

the hero of Khagendranath Mitra's *Ajana Desher Pathe* (On the Road to Unknown Land, 1930), reflecting on the heroic feats of the Western pioneers says to himself:

‘তারা এক একটি দেশ আবিষ্কার করেছেন। কিন্তু এ সবে উদ্দেশ্য কি ছিল? যশ এবং স্বদেশের সম্পদবৃদ্ধি। কিন্তু সে কিসের জন্যে এত কষ্ট ভোগ করছে? ..... সেতো পরাধীন দেশের এক নগণ্য যুবা মাত্র।’

(They had discovered one land after another... But what was the object of all this? Fame and increase of their nations' wealth. But why is he going through such pains? ...After all, he is only an inconsequential youth of a country in chains.)<sup>22</sup> The introduction of a hiatus between expectancy and fulfilment results in a radical violation of the narrative-contract peculiar to the sub-genre — and through this sudden lapse in continuity, what is foregrounded is a deep-rooted sense of lack of self-sufficiency. The point of dislocation at which the sequence of predictable episodes is broken, thus making the text come unstuck at the joints, is too crucial to be dismissed as only tangentially important — it is in fact the crux. Besides bringing about a cessation in mobility, the abrupt stoppage, also alters the existing ratio between ‘constraint’ and ‘mobility’. The joint invocation of these two words, leads us back to the question of ‘culture’, a question which has only been half-addressed and now requires to be dealt with from the perspective of the colonized elite.

### ‘Impressure’ and ‘Erasure’

In Bankimchandra's *Dharmatattva*, a Master engages in a dialogue with a Disciple to explain to him the intricacies of ‘anushilan’, a concept of utmost complexity. At one point, the rather presumptuous Disciple exclaims: ‘এ যে বিলাতী Doctrine of Culture!’ (Strange! this is the European *Doctrine of Culture*!)<sup>23</sup> A bit exasperated by the squeakings of a little puppy, the Master retorts; ‘Culture . বিলাতী জিনিস নহে। ইহা হিন্দুধর্মের সারংশ।’ (Culture is no foreign thing. It is an essential component of Hinduism.)<sup>24</sup> Expositulating further he says, no Matthew Arnold can ever grasp the full

significance of “anushilan”; the married woman’s veneration for her husband-god, the laws of abstinence for widows, the rules for rituals, the practices of tantra and yoga — implicit in all this is the doctrine of “anushilan”. Two points of decisive importance emerge from the Master’s argument: first, by neatly appropriating the conceptual category of ‘culture’ for the Hindu tradition, by wrenching it, as it were, from the hands of the sahibs, what is put to question is Europe’s claim of having spawned the concept; second, while the notion of ‘culture’ as it has developed in Europe is partial, that of “anushilan”, in vogue from time immemorial in India, is all-inclusive — nothing can evade its grasp. “Anushilan” then is not simply the Bengali equivalent for ‘culture’, it is neither a translated nor a borrowed term. And since the connotations of a stronger concept cannot be perceived in full if one tries to read it in the light of a weaker one, it is advisable to reverse the journey and move from the stronger to the weaker. This ‘reversal of journey’ signals a reversal of priorities and preferences. What the Master in Bankimchandra’s *Dharmatattva* pleads for is a correct and unbiased appraisal of the merits of ‘East’ and ‘West’; he seems to be saying, though we’ve long been accustomed to accepting the superiority of the ‘West’, it is high time we woke up to the reality and understood that the honour belonged to an eastern nation, that is, India alone. The Master, however, like the author of the text himself, is no dreamy-eyed idealist — he does not go to the extent of writing off the ‘West’ completely. He is far too cautious in his maneuverings; and this cautiousness is reflected in the idea of “anushilan” itself — “anushilan” does not negate ‘culture’, it only supplements the latter; the implication being that outright rejection of ‘West’, expelling what is always-already absorbed, is pointless.

