

Conclusion

'The future is what is not grasped, what befalls us and lays hold of us.
The other is the future.'

Emmanuel Levinas¹

It is not easy to 'conclude' a work, which has been trying to question the temporal resolutions taught us by modern historiography. The following few pages are, therefore, merely in the nature of a winding up—perhaps abrupt, but only so that the unfinished nature of both the work of colonial modernity and its critique becomes evident. In terms of chronology, which is both the presumption and the problematic here, I have talked about a long span of a hundred and fifty years, and cannot claim any self-evident chronological bracket which resolves my story. This long century-and-a-half saw many changes, contingencies and unresolved processes—in the structure and institutions of colonial power, in the politics of nationalism, in modes of social protest and mobilization, in senses of subjecthood, in social alignments, and in the distribution of power. It has not been my intention to flatten these complexities or impose a unilinearity on them. If I talk of the whole century-and-a-half as if from a single vantage point, it is to highlight different moments from across time—the moments of history-writing, travel, exchange, rebellion, aesthetics, and representation—which can contribute to our understanding of what I have called the politics of time. I have argued that this politics of time emerged out of complex and contingent negotiations, but also that an understanding of this politics offers us a single and radical clue to unpacking the predicament of postcolonial practice.

My last two chapters use texts from as late as the 1930s. Yet the 1930s do not constitute the only valid closure to our story. The story could as well be resumed, albeit with a difference, today. After all, in contemporary India the dominant choice that practical politics offers

us remains a choice between the paradigm of Nehruvian progress and development and the paradigm of militant nationalism of the Bharatiya Janata Party kind, which talks of avenging the historical past of 'foreign' rule and desecration. Both these paradigms, deprived of practical links to the politics of liberation, have worked together to finalize the splitting of time between the cultural and the monetary. As the nation seeks to 'liberalize' its economy and mirror the trajectory of global capital, it claims the purity and righteousness of cultural conservatism. As if culture remains both 'originary' and 'final', in the absurd presentism of profit and competition. I stop at the 1930s, however, because it seems a suggestive, though arbitrary, date. I show how by this time history had acquired its 'objective' and disciplined form in Bengal, as opposed to the 'subjective' and 'polemical' uses of history in the second half of the nineteenth century. By this time, anthropology, too, had become a domain beyond its administrative use by colonial officials—it seemed to have become a knowledge which the colonized could redeploy for the sake of the self. It was also by the 1930s, that a poetics of imagination was reclaimed in colonial Bengal—in a reaction against late nineteenth-century attempts at eliminating the imaginary from 'objective' knowledge. *But the 1930s must not be historicized as a time when the colonized finalized their claim to modern disciplines—indicating an end to the colonizers' monopoly over universal and rational knowledge forms.* To say this, would be to partake in the temporality of progress and to deny the unremitting postcolonial anxiety that, in the race towards the 'end of history', the colonized, the late-starter, could never really overtake the forerunner. It is therefore more fruitful to say that by the 1930s, the colonized, by way of reclaiming 'modern' knowledge-disciplines from the colonizer, hinted at his/her own marginality and lateness in the present.

While this irreversible delay was generally a matter of regret to the educated Bengali, it was also a possibility seized by some Bengali thinkers. Rabindranath Tagore, for instance, took advantage of this lateness to show that the drama of nationalism had already been played out in Western history, and its limits and violence were there for everyone to see. History now had to move, ethically and logically, beyond the narrow confines of this territorialized and imprisoned

subjectivity and towards, literally, a world-view that admitted, indeed thrived on, difference.² This was not only because India as a nation demonstrated that it was possible to embody difference, wonderment, and openness as its defining characteristic, but also because there was no other possible way of imagining nationhood itself. Rabindranath proposed the nation as *mahamanaber sagar-tir*—the coast outlining the sea of humanity—distinct from yet inviting endless waves of strangers and novelties. If Rabindranath, at the end of his life, lamented that he had failed to reach his own people, it was because this hint of collective life beyond the nation became, paradoxically and perhaps more so with imminent ‘independence’, an abandoned possibility. Perhaps, Rabindranath also understood that his critique of nationalism in the name of difference did not quite go towards a politicization of difference, because, in his fear of the colonized and congested everyday, he had tried to evade the very site where difference was mobilized and negotiated in practice.

What escaped the notice of Rabindranath and his contemporaries was, therefore, the other process we see consolidating in early twentieth century. This was the consolidation of a so-called ‘primitive’ rebellious space, an intervention into historical time itself, which could have reconfigured the conventional territoriality of Bengal, and of the nation in general. As Ranabir Samaddar has shown, if one sees the apparently disparate and discrete ‘tribal’ movements of early twentieth-century Bengal in terms of a single political narrative, nationalism would seem to have quite a different location than that suggested by the Bengali *swadeshi* and civil disobedience traditions. The rebellions of Kurmis, Mahatos, Santals etc. stretched over all of Jungle Mahals, from Mayurbhanj in Orissa through Midnapur, Bankura, and Birbhum in Bengal to the Rajmahals in Bihar, stretching across Barabhum, Manbhum, etc. all the way to Chota Nagpur. They stretched even to the north, into Malda and Dinajpur. Whether it was the 1917 Santal rebellion in Orissa against the recruitment of ‘tribes’ as labour corps or the role of the Santals of Midnapur in the 1942 Quit India movement or the role of Jangal Santal and his comrades in the later 1960s Naxalbari movement—‘primitives’ seemed to signify a history of anti-colonialism, distinct from mainstream nationalism.³ The very point of my work has been to show that it was not accidental that

this alternative and rebellious time of liberation was the practice of ‘tribes’—for they existed in colonial modernity as that alterity, that, counterfactual, against which the ‘modern’ appeared as modern in the first place.

Let me then recollect here the basic argument of this work. I have argued that modernity, even as we know it to be a category of multiple significations and usages, is primarily a decision to judge peoples and worlds as if they are, though formally of the same time, really non-contemporaneous. By this decision to make peoples into non-contemporary beings, modernity seeks to reduce knowledge (and politics) to the re-presentation of the non-modern, the absent, and the anachronistic in the time of the present and the ‘modern’ subject. And by this overdetermination of time by representation, representation as both a political and an epistemological act, modernity disallows the coming together of different worlds and peoples as co-eval, in and at the same time. In other words, in modernity, representation comes across as a very specific act of temporalization, which prohibits the coming face-to-face of the ‘primitive’ and the ‘progressive’, the archaic and the portentous, the present and the past. The temporality of *re-presentation*, in other words, neutralizes the temporality of *encounter*, and therefore the temporality of collective practice. In the place of practice and politics, representation offers predictive knowledge, and in the place of contradiction and/or solidarity, it offers an anxious and brittle appearance of identity. It is because of this that, in modernity, practice itself appears as the subordinate and ‘primitive’ other of knowledge.

This understanding emerges once we foreground the colonial condition as the basis for rethinking temporality. For this, we must move beyond the recognition that modernity was founded on colonial constructions of the ‘primitive’ other. We must even move beyond the realization that the ordering concepts of our world—progress or modernity or development—can never be found as pure, originary concepts, that they necessarily function as contested moments both within and outside Europe. Indeed, no modern social category can be thought as subsisting beyond colonial construction and its subversive hybridization—whether it be caste, tribe, gender, colour, history, science, state, truth, self, law, right, duty, or sentiment. Yet if

this recognition has to help us go beyond generalities, we must also readmit into our narratives that one defining entity—time—which always remains under-articulated if written only in terms of either colonial construction or subversive hybridization. This is not only because time comes to us as an undeniable calendrical consensus across the world, but also because time appears in both knowledge and in everyday commonsenses of modernity as that which is never fully thematizable. Even as time became critical in modernity's imagination of the other and of difference, temporality itself appeared as an unmasterable alterity, not only within the colonized reality but also within European philosophy itself. It appeared as that which must be presumed, invoked, and suggested, but which could never be fully thematized without it losing its temporalizing function—i.e. its function of admitting the contingent, the unpredictable, the deferred, and the irreversible. In other words, temporality functioned in modernity simultaneously as that which must be conquered, and as that which, being temporality, repeatedly slipped through the discourses of knowledge into the realm of unmanageable practice and the uncontrollable other.

To understand this alterity of time within paradigms of modernity, I have borrowed from the insights of Emmanuel Levinas, who conceptualizes, though for a very different purpose, time as 'the very relationship of the subject with the Other'.⁴ According to Levinas, it is an error to imagine time as something which appears by virtue of the self/soul/subject, or even by virtue of the death of the self, as Heidegger would have it. To Levinas, time is that which we grasp in the form of the realization that the other retains a future (and a past), despite the death (and amnesia) of the subject-self. In other words, Levinas shows, persuasively, that time cannot be the possession of the self, because time appears precisely when the other carries on despite the subject's own cessation. That is, time is something which can never be thought without thinking the other. This remarkably potent insight, however, is reduced by Levinas into an ethical question—he says that time can be understood only when one chooses the ethics of placing the other prior to the self.⁵ That is, Levinas refuses to ask the crucial question—why *modern* philosophy denies and disguises, as precondition to its own enunciation, this

conceptual and practical need for the other. It is because of this that Levinas can put Augustine and Hegel together as part of the same historical tradition—denying the crucial difference between the two, the difference that while Augustine could own up his inability to thematize time, a modern philosopher like Hegel could never do so. In fact, Hegel would claim to totalize temporality itself as world history, wherein the self would appear self-consciously modern and European, and the other incontrovertibly colonized and 'primitive'. Modernity was this imperative to make time into the possession of the (Western) subject, time which was no longer available to the now politically subordinated other. Instead of formulating time as the ungraspable other, as Augustine did, or as the subject's (ethical) relation with the other, as Levinas himself does, post-Hegel Western philosophy made time into that which the other lacked. In this sense, it is neither accidental nor merely a philosophical error, that Western metaphysics, and Levinas himself, would fail to name colonialism.

In this work, therefore, I use Levinas's insight about time and the other, but I also make colonialism into the critical condition of its enunciation. This might seem to be the wrong context for Levinas, but he is indeed useful to us in the postcolony because he reminds us that thought and knowledge must necessarily face a limit in temporality, and in the forever haunting shadow of the other. As the 'primitive' Santals reminded us, in course of their hul rebellion, rational or modern knowledges, despite their all-explanatory and predictive intention, can never fully apprehend or conceive of what may become possible in time. In the last instance, then, one has to engage with time in risky and irreversible practice, precisely because knowledge may not fully equip us to deal with the unimaginable future that 'befalls' us, to use Levinas' own term. This characteristic of time is perhaps also the characteristic of the other, who never appears before us as a self-contained and self-evident idea or object—even though Levinas seems to hope that the other can be as easily identified and owned up by the self, as the idea of the self itself. By definition the other does not claim an absolute and proper position, fully graspable and appropriable, because the other becomes threateningly potent precisely beyond the limits of the familiar, beyond the limits of all conceivable difference. Time and the other thus appear as beyond

knowledge concepts and beyond the knowing subject. In other words, time and the other begin to be critical precisely where knowledge stumbles—where practice, including that of conceptualization, becomes urgent and imperative.

Capitalist modernity was founded on a denial of this time-other equation. It was the claim of science and reason to be able to explain everything, including the other, and to be able to logically predict and capture the future. As the colonizer encountered unknown worlds and unanticipated destinies amongst strangers, this claim, this hope became a practical ordering device, though it was soon given the status of knowledge in and by itself. By claiming to possess time and history, and by claiming to subordinate the other, the modern European self sought to neutralize the alterity of both. In order to conquer and exploit the world, as imperialism sought to do, both the other and temporality had to be nullified—hence the spatialization of time and the essentialization of the other. And hence, the forgetting of the early Christian Augustinian insight that time is never fully graspable by the subject-self alone. As the universal intent of capital coincided with the universal claim of science and natural history in Europe, the world was reproduced as fully chartable, and the other, and temporality itself, appeared to yield before money and reason. The other and other times became particular derivative cases of universal and pre-given stages of history, even as they remained always backward and ‘primitive’ in relation to the modern subject. In other words, while the colonized other was represented as another time, the colonizer could claim a foreknowledge of it. In colonialism, thus, *time and the other appeared to be always already captured in knowledge, and then, only secondarily, negotiated in practice.* If this knowledge claim of capitalist modernity often fell through in practice, this was attributed to errors of strategy rather than to the limits that knowledge faced before contingencies of temporality and before the surprises of the different and the unfamiliar.

I have tried to argue that behind the effecting of colonial sameness and difference, behind the de-contemporization of peoples, behind the subsumption of temporal incommensurabilities to universal progress, lay this foundational subordination of practice by knowledge. My argument is configured in terms of the uneasy triangle made by

the colonial state, the Bengali middle classes, and the so-called real-life, extant ‘primitives’, the Santals. This triangle creates complexities and discontinuities of narrative. As the colonizer seeks to circumvent the educated Bengali in order to ‘privilege’ the ‘tribe’, the nation is temporally bifurcated. As the Bengali bhadralok defines history and market by counterpoising the ‘primitive’ to himself, the nation appears schizophrenic in its own perception. As the Santal becomes indebted to the Bengali moneylender under the ‘protection’ of the burdened white ruler, s/he is asked to choose the enemy from between the English and the Bengali. As the Santals get invited as the most ‘authentic primitive’ in the Damin, other ‘tribes’ like Paharias get displaced by them and lose their privileged ‘primitive’ status. As Bengali poetics invokes the sensuous and free Santal body in a critique of disciplinary history, s/he gets transported as the jungli coolie to tea gardens in Assam. And as representative politics takes hold, the Santal becomes the site of contestation in Hindu-Muslim communal politics, as Hindus insist that ‘tribes’ must be enumerated as castes and therefore as part of the Hindu majority of Bengal. Out of this complex process, emerges the double-edged temporal resolution of colonial difference. On the one hand, the ‘primitive’ emerges as synonymous to the ‘practical’ and the ‘sensual’, desired by middle-class men, yet negated as threateningly incompetent in financial and historical negotiations. On the other hand, the ‘primitive’ emerges as the only inappropriable site in colonial modernity, which the marginal Bengali poet seeks out in his critique not only of colonialism but of the limits of nationalism itself.

Let me end by saying, then, that peoples like the Santals became ‘primitive’ in colonial modernity not only because of colonial strategies of other-ing, but also because the colonized themselves tried to assume the representational location necessary for modern monetary and epistemological rationalities. To be modern, even differently modern, the colonized had to make the ‘primitive’ into the ‘practical’, and relegate the time of practice to a position subordinate to causality and history. Here, therefore, the Santal acts as a radical clue to the unpacking of the temporal politics of difference and identity of the nation. However, the danger always remains that—by appealing to the critical position of the excluded, the exploited,

and above all, the non-contemporary—a historical thesis of this kind might fall into the trap of imagining an authentic and autonomous subaltern voice, which serves no other purpose than that of a soothing therapy for the postcolonial authorial predicament. In order to avoid this temptation, this essay has tried to accept at the very beginning the impossibility of recovering ‘uncontaminated’ Santal voices from historical ‘evidence’. I have not presumed that I could write a true history of the Santals. I began on the premise that since history in colonial Bengal was founded in opposition to the imagination of the ‘primitive’ non-Aryan, one cannot hope to find Santal notions of time and practice in ‘facts’ and ‘sources’. Therefore, instead of trying to glean instances of an ‘original’ or ‘primordial’ voice from colonial or middle-class Bengali documents, I have sought to demonstrate the limits of historical enunciation itself. For history could not have been imagined, without the loss of ‘facts’ about the Santal and without the constitution of the Santal as anti-historical.

In this work, therefore, the Santal does not appear as an authentic indigene—mirror to the anxiously modernizing educated Bengali—the cultural site which remained innocently uncolonized even in colonial times. Rather, s/he appears as a contemporary and contingent critic of the nationalist reduction of time to history—a marginalized position which, in practice, exceeded its own locale and encroached upon the time of history over and over again. It is absolutely imperative that we remember that this ‘primitive’ position was an eminently ‘modern’ position, no more ‘authentic’ than the ‘nationalist’ one. But we also know that this ‘primitive’ returns even today as the unmanageable excess to the nation—in Jharkhand, in the north-east, in Chhattisgarh, in Orissa—confronting modernity precisely at the moment when the nation abdicates confrontation in favour of succession to colonialism. S/he returns as an excess, not because s/he is essentially ‘primordial’ or intrinsically rebellious, but because modernity makes her so. Because to the modern, her threatening alterity is like the alterity of time itself—impossible to synchronize to the presence of the subject/nation (the presence which seeks to be the non-temporal, the eternal, in time); and impossible to synchronize to the presentism of development and progress (a presentism which seeks to always defer the future before an incremental improvement of the present). In a paradoxical manner, then, it is modernity

which makes time itself into the domain of the ‘timeless primitive’—as the ‘primitive’ becomes identical to pure and contingent practice, and the colonial-modern subject continues to try to monopolize knowledge as totally and exclusively his own. It is here that the frustration of the modern postcolonial citizen lies—for he understands that he can never be what he ‘knows’ as truly modern, because, in practice, he remains contaminated by his own unreasonable desire for, and by what he experiences as, the dark, violent forces of the practical, the primordial, the sexual, the archaic, and the mythical.

A winding up note, then, on the political lesson that I draw out of my uses of the admittedly scattered and unresolved Santal narratives in this text. My earlier chapter on money and credit had argued that the Santals did not imagine an *absolute* other until they confronted Bengalis as moneylenders. My chapter on rebellion in turn argued that Santals did not posit an ‘original’ difference between themselves and the diku-moneylender. In fact, Santals enunciated temporality itself as something which was perpetuated through encounters and scattering of peoples, as ‘humans’ travelled in search of a country. Here, the Santal practice of *bitlaba* may be mentioned. This was a practical mode of other-ing, an act of collective gesturing and defilement of a transgressor, who had committed an unacceptable act and refused to make amends for it. The decision to perform this act was taken collectively, whereupon a sal-branch was circulated in all the villages, with the leaves indicating the number of days until bitlaha. On the day of the act, large groups collected near the house of the person to be expelled, danced to the drum and to *bir seren* or forest songs, and recited the reasons why the individual must be ousted from the solidarity. Then the house was defiled by throwing soiled plates, and other such things into the courtyard. This act of other-ing was not just a punishment, nor so much a permanent exclusion of the other. It was a publicization of the event of alienation, generally open to later rapprochements through fines and feasts. The colonial state outlawed this Santal practice by terming it ‘criminal’ and ‘violent’, also because sometimes the Santals performed this act on non-Santals, including on moneylenders, leading to difficult situations for the administration.⁶ I mention this Santal practice not because the bitlaha was any kinder than exclusionary practices of colonial modernity,

but to emphasize the practical nature of other-ing in non-colonial societies, which was fundamentally different from the representation of the other as always already so, in the time of knowledge.

In other words, the political lesson for us here is that social practices need not necessarily generate others in any *epistemological* sense. That it did so was the contingency of colonial-modern practice. Santal songs themselves articulated this difference between original and practical others. Santals pointed out that 'some say Hindu and some say Mussalman, was alas the disaster of kaliyuga.' That is, these estrangements were contingent to the present bad times:

Ke bole Hindu, ke bole Mussaiman
Ke bole boilo sarbanas
Kilike jo samaelore... nayan
Kuli yuge boilo sarbanas.⁷

What is significant for our purposes, here, is the admission of contingency itself. For it was precisely the fear of contingency that led the Bengali middle classes to finally neutralize their formulation of poetics as practice—a practice which sought to go beyond the constraints of all-explanatory knowledge. If, however, one could take seriously the Santals' recognition of the contingent nature of everyday reality, colonialism itself could appear as the biggest contingency of all—a contingency which could never be fully explained by a historical knowledge of the self/nation and a contingency which, however overwhelming, remained, because of its very contingent character, transient and eminently negotiable in practice. A recent Santal author, despite thematizing history in terms of the dominant *arya-anarya* split, has reiterated this contingent and open-ended nature of Santal identity 'through the ages'. Santal bintis or recitations of the past, N. Hembrom says, 'were tested time and again' as to their truths. The journey of the ancestors and their collection of stories and experiences constituted the Santals' *sari-panja* or the 'expedition' to truth. One of the Santal festivals, *Dasain*, thus not only celebrated *raska* or pleasure, it also commemorated and 'verified' the words of the 'oldest of the old generations who had suffered for the cause of desh and dishom, land and country'.⁸ The Santals thus saw their knowledge as a provisional body of truths, produced out of the practice of collective

journeying, truths which had to be reassessed along the way, along changing positions and practices. The *Karam* festival of the Santals, therefore, invoked *karam gosain*, the deity of hard and honest work, in the twin branches of the *karam* tree. The story goes that once upon a time, *dharam*—roughly translated as normative knowledge or truth—had committed the sin of mocking *karam* or work/practice. Hurt by his brother's contempt, *karam* deserted *dharam*. Since then, *dharam* suffered endlessly, because there was no work to accompany him. So he had finally to undertake great pains to woo *karam* back.⁹

If we take this Santal lesson seriously, that even knowledge is a provisional act of expedition, which must be accompanied by practices at every step, proper names, and language itself—the apparently natural ground of identity—come across as a temporal and contingent entity. Suhridkumar Bhoomik reminds us how nationalized languages like Bengali were actually produced through a forgetting of the shared temporality of utterance between Bengali and 'primitive' Kharwar languages. He shows how the pauses, the rhythms and the syllabic emphases of Bengali folk-poetry and *vratakatha* matched, not to Sanskrit poetic metres, but to the temporalization in Santal songs and musical *matras*.¹⁰ Debes Roy's path breaking work, on the other hand, shows how written Bengali in the nineteenth century was produced through an imitation of English syntax and verb forms, thus making 'nationalized' and literary Bengali almost intranslatable into spoken and 'popular' Bengali.¹¹ It is appropriate therefore, to end with another Santal story. Ramdas Manjhi Tudu's *Kharwal Bamsak Dharmputhi* says that naming is an act simultaneous to the clearing of the forest—that there cannot be a name, an identity, without a collective work or practice.

The sound came from/Where the sun sets/Then the great storm/
 And the reckless rain/The earth softened, the rivers/Flooded/The
 great mountain said in Cai Campa, Chirunagar/We shall clear the
 forest/Then they cleared the forest/And sowed *hari erba*/Then the
 man and woman/Had a daughter/The eldest/On the ninth day they
 named her first.¹²

This narration of the Santal creation story, in which the first child was named on the day of sowing, could only be significant, not as

historical knowledge of a past which remained true irrespective of the present, but as a reminder that naming must occur in association with everyday practice, and that the name must be recited at every naming ceremony of every newborn, just as the Santal creation stories were meant to be. This is a reminder that the name, like language, too is a contingent and temporal act. And this name holds true only in the necessary presence of others to whom a Santal is a Santal—for in the absence of the other, who calls a Santal a Santal, the Santal is only a hor, a human.

[NOTES]

1. *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Coen, Pittsburgh, 1987, pp. 76–7.
2. Ashish Nandy, *Rabindranath Thakur and the Illegitimacy of Nationalism*, Delhi, 1994.
3. Ranabir Samaddar, 'Territory and People: The Disciplining of Historical Memory', in *Texts of Power*, ed. Partha Chatterjee, Calcutta, 1996, pp. 167–99; Ashim Adhikary and Ranajit Bhattacharya, 'The Extremist Movement: an Appraisal of the Naxalite Movement with Special Reference to its Repercussions among Tribes', in K.S. Singh (ed.), *Tribal Movements in India II*, Delhi, 1983, pp. 119–27.
4. *Time and the Other*, p. 39.
5. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, 1979, p. 247.
6. W.G. Archer, *Tribal Law and Justice: A Report on the Santal*, New Delhi, reprint, 1984, pp. 559–64.
7. W. Archer and G.G. Soren (eds), *Hor Seven*, Benagaria, 1943, p. 372.
8. *Austrie Civilisation of India*, Calcutta, 1982, Preface, pp. 35, 41.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 42–3.
10. *Adibashider Bhasa o Bangla*, Mecheda, 1991, pp. 4–5.
11. *Upanibeser Samaj o Bangla Sangbadik Gadya*, Calcutta, 1990.
12. Probably composed in 1897–8, quoted in S. Bhounik (ed.), *Saontali Gan o Kabita Samkalan*, Calcutta, 1996, p. 91.