (not yet) left behind; and so when humans are part of communities whose very perseverance, to say nothing of flourishing, is a deathly struggle, a constant weathering, decomposition takes on a radical edge.

I have ended up somewhere quite far from Borlaug's vision of an earth made whole and rational by way of chemical fertilizer. Out of the collision between development, particularly as manifest in the manufactured inputs of package programs like the IADP and the Green Revolution, and Dulan's drive to survive in the face of caste-based violence, the beginnings of a more-than-human subsistence emerge. Against the depoliticizing force of development, agricultural labor becomes—or, rather, becomes visible as—a site of political contestation, of resistance to the aligned forces of caste, capital, and state. In this sense, and in its role in shifting the relationship to life and death, agriculture is productive of so much more than value. It gives life not just in terms of an abstract, impossibly large number of lives saved—the billion so often invoked when Borlaug's name arises—but, too, in the sense of an offering: an offering to the individual who has died but not passed on, who remains rooted or, rather, who offers themselves up to roots; an offering from that individual, in turn, to the community of which they thus remain a part.

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