The Master’s thesis can be recast in the following manner: while it is not just unwise but positively damaging to try to erase all traces deposited in the people of ‘East’ by ‘West’ and to interrupt the complex process of sedimentation and accretion which constitutes them, it is nonetheless important to realize that some of these ‘impressions’ have been pernicious, their disorienting influence has resulted in part-amnesia. The colonial double bond of ‘impressure’

and 'erasure', though stifling, is too strong to be wished away at will. Under this circumstance, the Master's counsel is to go for the optimum: one must only strive to circumvent a few of the impediments; anything more ambitious might cause large-scale disturbances. It all boils down to saying, India must somehow spell out to the world, in clear and bold letters, that she too has a destiny of her own. To make others accept and entertain India's claim of distinctiveness, it naturally becomes incumbent upon the Indians to first mark out something unique about themselves, and next to display it as a sort of exhibit. Then again, that being the only territory the Indians can regard as sacred and sovereign, it must be zealously guarded against all forms of encroachment — the rights of access to that special niche, must, at all costs, be denied to the foreigners. The Master also suggests in broad outlines, how that niche is to be figured: whatever stays of "anushilan" once 'culture' is accounted for, is, solely ours — that 'surplus', overflowing in bounty, stands for the 'spiritual essence', the 'dominating strain', the 'national character' of 'eternal' India, in brief, for the haloed Brahminical tradition. Fastening on to this 'fine excess', what the principal ideologues of 'Bengal Renaissance' sought, was to mark a difference from the 'West' which would in no way be demeaning. But since 'innate Indianness' was defined in terms of Hinduism alone, was composed of elements quite alien to a large section of the Indian populace, it also conduced difference and dissension within the country. While the pride in the Orientalist fiction called 'the glorious Hindu past' helped to strengthen affinities between members of the 'elect' community, it had an alienating impact on others, especially the Muslims. But conscripted within a narrow colonial space, neither was it possible for most of the bhadraloks to posit signs of absolute difference relative to the 'West'. Mobility for them meant a mere widening of the mental horizon; hence it was their fate to dream of a grand super-structure minus the support of material base, and to be struck by a never-to-be-requited wanderlust. More and more caught up in a world economy that ensured uneven development — an imbalance, not conjectural but organic to the system — the bhadraloks had to settle for a compromise, a

compromise which at the same time buttressed their position at home: they did neither opt for unconditional 'identity' nor unconditional 'difference', but for difference-in-identity. Hence the agenda was to play up differences in the realms of 'tradition' and 'culture', but in a way that would not prevent the elect from harkening to the persuasive calls of 'modernity' and harness themselves to the strenuous task of becoming identical with the 'West' in 'political' and 'economic' fields. However it isn't as though no one attacked or put to ridicule this agenda: no dominant ideology is so perfect as to be able to silence all alternate or oppositional voices. Therefore the discourses, weighty and ceremonious, that resound in any social space, must be heard in conjunction with utterances which seek to undermine them. It isn't as if the politics of separating 'culture' from material production, as decreed by the makers of modernity in Bengal, was not understood or not wryly commented upon by many, including those who themselves partly contributed to the same process.

That apparent separation served two objects. First, the exaggerated claims of cultural autonomy worked to compensate for economic and political dependence. The young Rabindranath, at his bellicose best, mocked the pathetic tactics of bruised and emaciated egos in words as barbed as these:

‘আমরা পরাধীন জাতি। আমরা পরের কাছে অপমানিত, সূতরাং ঘরে সম্মানের প্রত্যাশী। এইজন্য আমরা ইংরেজকে বলিতে চাই — ইংরেজ, তোমাদের শত্রু বড়ো, কিন্তু আমাদের শত্রু বড়ো; তোমরা রাজা, আমরা আর্ষ।’

(We are dependent people. Denigrated by others, we look for honour at home. Therefore we wish to say to the English — Englishman, your weapons are mighty, our scriptures are mighty; you are the King, we are Aryans.)<sup>25</sup> The second fall-out of the separation was: cultural 'regeneration' in the line of "anushilan" — it is telling that 're' is the most taxed of all prefixes in the works of the Bengali bhadralok — was viewed as the mediating agency which could alter the peripheral status of India and make it, politically and economically, at par with the Western developed nations. Again in the words of Rabindranath: