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**Tradition, Politics, and the Arts in Calcutta :
Creating a Bengali Postcolonial Aesthetic**

By

Julia Lynn Butterfield

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York**

2002

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

Tradition, Politics, and the Arts in Calcutta :
Creating a Bengali Postcolonial Aesthetic

By

Julia Lynn Butterfield

Advisor: Jane Schneider

This study examines the work and ideas of artists, film-makers, cultural critics, and theatre workers in the Indian city of Calcutta and seeks to characterize a canon of vernacular (Bengali) modernity to which they contribute. I describe the efforts of these “cultural producers” to draw from the diversity of Bengali and Indian “tradition” and to engage with and selectively assimilate Western categories and forms. That they do so primarily in the interest of addressing political issues of local relevance is an important aspect of Bengali criteria and standards of judgement about what makes “good art”.

Part I of the dissertation addresses the specificities of “the Calcutta context”: the city’s transition from an exemplary colonial city to its contemporary postcolonial status. The colonial experience and the rise of a 19th century Western-educated cultural elite known as the *bhadralok* are explained as the historical foundation of the ideology of Bengali modernity. During the Second World War international anti-fascist struggles sparked a global consciousness among Bengali intellectuals already attuned to the local popular politics of the nationalist struggle. The 1943-44 Bengal famine created especial empathy for “the people” and a search for forms to represent their experiences.

Part II presents Calcutta’s experience with theatre, the visual arts, and film, and

offers portraits of individual cultural producers, explaining their backgrounds and presenting their own and cultural critics' accounts of their work and how it is received by audiences. Characteristically the work reveals political content, an interest in history and the colonial past, and a desire to change spectators' thinking.

By examining questions about the sociocultural utility of art in Bengali postcolonial society – its role as a forum for public debate and a reservoir of images (both cosmopolitan and local) to draw on and contribute to a collective sense of self and a sustaining pride in Calcutta's heritage – I conclude that Bengali aesthetic modernity has served as an anti-imperialist gesture, a way of coming to terms with the legacy of colonialism, thereby enabling Calcutta's transition to postcoloniality.

Epigraph

Calcutta (excerpts) (1953)
by Buddhadev Bose (1908-74)

The evening lights in Chowringhee, the afternoon fragrance
Of the asphalt,
The huge swirling currents of strange crowds
On the footpaths,
And the descent of blue clouds on thousands
Of white rooftops
Made me mad with delight.

...

None can claim you: "You are mine alone,"
You are illusive, daughter of commerce
Parcelled out to the world—
But I gained my freedom when I was able
To whisper into the ears of your air:
"I'm yours."

...

The struggles during the famine,
The death of the heart,
The darkness of anarchy,
The partition and partings,
The arguments gritty like stone chips,
Theories honed by grinding of teeth—
It was on this lacerated soul of Bengal
That the 'gulmohar'¹ of my last summer blossomed—
And drooped.

¹ The gul mohar is a showy, fast-growing roadside shade tree with feathery and very elegant compound leaves and large pods. Native to Madagascar, it was introduced to India by the mid 19th century. During the hottest part of the year, immediately preceding the monsoon, the leaves drop off completely and large numbers of bright scarlet flowers burst open in a display that inspires the English name which is "Fire Tree." From the fringed scarlet calyx at the base of the flower derives the scientific name *Delonix regia* Raf; *Delonix* means "with a clear claw or nail" (Santapau 1991 [1966]: 33-35). Fiery hues emerging out of devastation, blossoming yet armed, make for a powerful poetic image.

Whatever we loved—
 The fragrance of the learned aristocracy,
 Friendship, love, grace,
 The developed personality—
 One by one all collapsed,
 Rolled down upon the stones of your pavements.
 The trees died. There were no birds left.

. . .

How many holocausts do you need
 For your rebirth?
 How many more deaths will you invite?
 Yet, dreams are immortal.
 I can never think of a civilization disappearing;
 Go, my wishes are shouting.
 I don't have any power, but my wishes have.
 I'm dropping the seeds of my wishes
 On the soil of your future.
 Are you planning to collect their harvest
 In some distant future—
 Won't you let me know even this?

(translated by Sumanta Bannerjee [in Sen, ed. 1990-91: 10-11])

Dedication

In memory of three dear friends and committed journalists:
To my mother, **Jan Butterfield**, (who taught me to trust my intuition
and to believe that I could do anything I set my mind to),
to **Helio Belik** (who preached spontaneity and appreciation for little presents),
and to **Jasvinder** (who gave me India, with a critical, political perspective from the very
start)

Their passion for “the work,” their eye for aesthetic detail, and sense of the comic have
enriched my life immeasurably.

Acknowledgments

Funding for the research was provided by an IIE Fulbright Program Grant for Research Abroad and by a Wenner Gren Foundation Predoctoral Small Grant. I also received an American Institute for Indian Studies Fellowship for their Advanced Bengali Language Program in Calcutta. Support for the writing of the dissertation came from a CUNY Silk Dissertation Year Fellowship and an especially engaging position as a CUNY Writing Fellow at the Borough of Manhattan Community College in the final stretch.

Completing this work has been a long and arduous process, and it breaks my heart how long it's been since I walked the Calcutta streets in sandals and a sari. But I haven't forgotten what it felt like, the warmth of the welcome I received there or the curiosity and appreciation my questions inspired. My work has been greatly enriched by conversations with the city's vibrant, verbal, often endearingly hospitable community of journalists, political and social activists, civil servants, architects, theatre and film people, artists, and historians. Uma DasGupta of the US Educational Foundation of India was my gracious guide and advisor who always kept her cool, oblivious to the shouts and burning effigies of Uncle Sam outside. Indranath Bandyopadhyay showed me the CPIM's cultural front from the inside; his Spartan little room decorated with images of Lenin, Rabindranath and Charlie Chaplin, the door always open for political advice, and a table cluttered with art work, books and political literature, always struck me as the epitome of Calcutta.

Other inspiration came from Debashis Nayak of CRUTA who made the culture and architecture of 19th century Calcutta come alive for me, and from Ramaswamy and Achinto who showed me the humanity and ingenuity of bustee dwellers and whose words and images communicated their documentary commitment to the city. Conversations with Asok Mitra, I.C.S., in which he shared his books, his ideas about art, his memories of the city, and allowed me to peruse his bookshelves and art collection were especially treasured moments. Swapan Basu privileged me with Bengali folk songs, his beautiful voice, and company for good political theatre. Raj and Kitty gave memorable parties on Prince Anwar Shah Road, where I saw the "Santiniketan ethos" in action and felt free enough to sample a little Indian rum. The staff of the Unnayan library on Garcha Road offered a cool place to hide when the city got too much and provided me with books, articles, and afternoon tea.

For foundational knowledge in Bengali culture I am particularly indebted to my Bengali teachers, Sagoree Korom, Farida Majid, Sucharita Guha and especially to Pratima Dutt whose cultural insight, girlish delight and motherly advice were a salvation. At the American Institute for Indian Studies on Swinhoe street where my Calcutta adventures began, Aditi Sen gave us entree to Ballyganj's produce vendors and video shops, and taught us how to wear a sari; Tarun Mitra provided stimulating lunch conversation about literature and art. William Reese and Leslie Minot were my co-conspirators in a revolution of sorts staged over tea and sweets. Thanks are certainly due

to my Calcutta landlords J.R. Das and Ajit Nain for their patience and tolerance when they knew not what to make of this unmarried American lady scholar and her late night comings and goings. I am particularly grateful for the friendship of Chirantan Sur, who taught me so much about sociability and our cultural selves, and was never for a moment my “anthropological experiment.” And I guess it will be here that I must gratefully acknowledge and offer my most heartfelt thanks to Sabbir Yasim an (extra-)ordinary working Indian whose bravery and pure human feeling saved my life one February morning along a North Indian rail line.

My friends in New York (and especially Diana Agosta, Geraldine Casey, Mark Harrington, Mitu and Peter Hirshman, Sharryn Kasmir, Paul Mishler, and Kenny Wessel) kept me plied with all the good and important things in life – conversation and encouragement, food and drink, film, music, art, and politics. Dwijen Bhattacharya and Sudipto Chatterjee did their best to keep me in touch with Bengali culture here in New York; Parag Amladi shared insights on life and Indian film. What proved to be an intellectually engaging and very productive collective, a dissertation group led by Jane Schneider and Vincent Crapanzano with Alcira Forero, Murphy Halliburton, Alfredo Gonzalez, Trenholme Junghans, Carmen Medeiros, Guita Ranjbaran, Jonathan Shannon, and Beata Vidacs has greatly enhanced my work as well as my spirits. Without their incisive comments and moral support and the after-meetings socializing at O'Reilly's I might never have finished.

With much of my Calcutta fieldwork left unfinished I had to complete my research in US libraries. The New York Public Library was an astounding resource and an awe-inspiring place to work. John Lundquist of the library's Oriental Division provided particular assistance and good cheer. But my favorite librarian is Nancy Goldman at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, who provided moral support, the most amazing clipping archives and free xeroxing. Charles Silver & Ron Magliozzi at the Museum of Modern Art Film Archive were also a great help. Richard Peña of the Lincoln Center Film Society provided advice and kindly loaned a rare Ritwik Ghatak video.

The Faculty and staff of the PhD Program in Anthropology have been unflagging in their support, providing me with crucial workspace and never making me feel I had overstayed my welcome. Bureaucratic tangles and tense deadline moments were smoothed by Terri Vulcano and Judith Attride in the old days and Ellen DeRiso and Heather Clarke in the new. The department's advocacy of public education and collective sense of commitment to social justice has been a powerful inspiration. I leave with a strong belief in CUNY's mission and a desire to carry on the work. Professors Talal Asad, Judith Balfe, Vincent Crapanzano, May Ebiara, Faye Ginsberg, Ed Hansen, Bill Kornblum, Shirley Lindenbaum, Louise Lennihan, Joan Mencher, Rolf Meyersohn, June Nash, Jerry Sider, and the late Eric Wolf offered me solidarity and enlightenment along the way. Special thanks are due to my advisor Jane Schneider whose passion for history and scholarship set an example, and whose enthusiasm and unwavering confidence in me has carried me through.

I maintain my ties and seek relaxation on the West coast as well. My Bay Area friends (Nancy Goldman, Michael Grotsky, Sandra Hyde, and Tim Kingston) have provided refuge and a rare sense of continuity in my life. My family has always been proud and supportive of my research. That they had to join forces to airlift me out of India and oversee my recovery was a terrible thing, but they all mobilized with great love and grace. That my mother did not live to see me called “Dr. Butterfield” is a profound regret for me, but she did know it was imminent and that the final draft had been delivered. My aunt Jil (a.k.a. “My Vigil Auntie”) made Herculean efforts to negotiate the minefields of medical bureaucracies with their the mounds of paperwork and contradictory information, in order to smooth treatment for both for me and my mother. In caring for my mother with compassion, she and my uncle Derek provided me the space I needed to finish this work; for that I am profoundly grateful.

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Map of West Bengal

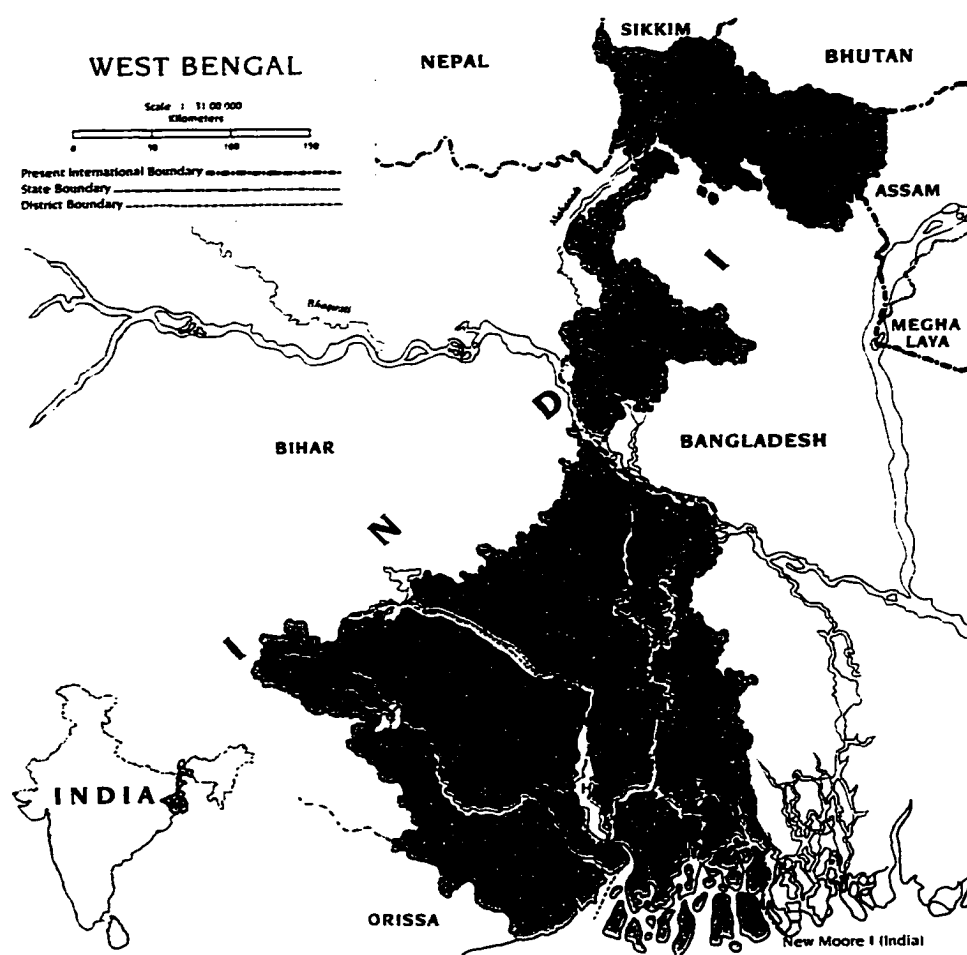


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Part I: A Foreword: Postcoloniality as Palimpsest

In a sense, the story of Calcutta is the story of India and the story of the so-called Third World in miniature. It is the story of how and why Empire was created and what happened when Empire finished. It is the story of people turning violently to Communism for salvation. It is also the story of Industrial Revolution. The imperial residue of Calcutta, a generation after Empire ended, is both a monstrous and a marvellous city (Moorehouse 1983[1971]:7).

These observations from an explanatory foreword to Geoffrey Moorhouse's popular monograph Calcutta: The City Revealed summarize in the broadest possible strokes the attraction Calcutta presented to me as a young anthropologist interested in politics and urban society and colonial history as I contemplated conducting fieldwork in India. I was fascinated by the notion of "imperial residue" (what would that look like on the ground? How would people talk about it? Or would they?). Would Calcutta, as a former colonial capital, still look and feel like a palimpsest, with layers of history bleeding through, influencing social life and daily interactions? If the Bengali reaction Moorehouse seized upon was "people turning violently to Communism for salvation," the reactive response I have in mind is people turning for salvation not to politics but to the expressive, critical, and often politicized, culture of the arts. After an unimaginably circuitous journey, I present here my findings which it is hoped reflect as sensitive and meticulously researched a portrayal of the modernity of Calcutta's aesthetic and intellectual culture as was humanly possible for me under the circumstances. That I have not been immune to the undeniable passion Bengalis have for their city and their love/hate relationship to all its contradictions should be clear from what is to follow. That my decision to leave the city was not a willful one, the circumstances of my departure a strange synchronicity of historical, political and personal events, is part of a personal tragedy that I hope is a less obvious feature of what the reader will encounter in all that is presented here.

Chapter One: Calcutta's Cultural Producers and the Construction of Postcoloniality

This work is intended as an ethnographic study of cultural producers in the modern Indian city of Calcutta, and the characteristic political and socio-cultural discourse that the city's cultural production reflects and to which it in turn contributes. Focusing on a period that begins just prior to independence in 1947 and runs through the three decades immediately following, my aim is to interrogate the role of aesthetics in colonial and post-colonial Calcutta, and to depict the social history of cultural production not merely as a reflection of the city's social reality, but as a highly conscious and deliberate strategy of socio-cultural intervention.

I want to analyze the social function of the arts in the city's political and cultural life and pose some questions: How does cultural production contribute to Bengali social life? What culturally significant issues do the arts address? How does art play a role in the formation of narratives of the city's cultural memory?

I will examine the ideology of the city's cultural/critical producers in an attempt to highlight their self-consciously political efforts to create what I want to characterize as a postcolonial aesthetic. Central to the efforts of these artists and intellectuals and their project of postcolonial critique is a struggle over representation, which challenges colonialism's depiction of cultural identity and assignment of subject positions. These identity issues take on particular salience in Calcutta, in relation, response, and reaction to "the West," and specifically to the West's often Orientalist impressions of India and exoticizing conceptions of "Indianness." With this focus on the politics of representation, I will then go on to

analyze the discursive context for the production and reception of works in a variety of media, while situating the producers and their works in the context of local media histories.

Why Focus on Cultural Elites?

This study has roots which extend to my attempts in the mid-late 1980s to formulate an anthropological approach to the study of colonialism, focusing on the socio-cultural impact of European imperialism with attention to both its material and ideological dimensions. It is now my intention to offer an analysis of colonial and post-colonial cultural production in Calcutta as an instance of ‘native reaction’ – as one way of approaching the problem of the colonized’s resistance. With attention to the political-economic context, I will examine an urbanized cultural elite’s attempts at agency and resistance in response to imperialism and in pursuit of its own nationalist/regionalist impulses and political agendas.¹ In his recent book Postcolonial Theory, Bart Moore-Gilbert referred to European imperialism as having “complementary components,” namely “the processes of subject constitution and material exploitation” (1997:100). Although this study focuses on the implications of the former component – the ideological dimensions of colonial violence – it does so without wishing to underrate or disclaim the devastating implications of the latter. The correlative class significance of these important issues is all too clear: If the colonized

¹ In the discussion here I will be using the term “cultural elite” to speak broadly about Bengal’s intellectual and artistic community who are engaged in definitional “image making” processes, and the construction of ideologies that make up Bengali cultural identity. I reserve the term “cultural producers” for those actually engaged in the production and exhibition of the arts, and use “intellectuals” to refer to those engaged in the world of ideas often in dialogue with cultural producers.

subalterns bear the brunt of material exploitation in the struggle for daily existence, it is only those more privileged who may engage in struggles over identity and the interpretation of history. The stresses, though differently experienced and articulated, affected all. As cultural critic Geeta Kapur has noted:

Once independence has been gained nationalism itself poses ontological questions – what is at stake in being Indian?...there is a burden of it that rests on a particularly fraught class and its individuals. This is the urban middle class intelligentsia including the artists. This cultural elite rests most uneasily on its privileges...it is seen to stand accused among its people (1990:114).

Kapur makes a particularly trenchant argument about the urban middle class intelligentsia's ideology, its significance and hegemonic role in Indian society. Because its consciousness of identity and role is so far evolved, she argues, this cultural elite – unlike the national bourgeoisie or the peasant and proletarian classes – must accept the burden and “responsibility of reckoning,” by which she means something like the requirement to formulate a guiding ideology “when nationalist truth and unrealized socialism no longer suffice”(114). The burden is “to evolve... subjectivity into an exemplary selfhood that indirectly but surely fulfills the demands of an exemplary nationhood” (114).

Characterizing the “Cultural Producer”

In a recent edited volume, George Marcus adopts the term “cultural producer” as a collective label to refer to individuals who are “critically self-aware” and reflective, “articulate and politically active,” examples of whom are presented as interlocutors in a series of compelling interviews collected as a volume in the “Late Editions” series (Marcus,

ed. 1997). Marcus bypasses the term “intellectual” – with a nod to the “cachet” among left-liberal critics of Gramsci’s “organic intellectual” – noting that the latter, conceptually associated as it is with “social theoretical frameworks of modernity (that is, derivations of Marxist thought),” is, given “current global transformations,” a term that has outlived its relevance (9). Furthermore, “organic intellectual” did not seem particularly germane given that the intended objects of analysis were middle class professionals working in media production, and the term, as Marcus notes, is most readily applied to members of the subaltern or proletarian classes. Finding the term “cultural producer” most expedient for his needs, Marcus offers this explanation:

[It] is a term in common usage today in the discourse of cultural studies, media studies, and social science that itself signals pragmatically the so-called crisis of representation. It serves the purpose of labeling those who engage in intellectual work in various genres and who are difficult to pin down by any single speciality, craft, art, expertise, or professional role. It is a knowingly vague designation and signifies a cross-cutting or blurring of genres of media in their activities (Marcus, ed.1997:8).

Thus, “cultural producer” has the advantage of more easily encompassing a certain fluidity that is appealing to contemporary eyes. Such surprises in the crossing of genres and traversing of social locations have now become increasingly familiar in a transnational era. Marcus further justifies his selection by noting that the term is more appropriate to the current paradigmatic shift in attention away from class politics to social movements. But as Marcus hastens to add, “the designation cultural producer retains the attraction that organic intellectual has had of carrying with it the connotation of commitment to cultural critique and activism”(9).

An important factor in Marcus’ attraction to the term “cultural producer” is that it

connotes “a loss of faith in available frames of representation” and points to “strong impulses” among those who would document social conditions “to say more than, or to treat what has been missed by,” standard discourses (8). This is the aspect of Marcus’ discussion that seems most relevant here. The Bengali cultural producers I am discussing are certainly seeking new frames of representation, but as will become clear, this urge to find new forms is by no means the endpoint of their efforts. Marcus expresses it in these terms:

[I]n place of representation itself, there is a strong desire among cultural producers for connection with and effect upon their audiences/spectators – this is, indeed, the traditional desire of the performer and the activist (8).

Thus along with the urge to represent, Bengali cultural producers typically exhibit an urge to communicate, to make an impact on their society, and to effect change. They may formulate and test their ideas in the context of discussion with a local community of intellectuals, but they ultimately seek to reach, and engage the interests of, a broader public.

As we will see, a strong sense of community and an ideal of collective identity and shared tradition tend to prevail among cultural producers, and the intellectual community of which they are a part. The more politicized among this cultural elite (those who opt for the Left and/or adopt the identity of “fellow-traveler”) feel a compulsion to understand and communicate the experiences of the common people. Expressing a desire to share in the people’s pleasures as well as their suffering, cultural production in Bengal from the 1930s onward increasingly incorporated popular representations. Efforts on the part of cultural producers to incorporate these popular stories and perceptions of the material world into their own world view and forms of expression, and the frequent descriptions of these encounters with the subaltern as significant transformative experiences, form central themes

of this investigation.

Finally, it should be noted here that the standard term in Indian English discourse for what are here being labeled “cultural producers” is “artistes.” Theatre people, dancers, singers, film-makers, and musicians refer to themselves in such terms, and especially when speaking collectively. To these American ears, this always sounded a trifle precious. At the same time, self-professed marxists, socialists, and communists referred to such people or themselves among them as “cultural workers,” or sometimes “cultural activists.” This kind of rank-and-file approach to all that is required in executing and mounting cultural productions, and the avoidance of hierarchy and “star-billing” in company organization it connotes, I must say I found rather refreshing once my initial surprise became a smiling recognition, a kind of fist-in-the-air “yeah, why not?”

The Politics of Culture in Calcutta

The politics of culture and aesthetic debate in Calcutta thrives on contradictions, and encompasses a seemingly impossible unity of opposites in the range of issues with which it deals: East and West, popular and elite culture, tradition and modernity (and more recently – not to be left out of global cultural debate – postmodernity). Insatiably curious and broad-minded in their internationalism, Calcutta intellectuals engage with global debates of the day from multiple perspectives, taking pride in both their cosmopolitan connections and their Bengali identity, and reveling in the diversity of their aesthetic experience.

With an ongoing trajectory of what John Roberts refers to as the “nationalist/

modernist dialectic” as backdrop, the politics of the city’s cultural debate can be intense (Roberts 1994). On the one hand one encounters prideful celebration of an Indian or more specifically Bengali cultural aesthetic and traditions, and praise for, or claims to, “authenticity” and “Indianness.” On the other hand there is frequent adulation for “foreign-returned” practitioners and increased status for those whose work contains references to extensive contacts and familiarity with movements abroad. Attitudes toward Western modernist cultural practices are contradictory, often passionately verbalized, ranging from disdainful rejection to conscious, studied emulation. Artists are circumspect about foreign inspiration and assimilation of Western forms and techniques; “wholesale borrowing” is always seen as negative and widely criticized. But so is “wholesale rejection.”

Calcutta intellectuals are self-conscious in their embrace of these complex confrontations, combining elements in an ironic “code-switching” personal style that is charismatic and often astoundingly articulate. Art’s contribution as a form of criticism to Calcutta’s passionate public dialogue and perennial social debate has fuelled further critique and cultural production, while strengthening, celebrating and extending a particular cultural tradition. It is a heterogeneous, living tradition that prides itself on its hybridity, incorporating both indigenous (i.e regional or national) elements and cosmopolitan (international) ones. Calcutta’s artists are engaged in an ongoing process of self-reflexive and socially inquiring analysis that reverberates in the critical reception of their work and, importantly, is always generating wider public debates. These debates contribute to the creation of a rich, self-consciously politicized tradition in Calcutta’s artistic and cultural “scene.”

For critical, socially-conscious, Bengali intellectuals, art and cultural production can provide a means of confronting cultural crisis. In an essay on the cultural vitality of urban environments entitled “the Urban Swirl,” Ulf Hannerz attempts to identify factors that are “culturally generative” in the urban context – invoking concepts such as “diversity,” “interaction,” “engagement,” and “the spatial proximity of the everyday and the avantgardes”(1992: 215). While all of these are features of life in Calcutta (and indeed 19th century Calcutta is one of his case studies, along with Vienna and San Francisco), another of his observations is particularly relevant and worthy of pursuit here. It is the idea that “a sense of affinity, an availability of metaphors” may be intensified by “a common feeling of cultural crisis resulting from historical change” (211).

In my reading of Calcutta’s cultural producers and their efforts, it is this all pervading sense of cultural crisis that spurs production on. To some extent it has always been there; a result of Bengal’s constantly shifting landscape of cultural and historical encounter (cf. Partha Chatterjee 1997). Narratives of crisis, metaphors of decay and degeneration seem to be on every adult Bengali’s lips. The culture is dying, tradition is degenerating into vulgarity, the most treasured aspects of society (such as the love of extended intellectual debate and discussion known as *adda*) are “drying up”. Although on the surface these may be merely the doom and gloom expressions of disgruntled cynics, and conservatives resistant to change, such narratives on the part of cultural producers and critics alike are intended as a call to arms. Tradition (and a sense of who “we” are and what we hold most sacred – ‘the Bengali way of doing things’) must be rescued! It is in this sense that the feeling of cultural crisis can be culturally generative as Hannerz suggests. And it is here that a community of

cultural producers armed with a “sense of affinity” can spur each other on, encouraging one another to mine local tradition(s), and create works that use available metaphors to actively respond to what they sense as the catastrophe at hand.

Creating evocative images that respond to contemporary events and engage audience attention, cultural producers contribute to ongoing public discussion by addressing issues consciously perceived as most at stake in a given moment. Naturally the perceived crisis will vary depending on the contemporary political economic and historical conjuncture; the threat of fascism that rallied cultural producers of the late 1930s has given way to present day concerns about religious fundamentalism and fears that globalization will necessarily result in a homogenization of the world’s cultures. The public exhibition of works always provides a means of mobilizing public opinion and community solidarity, a place to encourage debate and a context for community catharsis. That works of art can lodge in communal memory, and hold such a central place in public debate, reveals a great deal about the social utility of art in Bengali society. Indeed, the passionate entry of artists and critics into current debates, and the broad social significance of the issues addressed, make it impossible to view art in Bengal as autonomous from other cultural processes. In Calcutta, art, like politics, is never seen as something apart from life; art is life.

The psychological rewards of this tremendous creative vitality at the center of social life are many. Its most obvious expression is in the valued Bengali cultural institution known as *adda*, an informal and wide-ranging discussion – sometimes organized, more often spontaneous – about society, culture, politics, and their interrelations. It is the satisfaction, in the context of these cultural discussions, of a particularly Bengali cultivation of taste, a

love of satire, irony and self-denigrating wit, and above all the savoring of aesthetic experience, that clearly fuel many people's energy for survival in this challenging and stressful urban environment.

The Calcutta Context

This study sets out to examine critical issues in the politics of representation that arise in the process of cultural production, presentation and reception, in the context of, and often in response to, Calcutta's socio-political complexities.

If one imagines a concept of "India" formed in the context of imperial power and colonial domination, and placed against a multi-layered ground of historical texture, Calcutta is the pre-eminent representation. It is a city the Raj created, and then, in the 20th century, left to its own devices, to continue to wrestle with its own debates about history, politics and modernity. An evocative image for me is to see Calcutta as a palimpsest – layer upon partially effaced layer, all of the layers simultaneously present and mutually influencing. The psychic effects and structural legacies of colonialism are omnipresent, and inform both popular and official culture. How, then, to conceptualize the cultural and political landscape of the post-colonial city? If we are to try to characterize Calcutta, perhaps the best way to do so is as a reality that is a field of struggle, a contested and shifting terrain of connections and interplay.

As a former colonial capital, once "the second city of the Raj," Calcutta has a rich and syncretic socio-cultural history. The city's culturally dominant group, an upper caste,

middle class known by the Bengali term *bhadralok*² or “respectable” people, has received Western culture and technology with eagerness and fascination, and been active and enthusiastic in its engagement with varied international strains of modernism.

Yet in the course of this constant and critical assimilation process, the *bhadralok* have always retained a highly politicized cultural pride, rooted in a strong sense of national and regional history and respect for the viability of indigenous tradition. Motivated by nationalist pride, Bengali intellectuals have explored their culture’s folk and tribal roots, inspiring the production of creative work that is tradition-inspired but modern in its self-reflexive and critical aims.³ Foremost among the commitments that aesthetically-inclined Bengalis recognize is the crucial importance of encouraging the creative vitality and heterogeneity of the living tradition. As artists, they need to constantly re-establish a rapport with the past, and their efforts to re-evaluate tradition have fueled creative exploration and experimentation, and nurtured a well-developed sense of contemporary Indian/Bengali ethos. This ethos is often relied upon as a kind of anchoring device in the maelstrom of socio-political changes.

Cultural expression has always been integral to the dynamism of the Bengali tradition. But the Western encounter and the selective cultural borrowings that formed the

² See Chapter Two for further discussion of the *bhadralok*.

³ An important early advocate of the “living traditions” of distinctive regional Bengali art forms (folk songs, dances, painting, and applied arts) as a cultural ideology and a nationalist project was Gurusaday Dutt (1882-1941), a Cambridge-educated East Bengali who served for 35 years as an official and Magistrate of the Indian Civil Service. He lectured widely and founded a youth movement to promote the arts as an educational instrument to “arouse love of country and pride of race” and provide spiritual and moral inspiration (cf. Dutt 1990).

media for what has been labeled a “battle for parity” with the West greatly intensified the pace of social change and stylistic innovation (cf. Schwarz 1997). By producing creative work that has augmented the stock of images available for representing India, beyond those constructed and constrained by Orientalist ideas of European origin, Bengali artists and intellectuals have made major contributions to the cultural heritage of both East and West. Certainly the cultural production and aesthetic discourse of Western-educated *bhadralok*, who were trained in British colonial educational institutions in India and often received European scholarships for post-graduate education abroad, eased the acceptance and incorporation of European modernism into Bengali society.

It is important to keep in mind that traveling across borders and into different contexts, modernist ideas and images, techniques and methodologies often took on entirely different meanings, and served altogether different purposes than they did in the context of their origin in Europe. We will do well to recognize the productivity of these new confrontations in India, and to appreciate the generative contradictions that these new juxtapositions brought forth. As Rushdie has noted in a discussion of postcolonial writing in English, contrary to an idea that laments all that is or can be lost in translation, the point is to see – in this larger context of cultural/critical production especially – that there is in fact much to be gained in the process (Rushdie 1991:17). It is my contention that, for Bengalis, the assimilation of modernism and its methods – as an aesthetic and philosophical attitude of innovation, sustained as it was by a consciousness at once nationalist and internationalist – constituted an anti-imperialist, oppositional gesture of profound significance.

The Aesthetic-as- (Anti-Imperialist) Critique

Cultural expression in the city, and the public debate it engenders, has historically provided a means of coming to terms with the legacy of colonialism, offering a way of resisting or transcending imperial dominance and the bruises inflicted on cultural nationalist self-esteem. The centrality of aesthetic production's role in the social life of Calcutta must be attributed, I would argue, to the fact that engagement in the production and reception of art, and the pleasures of participation in aesthetic discourse, have for Bengalis significantly eased the wounds of what Gayatri Spivak has aptly named the "epistemic violence" of colonialism.

Thus, I want to portray this specifically Bengali version of a postcolonial aesthetic as a form of agency, an enabling discourse that has well served the society to combat the effects of imperial domination and particularly its lingering psychological after-image. In what I am arguing should be seen as an effort to combat the psychic traces of this violence, Calcutta's postcolonial aesthetic-as-critique devotes careful attention to the sphere of images and the historical and socio-political connotations with which they are charged. This concentrated effort requires an engagement in a process of cultural national identity construction that involves a complex dialogue with the past.

While exploring the use of cultural expression as a means of resisting or transcending imperial dominance, I also envision this study as an attempt to write an ethnographic account of the colonized creative imagination in the Bengali context – not as a tale of victimization and humiliation, but as a highly-conscious, carefully considered cultural struggle to survive

and to flourish in contentious circumstances, and often against great odds. The focus will be to analyze specific forays into cultural struggle by means of creative works that consciously position themselves within the politics of postcolonial, anti-imperialist representation.

This elaboration of a postcolonial aesthetic in Calcutta presents a fascinating case study of what Homi Bhabha has referred to as “contramodernity”⁴ – offering an important example that details the development of a canon of modernism with an anti-colonial thrust and a regional particularity.

Assessing Tradition: Producers’ Dialogue with the Past

The nature of cultural struggle in Bengal might be described as a dialectic between what Marcus and Myers in another context have referred to as “a very modernist questioning of received traditions” and “a nostalgia for aesthetic integration with harmonious patterns of cultural life”(1995: 12). This dialectic between cultural nationalist longing and an angry avant-garde iconoclasm seems to pervade the cultural debate. In this dialogue, the city’s cultural elite, its intellectuals and cultural producers, bring together the richness of Bengal’s hybrid cultural history and the socio-political complexities of the colonial cultural legacy.

⁴ As Bhabha notes “postcolonial critique bears witness to those countries and communities...constituted...‘otherwise than modernity.’ Such cultures of a postcolonial *contra-modernity* may be contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with it, resistant to its oppressive, assimilationist technologies; but they also deploy the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to ‘translate,’ and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity”(1994: 6).

It is my intention to explore their use of the aesthetic as a space to engage in discursive struggle. At issue are discussions about the implications of history, debates about the meaning of tradition and its relevance for contemporary life, and a striving to formulate an autonomous form of modernity that is locally serviceable, reflective of context, and does more than merely imitate the West by mirroring its forms.⁵

For many Indian artists and creative intellectuals, the sustenance for creative exploration and experimentation is found in this formal re-evaluation of tradition in terms of modern sensibility. They confront what may be articulated as a three-fold problem: 1) response to tradition, 2) incorporation of new methods and media, often of foreign inspiration and 3) evolution of an individual voice or style. As cultural critic Geeta Kapur notes:

[D]efinitions of tradition and modernity are constantly being repositioned in the discourses of the Third World...the relationship between the two at a substantive level has to be thought through at every point (1990: 115).

As Kapur sees it, tradition is “historically invented in the process of decolonization” (1990:114). It is “what is invented by a society’s cultural vanguard in the course of a struggle” (109). Her fascination with tradition is that it can be mobilized as “an oppositional category, it has the power of resistance...” (110). An invention of nationalism, it is seen as a process – one that Kapur calls “tradition-in-use” (115). Emphasizing the hybridity that characterizes India’s cultural history as process, Kapur makes a plea for a collective

⁵ My interest in autonomous forms of modernity has crystallized as a result of reading, conversing, and collaborating with Jonathan H. Shannon. His work on music, painting, and “the aesthetics of authenticity” in contemporary Syria (cf. Shannon 2001) has offered inspiring comparisons with my own thoughts on Calcutta’s cultural producers and their attachments to Bengali traditions.

interpretive effort:

We have...to look at the peculiarly structured inter-referentiality of Indian national culture as a continuous formation; to look at ourselves aspiring to enrich the neutral ground of our contemporaneity with a crop transplanted from a unique tradition; as also with the universal marker of the age that is modernism...The artists'...task [is that of] making a tradition-in-use that nurtures contemporary existence (117).

This tradition-in-use, an interpretation of tradition seized upon to serve psychic and instrumental needs, is a nurturing and sustaining concept of tradition that can be invoked in the context of cultural and political struggle. It is not merely a defensive reaction but an active innovation that serves the specific needs of the moment and is seen as making a contribution to world culture.

In the media history chapters to follow a broad range of these inventive negotiations with tradition by Calcutta's cultural producers will be considered. These efforts should be seen as a creative refusal to succumb to the sense of inadequacy and cultural devaluation that the colonial encounter sought to inflict. As innovations, they contribute to the formulation of a postcolonial aesthetic that is at once context-sensitive and internationally *au courant*. These criteria coincide with what Partha Chatterjee has described as the middle class standards of legitimacy that became the Bengali cultural norm – to be at once “national” and “comparable with the most advanced international standards” or, in other words, to be indigenously authentic and cosmopolitan (in Mitra, ed. 1985: 84; Chatterjee 1997: 21). Chapter Two will explore the historical roots and construction of this complex, dialectical, and distinctly Bengali ideology.

In contemporary India and Bengal, tradition continues to be a repository of resources for people – both socially and personally. As it is used in public discourse, it provides

images of the past, that can be sensed and captured in stories, with the potential to be continually reformulated and reworked. As Javeed Alam has written:

[T]he past transmitted as tradition...carries a sense of living presence which is cherished. As such, tradition, though historically embedded, is socially present... Ontologically, the ground of its being can only be felt...it is self-evident to one who is inside it (in Fuchs, ed.1994: 24).

In its most obvious sense, tradition is defined in terms of the richness of indigenous culture – as preserved, recorded, remembered and celebrated in orientalist nostalgia and cultural nationalist fantasy. This notion of tradition is evidence of the complex links between indigenous and orientalist discourses, and reveals the manner in which they interplay and have influenced one another in the formation of knowledge about India, and in the conceptualization of the Indian landscape (cf. Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993). The prevalence of “nativist nostalgia,” with its attempts to fix an authentic image of a national essence, I would argue, should be seen as further evidence of how orientalism became embedded in Indian culture, what has been referred to as “internal orientalism” (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993: 11).

We have now become sensitized to what Breckenridge and van der Veer refer to as “the ‘colonial discourse’ mode of entry into the politics of ‘otherness’”(10). The most common method involves placing the other in the colonial past (cf. Fabian 1983), an approach that tends to “ignore the contemporaneity of what used to be the colonial world – its current politics and its debates about modernity” (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993: 10). Indian intellectuals are sensitive to and justifiably angered by these sorts of cultural perceptions and the still pervasive traffic in exotic, “timeless India” images that convey them. But being implicated in that history, sharing in that colonial cultural legacy, even

Indians are not immune to these ways of seeing. Thinking outside entrenched orientalist categories – the artificial “freeze frame” notion of ‘traditional Indian culture’ – when representing India is difficult for everyone. Perhaps it is for the upcoming generation of Indian cultural theorists to indicate a preferable direction, one that could accommodate a more fluid and dialectical way of visualizing the indigenous legacy. As Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir, and Vivek Dhareshwar have noted in criticizing the traditional social science representations of India, “whether Indian or Euro-American”:

This monolithic view of culture...precludes the possibility of seeing tradition as constantly in the making, as strenuously contested and redefined by different communities (1993: 5).

Leaving aside for a moment this strictly indigenous notion of tradition, an equally important conception that one encounters in Calcutta, and a matter of significant cultural pride among Bengali intellectuals, is that of tradition as a creative response to Western domination, an evolving practice of engagement, selective assimilation, and transformation of foreign cultural elements. In a recent discussion critical of the genre of “Commonwealth literature” and its “bogy of authenticity,” Salman Rushdie argued in support of this “composite culture” conception:

...the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition...Eclecticism, the ability to take from the world what seems fitting and to leave the rest, has always been a hallmark of the Indian tradition (Rushdie 1991: 68)

These various readings of “tradition” (from essentialist ones that emphasize the autochthonous to those that praise India’s ability to absorb and creatively assimilate) have been put to use at different times, in different ways, for different ends; as Kapur notes “even the very act of handling the tradition is in a sense political” (1990: 110).

Yet regardless of the connotation selected, the concept of “Bengali tradition” cannot be detached from the colonial context that nurtured it – whether from well-meaning British Orientalists who played the role of midwives in the indigenous tradition’s ‘rebirth’ and its rediscovery by the Bengali middle classes (cf Guha-Thakurta 1992), or from the colonial educational institutions that trained the leaders of Bengal’s ‘Renaissance’ and the vast majority of Calcutta’s cultural producers and critics. As Javeed Alam has noted in a recent article: “Tradition in India...[has been] an ongoing dialogue with itself, that...[over time] alters its own terrain as well as those involved” (in Fuchs,ed.1994: 24). Yet Alam points to a crucial distinction: prior to the British intrusion this dialogue took place within tradition, the “mode of questioning” was “wholly internal to the presuppositions of the tradition” (24).

An example is that of the 16th century movement of Bengali devotionism known as *bhakti* that crystallized around the charismatic personality of Chaitanya. Originating in urban West Bengal, it became a deeply rooted form of mass cultural expression characterized by an intense and passionate relationship with the divine. Continuing in the present day, public exhibition of Vaishnava piety takes the form of communal singing of *kirtan*, songs in praise of Krishna. The movement challenged Brahminical religious hegemony by incorporating Chaitanya’s condemnation of caste, Hindu rituals and idolatry. In emphasizing devotion over ritual, and making use of the Bengali language rather than Sanskrit, it attracted followers from the lower classes. Thus the *bhakti* movement provided an outlet for social discontent, in a protest that could be accommodated within the existing ideology. Brahminical Hinduism responded by both resisting and incorporating Vaishnavism (Embree, ed.1988[1958]: 342; Eaton 1996[1993]: 110).

Tradition was subject to a process of interpretation and re-interpretation, from which emerged a variety of responses and solutions. What made the pre-colonial era distinct in Alam's view was that "there was no external yardstick ...to measure the relevance of tradition" (in Fuchs, ed.1994: 24). Compared with earlier situations of culture contact encountered in the subcontinent, the colonial intrusion constituted a qualitatively different impact upon Hindu conceptions of tradition. In Alam's reading, modernity's implantation in Indian soil introduced "a number of thematic challenges":

[I]ts categories for organising social reality forced a dialogue on tradition...the dialogue took place under a sense of defeat, domination and humiliation, with the realisation of being under foreign rule (25).

According to Alam:

What Islam could not do, colonialism did, it induced a rupture within the ontological basis of tradition. It forced an engagement that became the undoing of tradition as it had existed till then. Received beliefs were no longer taken to be adequate (25).

I see this argument as a compelling way to expand the connotations of Spivak's "epistemic violence." For me, Alam's observations clarify and make visceral the significant disorientations the colonized must have experienced on an ideological plane. Colonialism ruptured people's connections to their tradition, causing them to question essential cultural truths – their beliefs, their ethical choices, their basic understandings of life's meaning. It created an interpretive crisis that intellectuals banded together to address. Being forced to face this challenge to the collective self-identity, with 'tradition' called into question, Bengalis felt their 'racial' and ethnic pride aroused. Many intellectuals and cultural producers felt the need to justify the significance and contemporary relevance of their tradition. In Alam's account it is with this emphatic sense of rupture, and an implied "notion of crisis,"

that “all ‘modern’ exercises of negotiating tradition begin” (25). And as previously noted, clearly this common feeling of cultural crisis,” which provides “a sense of affinity, an availability of metaphors” can be culturally generative as Ulf Hannerz has recognized (Hannerz 1992: 211).

Cultural Producers’ Aims and Commitments

In presenting images of themselves to the outside world for public consumption, Bengali artists take pride, find pleasure, and a certain solace in contradicting occidental assumptions, and in confounding what the Western gaze anticipates in viewing “Indian art.” There is always a certain glee about challenging cultural imperialist prejudices that would establish claims to modernism’s aesthetic breakthroughs as the sole cultural property of Europe and the United States. A kind of righteous oppositional face is presented, asserting that ‘yes we, too, can be internationally-conscious, modern, innovative, even path-breaking avant-garde’ – a certainty that is based on a sense of entitlement rooted in the assumption that modernism, after all, is a universal cultural property available to everyone, without geographic or cultural restrictions.

Local artists pride themselves on mastery of Western forms, but would argue for their right to adapt these “borrowed forms” to communicate highly personal and political themes of local inspiration in artworks that nonetheless speak to global issues and universal humanist concerns. While the assimilation of Western forms and technologies has been constant in Calcutta’s progressive cultural milieu, it has also been circumspect and conscientious with

regard to consideration for local utility and relevance. In whatever medium one chooses to discuss, formalistic borrowings from Western aesthetic traditions can be seen, upon reception, to have served culturally particular local agendas in complex, and intricate ways.

The discussion here is unified by arguments about the Bengali conception of tradition, and creative representations of history and cultural memory. Artists' self-reflexive statements about how they work within and at cross purposes to tradition, and what they see as the most innovative departures in their respective fields, as well as the advances they note in the larger culture will be of particular interest in this regard. As for the broader implications of these questions, the concerns Rushdie articulates in a discussion of post-colonial literature are apposite and can be paraphrased as follows: How can we change and move forward without playing into enemy hands? What are the implications of our creative choices – whether to embrace or reject Western ideas and practices? In short: “How are we to live in the world?” (1991: 18).

The task as Kapur defines it is “to bring existential urgency to questions of contemporaneity” (1990: 117). As the artists' statements discussed in this study will show, it is this sense of “existential urgency” that epitomizes the cultural debate in Bengal. Their capacity to address these issues, in graphic and visual terms, and to make strong impressions that lodge in viewers' memories, are why art matters.

I am particularly interested to examine how artists verbalize their intentionality in “practice-oriented” statements in their own writings, and in published conversations with cultural critics. How do they articulate their relationship with a local audience as opposed to a national or international one? What do they see as their social contribution?

Significantly, participants engage in these discussions to make clear that while they may be caught up in the technical specificities of the production processes and developmental histories of their respective crafts, they never lose sight of the demands and implications of the local context and a sense of obligation to local community as they perceive it. A particular and characteristic compulsion of Calcutta artists and critics is a concern for what might be labeled the “communicative efficacy” of the work under discussion. Artists search for the best form to communicate as directly, effectively, and intensely as possible to their local audience (in the hope that the spectators might change a little and come to see things differently). Calcutta’s socially conscious artists frequently proclaim a concern that their art communicate with a broader popular audience, in order to play an educational and consciousness-raising role for the wider society, and to reach beyond the narrow limits of the urban cultural elite.

And so there are continual discussions in Calcutta of the social relevance of art, and constant debates about art’s ontological justification, particularly in the context of local political, cultural, and historical specificities. In particular what is constantly being assessed is the work’s connection with common experience, with life in the streets. Herein lies its relevance, its primary justification.

I’ve chosen just two examples here, from published statements of cultural critics who write about Bengal, to illustrate the point that, in Calcutta, cultural producers cannot be ivory tower intellectuals, but are expected to remain socially engaged. In writing about the Bengali literary world and Calcutta’s enthusiastic public for “little magazines” and poetry readings, Ron Bannerjee has noted:

The centrality of the poetic tradition in Bengali culture calls for an effort to keep an unbroken link between the street and the study on the part of the poet and the public (1989: xiv).

And Rustom Bharucha, in his monograph on Bengali political theatre, has written:

Theatre...is an activity that needs to be in ceaseless contact with the realities of the world and the inner necessities of our lives (1990: 6).

Constructing a Postcolonial Aesthetic

I see these progressive Bengali modernists, whose work I am examining, as having been engaged in a highly self-conscious process of creating what I am characterizing as a “postcolonial aesthetic.” Despite a history of encounters with the Western tradition that de-legitimized Indian traditions, de-moralized Indian consciousness and primarily valorized successful assimilations of that Other culture, Calcutta-based creative intellectuals devised dynamic strategies of indigenous creative production that constituted an active coming to terms with the contemporary political economic situation and generated debate on issues that the citizens of Calcutta, and the urban middle classes in particular, were forced to confront. Image-making has clearly provided a significant means of socio-cultural intervention.

This “postcolonial aesthetic” under discussion is precisely a rejection of cultural nationalist notions of preserving purity that fetishize the traditional culture’s “authenticity.” Its richness stems from an ironic playfulness with representation and the layered meanings of images, and a selective assimilation from a diversity of influences irrespective of their site of geographical origin. It exhibits an internationalism that is motivated as much by national pride as by intellectual commitment and personal engagement. It represents an ingenious

transformation of foreign cultural lessons, and a conscious rejection of provincialism. It celebrates both the native and the foreign, both tradition and modernity. Its forte is an intermingling, a blurring of boundaries and rigid binary oppositions. My intention is to portray a specifically Bengali version of this postcolonial aesthetic, and to examine the role of this aesthetic as a crucial aid in working through the trauma of cultural de-legitimization and identity crisis that is one of colonialism's enduring legacies. The approach will be to introduce individual cultural producers and their work, and to analyze the discourse surrounding their production so that their creative work may be understood, against an historical background, as specific forays into cultural struggle, and a conscious positioning within the politics of postcolonial representation.

By way of concluding, I want to characterize the postcolonial aesthetic I've been discussing as a process of aesthetic explorations in context, a context that is seen emphatically in social, political and historical terms. This aesthetic might be summarized as a search for new forms to communicate an analysis of socioeconomic reality and a circumspect assimilation of Western innovations with a sense of "local utility" as the constant yardstick. Above all there is a very real need to communicate with audiences both local and foreign, and a consensus that the best work communicates on both levels so that aiming for one should not drown out the effectiveness of communication to the other.

Bengalis have a particular appetite for those Western genres that contain a critical edge and a sensitivity to social reality. The look and feel of Soviet and Italian Neo-realist cinema have made a significant impact. Early Modernist experiments such as the Bauhaus design school and the cubist collage effects of 'School of Paris' are widely appreciated by

intellectuals. Bengali cultural producers have also effectively mined Brecht and Godard's strong sense of iconoclasm and agit-prop aesthetic in devising a politicized aesthetic language.

The individual media chapters in Part II of this study are presented in such a way so as to highlight this Bengali engagement with Euro-American culture, and to narrate the experiences of some of Bengal's most creative thinkers in encountering new foreign influences. In each of the media histories the focus will be upon the selective assimilation of foreign forms, their "retooling" and careful selection by cultural producers in order to address local cultural and political needs, and the artists' personal take on what those needs might be that constitutes their individual message.

Although cultural producers feel a compelling need to express an authentic cultural national identity, it is hegemonic Western culture that is an omnipresent if sometimes unconscious standard by which they measure their own creative output, and that of their society in general. If the everyday conflicts of the dialectic between acceptance or compliance and rejection or resistance have disappeared, along with the presence of the colonial rulers, the creative tensions around the response to Western forms have not. In fact they remain an ongoing feature of the Bengali middle class ideology and a prominent aspect of the political culture of Calcutta's cultural production. One of the larger questions this aesthetic addresses is essentially how to be contemporary and Indian at the same time – what it means in short to be a "modern Indian artist" and, these days, what any of this means in the context of postmodernity and an awareness of a transnational global community.

**Chapter Two: Bengali Response to the Colonial Cultural Legacy:
Building a Cultural-Nationalist/ Modernist Identity:**

The cultural elite of creative producers in Calcutta, whose work and discursive practices this study examines, draw on a particularly complex historical experience that allows them to invoke a range of culturally meaningful concepts and ideas in the various aspects of their cultural struggle and processes of identity formation. Depending on the context and the intentions of the moment, these self-same artists might be seen as contributing to the production of regional, national, or international cultural identities, or be conscious of making a statement that reads simultaneously as regional, national, and international. Similarly their work may be deliberate in its invocation of and ironic play with culturally meaningful oppositions such as East and West or tradition and modernity – questioning boundaries and blurring distinctions, borrowing and “lifting” as if nothing were sacred. The intended audience may be the one at home (and the limitations of local taste are in fact much discussed) or the audience abroad. Certainly, for these artists, the lure of Western praise is all powerful, both for the prestige of international recognition, as well as for the Western markets such affirmation might entail. Yet these producers of culture frequently speak to, and attempt to challenge, the anticipated expectations of Westerners (regarding, for example, what constitutes “Indian art”) in a manner that provides another sort of play.

I would agree with Homi Bhabha’s observation in his discussion of the new “revisionary” South Asian historiography that the transformation of alien impositions in daily practices provided the colonized with opportunities to recover will and agency (Bhabha

1997). While Bhabha's focus is upon what he refers to as "the alien 'rule' of law, language, or the media," my interest is the sphere of images and representations, and the uses Bengalis made of these to depict themselves and their history. I am thus adding certain progressive styles of art, and the notion of a self-consciously avant-garde aesthetic, to Bhabha's list of Western introductions that Indians took it upon themselves to confront, accomodate, and make their own.

Such confrontations (what Bhabha discusses as the not always smooth "course of cultural translation") should be seen to open up emancipatory possibilities (Bhabha 1997: 15). Along with the "hybrid knowledges" produced, "there emerges a mode of judgement or proof less tied to the cultural origins of knowledge and customs and more concerned with... 'use in the world'" (15). These creative translational confrontations in fact "become strategies for coping with the particular challenges of a postcolonial modernity" according to Bhabha – it is living through the contradictions of such a modernity, "enduring its ambivalences and translational realities, [that] may, in fact, create a counter-modernity..." (15).

Given Calcutta's colonial history, and the rich socio-historical context of cultural encounter the city has provided from its inception, it is my assessment that the Bengali version of the national-cultural identity struggle, especially in the twentieth century, has been for intellectuals to elaborate a distinctly national/regional form of modernity.¹ Aiming to

¹ Given the complex history of Bengal vis-a-vis the rest of the subcontinent – from a peripheral frontier with tenacious elements of Buddhist and adivasi (autochthonous or "tribal") culture that resisted "brahminization" and survived under Muslim rule and thereafter, to the initial gateway for British commercial access to the riches within – this "nationality" is particularly convoluted and variable. Bengali identity is made up of

find “a different modernity,” they have drawn lessons from Western contact, but assimilated selectively, ruling out what is deemed inappropriate to the Indian context, and casting aside what is irrelevant to the perceived needs of cultural struggle in Calcutta in particular.

It is my argument that art, and the highly valued socio-political discussion surrounding it, became central to the “strategies for coping” with modernity in Calcutta, and with an urgency and intensity that only increased in the postcolonial context. In a similar vein, in an essay entitled “Our Modernity,” Partha Chatterjee has written: “Our attitude to modernity, ...cannot but be deeply ambiguous...We know that to fashion the forms of our own modernity, we need to have the courage at times to reject the modernities established by others” (1997: 210). This study explores the work and personalities of Calcutta cultural producers who found that sort of courage, and drew upon it to inspire their work, to enlighten and invigorate their audiences and contemporary intellectual discourse, and shape cultural history for Bengal, for India, and for the world at large.

multiple factors – linguistic, religious, geographic – that have overlapped and pulled in opposite directions making it impossible to maintain an autonomous identity coterminous with stable borders. It makes “Bengaliness” so temporally and context-specific as to be virtually indefinable. It is something that is merely recognized by those familiar with the culture – a manner of speaking, a style of joking, an attention to detail in certain traditional articles of clothing (handloom saris, a taste for *khadi* on ceremonial occasions), a certain aesthetic and *swadeshi* sensibility, a reliance on sentiment as a source of social cohesion, an addiction to *adda*. Yet this concept of “Bengaliness,” a cultural essence perhaps, an imagined community certainly, is meaningful for those within it, something fought over, both literally and figuratively, and a frequent topic of conversation.

The Colonial Cultural Legacy

I want to turn now to a discussion of a Bengali sense of cultural nationalism as it emerged from out of the colonial context. My goal is to demonstrate some of the ideological continuities from the 19th century to the present day that exist among the Bengali educated middle class, many of which can be traced to the historical and political economic underpinnings of the colonial experience. This will provide a starting point for what will be my ultimate objective, namely an analysis of Bengali postcoloniality as a state of mind and specifically the role of the arts and the accompanying ‘art world’ discourses in constructing it. I begin with a quote from a young Bengali writer, Amit Chaudhuri (b.1962):

In what way colonialism and its manifestations – education, the railways, the emergence of a new class-structure and new urban centres – represented a troubled, but rich phase in the Indian’s sense of self, and his or her relation to tradition, history, community and change, remains largely unexplored and unknown in the West. And yet...this phase of self-enquiry and self-redefinition is, substantially, what colonialism meant in India...(A. Chaudhuri 1997: 15).

These remarks are striking for the manner in which they speak to linkages between certain objective aspects of the colonial political economy and its institutions, and the ideational repercussions in the intellectual’s struggle to secure a sense of self. They are especially significant in a statement that comes from a writer who, though immersed in the critical, modernist, anti-imperialist, Bengali cultural nationalist tradition, is nonetheless of a generation born significantly after a time when colonialism was – objectively speaking at least – an aspect of immediate, everyday experience. Yet for him, the Indian self is defined in terms equally inflected by this colonial history and a constant yet changing sense of allegiance to tradition and community.

The creative tensions in this struggle to construct a modern Bengali sense of self, and the contributions borrowings from the West have made to it, underwrite the vast majority of themes central to the cultural history of modern Bengal and the changing attitudes of Bengali postcolonial intellectuals. This identity, I would argue, must be seen as both processual (in the sense of an ongoing effort to find, transform, and maintain identity as individuals and as a community) and relational (something produced in the course of contact and interaction with other cultures, experiences and ideas). Because of the complexity of historical processes and the entangled nature of intercultural relations, Calcutta's colonial and post-colonial cultural context served as a kind of crucible for what Partha Chatterjee refers to as "mutally conditioned historicities" (1993: 13). In this urban colonial context, Bengali identity developed in a particularly rich and hybrid manner as a result of complex interrelations between the city's diverse social groups (e.g. between colonizers and natives, Bengali and immigrant populations, and elite and subaltern sectors).

This chapter is intended as a provisional history of the construction of modern Bengali identity with a particular emphasis on the conscious, constitutive efforts made by Calcutta's cultural elite. I will elucidate significant elements of this process so as to enable a fully-contextualized discussion of Bengali modernists' canonic cultural production – its "relation to tradition, history, community and change" as Chaudhuri has phrased it – that is to be offered in later sections. Chaudhuri identifies precisely questions that will be of central interest to my discussion and the contribution these inquiries are intended to make to existing literature:

...to be interested in a canon, you have to be interested in how a nation or community sees itself. You have to be interested...In how a nation sees its own historical process – an area of knowledge that the West, in connection with India, has inquired into very little (Chaudhuri 1997: 17).

By providing a Bengali take on the historical process that has informed their worldview and postcolonial perspective, this chapter will offer a foundation that will facilitate a fuller appreciation of Bengali autonomous modernity, both as a canon of cultural production, and as an anti-imperialist oppositional gesture of critique.

The Origins of Bengali Cultural Nationalism

I will begin this account of the origins of Bengali cultural nationalism by examining its constituent elements in Bengali educational/ pedagogical initiatives of the 19th century, and in the creation of institutional spaces to modernize the Bengali language, its literature, and ultimately Bengali social consciousness. This is a Calcutta-centric, cultural nationalist reckoning of historical experience, an imagined production of a proud and self-conscious urban intellectual community. To initiate the discussion, we must turn back to early 19th century British debates over cultural policy for India, and their polarization into what have been described as the Orientalist and Anglicist positions. While the latter won out in terms of official East India Company policy during the 1829-35 administration of Governor-General Bentinck, its victory proclaimed by Macaulay's Education policy (see below p. 45ff), it was the Orientalists' initiatives that initially fostered Bengali openness and enthusiasm to Western ideas and education. Operating from a position of cultural respect and genuine intellectual curiosity about Indian tradition, and often motivated by missionary

zeal, the rapport they established with members of the Bengali intelligentsia facilitated the transmission of new cultural ideas, and led to the creation of numerous “learned societies” and associations that have played a central role in Calcutta’s socio-historical identity (cf. Kopf 1969). Inaugurated under Orientalist guidance and sponsorship, a movement whose primary objective was the diffusion among the native population of what was termed “general knowledge” (primarily consisting of Western science and liberal philosophy) soon flourished with Bengali initiatives. The new Calcutta elite, all conservative upper caste Hindus, and beneficiaries of lucrative trade relationships with the English, founded educational institutions to tutor their sons in European letters and sciences, notably Hindu College founded in 1817 and converted into Presidency College in 1855.

The Orientalists were engaged in a scholarly reconstruction of the Hindu tradition, while at the same time imparting historical consciousness and an ideology of human perfectability that they hoped would inspire a Hindu movement of “reform from within” on the example of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. The Orientalists reconstructed a model of “a Vedic golden age,” a romanticized view of Hindu social life and the society that preceded the Muslim invasions which ultimately culminated in Mughal rule. This Western-constructed image of a long lost Vedic society inspired the Hindu intelligentsia to rediscover their heritage and its material and intellectual culture,² and motivated their desire to work to

² Orientalist-inspired *bhadralok* evaluations of Indian culture retained an elite bias and singular disinterest in the lifeways of the common people, encouraging only the conservation of traditional courtly culture. Elements of high culture such as Sanskrit and Persian classics and sacred architecture were the forms of cultural production deemed worthy of preservation, while folk culture was entirely marginalized. As Sumanta Banerjee has so richly described in his monograph The Parlour and the Streets, the culture of “the Bengali lower orders,” the traditional artisans and craftsmen who evolved

revitalize their religious traditions.

This search conducted by Bengali elites for inspirational models from their own past, and their application to a reasoned reform of contemporary society, has been labelled “the Bengal Renaissance.” The movement generated a feeling of self-respect and collective engagement, encouraging a sense of community that was a *sine qua non* for the emergence of nationalist feeling. This modernizing effort in the context of the dynamism of 19th century Calcutta culture has been written about extensively, and not only by historians and area specialists (cf N.S.Bose 1960, Kopf 1969, Sarkar 1970, Baumer 1975, but also Hannerz 1992). Its ideological importance was at the center of one recent attempt to outline “a distinctive culture common to Bengalis” :

It is only in a limited sense that this culture is premised on practices and beliefs that are wholly local. Nevertheless there are peculiarities that permit one to...call it a society. Chief among these is the evolution of a Bengali cultural identity...*based on the ideas, values, and outlook of the so-called Bengali Renaissance* [emphasis added]. Not as easily demonstrable, but arguably the case, is a distinctiveness in the nature of Bengali social relationships...the nature of “sociality” itself (Rabindra Ray 1992: 53).

In retrospect, the radical reputation of the “Renaissance” and its postulation of an indigenous ‘classical’ past has become rather tarnished; certainly the heated 19th century controversies between “reformists” and “revivalists” have lost relevance with the passage of time. From the perspective of the 20th century, it is the commonalities among the Renaissance personalities that are seen, and allowances are made for the limitations on what was then achievable given “the colonial set up.” Indeed writing on the occasion of

a new urban folk culture in the Calcutta context, was “‘silenced’ by an indigenous elite whose thought patterns were shaped by ‘listening’ to the ‘voice of the metropolis’ from England” and whose attitudes bore the stamp of Victorian morality (1989: 11).

Calcutta's centenary in 1990, Sumit Sarkar could argue, with a touch of wistful irony, that, at least from the "standard middle-class view of the city's cultural history," the "renaissance probably provides today the major justification for recalling the history of our city with some degree of pride" (in Chaudhuri, ed.1990a: 95).

In reference to these cultural nationalist retellings of the Renaissance and its heroes, Spivak made this rather barbed if apt assessment of "the fabrication of this truth":

That particular mediation has been commented on ad nauseum and is indeed a cliché of Indian cultural history. Like most clichés, this one has become part of the 'truth' of Indian cultural self-representation (in Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993: 139).

Certainly it was my experience as an anthropologist talking with older middle-class Bengalis about their images of the city to feel obliged to sit patiently through enthusiastic recountings of the glories of the Renaissance while desperately seeking a polite way to shift the discussion to "eye witness" cultural knowledge. This 19th century obsession only made me that much more curious about 20th century Calcutta, and about the significance of more contemporary oppositional initiatives that had been overlooked and left unspoken.

As Sumit Sarkar has noted, nostalgia for the achievements of Renaissance figures reached its apex in 1946 at a moment of perceived cultural crisis "in a Bengal which seemed on the point of being shattered by famine and Partition" (in Chaudhuri, ed.1990a: 97). Renowned Bengali Marxist historian Susobhan Sarkar published his 1946 Notes on the Bengal Renaissance as a pamphlet for "political workers on the left," at a time when, as he put it, "disintegration threaten[ed] every aspect of our life" (97). Henry Schwarz describes it as a document that speaks to the cultural appeal and "persistence of English aesthetic ideology" in "an odd but telling combination of liberal aesthetic with radical political

tendencies,” a “significant...demonstration of the resiliency of the [Western-inspired] cultural heritage” (1997: 85). Apparently written at the behest of Communist Party secretary P.C. Joshi, for Susobhan Sarkar, its author, it was both an assertion of “Bengali regional exceptionalism” before a national audience, and an opportunity to popularize the Renaissance cultural revival, to rewrite it as a populist movement (86-88).

Subsequent historiography (notably a radical revisionist movement of the 1970s) has been critical of the elite and communal biases and blind spots at the core of the Renaissance ideology, and demonstrated unfortunate historical consequences that were unforeseen by its enthusiastic Hindu elite proponents. As middle class professionals and privileged products of the colonial education system, they evolved a concept of nationalism that retained illusions about British integrity and good intentions. (In this their sense of betrayal, and shocked and angry condemnations of “un-British rule” are particularly telling.) Significantly, they were not yet questioning, let alone fundamentally challenging, the legitimacy of colonial rule. As upper caste Hindus they were quick to seize upon a periodization of Indian history that labeled the medieval era as one of “Muslim tyranny,” and to construct a nationalist ideology that was unconscious of its alienating effect upon Bengal’s Muslim majority.

Print Culture and Bengali Modernity

Another Orientalist contribution that Bengali cultural nationalists quickly made their own was the introduction of print technology. Importantly, this arrival of “print capitalism”

“provide[d] the new institutional space for the development of the modern ‘national’ language” (Chatterjee 1993: 7). Already in the 16th century, Portuguese missionaries were producing catechism books in Western India. But in Bengal, due to political instability that reigned until the British secured dominion in 1765, and the fact that missionaries were excluded by East India Company decree, the first printing press was introduced only in 1777 (Nikhil Sarkar in Chaudhuri, ed. 1990a: 128). Before the end of the 18th century, Englishmen had set up an infrastructure for the printer’s trade in Calcutta, training Indian labor, and making use of locally designed and produced type for Indian languages, as well as locally manufactured paper. Bookshops and circulating libraries were also already in existence in the city. In 1778, under the direction of Warren Hastings, Halhed’s Grammar of the Bengali Language was produced with locally made Bengali type, to be used in the training of British civilians. In 1800, the year Calcutta’s College of Fort William was founded to train English officials in local languages, the Baptist Mission Press in Serampore, under the direction of Orientalist William Carey, began translating, printing and publishing religious books and grammars in over forty languages including Bengali. The first monthly and weekly journals in Bengali also appeared from Serampore. An associated Baptist Mission Press in Calcutta remained active until 1970 (Chaudhuri, ed. 1990a: 132).

From the second decade of the 19th century presses owned and managed by Indians began to spring up in the Bengali quarter of North Calcutta. Battala, the great printing mart of Calcutta until the 1860s (when it followed the city’s educational institutions south to College Street), was at the heart of Bengali town and the source of cheaply produced books for the poorest of the literate population. From there emerged a wide selection of illustrated

popular literature, including religious works such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, Bengali translations of Arabic and Persian classics, verse and prose writings, erotica, popular fiction, drama and historical sketches.³ This cultural production attests to what Nikhil Sarkar describes as “a flourishing world of urban folk culture” in which high and low were interpenetrating and mutually influencing (134). Sarkar also notes that there was a “remarkable communal exchange and harmony” between Hindu and Muslim publishers, writers, and clients, as evidenced by their reading and production of one another’s classics as well as contemporary works.

This efflorescence of Bengali print culture was an important and creative developmental aspect of the early modern regional/national culture in Calcutta and it continues to this day. It holds a central place in Partha Chatterjee’s account of Bengal’s version of the formation of anticolonial nationalism⁴ and its protected “inner domain”:

An entire institutional network of printing presses, publishing houses, newspapers, magazines and literary societies is created around this time [mid 19th century], outside the purview of the state and European missionaries, through which the new language, modern and standardized, is given shape. The bilingual intelligentsia came to think of its own language as belonging to that inner domain of cultural identity, from which the colonial intruder had to be kept out... (Chatterjee 1993: 7).

For Chatterjee the significance of a cultural elaboration such as Bengali print culture,

³ For an account of new technologies of art reproduction and the popular market in mythological images and calendar art see the discussion in Chapter Five.

⁴ Chatterjee describes how Asian and African anticolonial nationalisms differ in their creative self-imagining from what he refers to as Western “‘modular’ forms” of nationalism in that they divide the social world into two domains, a material domain of the “outside” – in which Western science, technology and statecraft was recognized to be superior (and thus of unquestionable utility as cultural lessons for the nation to acquire) – and that of the “inner” domain described here (1993: 5-6).

and the standardization of the language that was carried out within it, is that it represented a location where essential and distinctive cultural identity could be sited, and kept off limits from external influences (Chatterjee 1993: 6). Within the context of the colonial society, it was within this inner domain that the intelligentsia created its own sphere of “sovereignty,” seizing the initiative and cultural control, before it initiated “its political battle with the imperial power” (6). It was here that the nation was creatively imagined in its difference, a different sort of contest than the one for political power.

Chatterjee (using language that strikes me as regrettably Orientalist in flavor) labels this inner domain “spiritual,” citing its contents as areas “that nationalism transforms in the course of its journey,” and those from which the colonial intruder had to be kept out (6). These crucial and creative aspects of national culture – they include the vernacular language, educational institutions, ideas about women and the family, and the aesthetic – would be modernized, and yet be conscientiously protected and allowed to retain their recognizably Indian character. Imagining the nation in its difference, with a motive of tending to, and serving the needs of, this “inner domain” that bore “the ‘essential’ marks of cultural identity,” the bilingual elite adopted European forms and technologies, applying indigenous standards and conventions, with an agenda that was local and national. As Chatterjee poses the question (what he describes as nationalism’s “most powerful, creative, and historically significant project”): how to “fashion a ‘modern’ national culture that is nevertheless not Western”?

This introduces a notion that has become a frequent topic of discussion in recent postcolonial literature, namely the concept of “alternative modernities” (cf Akhil Gupta

1999, Public Culture 11[1] 1999).⁵ It will be of central relevance for our discussion of Bengali cultural production, and in fact a “striving to formulate an autonomous form of modernity” has already been introduced above in Chapter One. Similarly, I introduced this chapter with the notion of Bengali intellectuals’ elaboration of “a distinctly national/regional form of modernity.

Chatterjee’s discussion excels at depicting the creativity Bengalis exhibited in filling the “inner” domain. What I want to emphasize is the creativity Bengalis have displayed in articulating potential linkages between the domains, and in their selective assimilation of Western cultural elements from the “outer” domain for application in the context of creative elaboration in the “inner” domain. It is the Bengali facility to move with fluidity between these domains (between science and poetry, between technology and the arts), the ability to draw upon one and then the other, or both simultaneously, with equal passion and sophistication, being conscious of the relevance and implications of each, for the audience being played to, that fascinates me.

In the context of Bengal’s book-loving culture, print technology, graphic design, typography, and book illustration are areas in which the society’s creative talent has flourished, and the modern practitioners and entrepreneurs of these new media have earned public adulation. The annual Calcutta Book Fair is a much-anticipated cultural event with a mass public attendance and collective enthusiasm that is a wonder to behold. In general,

⁵ In a recent special issue of Public Culture dedicated to an exploration of the concept of “alternative modernities,” the journal’s editor Carol Breckenridge credits Arjun Appadurai with the term’s coinage in the mid-80s as a means of conceptualizing “the Asian, African, and Latin modern” (1999:viii). She describes it as an apparatus to describe the postcolony as something other than “a site of mimesis for Western modernity” (viii).

books are important artifacts in Bengali cultural memory and nationalist sentiment. These important cultural icons, described by Bengalis with great love and affection, and often eagerly loaned or offered as gifts, range from a child's first set of Bengali primers (such as Sahaj Path written by Rabindranath Tagore, with woodcut illustrations by Nandalal Bose⁶), to famous books of nonsense rhymes with comic illustrations (Abol Tabol written and illustrated by Sukumar Ray), to fine editions of Bengali poetry (with cover art and illustrations by the likes of Satyajit Ray). They are treasured possessions and popular gifts for formal occasions such as weddings and graduations. In Satyajit Ray's film Aparajito, the second of his much-loved Apu trilogy, when the central character Apu comes to Calcutta for studies, he finds sustaining if debilitating employment in a grimy local printshop, a symbol nonetheless of metropolitan modernity for a boy just arrived from the village. In fact, Satyajit Ray's grandfather Upendrakishore Ray Choudhuri and his father Sukumar Ray were both printers, internationally recognized for innovations in blockmaking and half-tone printing that facilitated the production of taste-making popular art prints in color (Chaudhuri, ed. 1990a: 136, 155, 255).⁷ Satyajit himself began his professional career as a graphic designer and commercial illustrator for a British owned and operated advertising firm that sent him to London, where he had his first opportunity to immerse himself in European cinema.

⁶ See some examples in Chapter Five fig.16, p. 201.

⁷ These reproductions and their social impact are discussed in Chapter Five pp.182-83.

“Macaulay’s Project of Englishing India”⁸ & The Bengali Response

The history of English educational policy in India is one of collaboration between native elites and the foreign power. It was not until 1835 that the British decided on a definite education policy that advocated the spread of the English language and the cultivation of European learning. The policy was formulated by Thomas Babington Macaulay with support of the native elite and the official approval of Governor-General William Bentinck. The intentionality of British aims in spreading civilization to a select group of natives was made clear in the words of Macaulay’s 1835 “Minute on Education”:

We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect (quoted in N.S. Bose 1960: 66).

According to Schwarz, the Government of India was advancing a “purposive and intentional mobilization of aesthetic satisfaction for political ends” (1997: 20; see also Viswanathan 1989). As evidence of their conscious objectives, dating back to the late 18th century, he cites the comment of the East India Company Orientalist N. B. Halhed that “new subjects should as well feel the benefits, as the necessity of submission” (quoted in Schwarz 1997: 17). By educating elites in the Western literary tradition, the intention was clearly to manufacture consent as well as facilitate colonial administration. Colonial rule could then be represented as an educational mission and the humanity of English culture would be underlined. The British exercised hegemony through the imposition of Western aesthetic and moral traditions, by “eliciting compliance” from the newly created middle class whose

⁸ The expression comes from Schwarz (1997: 11).

social function was as a cultural elite. According to Gauri Viswanathan, English Studies was transformed into “an instrument for ensuring industriousness, efficiency, trustworthiness, and compliance in native subjects,” and the English literary text functioned as “a mask for economic exploitation... successfully camouflaging the material activities of the coloniser” (quoted in Gandhi 1998: 145). Rewarded for memorizing choice passages of literary texts as part of their education in select colonial institutions, colonized youth’s eager recitation was at once a source of pleasure and “a ritual act of obedience” (146, citing Ashcroft et al. 1995: 426). In this studied process, the reproduction of European forms became internalized, and compliance became play.⁹

An inevitable by-product of this colonial education process was a kind of love/hate relationship *vis à vis* European culture which produced what Schwarz refers to as “the ironies that constituted the intellectual world of the *bhadralok*”¹⁰ (1997: 160). A natural outcome of the system was “the double consciousness of the colonial middle class” (161), as the young intellectuals who were its products learned to master the subtleties, riding “the dialectical tension between compliance and resistance” (27), and developing highly sensitized, context-specific attitudes and relations to European culture. This would account for what Schwarz terms the “radically and irreducibly contradictory” ideological makeup of Bengali intellectuals (13) and, as in his reading of Chatterjee (1993), the simultaneous acceptance and rejection of European ideology that characterized the “split personality” of

⁹ Further discussion of colonial ideology and policies as they applied to art education (and the Bengali reaction to it) will be presented in Chapter Five.

¹⁰ See page 48ff. below for a description of this Bengali caste/status grouping.

Indian nationalism (27).

If Calcutta-educated youth complied in serving the Raj by developing careers as clerks, accountants, civil servants, lawyers, and even magistrates in posts throughout Northern and Eastern India, such professional dedication built upon hard won education could just as readily be marshaled to oppose colonial policies. The law and journalism in particular were adopted as oppositional media of choice.

In analyzing the ideological ramifications of the colonial impact, it is important to move beyond a Eurocentric “Western initiator/Eastern recipient” way of framing the issue. It is not simply a question of Western imposition and native acceptance. The colonial context demands a more nuanced and historically-conscious view than is permitted by what Julie Stone Peters refers to as “the imperialist-oppressor-native-victim dichotomy” (In Gainor 1995: fn3, 211). Indeed education became a proud hallmark of status and an arena of active agency. English language education was accepted and promoted with enthusiasm, and educational politics assumed particular importance as an avenue of “constructive public endeavor” open to leaders of the Bengali community in the colonial context (Broomfield 1968: 8). Presidency College, the most prominent of undergraduate colleges affiliated to Calcutta University, was a site of intellectual and patriotic ambition, notably the 19th century “Young Bengal” movement led by the Anglo-Indian teacher of English, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31). At Calcutta University, which opened in 1857 as an examining and degree-conferring body, English literature held pride of place in the curricula, Law being the second most popular subject. Even today the University is associated with the personality of its most prominent Vice-Chancellor, Sir Ashutosh Mukherji, who is remembered for

having widened access to higher education with an intent “to free Western-style education of motivated British control and naturalize it as a liberating force in Indian society” (in S. Chaudhuri 1990b: 202). His imposing figure is memorialized in a monumental statue that today graces a major thoroughfare in Central Calcutta.

A far messier aspect of this problem of “contradictory consciousness” is what Sara Suleri in her analysis of colonial discourse has described as an “economy of complicity and guilt” (quoted in Schwarz 1997: 14). I hesitate to enter into this kind of psychologizing argument about cultural inferiority complexes (or righteous anti-imperialist anger for that matter) but the issue is clearly relevant (Gayatri Spivak’s rendering of the effects as the “epistemic violence” of imperialism has already been introduced in Chapter 1), and significantly backgrounds many of the discussions in this study.

My sense of how these factors push and pull against each other runs something like this: Among those privileged with access to “English medium schools” and Western-style education there is clearly a sense of pride and entitlement, of having attained intellectual goals, diversity of experience, and new cultural expertise, often achieved at great personal and familial cost. Yet with that comes some guilt that complicity with the foreign power and its institutions could bring such pleasures, and concern about what such concentrated engagement with “the Other” might indicate about one’s sense of cultural inferiority *vis à vis* Western cultural achievements. The at times painful recognition that identification with the West had become almost unconscious or “second nature” only compounded an unsettled sense of self. A lack of appetite or disregard for the native and the local was a cause for shame as it was seen to devalorize Bengali national identity. But to continue with the

culinary metaphor, the point that must be emphasized precisely is that Bengalis have a masterful ability to extend and diversify their palates – local and foreign, East and West – and if no easy synthesis is possible, they usually succeed in artfully embracing the contradictions.

Characterizing Bengal's Cultural Elite

The primary actors in any account of Bengali identity formation are members of the Bengali cultural elite known as the *bhadralok*, an educated, Hindu, high caste/status group that provides the social background of the majority of Calcutta's cultural producers. Composed of three upper castes, Brahmin, Kayastha, and Vaidya, with a continuous tradition of literacy over many centuries, they form a common dominant elite in urban and rural Bengali society. The term is a peculiarly Bengali derivation often glossed as “respectable people.” It is a compound of *bhadra* and *lok*; the latter essentially means “people” while the former is derived from the original Sanskrit sense of fortunate or privileged, but has developed a connotation of “politeness” or “gentility” (Rabindra Ray 1992: 53). The standard Bengali-English dictionary Samsad defines *bhadra* as “polished or elegant in taste or demeanor; civilized; courteous; polite; well-behaved, mannerly...” (2nd ed.1982). In Tapan Raychaudhuri's account of the traditional morality of the Bengali upper castes, he refers to their allegiance to “generally accepted ethical norms – notions of universal morality summed up in the expression *sil* (right conduct)” as part of their recognized “caste duties” (in Baumer, ed. 1975: 21).

In a discussion of late 18th century Bengal, Baumer notes that a “substantial number of high-caste, educated, and influential Bengalis...had developed a worldly-mindedness” and “many prominent Brahman families of Bengal had adopted a secular style of life molded by the necessities of position and survival under the Muslim power” (in Baumer, ed. 1975: 85). With their cosmopolitan taste and manners, administrative and commercial involvements, Persian as well as Sanskrit learning, members of this elite society were well-suited to secure a dominant place in the new system once the British assumed political authority. They recognized the need to become “familiar with the methods and manners of the new rulers” and “perceived the urgency of accommodation and synthesis” (85).

Conscious of their superiority and social privilege, the *bhadralok* rely on high caste proscriptions and education to distance themselves from the masses, sharing a pride in language, literate culture, and history. Continued mastery of their characteristic traits of high-level literacy and cultural adaptability allow the *bhadralok* to retain their dominance in the spheres of culture and social exchange.

The *bhadralok* pride themselves on being guardians of a great cultural tradition, and in accordance with that tradition, regardless of the context – rural or urban – in which they reside, they follow ways of living and actions that are deemed pure, pursuing occupations consonant with the customary parameters of priestly, scholarly and scribe work (Sengupta 1970: 66). They bear distinctive cultural characteristics and consciously distinguish themselves from others by their behavior, deportment, ways of talking and dressing, their eating habits, their style of housing, their marriage customs, ritual observance, and associations. The pursuit of education and white collar jobs are their accepted ideals, and

they consider manual occupations inferior (Sengupta: 69). They are, as well, accustomed to marrying among themselves, and do so with rare exception.

In the villages of West Bengal it is the *bhadralok* who dominate the traditionally prevailing pattern in which power, property, and education are distributed, so that they both “claim and are accorded recognition of superior social status” (Nair 1961, Sengupta 1970). In the past, education in the villages was predominantly monopolized by upper caste males whose families were also the largest property holders.¹¹ In Nair’s characterization: “Apart from caste and property qualifications, the most distinctive feature of the *bhadralok* is that they do not work with their hands” (1961: 148). Although their monopoly on the ownership of land gives them status, the *bhadralok* will not till the soil themselves; they either supervise hired labor or lease out their lands. The census classifies them as “non-cultivating owners of land, agricultural rent receivers and their dependents”(148).¹²

In rural communities education is looked upon as an avenue of escape from

¹¹ These patterns of concentrated landholding are a legacy of the 1793 Permanent Settlement which the British introduced in Bengal in order to transform native revenue collectors into improving landlords and gentlemen farmers on the model of English country gentlemen and property-holders (cf. Guha 1963). All permanently settled *zamindaris* were abolished and officially taken over by the state in 1955 under the “West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act, 1953.” Despite major efforts at land redistribution schemes by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), large scale landholdings continued to exist.

¹² A representative survey of four villages in Birbhum district conducted by the Indian Statistical Institute showed no significant change in the distribution of power and property from 1933 to 1956-7 (Nair 1961: 147). 70% of the tribal Santals and 90% of low caste families were landless. In another typical village in Burdwan district 90% of upper caste families owned land, on average 15 *bighas* (approximately 5 acres), and only 20% of low caste households had any land at all (on average less than 1 bigha [1/3 of an acre]). Only 10% of the land was held by agriculturalists who actually worked it (157).

agriculture. Even among the agriculturalist castes, those boys able to pursue their education wholly abandon their inherited way of life. They soon become what Bengalis refer to as *babus*, taking on urban inflected social standards that require fine clothes, sunglasses, watches, fountain pens, bicycles and transport by bus rather than walking.¹³ A sore point for modernization theorists and proponents of development is that under such circumstances the spread of literacy does not improve techniques of cultivation or agricultural production (Nair 1961: 151). Generally for Bengal, ‘gentleman farmer’ tends to be a contradiction in terms.

The *Bhadralok* in Calcutta

In the context of colonial Calcutta’s political economy, the better capitalized trading castes from Western India forced the *bhadralok* to relinquish their early hold over commerce, and British managing agencies assumed control over industry. Rigidly maintaining the distinction between high and low (*bhadra* and *abhadra*), the urban *bhadralok* set themselves apart by their behavior, including abstaining from manual labor which they considered degrading. They soon secured a monopoly on the “learned professions,” notably government administration, the law, education, and journalism. On the strength of these experiences they came to dominate the leadership of the early nationalist movement, distinguishing themselves by “their cultural values and their sense of social propriety” (Broomfield 1968: 5-6). Addy and Azad summarize nicely their distinctive

¹³ These increased standards of material consumption resulted in widespread deterioration of the majority of people’s diet in the 1950s, so that even “the better-off sections” ate less milk, meat, fish, and eggs (Nair 1961: 152).

role in Calcutta society:

...the *bhadralok* occupied in their own metropolis the position of a middle class... The *bhadralok* neither formed part of the new industrial bourgeoisie – composed mainly of Marwaris, Gujratis and Sindhis – nor participated in the labour which generated their capital...the colonial land market and the bureaucracy of the raj secured the *bhadralok* all the advantages of the new order and placed them at the centre of the economic, social and political contradictions of British Indian Bengal (1973: 78).

Thus while they constituted the cultural elite of Bengali society, their socio-economic function in Calcutta was as a “middle class,” and they continue to self-identify as such. Inherited land titles continued to provide status and economic sustenance for *bhadralok* families, and as a class of landlords, even though primarily absentee, they retained strong socio-cultural ties to rural communities. These contradictions become especially clear when one sees the *bhadralok* against the larger socio-economic background of colonial (pre-Partition) Bengal, as a prosperous, increasingly urbanized, Western-educated Hindu elite in an agrarian economy of overwhelmingly illiterate, predominantly Muslim, insecure tenants, sharecroppers, and casual labor. Addy and Azad note a further irony:

Through their education, their professions and their cosmopolitan experience, the *bhadralok* displayed to the mass of society the culture of their colonial overlords...as functionaries of alien rule, the *bhadralok* experienced intimate proximity to, but ultimate exclusion from, power (1973: 78-9).

It is Addy and Azad’s argument that, despite the strength of their efforts to initiate the anti-colonial movement, a combination of objective factors for the *bhadralok* – a lack both of political and economic independence and of social ties to proletarian and peasant masses – “compromised their politics and distorted their ideology” (79). They functioned as “enlightened collaborators,” living off the proceeds of British experiments in land revenue collection, accepting the colonial order, “while agitating for reforms allowing a wider middle

class participation [in politics]” (83). Straddling such contradictions they were unable to radically transform Bengali society (79).

The *Bhadralok*'s Rural Ties Attenuate

Once their secure economic base in landholding fell apart, the *bhadralok*'s easy hegemony was soon thrown into chaos. The 1930s depression occasioned a credit crisis in Bengal's political economy that, when combined with changes in the structure of land relations (notably a 1938 amendment to the Bengal Tenancy Act), resulted in “the complete non-viability” of much of the *zamindari* and tenure-holding landed property (cf. Chatterjee 1984: 177 and Sugata Bose 1993). The effect was to create a large, radicalized middle class, predominantly urban in livelihood and social outlook, concentrated in administration, small trade and commerce, education or the professions, and completely dissociated from production and from landed property (Chatterjee 1984: 179). An uprooted upper-caste intelligentsia, these urban *bhadralok* dominated the cultural scene in Calcutta. The new avant-garde cultural and literary trends of the 1930s were an important outcome of their new sense of self-conscious, objectified urbanity (Chatterjee 1984: 179). An irony that needs to be underlined in the developmental trajectory of Bengali cultural production is that just as the *bhadralok*'s socioeconomic ties to rural Bengal became so attenuated as to become a nostalgic childhood memory, only then did urban artists and writers begin to “search for new forms among the neglected and almost forgotten folk art of the villages” and to cultivate “a new awareness of the vigour and dynamism of collective rural life” (179). On the political front the *bhadralok* immersed themselves in Marxist ideology and became an indispensable

feature of West Bengal politics by forging political organizing links with the masses in militant trade unionism, mitigating the kind of caste-interest politics that dominates elections in other Indian states.

Strange Fruit (From a Bittersweet Tree)?

In a compelling article entitled “The Fruits of Macaulay’s Poison Tree,” Partha Chatterjee traces the historical roots of Bengali middle class ideology, describing how the class found a sustaining sense of dignity, and a moral legitimacy that was based on “a pride in having emulated the English in the best aspects of their knowledge and culture but having done so without losing its distinct cultural identity” (Chatterjee in Mitra, ed. 1985: 86). Among the modern cultural achievements of Calcutta’s English-educated intelligentsia, Chatterjee mentions the standardization of the Bengali language, and the development of an artistic and theoretical literature “of undoubted modernity” reflecting “the social, intellectual and artistic concerns and tastes of a relatively well-educated, largely urban, middle class” (83). What their efforts reveal, in Chatterjee’s reading, is an “avant-gardism,” “a consistent urge to ‘keep up’ with the most advanced cultural trends in the rest of the world, more specifically in Europe” (83).

This initiative typifies the intellectual attitude of Bengal’s cultural leaders – “undoubtedly born [as Chatterjee notes] out of the peculiarities of the colonial situation” – which consists of two seemingly contradictory desires: “an urge to find a distinct and authentic cultural identity for the nationality” and “an urge for cosmopolitanism” (83-4).

The typical middle class cultural aspiration, then, is to be “not merely national but comparable with the most advanced international standards” (84). According to Chatterjee, this standard of legitimacy became “the accepted cultural norm for the entire nationality” (84).

This combination of collective self-respect, national/ regional identity, and pride in Western educational attainment is reflected in what Chatterjee presents as having been “the central question of our emergent nationalist thought,” namely: “How could we prevent ourselves from being submerged completely by the dominant culture of the West? By imitating the West we might become modern, but what about our national character?” (78-79).

“[T]he intellectual and creative tension between the two demands, for indigenous authenticity on the one hand and cosmopolitanism on the other” reflects for Chatterjee a “fundamental contradiction encountered by the new middle class in its whole colonial experience – the contradiction between the national and the modern” (84). This phenomenon carries over into the postcolonial era as well in which this strange hybrid fruit – the Bengali cultural elite – strive to hold in balance their urge to cultivate an authentic cultural national identity with their equally compelling Westward-looking, modernist, cosmopolitan desires. It is this creative tension that drives Calcutta’s cultural producers to experiment and explore and that lies at the source of much of their most exciting work.

Internalizing Western Forms: The “Battle for Parity”

To Chatterjee’s discussion of these two seemingly contradictory desires of Bengali middle class cultural aspirations – this idea of cosmopolitan longing and an urge for cultural national authenticity – should be added an idea Henry Schwarz drew from Ranajit Guha, namely that of a “battle for parity” with the West. Schwarz’s commentary on the British “mobilization of the aesthetic” as an aid in creating a favorable political response in India has already been mentioned. The flipside of that relationship is what I want to address here – namely how the aesthetic was seized upon by Bengalis in their engagement with European culture. Schwarz’s project is to recount the discursive moves in the development of Bengali historiography, and an aspect of that effort is an analytical focus on what he calls “the complex negotiations that occur at the level of form”(1997: 5). His aim is “to demonstrate the retooling of European [literary and historiographic] forms to suit various local purposes at different times”:

The very act of transportation incurs a translation and a displacement whereby these styles are transformed, adapted, negotiated – and of course often changed utterly – in order to be understood in the target culture (6-7).

As Schwarz notes “the rivalry with European form is both a test to be met and a limit to be transcended” (10). He describes the relationship between the Bengali writers and the European historiographic tradition that served as their inspiration in various terms – as an embrace, an act of subversion, as “competition, refashioning, and counter-practice” that “exerted an equal if not greater force than compliance to the dominant discourse” (22).

Schwarz argues a case that “the conceptualization of ‘modern’ or colonial Bengali

culture” was an “antagonistic formation,” a result of the fact that “Bengaliness” was historically constructed in contra-distinction to the “Englishness” that was “so central to the efficient maintenance of power in India” (21). He cites Ranajit Guha’s observation that the first histories of Bengal written in the Bengali language constituted not only an emulation of Western cultural superiority but “an attempt to achieve parity” (21). As Schwarz notes, “One way in which parity could be achieved within the hierarchy of power was through the universalizing claims of the aesthetic” (21). In an effort “to achieve equality with European standards of taste,” the Bengali intelligentsia followed “the logic of the European aesthetic,” translating dominant European concepts into idioms that they could then appropriate for use in their own work (22). As an example of this view of parity Schwarz discusses Romesh Chandra Dutt’s Literature of Bengal (1873-77):

Dutt’s belief in the battle for parity is evident in every phrase of his history. Himself a product of the British educational system, and deeply imbued with its ideologies of progress and advancement, he saw British influence as having an almost entirely beneficial effect upon Bengal’s cultural life...But despite its high praise for English influence, The Literature of Bengal makes some significant gestures toward developing a more balanced and politically enabling strategy for cultural nationalism. We can trace here the modest beginnings of a dialectic of resistance (40).

Along with this rivalry with Western form grew strains of a more liberal spirit, a striving to identify harmonizing elements in the cultures of both East and West that would provide for their mutual enrichment. Rabindranath Tagore, one of the foremost proponents of this effort, spoke these words of Bengali cultural pride before an audience in East Bengal in 1926, but with a word of caution as an addendum:

We congratulate ourselves on the fact, and consider it a sign of our being live in soul, that European thoughts and literary forms found immediate hospitality in Bengali literature from the very beginning of their contact with our mind. It ushered in a

great revolution in the realm of our literary expression...And yet, we may go too far if we altogether reject tradition in the cultivation of the arts...(quoted in Banerjee 1989: 5).

Though Bengalis might reasonably boast of their achievements in the “battle for parity,” Rabindranath wished to remind his audience that they must not ignore a rich source of inspiration closer to home. This was the voice of tradition calling – its allure was strong, and the needs it served poignant and profound.¹⁴

The Lure of Western Praise

Western praise for Bengali cultural achievements has consistently been the ultimate affirmation in the eyes of the Bengali public, and the lure of foreign critical acclaim (and undoubtedly the markets that follow along with it) has consistently been a tempting motivational force for cultural producers. While there may indeed be elements of self-promotional impulse and ego involved here, and perhaps, at a deeper level, a need to compensate for a sense of cultural inferiority, the Bengali answer to this claim and not-so-implicit criticism is that the “lure of Western praise” is not at all a question of self-doubt, or of reservations about Bengal’s cultural credibility, but rather its opposite, namely the fact that Bengalis consider themselves entitled and entirely capable of making a mark as equal contributors to world culture. They feel Bengali cultural achievement in general, and the

¹⁴ Rabindranath was able to establish an institutional foundation for his philosophy that melded Bengali cultural nationalist cultivation of tradition and appreciation of Nature with an openness to foreign learning in the creation of a university located in Shantiniketan (Abode of Peace) a hundred miles north-west of Calcutta. See Chapter Five p. 199ff. for further information.

merits of their individual work in particular, are deserving of international recognition, and they want the outside world to confirm the fact. They will equally state a claim that the desire to amuse, stimulate, and educate the local Bengali audience remains close to their heart and a primary objective, regardless of their successes abroad or with foreign buyers at home.

A classic example of Bengalis subscribing to this view of parity is the overwhelming sense of pride and affirmation that the community experienced as a result of Rabindranath Tagore being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Drawing what strikes us now as a highly revealing equation, the Bengali modernist poet Buddhadev Bose wrote in his 1948 monograph on Bengali literature Leaves of Grass that “Rabindranath...made Bengal a part of Europe, and the Bengalis citizens of the world” (in Schwarz 1997: 22). And Sukumar Sen, writing a 1960 Government of India sponsored History of Bengali Literature, saw the prize’s significance as “the first recognition of contemporary India as an equal partner in the assembly of the men of letters of the free and progressive world” (22). I would argue that these comments, proffered so many decades after the fact, should also be seen as evidence of the degree to which the occasion has lodged in Bengali cultural memory as a significant historical milestone, solidifying Rabindranath’s status as cultural hero in terms that have regional, national, and international implications. Somewhat closer to home (and to the Bengali anti-imperialist heart) was the British bestowal of a knighthood, which afforded Sir Rabindranath the opportunity to make the ultimate political gesture of renouncing it. In protest of the massacre by General Dyer’s troops of a peaceful assembly gathered in the

enclosed ground known as Jallianwallah Bagh in the Punjab in 1919,¹⁵ he relinquished the honor and returned the medal along with an aggrieved letter of reproach. Addressed to the Viceroy Lord Chelmsford, Rabindranath's letter sought to give "voice to the protest of the millions" and included these brave words:

The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen who for their so-called insignificance are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human blessings (in Kripalani 1962).

A facsimile of the original letter and the accompanying medal were much vaunted contributions to "The Calcutta Gallery" that was opened to popular acclaim during the course of my fieldwork by West Bengal Chief Minister and CPI(M) leader Jyoti Basu at Calcutta's Victoria Memorial Museum.

More recently for Satyajit Ray, who is recognized primarily as a film-maker in the West but like Rabindranath is a much loved Bengali cultural icon (appreciated at home as a

¹⁵ The Bengali historian Sumit Sarkar provides an account of the incident in context of "the biggest and most-violent anti-British upsurge India had seen since 1857" which was met in the Punjab by policies of brutal repression and a declaration of martial law by a colonial governor alarmed by evidence of remarkable Hindu-Muslim-Sikh unity. Sarkar notes that the crowd – attacked without warning – consisted largely of villagers attending a fair, unaware of a ban on meetings. In addressing the inquiry commission General Dyer stood by his objective of "producing a moral effect," and regretted only having run out of ammunition and that space had not permitted entry of an armored car. Official estimates recorded 379 dead (Sarkar 1989[1983]: 189-191).

Bengali writer Nirad Chaudhuri in his reminiscences of the end of the Raj refers to "the Amritsar episode" as "the watershed of Indo-British relations" and "the worst exhibition of the spurious and arrogant imperial sentiment" that was only compounded when majority opinion in the House of Lords condoned Dyer's actions and "declared that his action had saved British rule in Punjab." Seeing it as a turning point in arousing hatred of the British, Chaudhuri concludes: "Nothing could make any Indian forget or forgive Amritsar" (Chaudhuri 1990[1987]: 52-54).

kind of “Renaissance Man” as well for his popular detective novels, illustrated children’s literature and graphic design) the crowning glory in Bengali eyes was his Academy Award for Lifetime Achievement. Ray’s acceptance remarks were videotaped from his hospital bed in Calcutta in March of 1992 and televised as part of the awards broadcast; he died on the 23rd of April.

The Politics of “Cultural Assertion” in Negotiating Modernity

In his recent monograph, India: Living With Modernity, Javeed Alam poses compelling philosophical questions about how the intelligentsia in the Indian colonial context “received the experience” of Modernity, noting both their resistance to Modernity and their efforts at bargaining for its advantages (1999: 55ff). He considers issues such as “how the resources latent to a culture and its languages become available or mobilized for rendering new experiences into meaningful expressions”(58). Given that every facet of subjectivity is affected by the interface, how, Alam asks, is the experience and understanding of Modernity translated into the local culture? His focus in this discussion is upon the political intervention of elites, but like Partha Chatterjee’s admonition that nationalism is not merely a *political* movement (1993: 5), Alam emphasizes what he refers to as the elites’ efforts at “cultural assertion.” These amount to their “speaking for” the society *en masse*, and the notions they pose regarding what constitutes “the social good,” specifically in relation to the larger tradition. In assessing the utility of Chatterjee’s discussion of “sovereignty” in the “inner domain” from The Nation and Its Fragments, the Marxist in Alam cannot help but introduce

the idea that when the (male, high caste) intelligentsia sought to establish their sole right to speak on these matters, it amounted to an attempt to silence subaltern voices. As Alam notes, they were in effect re-introducing the traditional right of the literati to be social arbiters, and asserting their “sovereignty” not only against the colonizers but against women and peasants (1999: 78, fn14).

Under the colonial regime, the establishment of modern representative and legal institutions introduced new principles of equality before the law and a notion of individual rights and equality of persons regardless of property, caste and gender that strained the society’s hierarchical traditions (67). If anything, these tensions were only exacerbated in the context of postcolonial India’s democratic institutions. Alam introduces a compelling perspective on *bhadralok* ideology in the wake of these transformative democratic shifts: recovery of lost privilege was sought “at the level of the social and through the means of culture” (67). With significant impact, the classification of the population as either *bhadralok* or *chotolok* (the common, “little” people) was deeply internalized in Bengali society. Alam explains the intricacies of *bhadralok* status:

Its deviousness lies in the fact that it was never defended on the basis of property, caste, or modern industry...In fact the Bengali gentry slowly came to distance itself from caste, as their ideological justification. The category distinction was defended, as it is defended even today, on the grounds of educational accomplishments and literary pursuits; in effect on grounds of culture and polish...(67-8).

This, in effect, is an argument about how an elite uses culture as a “political weapon” to defend its class privileges and recover what has been lost through the democratic popular reforms of law, politics, and popular struggle:

...in general the process works so that privilege comes to be in the costume of culture and accomplishment and when under threat what is defended is this costume and never the privilege (67-8).

In characterizing this kind of political intervention by “advantaged sections of society,” (citing the example of Bengal in the second half of the 19th century specifically), Alam notes:

A curious aspect of this process is that those who engage in this kind of politics feel a genuine sense of loss...a sense of something that is cherished and ought to be which may be lost otherwise (68).

In fact Bengali *bhadralok* culture is rife with poignant narratives of loss, images of separation and unbridgeable distance, what might be described as an “aesthetic of nostalgia.” Perhaps elements of a materialist explanation can be sought in the Hindu *bhadralok* pining for their lost hegemony, a decline Partha Chatterjee readily attributes to the democratization of Bengali politics since the 1930s (Chatterjee 1997). But there is more to this “structure of feeling” – and Raymond Williams’ phrase is particularly apt here – than that. Similar moods and themes can be found in the impassioned imagery of Rabindranath’s poetry and songs, a spiritual longing, verging on the erotic, for the absent, unattainable divinity whose presence is the object of fantasy and desire, almost as that of a distant lover. This sentiment and aesthetic is both a rallying around a sense of “we-ness” that is seen to be slipping away, a celebration of tradition and of the specificities of cultural identity, and a romanticization of the glories of the remembered past, of what (perhaps never) was. What is longed for is what cannot any longer be. Such “tradition inspired” cultural production, the fond childhood reminiscences of traditional, especially rural, community life, with a sense of connectedness to Nature and to typical features of the Bengali landscape, the literary and artistic renderings of disappearing forms of material culture, the ancestral houses and traditional styles of dress,

relies on the positing of what Gyan Prakash would argue are “founding themes” that are a means of both constituting and resisting subordination and must be interrogated “in order to deploy history as an enabling discourse” (Prakash 1992: 354). In this poststructuralist analysis, at any rate, it seems this Bengali nationalist deployment of history could be faulted as a “disabling discourse.”

I do believe, however, that this appeal to forces of tradition is a means for Bengalis to come to terms with postcolonial urban reality with all its contradictions and jarring juxtapositions. Cognizant that the impact of the 20th century’s accelerated pace of social and technological changes undermines the structure of experience, the Bengali aim is to make aspects of the traditional and historical past relevant for the present. Thus remembrance becomes part of the communally shared, lived experience of now (and its continuity with life as it has always been), an appreciation of the joys of “Bengaliness,” of all the aesthetic pleasures to be experienced (or “tasted” as the Indian aesthetic theory of *rasa* would formulate it), and in the course of which identity is maintained. Imparting a sense of the continued importance of tradition, of the everyday presence of the past, both to the young and to foreigners who would seek to understand Bengali culture is a treasured educational mission for Bengalis, and an important objective of much of their cultural production.

Adda as the Privileged Site of Modern Bengali Identity Formation

Finally, I want to turn to a ubiquitous institution of Calcutta’s urban life, the custom and regular practice of *adda* which has been defined as “a long talking session, commonly

of a recurrent sort among friends or co-activists,” that combines informal debate, discussion and gossip (Chaudhuri 1990b: 247). The ability to relish this shared communal pleasure is often described as that which most distinguishes a Bengali, a compulsion so quintessentially Bengali as to defy explanation. Celebrated as “inspiring, vitalizing, brainstorming sessions,” which, if the spirit is genuine, are “never held for a gainful purpose,” *adda* sessions are also reviled (primarily by non-Bengali critics) as responsible for exhausting its participants’ creative energies in idle talk (247).

In a recent Public Culture volume entitled “Alter/Native Modernities,” Dipesh Chakravarty discusses the institution and practice of *adda* in Calcutta in the first half of the 20th century as a crucial cultural location, a local site where the debates of modernity could be played out. It was in these (predominantly male)¹⁶ spaces that Bengalis could, in a leisurely and pleasurable fashion, negotiate for themselves new oppositions and contentious issues of the day (public/private, modern/traditional, male/female, elite/laboring classes) and thus find “a particular way of dwelling in modernity, almost a zone of comfort in capitalism” (1999: 144).

Chakravarty implies that the sacred if illicit pleasures of *adda* have something to do with the tension between its ideals and those of modern civil society. As he notes, “They are mutually antithetical organisations of time and place”:

Conversations in an *adda*...are by definition opposed to the idea of achieving any definite outcome. To enjoy an *adda* is to enjoy a sense of time and space that is not subject to the gravitational pull of any explicit purpose. The introduction of a purpose...kills, it is claimed, the very spirit and the principle of *adda*...The centre of gravity of the *adda* lay in a direction away from the telos of productivity or

¹⁶ On the specifically gendered nature of *adda* see fn.17 below p.66.

development...(135).

Thought to have originated in the gathering of village elders at day's end, urban *addas* can take place anywhere – on the verandahs and roofs of Calcutta houses, in parks, in offices after hours, at tea stalls or in coffeehouses. The *addas* that are Calcutta's pride are primarily literary or at least cultural and intellectual; Chakravarty describes them as “spaces where a democratic and cosmopolitan vision of the world could be nurtured and sustained”(130). In contrast to “the sedate and aristocratic *baithak*” of the 19th century (gatherings held in the landlord/patron's *baitakkhana* or parlor), later *addas* became known for “the young nationalist, radical, and socialist writers of the 1920s and 1930s [who] were no longer rich,” but were united by their idealism, their love of literature and “a post-Tagore Bengali faith in the redemptive role of arts and literature in middle-class lives”(127, 129).

As the more aristocratic role of patron/host was lost to *adda* culture, in favor of the middle and lower-middle class custom of “going dutch” in coffeehouses, the editorial/censorial role of the host gave way to a more democratic ambiance in which the catholicity of participant's interests was encouraged, and no subject was left undiscussed. In such contexts, intellectual pursuits and literary activity furnished respectability, even for the unemployed; it was, by definition, seen as “a thing of cosmopolitan and global relevance”(129). *Adda*, in short, became a space to practice this literary cosmopolitanism, and encouraged those fundamental aspects of modernity – a habit of questioning, a mood of critical distance.

Some of the most famous *addas* were formed around literary journals in the 1930s (e.g. by the progressive writers of Kallol, by the modernist writers of Sabujpatra and the

conservative counteradda that formed around Shanibarar Chiti). The reportedly “highbrow *adda*” of Parichoy whose discussions have been described as “far flung and often bizarre” were presided over by poet-editor Sudhindranath Datta and frequented by left intellectuals such as Marxist historian Susobhan Sarkar, the Communist critic Hiren Mukherjee, the artist Jamini Roy, and Bengali physicist Satyen Bose whose conversational artistry earned him the fond epithet of “*addar raja*”(king of *adda*) (Chaudhuri 1990b: 248; Dipesh Chakravarty 1999: 117). Another site of Bengali nostalgia is the College Street Coffee House; Dipesh Chakravarty refers to it as “a space treated in Bengali middle class memory as a sacred site in the history of Bengali literary modernism”(1999: 111-112, fn 7). The *addas* at the Central Avenue Coffee House have also been celebrated, as having been formative in the history of modern Bengali cinema; Satyajit Ray, the film critic Chidananda Das Gupta, Mrinal Sen were all *habitués*.

Aside from energizing cultural producers with its ambience of mutual enthusiasm and debate, *adda* is often associated with the production of a modern Bengali audience for the arts. It has been pivotal in the creation and dissemination of taste in the areas of literature, film and the visual arts. Calcutta’s booktrade could be said to be organized around the institution of *adda*; *addas* of editors, writers, critics and dedicated readers are known to gather around the offices of literary magazines and certain bookshops (see Reese 1996). Conversations there both set the tone for artistic innovation and encourage its acceptance. It is Dipesh Chakravarty’s argument that the culture of *adda* with its homosocial intimacy¹⁷

¹⁷ As Dipesh Chakravarty notes, given the traditional separation between male and female domains, it was in the context of affectionate friendships between men that “European romantic and cosmopolitan sentiments” entered Bengali consciousness and social life

and its content of literary and aesthetic discussion was crucial to the “production of Bengali selves” (Chakravarty 1999: 128). As Chakravarty explains, to be good at *adda* was a tremendous cultural value:

...*adda* provided for many a site for self presentation, of cultivating a certain style of being in the eyes of others... *Adda* became an arena where one could present oneself as a character...through the development of certain mannerisms (meant for the enjoyment of others), habits of speech, and gestures. In the reminiscences of *addas*, people are typically remembered...for how they presented themselves to the *adda* (116-7, 138).

Finally, as further evidence of the institution’s importance for Bengali identity, Chakravarty characterizes the nature of recent Bengali literature and memoirs about *adda* as:

...an impressive amount of mourning and nostalgia on the part of Bengali writers for what is perceived as the dying practice of *adda*. It is as if they fear that with the slow death of *adda*, the identity of being a Bengali will also die (111).

We are reminded here of Javeed Alam’s observations cited above about the political intervention of elites and their “genuine sense of loss” as they identify elements of traditional culture that must be cherished or lost forever.

(142). He goes on to say: “Bengali modernity, for complicated reasons, never quite transcended the structure of opposition between domestic space and that of *adda*...[L]iterary modernity...did indeed help to expand, deepen, and modernize the homosocial space of *adda* and even allowed for women’s participation in it. But its male character was never erased” (144). Pratap Kumar Ray notes “We have always thought of the *adda* as a male stronghold,” (Chaudhuri 1990b: 250) and maintains that “no *adda* I know of before the second half of this century admitted women”(248). Chakravarty cites a conversation with feminist critic Manashi DasGupta to emphasize the point that “the very public acts of orality – speaking, eating – through which an *adda* created its sense of community tended to form “traditional” barriers to women’s participation in a male *adda*” (1999: 138). Bengali middle class ideas often betrayed 19th century roots in their fastidious concern about the respectability of women in public and limitations on male-female interactions, and particularly their public display. This certainly kept female participation in male-dominated *addas* to a minimum, and ensured that women were more at ease in *addas* of their own.

Yet as 20th century *adda* culture became increasingly democratized, and a strong populist sense of community and Bengali cultural nationalist identity tended to prevail, members of the cultural elite with a more pronounced political sensibility felt an urge to transcend their urban elite milieu and seek inspiration in the experiences of the common people. As intellectuals and cultural producers, they strove to address “the people’s” sufferings as well as their popular pleasures, by means of references and representations that drew from sources regional, national, and foreign. As a result of these Bengali avant-garde encounters with the subaltern, popular forms of expression were incorporated into cosmopolitan-influenced elite cultural production in ways that were fundamentally transformative. The objective was to formulate a national culture that was modern, but that did not merely imitate Western forms – an indigenous product recognizable for its authenticity, its local context, and relevance to popular culture. The goal, in short, was to negotiate an “alternative modernity” for Bengal.

Chapter Three: The Ideology of Cultural Producers in Calcutta: Internationalism, Populism, and the Politics of Bengal's Cultural Nationalism

Having outlined the 19th century origins of Bengali cultural nationalism in the previous chapter, I want now to characterize the nature of the ideology that coalesced in the 20th century to become typical of Calcutta's cultural producers and critical intellectuals. Bengali cultural nationalist pride is rooted in a consciousness of the history of Bengal's cultural struggle, and contemporary intellectuals demonstrate an ongoing commitment to a specific set of populist and internationalist ideals and intellectual affinities that emerged in the context of that struggle. Their complex and syncretic ideology, identifiable if never wholly consistent, took shape in the context of political and cultural events in Bengal's conflictual history.

Both a worldview and a motivating force for action in the world, this self-consciously political ideology and social philosophy is often labeled “progressive” – an umbrella term for attitudes incorporating aspects that are modernist, anti-imperialist, populist and internationalist. Drawing sustenance from their critical historical reading of what the Bengali/Indian “tradition” entails, intellectuals then conjoin that vision with their progressive ideology. The combination serves as a catalyst for many of the “culturally generative” initiatives in which Calcutta intellectuals and cultural producers engage, in order to jointly confront issues perceived as indicative of contemporary cultural crisis.¹

I focus here on a few 20th-century instances in which Bengali intellectuals banded

¹ This idea was introduced in Chapter One, p. 21-22 with references to Ulf Hannerz and Javeed Alam.

together to form organizations and informal associations to address these crises, thereby reaffirming their commitments as critical thinkers and political beings, and contributing to an ongoing history of the city's progressive cultural movements. The crises confronted were at once political and cultural in nature, and constituted a threat to both political/ethical conscience and national consciousness. The oppressions to be protested were either externally imposed such as imperialist or fascist tyrannies, or more insidious internalized complexes such as the intellectuals' own sense of alienation from "the people." The political/cultural crises confronted must of course be analyzed as contemporary events in the context of a specific conjuncture and historical moment. There will not be space in these pages to do more than merely allude to some of these very crucial and relevant aspects of Bengal's political economy as these influenced and defined the outcome and significance of contemporary predicaments.

The focus of this study is the cultural production and aesthetic debate for which Calcutta's vigorous intellectual climate and long-standing tradition of formal associational behavior has provided a rich and nurturing context. Indeed cultural production across a range of media, and the high level of engaged critical discussion surrounding it, must be seen as an ingenious Bengali response to the challenges and quandaries of social life. By allowing the community to jointly address pressing sociopolitical issues of contemporary significance, Calcutta's art worlds operate as a constantly renewing source of cultural strength, providing an essential identity-fortifying survival mechanism for many.

The *Swadeshi* Legacy and Bengal's Nationalist Politics

An important milestone in progressive self-constructions of Bengali nationalism is the 1903-8 *Swadeshi* (“self-reliance,” literally “one’s own country”) period. As Sumit Sarkar has noted “despite its brief duration, [the period] has come to occupy a very notable place in the historiography of nationalism and in the collective memory of our people”(1973: 1). The movement began as an elite-directed popular movement in reaction to the division of Bengal Province by the colonial Government of India’s administrative fiat. Allegedly intended as a measure to ensure greater efficiency of provincial governance, Bengalis had no illusions about the fact that the partition was an imperialist strategy of ‘divide and rule.’ The policy appeared to Bengalis as a means instituted to quash the successful efforts of Bengal’s politicians to rouse patriotic feeling and build a collective public consciousness against government inequities. Recognizing the insufficiency of the heretofore customary methods of conducting politics, namely by predominantly urban elites petitioning the Government and addressing the public with formalized speeches, Bengalis responded by forming both mass protest organizations and revolutionary underground societies (R. K. Ray 1984).

For the first time, women of educated households attended public political meetings, often contributing their gold ornaments to benefit the *Swadeshi* cause. Issues promoted included national education, the boycott of foreign goods, and the physical training of youth, as pleas were made for courage, unity, and self-sacrifice in the battle for national freedom. Significantly, the movement spawned the first efforts of the nationalist *bhadralok*

intelligentsia to mobilize the masses, with intensive use of the press and the platform. But its limitations underlined the contradictions in Bengal's socioeconomic structure, both the elite-mass gap and Hindu-Muslim tensions, and the movement soon gave way to methods of individual terror (Sumit Sarkar 1973).

Though fondly remembered, Bengali efforts to establish small *swadeshi* manufacturing firms to locally produce goods of everyday use such as soap, matches, hosiery and leather products, were regularly thwarted by lack of capital, lack of practical business experience, and the difficulty of obtaining bank credit (R.K. Ray 1984).

In Bengali cultural memory the *Swadeshi* period is particularly celebrated for the rich artistic expression that the era's sense of patriotism and promise produced – an outpouring of popular *swadeshi* songs, poems, plays, essays, paintings, and novels that were vital to the movement's propagation (see Sumit Sarkar 1973 and media chapters to follow). Important initiatives of “*swadeshi* scholarship” stimulated popular and intellectual interest in Bengal's folk traditions and made conscious links between science and patriotism. Bengali scientists Jagadishchandra Bose and Prafullachandra Ray saw their research as “helping to put India and Bengal on the map of world culture” (Sarkar 1973: 498).

The movement, whose attractions remained limited to members of *bhadralok* social groupings, ended with a sense of anti-climax as *swadeshi* initiatives and institutions petered out, a combined result of inertia and Government repression. After six years, the partition of Bengal was in fact revoked, but the Government of India's administrative and political capital was transferred from Calcutta to Delhi in 1912. This unexpected and clearly punitive move took the wind out of Bengali sails, challenging the Bengali sense of collective self-

importance and the hegemonic position of Bengal's politicians within the nationalist movement.

1920s Bengal: Politics with Mass Appeal

Among the most heroized of Bengal's nationalist leaders is Chittaranjan Das, whom Bengalis refer to as *Deshabandhu* ("Friend of the Nation"). Although his fame is due to a well-deserved recognition of his able leadership of the Bengal Congress during the period of the Non-Cooperation Movement² and the 1921-22 alliance with the Muslim *Khilafat* movement³ he is also praised as an instigator of revolutionary mass upheaval. Sumit Sarkar has referred to the period as "possibly the point of greatest strength and unity in the entire history of the national movement in Bengal" (1989: 218).

Das, who bitterly opposed the election boycott scheme advocated by Gandhi, typifies Bengali ambivalence toward Gandhian methods. At the root of the Bengal leaders' political disagreements with Gandhi was a serious "clash of cultural values." Proud of their urbanity and their rich intellectual culture, *bhadralok* politicians objected in particular to what Rajat

² In the aftermath of WWI, when wartime ordinances that allowed Indians to be held without trial were extended, Gandhi was able to build a mass movement by organizing national *satyagrahas* (mass political activity labeled a "quest for truth") that became the 1920-22 Non-Cooperation Movement to boycott British goods and institutions.

³ The popular pan-Islamic *Khilafat* movement championed the cause of the Ottoman caliph whose empire was dismantled by the victorious Allies. The Congress party won a mass Muslim following when Gandhi joined forces with their movement; a period of Hindu-Muslim unity that lasted until the movement collapsed when Ataturk abolished the caliphate in 1924 leaving young Muslims without a cause.

Ray refers to as “Gandhi’s rural moralism” (1984: 246). Ray sees the real issue of contention between Das and Gandhi to be a question of tactics, and their “differing conceptions of the extent and use of mass participation in nationalism”(249). Gandhi was opposed to mass economic boycotts, and Calcutta politicians despaired that the program he advocated – withdrawal from government schools, colleges, law courts and government service and boycott of legislative councils – would target only educated Bengalis for self-sacrifice and leave untouched issues of economic monopoly and racial domination by foreigners (249). Moreover, Bengali politicians saw control of government institutions as a valid and realizable objective for nationalists to strive for.

A master at political maneuvering and party management, Das built up a vast network of local Congress committees and recruited radical young activist organizers, many of whom had been members of revolutionary terrorist cells, to set up volunteer corps for picketing and boycott. The social composition of the volunteers who “courted arrest” during this period – women, millhands, boatmen, laborers – made this political moment radically distinct from the *bhadralok*-dominated politics of the *Swadeshi* era. The Congress and *Khilafat* committees sought to organize a national front against the British that would incorporate all classes and communities.

The party machine built up by Das included “influential men from Calcutta’s high professional and landed society, organizers of popular movements in the villages, labour leaders, revolutionary cadres, important business interests and representatives of the Muslim community” (Ray 1984: 323). Union organizing drives were initiated, though these attracted primarily white collar and transport workers; the mass of factory workers and mill hands

stayed away. Projects to form peasant unions and rural cooperatives were also unsuccessful. In what was known as the Bengal Pact, Das managed to secure Muslim support for a broad legislative coalition against the British, described by Rajat Ray as “a bold step towards a solution of the Hindu-Muslim problem” (316).

Significantly for the future of Bengal’s politics, this period of effective communal alliance-building passed with Das’s death in 1925, when leadership of the Bengal Congress was taken over by members of a professional elite who engaged in frequent factional squabbles. On-the-ground organizing work was carried out by former revolutionaries who retained secret networks and continued recruiting for underground work through local athletic clubs, social service and cultural organizations, and in colleges and student hostels. A significant aspect of Das’ legacy is that well into the 1960s, the predominant figures in Bengal politics, both Hindu and Muslim, were men whom Das had recruited and trained in parliamentary and political skills (Gordon 1990: fn68 p.699).

Communal Tensions Rend Mass Unity

A rhetoric of tidal movements is often used to describe mass agitational politics in Calcutta, with nationalist agitations ebbing as communal tensions rose and vice versa. In these accounts, repressive police action and factional fighting among political leaders are seen merely to increase the swells.

For example, in the mid 1920s there was a decline in mass agitational politics that can in part be attributed to repressive legislation, as well as to the factional fighting that

consumed the energies of Congress and Calcutta Corporation (municipal government) leaders. But significantly, as Suranjan Das has noted, “the ebb in nationalist agitations coincided with increasing communal tensions in Calcutta” (in Chaudhuri 1990b: 20). Rioting crowds in the city consisted primarily of “upcountry Hindus” (North Indian migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) and Muslims of the lower social strata. Agitations in the late 1920s and 30s were notable for the participation of women in processions and picketting, and for striking laborers such as dock and transport workers, millhands and Calcutta scavengers who engaged in acts of solidarity across their professions. In the early 1930s Communists established their hold over labor politics in Calcutta, until the CPI was declared illegal in 1934 and forced to operate underground.

The elections of 1937, the first held on the basis of separate communal electorates, with nearly half the seats of the Bengal legislature reserved for Muslims, brought a Muslim League-Krishak Praja coalition to power, primarily consisting of Muslim middle class from districts in East Bengal. These leaders soon became disastrously implicated in the communal conflicts of Bengal politics. Once a protege of Das’, H.S. Suhrawardy had played a despicable role inciting his Muslim co-religionists to loot during the Calcutta riots of 1926, while he was serving as Deputy Mayor of the Calcutta Corporation (Das 1991: 95). And during the savage riots of August 1946, known as “The Great Calcutta Killing,” when talk of Pakistan was in the air, Suhrawardy, then Chief Minister, both instigated destructive actions by Muslim *goondas* (lumpen criminals-for-hire) and constantly interfered with police operations attempting to quell the violence (185,187).

The Progressive Writers' Association: Internationalism and The Defense of Culture

Prominent in the cultural memory of Indian progressive intellectuals is the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), an extremely influential pan-Indian organization of writers of regional languages that came to fruition in the mid to late 1930s. It has been described as having "played a crucial role in disseminating the Marxist point of view in the sphere of Indian cultural thought" (Pradhan 1982: 6). From the outset the PWA incorporated a global vision. As an intellectual movement it addressed international issues such as the struggle against fascism and imperialism, as well as a more localized sense of responsibility to invoke tradition progressively and see that new cultural initiatives would benefit all the people of India.

Among the association's founders were Urdu writer Sajjad Zaheer and Hindi writer Mulk Raj Anand who, during their student days in London, had formed the Indian Progressive Writers' Association in 1934-5 to make contact with progressive literary movements abroad. In a nostalgic memoir written in 1940, Zaheer described how, seeking a contribution they could make as Indians in exile, they built an organization that sought "to represent Indian literature in the West and to interpret for India the thoughts of Western writers and the social problems which were profoundly influencing Western literature" (in Pradhan, ed. 1985[1979]: 31). He vividly recounts how inspired they were by the movement in France for a United Front against fascism, and their attendance at the World Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture held in Paris in 1935. They were impressed as much by the gathering of "famous personalities" – including Andre Malraux, Maxim Gorki, Romain

Rolland and Thomas Mann – and the “rousing reception” given to the delegation of Soviet writers and testimonies of Chinese writers’ contributions to the struggle against Japanese imperialism, as by the gravity of the Congress’ declared aims “to save civilization and culture from the rising tide of reaction and degeneration” (31). Upon his return to India, Zaheer became General Secretary of the Progressive Writers’ Association, now based in India.

In April 1936, the first All-India Conference of the Progressive Writers’ Association was held in the historic northern Indian city of Lucknow. It was a momentous occasion, the first national gathering of writers of India’s many regional languages uniting to address common cultural concerns. Writers from Bengal, the United Provinces, Punjab, Maharashtra, Gujerat and Madras were in attendance. The conference was organized in just three weeks, in order to coincide with the annual session of the Indian National Congress also being held in the city.⁴

A PWA Statement of Purpose entitled “Towards Progressive Literature” was

⁴ The Lucknow Congress session represented the highpoint of Congress and its President Jawaharlal Nehru’s leftism. Recently returned from Europe, Nehru introduced from the platform an anti-imperialist, anti-fascist National Front slogan and spoke of socialism as “the only key to the solution of the world’s problems and of India’s problems.” He persuaded the session to pass resolutions condemning Italian and Japanese aggression, and expressing solidarity with Abyssinia, China, and Republican Spain. Sumit Sarkar recognizes this internationalism as “one of Jawaharlal’s most notable contributions to our freedom movement”(1989[1983]: 343). It was also at the Lucknow session that a formal agreement for mutual cooperation was made between the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) (a left interest group that had formed within the Indian National Congress in 1934) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) (under official Government of India ban since 1933). Subsequent to the Comintern Seventh Congress tactical switch to a United Front policy in August 1935, communists had been allowed to join the CSP as individuals (Wood 1985). Their ability to work within the Indian National Congress led to an important growth of influence for the CPI.

published in booklet form just after the Lucknow meeting. In its preface, Zaheer explained the background to the organization's foundation:

The need for organising the progressive writers' movement in India was being felt by many of us for the last two or three years. In many parts of India groups of writers, mostly young, were feeling the need of making a break with the supine and escapist literature with which the country was being flooded...Our culture, which we wanted to use as an instrument of service, of enlightenment and of joy for the entire people of this country, was withering away before our very eyes (in Pradhan, ed.1985 [1979]: 1-2).

Zaheer offered the following series of explanations as the writer-members' analysis of the crisis in culture they were experiencing:

On the one hand the grievous restriction of education to an infinitesimal minority of the Indian population by a foreign and unsympathetic administration, the poverty and misery of the Indian people as a whole, the growing curse of unemployment among the intelligentsia; on the other hand the policy of abject revivalism, the senile attempt at copying the artistic forms and concepts of our past, even though the present social environment was entirely different, resulted in making Indian art and culture hopelessly restricted, devoid alike of vision and the actualities of life (2).

Aware of the need to struggle against these serious limitations, the PWA believed that "a new and vigorous effort should be made to enrich the cultural life of this nation" (3). Branches would be established in every literary center of India where meetings would be held to read and discuss progressive literature and rally forces – "by inducing our writers to study closely the life of our people, a suitable *milieu* was to be created" where a new literature could grow and flourish (3). But the new literature was "not rejecting our literary heritage," in fact the writers of the PWA maintained that "only progressive writers and not pedantic reactionaries, worshiping dead forms, could claim to be the true inheritors" of that tradition (4).

Also contained in "Towards Progressive Literature" was the PWA Manifesto as

adopted at the Lucknow Conference. The statement was critical of escapist tendencies, and of “the spirit of reaction,” then seen as making “desperate efforts”:

Indian literature...has tried to find a refuge from reality in baseless spiritualism and ideality. The result is that it has become anaemic in body and mind...(in Pradhan, ed.1985 [1979]: 74).

Among the stated objectives of the association was the encouragement of “interpretive and creative work (with both Indian and foreign resources),” and the desire “to bring arts into the closest touch with the people and to make them the vital organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future we envisage” (75). The manifesto stated these tenets of the PWA credo:

We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of our existence today – the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and un-reason we reject as reactionary. All that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organise ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive (75).

Conference attendees passed a number of resolutions to condemn attacks on “the free cultural development of the country.” These included 1) a protest and call for the repeal of Government of India restrictions on freedom of expression including Press laws and the Customs Act which suppressed periodicals and proscribed progressive literature, preventing the entry into the country of radical literature from abroad and 2) a demand for removal by University authorities of restrictions on students’ freedom of expression on social and political issues, and in their organizations and journals (76-77).

Before long, the Government of India had signaled its anxiety about the PWA’s potential impact by distributing an official warning from the Home Secretary to all local governments. The “Hallet Circular,” as it came to be known, cast suspicion on the

“comparatively innocuous” aims proclaimed by the organization, and drew attention to the movement’s inspiration from “avowed and active communists” whose objectives were to make contacts among intellectuals with the intention of “spreading Communistic ideas and gaining converts” (in Pradhan 1985[1979]: 107-8).

Calcutta Hosts the PWA, 1938

From the perspective of writers in Bengal, the relevance of the PWA was literally brought home in 1938 when the Second All-India PWA Conference was held in Calcutta in the month of December. Riding on its successes in initiating a national-level discussion, the organization then confronted the impassioned scene of the city’s cultural politics. The results were provocative, and particularly inspiring for local intellectuals’ ideological formation. In the course of presentations and debates that took place at the Calcutta Second Congress, the progressive writers continued their discussions of perceived cultural crisis, their productive assessments of tradition and its continued relevance, and made suggestions for new directions in progressive cultural production.

The conference was inaugurated with an address by Rabindranath Tagore, and the Bengali modernist poets Buddhadev Bose, Samar Sen, and Sudhindranath Datta all presented papers. Rabindranath, clearly intending to rally the audience’s creative and oppositional forces, spoke to “the causes of the downfall of Eastern culture,” invoking images of civilizational destruction and shame regarding the Indian acceptance of a subordinate role *vis à vis* the West:

The habit of clinging to the past has led to endless misery and humiliation and in the course of time the impact of the West destroyed our own civilization, uprooted the culture that once had spread into the remotest villages. Sitting at the feet of the foreign school masters we grew more and more convinced that our powerlessness and ignorance were inherent...Now...was the time for a new synthesis (as reported in Pradhan 1985[1979]: 101-2).

The Bengali poet Sudhindranath Datta's address to the conference was entitled "Whiggism, Radicalism and Treason in Bengal." In it he briefly reviewed the history of Bengal's syncretic culture, lamenting the fact that romanticism and mysticism came to be attributed to Bengal "by ourselves along with outsiders whom our notorious slave mentality compelled us to copy." In angry words he mourned that "Macaulay, in his quest for clerks had succeeded in quenching the native culture in its entirety" (Pradhan 1985[1979]: 82-3). Addressing his audience as "men anxious to cope with the crisis in our culture," (87) he reminded his listeners that "the first duty of every self-respecting author should be to recall the past whenever he is confronted with the future"(85). He went on to state his beliefs about the function of progressive literature:

...for the progressive who, by definition, is the standard bearer of civilisation, Tradition becomes more important than Experiment; and although he can hardly live without attempting the latter, yet must the former, at every step, confirm the results obtained. Now tradition is...a growing thing; not the intellectuals, but the enduring masses are the guardians of tradition and directors of progress... the experimenter... [must pass] the pragmatic test of his people...This I believe to be the function of progressive literature (86).

The message for the Calcutta audience was clearly that the legacy of the past should serve as a source of strength from which to draw, as a means to counteract the disempowering sense of inferiority that resulted from the all too common propensity to draw invidious comparisons between "the West" and "us." Intellectuals were reminded that they must look to "the people" as the keepers of that legacy, and work with them to maintain the

viability of popular tradition and a pride in cultural heritage.

Datta offered up poetic images of “the common people,” as “the indigenous force of progress,” “that source of perennial energy,” a once vital spring that had become “choked up again, not with decayed leaves as on the last occasion [a reference to “Moghul feudalism”] but with weeds of foreign extraction – the Bengali middle class ” (87-88). He urged the writers in the audience to make “new borings” to tap once again into that fount of popular energy. He ended by saying “I realise that the crisis in our culture is of class origin; and therefore I place my forlorn hope of regeneration in the people...”(88.).

Rabindranath’s message to the Conference had taken up a similarly populist line. Sumit Sarkar has remarked that its tone was “unusually self-critical” for the poet, and Sarkar particularly highlights Rabindranath’s poignant description of himself as “regretting his own relative isolation from the masses” (1989 [1983]: 343).

The second session began with a discussion entitled “The Crisis in Culture” presented by the Marxist critic Hiren Mukherjee, one of the conference organizers. Mukherjee enjoined those writers and artists on the side of the workers and peasants to “forge out of their art a sword for use in the struggle which they cannot avoid” (reported in Pradhan 1985[1979]: 104). His message to the assembled writers had a strong populist thrust:

Our literature will not acquire reality and vitality unless it broadens to include the consciousness of the working masses of our country. The hard realities of their life, their zeal and unself-conscious freshness, their innate practicality and simple courage shall be our weapons to root out the anaemic tendencies in our cultural heritage... (quoted in S.Banerjee 1989: 7).

One of the founders of the PWA, Mulk Raj Anand, presented the audience in

Calcutta with a programmatic outline of the progressive literature movement, its historic mission and international context:

...[A]t this moment of the crisis in culture...we prefer to re-interpret the old values...so that they may come to be regarded...as related to the requirements of the changing society to which we belong... In the Progressive Writers' Association... [we] join for common actions, in the defence of our old culture and the development, through a proper criticism of the past, of a new culture...we must unite...to save our civilisation. For if we let our civilisation be destroyed we will not have left even the vestige of freedom through which we can discuss, criticise and remould our varying ideals and develop our national culture; if we once let ourselves be crushed and stifled into an abject acceptance of a false view of our past culture...; if we do not come together now to pool our resources...we as a nation and our culture will lapse and be forgotten forever...a cultural awakening...is demanded not only by the contingencies of our lives in India but by the world struggle which by the growingly successful offensive of Fascism in Europe affects us in a far more real way than we imagine (in Pradhan 1979: 15-17).

In his remarks Anand also gave a report of his eye-opening experiences at the first two conferences of the International Association of Writers for the Defence of Culture against Fascism, in Paris in 1935 and London in 1936. He underlined the importance of India's participation in such forums, and advocated Indian contribution to their projected publishing ventures as "a unique opportunity," "because for the first time there is a scheme through which we can have a voice in international discussion"(20). Emphasizing the strengths of the transnational bonds discovered there, he offered these words of assurance:

We, the writers of India, know how the forces of repression and censorship have thwarted the development of a great modern tradition in the literature of our country... The sympathy of the world writers, in our task of creating a new culture, in the face of the indirect censorship of which our rulers are masters, is with us (21).

Anand urged the Calcutta audience of progressive writers to rally themselves and accept responsibility for the tasks that lay ahead:

...we have to concern ourselves with the positive defence of our culture by reinterpreting the past so as to rescue it from the maligning of Imperialist

archaeology on the one side and from its misuse by the reactionary element in our society...(22).

Writers should mobilize their technical skills in the production of “vigorous journalism,” “in daily contact with actual national and social problems,” and work for “the popularisation of culture” through literacy campaigns and recognition of “the importance of regional languages and literature”(22). Anand spoke of the Indian writers’ obligation “to take an active part” in preparing the audience to appreciate the new works to be produced in a variety of media including radio, film as well as literature, that they might serve as ammunition in the people’s cultural struggles:

The popularisation of culture is one of the greatest tasks facing a country which has been deliberately kept ignorant by its rulers. Alongside our attempt to evolve new values we should arm our people intellectually (22).

Anand concluded by emphasizing the global significance of their objectives:

The task of building up a national culture out of the debris of the past, so that it takes root in the realities of the present, is the only way by which we will take our place among those writers of the world who are facing with us the bittersweet struggle in history, the struggle of the peoples of the world against Imperialism...(24).

The language of the conference resolutions communicated the PWA internationalist vision, expressing “solidarity with the writers and artists of the world who are fighting against reaction, Fascism and Imperialism.” Significantly, they stated the “opinion that literature and art are the heritage of the whole of humanity and are not divisible in racial, national or geographical boundaries” (in Pradhan 1985[1979]: 103).

The Local Impact of Global War

No All India Conferences of the PWA could be held between 1939 and 1942. Sudhi Pradhan, self-appointed archivist of the Marxist Cultural Movement, observes that “there was no document available to explain the absence of activities”(1985[1979]: xiv). The politics of the period are complex, and do not warrant easy summary, certainly not without being drawn into the vortex of Indian factionalist politics. Pradhan renders it in these terms:

...the Marxist Cultural movement had a set-back due to disruptive activities of a section of the Left, with the active connivance of the Right, with Jawaharlal sitting on the fence with uneasy conscience... A political confusion regarding war, fascism and the way to achieve Indian freedom, created a rift in the leftist movement (xiv-xv).

International events, from the Soviet Non-aggression pact with Germany in August 1939, to the Soviet invasion of Poland and war in Finland, created a sense of confusion and unease among Indian leftists and a withdrawal of support from the Progressive Writers' movement. After Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union, the Communist Party of India made a significant tactical switch from denunciations of “imperialist war” to a declaration of strategic cooperation with what was now seen as a “People's War” effort. That, combined with the entry of Japan into the war, and the far too-close-for-comfort fall of Singapore and Burma, led to a radical shift in mood in India. Communists were officially rewarded for their support of the Allied war effort with a formal legalization of the CPI in July 1942. As a result they generally held back from participation in the popular ‘August Rebellion’ of Gandhi's ‘Quit India’ movement, a decision that generated animosity between Communists and Congress, and an enormous rift in the nationalist movement.

Meanwhile, Calcutta had become a center of wartime activity, with a massive presence of Allied forces and an artificial boom in the economy that fueled profiteering and the black market. Many Bengalis were dismayed by the unscrupulous and unseemly behavior that had become widespread in both commercial and social life, and lamented the accompanying erosion of human and moral values in their society. Others, those among the cultural elite, reveled in the new opportunities for contacts with European and American modernist culture, learning of the latest Western trends and acquiring new tastes for jazz, painting, and cinema.

Culture in the Service of Politics

In 1940, urban middle-class English-educated youth in Calcutta initiated a movement for the politicization of culture calling themselves the Youth Cultural Institute. They are often credited with having been first to take culture to the masses, and having initiated many of the practices that became standard fare in Bengali political meetings such as patriotic song recitals, popular poetry, and dramatic performances “on topical realities” (Pradhan 1985[1979]: 120). Their 1941 conference on the theme “Crisis in Culture” included an innovative poster exhibition (the first of its kind in Calcutta) and critical appraisals of the work of Gorky, T.S. Eliot, Andre Gide, and George Bernard Shaw. But their internationalist focus drew criticism, as visitors commented on “the almost complete absence of Indian culture” (112).

By 1942, intellectuals in Bengal had taken the lead in reviving India’s Marxist

cultural movement, forming organizations such as the Friends of the Soviet Union and the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association (AFWA) to keep abreast of international cultural issues and to speak out in defense of artistic integrity. Overstreet and Windmiller lumped these groups under the rubric "Communist 'front' organizations," noting their function as propaganda forums and sources of recruitment for the Party (1959: 407). Describing what soon became the All-India Friends of the Soviet Union as "the first important front organization to appear in India," the authors noted: "Like so many other Indian political movements it had its origin in Bengal" (407).

It hardly need be stated that, for Bengali intellectuals and students who joined these organizations, the view from within was somewhat different. Bengalis are quick to recall that AFWA was founded as a rapid response to public outrage at a "crime [that] shook the entire literary and artistic world of Bengal," namely the murder of Somen Chanda, a young writer and trade unionist "stabbed to death by the 5th column in Dacca" (Pradhan 1985[1979]: 169-70). Seeing itself as "a crusade against fascism stalking within," the organization's first article of business was a mass public meeting where an anti-fascist manifesto was signed. The organizing committee included Bengal's leading writers, critics, poets and the painter Jamini Roy (122). The organization's President was Ramananda Chatterjee, "the doyen of India journalism" and editor of the hugely popular and solidly middle class periodical Modern Review (170).

AFWA is particularly remembered for its sponsorship of the popular song movement, the organization of traveling song squads, and its publication of anti-fascist songs, poems, and pamphlets by Bengali authors both celebrated and unknown.

The Impact of Famine

Unlike their broadly successful efforts to institute egalitarian rationing schemes in the war economy at home, in Bengal, the British made little serious effort to regulate local food supplies. Feeding the army was the official priority, and with the disastrous loss of Burma as a source of rice imports, prices skyrocketed, and hoarding went unchecked. Fear of imminent Japanese invasion generated a drastic government policy known as the ‘boat denial’ scheme, whose callousness can only have been the product of panic. Local transport boats were officially confiscated and destroyed lest they be commandeered by invading troops, severely obstructing Bengal’s essential riverine distribution systems. The rapid and devastating result of such misguided policy efforts was the Bengal Famine of 1943–44. With no abnormal climatic conditions or significant shortfalls in rice production, it was indisputably a man-made phenomenon – the product of human negligence and poor planning at various political and social levels simultaneously. Over the course of the famine period village communities were abandoned; families became separated; women and children were left to starve and fend for themselves. Millions upon millions of Bengalis died.⁵

In Calcutta, *bhadralok* intellectuals received the shock of their lives as hundreds of thousands of destitute rural Bengalis flooded into the city to beg for food and die in the streets. For many who witnessed the suffering in their midst it was a powerfully

⁵ Estimates of famine mortality range from “around three million”(Sen 1981) to 3.8 million (Greenough 1982), to the five million figure that many Bengalis relate and that has become part of Bengali popular memory of the famine (e.g. the end title of Satyajit Ray’s 1973 film Ashani Sanket [“Distant Thunder”]).

conscientizing experience and a call to action.⁶ All of a sudden, the idyll of rural Bengal was horrifyingly revealed to be merely a romantic intellectual fantasy. The misery of the rural poor and the unsustainable thinness of their margin of survival was made all too palpably real. This realization, and the trauma it meant for Bengal, would again find echoes in the East Bengali refugee crisis subsequent to the Partition of 1947.⁷ It is a realization that continues to feed the radical consciousness of Bengal.⁸

Separation From “The People” & A Populist Ethic as Redemption?

In his 1961 The Intellectual Between Tradition and Modernity: The Indian Situation, Chicago sociologist Edward Shils discussed a sense of cultural crisis he perceived among Indian intellectuals, a “troubled sensitivity” that he attributed to a clash between their profound attachment to things of the West – ideas, opinions, technologies, commodities, to the English language itself – and their pride in the Indian nation and attachment to its symbols that was fostered by the Independence movement (Shils 1961: 70). In Shils’

⁶ One especially positive and progressive outcome of intellectual response to the famine was the formation of the Indian People’s Theatre Association described in Chapter Four. See also the discussion of films by Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen about the famine in Chapter Six.

⁷ The films of Ritwik Ghatak are particularly evocative of the director’s response to Partition and the forced separation from the land and riverine landscape of East Bengal (that became Pakistan and later Bangladesh); it was experienced by Ghatak and many Bengalis as a profound psychic loss. Ghatak also brilliantly incorporates themes of longing and bereavement and a mystical vision of Nature by introducing the songs of Rabindranath Tagore. See Chapter Six.

⁸ Indeed many of these East Bengali refugees were a radicalizing force behind the CPIM, and the brains behind its sensitive and politically astute focus on rural issues and landlessness in particular.

estimation this dissonance that he found pervading Indian intellectual culture amounted to “a tragic situation which only the passage of many decades can resolve” (1961: fn.6 p.72).

From his own empirical observation Shils noted the omnipresent “pull of the foreign and especially of the Western” in India’s intellectual culture, remarking with not-so-veiled condescension that among Indian authors “British judgement of their work means more to them than the Indian judgement” (77, 78). With a rather remarkable obliviousness – not to say blatant insensitivity – to global power relations, Shils made the following rather blithely critical pronouncement: “the Western world and India’s relation to it, is too much on the mind of the Indian intellectual” (77). Shils did acknowledge that for the Indian intellectual an attachment to traditional practices still retained a firm hold (though one he might be reluctant to justify to a Westerner).⁹ However the point Shils wished to emphasize was that the intellectual was troubled by a constant concern that he had become “insufficiently Indian,”:

The feeling of being cut off displeases him and troubles him; sometimes it obsesses him. He worries a lot about not being Indian enough, about being estranged from India (76).

He acknowledged that this sense of crisis was generally true of peripheral intellectuals, namely the intellectuals of the underdeveloped countries of Asia and Africa, who functioned in their societies as “proponents of modernity”:

...the intellectuals have developed anxiety about whether they have allowed themselves to be corrupted by excessive permeation with the admired foreign culture (73).

⁹ Thus Shils speculated that an intellectual informant might find it easier to attribute his own ritual observances to the preferences of females of the household – “hiding behind the women’s saris” in effect [64]).

Yet, as Shils also noted, the Indian intellectual maintained a constant struggle against “the consequent sense of derogation” that his devotion to the metropolitan culture aroused within him (75).

A common response that Shils observed was a strongly felt “need to be ‘in contact with the people’”(71). For many, to be “in touch” with the masses, and to make some amends for their being so distant by virtue of their “cultivation of English,” had become an “urgent necessity” (72). In this, according to Shils, the intellectuals had seized upon a solution to their sense of crisis:

To identify themselves with the people, to praise the culture of the ordinary people as richer, truer, wiser and more relevant than the foreign culture in which they had themselves been educated, has been a way out of this distress (73).

Thus the intellectuals’ response to their alienation, and the anguish suffered for what they regarded as their “separation from the people”(71-72), was to devote themselves to an ethic of populism, which Shils defined as “a belief in the creativity and in the superior moral worth of the ordinary people”(73). In Shils’ assessment, “the people, who are alleged to have preserved intact whatever is really living in the indigenous culture” provided intellectuals with a kind of “salvation” and “moral comfort”(75).

In the post-Independence era Shils noted that particularly among “outsider” intellectuals the “need to be in contact with the people” had become “especially poignant”(71). To account for this postcolonial dispensation of the populist ethic, Shils introduced the notion of an “aggrieved and aggravated” sense of nationality (71). It was because they were ashamed both of being Indian and of not being Indian enough that Indian intellectuals faced a cultural crisis. To account for this sensibility which “appears at first

sight paradoxical,” Shils put forth a problematic theory of Indian intellectuals’ “nationalistic sense of national inferiority”:

This uneasiness...seems to arise...from being Indian, being aware of it, even excessively aware of it, and being, in a sense, ashamed of it...The fact is that intense attachment to the symbols of one’s nationality, and the belief that one should be more possessed by them than one actually is, are intricately intertwined with a sense of the inferiority of one’s own nationality. Much of the nationalism of Indian intellectuals is a reaction of their unhappy feelings about the inferiority of their country to other countries (76).

It was this attitude – fueled by “a conviction of the superiority of foreign things and the inferiority of Indian things,” and a sense of shame “that their country is not a ‘modern country’”-- that would explain all the publically spoken clichés in praise of India, especially those uttered by Indian intellectuals abroad (76-77). As Shils explained: “The nationalistic reaction occurs partly because, for the intellectuals of the underdeveloped countries of Asia and Africa, provinciality is especially stressful” (86). Continued deference to the metropolitan culture, the intrinsic value of being “foreign returned,” is seen as implicit criticism of the intellectual’s own “provincial” culture. This fact, according to Shils, in effect seals the peripheral intellectual’s fate: “His fate destines him to provinciality, until his own modern culture becomes creative”(87).

It is in part to demonstrate that such patronizingly disparaging comments were unwarranted even in 1961 that this study is intended. An historical look back at the conscientious efforts of Calcutta’s cultural producers to balance the two simultaneous needs that Shils recognized, namely “the need to be ‘in contact with the people’ and the need to be in contact with the West”(71), produces evidence of a localized Bengali version of an autonomous modernity. Although Shils did not recognize its aesthetic and political

significance in 1961, that moment of modern cultural creativity had already arrived.

A Postscript on Populism: Shils in the 1990s, an Ethnographic Update

In a 1996 dissertation analyzing the ideologies of writers who contribute to Bengali language literary journals in Calcutta known as “little magazines,” William Reese re-introduced some of Shils’ arguments (Reese 1996). In particular, Reese returned to Shils’ thesis that populist traditions offered compensation for a peripheral self conception in order to assess its validity for the contemporary empirical situation.

Reese sought to examine the relationships Shils claimed existed between a tradition of populism (defined as “belief in the creativity and superior moral worth of the people” [Reese 1996: xii]) and “a putative sense of peripherality” (15) (defined as “a sense of exclusion from the centers of vital action in the world”[xiii]). While acknowledging a number of weaknesses in Shils’ argument, notably “its occasionally patronizing tone” (33), its excessively broad generalizations and outdated assumptions of Western superiority, Reese’s premise was that Shils’ ideas were “worth rejuvenating”(31). Indeed Reese found that the ethnographic situation he encountered in Bengal confirmed Shil’s remarks on peripherality.

Among the Bengali journal writers he studied, Reese found “similar styles of thinking, and of assessing virtue” that he believed could be aptly represented by the rubric “populism” (90). Reese noted that members of this community of intellectuals “adhere to a distinctively populist and broadly ‘leftist’ system of ethics” (xii). In fact he found that

“People judged one another in relation to evidence of their subaltern sympathies” (15, 90). This populism provides them with “a general pattern of personal ethics,” one that Reese saw as “curiously rule-bound,” with its virtues “precisely conceived” (15). These populist ethics function to define the authors’ selves and value-systems; they are seen as conferring rights and obligations to membership in a moral community (91). Significantly, they are espoused even by those not particularly interested in politics. As Reese notes: “Populist ethics enable a hierarchical discrimination of moral persons (xiii). Those who “do something for the people,” live simply, and consciously, and who are altruistic, and disciplined in their creative pursuits, are seen as paragons of virtue (85, 94). Exemplars of sacrifice in the world of arts and letters are eulogized; the solitary writer/artist toiling in a dingy room, enduring the rigors of poverty and physical suffering is an archetypal figure. Another respected role is that of the *buddhijibi* (something like a “public intellectual”) who renders public service through words and actions – participating selflessly in public functions and supporting protests by marching in processions, holding banners, talking with the press, and giving speeches about contemporary political issues. Bengal’s cultural hagiography continually praises those who retain their suspicions of the corrupting impact of success, and refuse to allow their egos to become inflated or their talent spoiled by the lure of publicity and the market.

Whereas Reese found such expressions of ethical populism to be characteristic features of the ideology of Bengal’s literary scene, his informants associated them more generally with notions of Bengali identity. Reese lists “the compulsory virtues of renunciation, activism, sacrifice and simple living” (361), referring to them as “‘brahminical’ ethics” that have been “enlisted to promote secularism, nationalism and modernism” (87,

90). These values, which Reese describes as “a certain religious position and outlook among otherwise secular intellectuals” (xiii), are seen by informants to illustrate the “moral distinctiveness” of Bengalis, and “clearly” – in Reese’s view – have roots in the Hindu philosophic tradition. They are commonly expressed in acts that are seen as “typically Bengali” such as the sacrifice of creature comforts for the good of others, collecting money for a worthy cause, offering hospitality to strangers, being open-minded and accepting others’ differences (350). By invoking populist sentiments, ethics, and aesthetics, and “by minding the lineages of ancestors,” the writers sustain a conception of themselves as Indians and as Bengalis – creating and sustaining an intellectual posture (“an imaginative position conceived by its believers to compose a tradition”) which they see as enabling them to gain some distance from the West (342, 364). This “alternative cultural tradition” that stands outside and apart from Western tradition, but alongside and parallel to it, makes possible “controlled participation, commentary, and potential challenge” (341). Maintaining an involvement with Western discourse, yet preserving a crucial ethical distance, on the strength of their intellectual tradition, the writers can retain a sustaining sense of identity. They are confident that their work can “serve elevated moral and social purposes” (347). According to Reese’s assessment, their literary tradition, a noteworthy example of indigenous, non-western high culture, “provides a moral and intellectual resource that enables them to feel that they are outperforming the West ethically” (xiii).

What Reese’s ethnography provides is some engaging empirical evidence of certain ideological characteristics that are shared among Bengali writers. But in the leap from noting their coexistence – an observation of associated (and thus presumably related)

variables – to postulating an explanation, he recapitulates Shil's theory of peripherality in an unconvincing manner. Perhaps we should look elsewhere to explain this populist impulse? Perhaps by analogy we should turn to the cultural theorists on the left in Britain and inquire as to where their ethical distance originates? Their sense of superiority *vis à vis* Western hegemonic values, their dedicated activism, and sense of sacrifice surely has little to do with a sense of peripherality or "brahmanical ethics."

To conclude, Shils' negative assessments and derogatory readings of the Indian intellectual's cultural self-perception (his "troubled sensitivity," the pervading sense of tragic "dissonance," with the West "too much on the mind"), Shils' dismissal of populist/subaltern sympathies as somehow "poignant" and a compensatory psychological crutch, were quite simply a failure to grasp the creativity and historical consciousness of Bengali modernity. A far more fruitful approach is to see the cultural rewards that are obtained through an ability to relish disjuncture, to savor new combinations (as of East and West, High and Low), to appropriate and retool, and hold the discursive contradictions in balance however transitorily and imperfectly.

Perhaps "the nationalistic sense of national inferiority," or an oppressive awareness of "provinciality," (where it is in evidence) is merely the regrettable cultural shame of those victimized by history but only half-mobilized by affirmative cultural symbols (i.e. nationalistic or indigenous aesthetic ones). Perhaps it is symptomatic of those insufficiently radicalized or conscientized to be able to see a way through dominant ideological constraints by means of mass cultural and aesthetic struggle. Perhaps it is characteristic of those not yet fully comfortable in the skin of their cosmopolitan identity so as to be convinced of the

importance of the local cultural contribution to world culture. Might not what Shils saw as a predestination to “peripherality” be seen by another as wholly justified cultural pride in the local and an active and positive cultural allegiance and appreciation for an indigenous aesthetic, however “impure” and cosmopolitan in inflection?

With an astute recognition of the exigencies of the global political economy and of the need to maintain a critical awareness of current Western cultural and technological production (always with an eye to its potential application at home), Bengali intellectuals have at the same time continued to sustain nurturing connections and personal involvement with local cultural initiatives that are affirming of both selves and community. A proud Bengali identity has become self-consciously connected with a carefully honored tradition and an ethic of what Reese has labeled activism, renunciation, and simple living, all in the service of secularism, nationalism, and international modernism. This is the autonomous Bengali modernity I hope to elucidate here.

Urban Political Violence and the Naxalites’ ‘Cultural Revolution’

Finally, this brief history of Calcutta’s progressive political associations and analysis of the cultural movements and critical discussions in which they were engaged would not be complete without an examination of the activities of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) and the cycle of violence and counter-violence their urban guerilla activities unleashed during 1970-71 in the state of West Bengal. Those who formed the CPI(M-L) in May of 1969 were motivated by subaltern sympathies and offered critical

responses to popular oppressions just as many of their progressive Bengali predecessors had done. Despite limited on the ground successes and a tragic and bloody denouement, the CPI(M-L) arguments and ideology thoroughly permeated Indian socio-political life during a five year period 1967-1972 (Banerjee 1980: xi).

Having broken away from the Communist Party of India (Marxist), members of the new Marxist-Leninist fraction were labeled “Naxalites” because of the inspiration they drew from a peasant uprising that broke out in Naxalbari in Northeast Bengal in May of 1967. Led by armed Communist revolutionaries, the peasants there had fought against police and government troops sent to quell the violence and protect local landlords. Their movement drew attention to the lot of the rural masses, and raised questions about the viability of armed struggle to combat the intolerable conditions of economic oppression and social humiliation. The CPI(M-L) shaped its agrarian theory and guerilla tactics following Mao Tsetung’s methods of analysis; an important strategy was the establishment of liberated zones in the countryside. Planned assaults on the institutions that upheld the established order were seen as a prelude to a successful “people’s war” to bring about communist revolution in India.

The political atmosphere in Calcutta was volatile in the context of a 1966-67 food crisis that had sparked riots and raids on food shops, and in the course of which police had fired on crowds and made mass arrests. Already angry about bleak employment prospects for college graduates, the city’s youth were drawn into active politics by the popular ‘Food Movement’ that galvanized in response. Students at Calcutta’s Presidency College with an increasingly militant Marxist orientation began to develop differences with the followers of Communist Party of India (Marxist) whose student organization ran the student union. Boys

with high connections and brilliant academic records began to leave their studies and go to work in the villages, to learn from the peasants and propagate revolutionary politics among them. Opting to become one with the deprived Indian masses, they felt ennobled by their voluntary sacrifice and their belief in the cause. As a result of misguided acts of youthful daring and savage police repression, the CPI(M-L) became “a party of martyrs” (Banerjee 1980: 65).

Anger with the system and a romantic fascination for adventure came to be expressed not merely in the Maoist slogans scrawled across city walls, but with horrifying effect in the CPI(M-L)’s urban strategy. Strategies to capture firearms and an “annihilation programme” directed against traffic constables, police officials, and State paramilitary forces soon carried over into assassination of political rivals and the settling of personal scores among cadre. Rivalry between the CPI(M) and CPI(M-L) was territorialized; Calcutta localities and suburbs were demarcated according to the parties’ spheres of influence with trespass punishable by death (Banerjee 1980: 254). The ethics of Calcutta’s underworld ruled the streets; political organizations were infiltrated by gangsters, and savage acts of violence were carried out by paid lumpen elements.

Panicked and demoralized, forced to work with their rifles chained to their belts lest they be seized, the police force responded with equal brutality. To provide sanction for their activities, a notorious colonial-era law once used against nationalist freedom fighters, the “Bengal Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act of 1936,” was reinstituted in September 1970; it permitted arrest on suspicion for up to 24 hours. Entire neighborhoods were cordoned off by the army to facilitate what were known as “combing operations” – house

by house police searches and seizures. On suspicion of “terroristic activities” premises could be searched, literature and arms seized, and young men taken into custody.

In November 1970 “The West Bengal Maintenance of Public Order Bill” and “The West Bengal Prevention of Violent Activities Bill” were passed with presidential approval, further extending police powers and allowing suspects to be detained without warrant and held without trial for up to three years (Ray 1992: 115; Banerjee 1980: 245, 345). The torture and shooting of detainees and the wounding of innocent bystanders became regular occurrences. Calcutta residents developed the reflex of crossing city streets with arms raised.

To create a different image for their party in reaction to what they saw as “the long history of petty-bourgeois opportunism in Congress and Leftist politics,” and prove their revolutionary *bona fides* to the masses, CPI(M-L) members in custody took a principled position not to accept privileges offered by the State, often refusing bail, higher prisoners’ classification, even legal defense (Banerjee 1980: 251). Cadre-organized attempts at “jail breaks” only facilitated police accounts of “gun duels with extremists” and of suspects “shot while trying to escape.” Victims’ bodies were often thrown into the street to serve as warning.

Meanwhile Naxalite attacks on the “colonial” and “anti-people” educational institutions, and the desecration of symbols of India’s intellectual heritage in spontaneous waves of “statue-smashing,” filled the news reports. Painted portraits of 19th century Bengali social reformers were burnt, along with school furniture, exam sheets, and student files; busts and statues were decapitated in a frenzy of iconoclasm. CPI(M-L) ideologues argued

that now that the economic base was crumbling as a result of the peasants' armed revolutionary struggles, the time had come for "cultural revolution" to attack the superstructure as well. As has been mentioned in Chapter Two (p.38) this iconoclasm and ideological critique of intellectual heroes carried over into the work of Bengali left historians and their re-reading of the 19th century 'Renaissance'. The utter senselessness of the times was underlined for many when the respected Vice-Chancellor of Jadavpur University, the city's most radical university, was murdered in December 1970 (Ray 1992: 115). The complete break down of law and order, the horror of escalating violence, and the indiscriminate choice of cadres' targets including attacks on small businessmen and lowly traffic constables, made people apathetic and afraid. The 'progressive' middle-class who had originally supported the movement (or at least admired the youthful initiative and personal sacrifice) soon turned away.

For the General elections of March 1971 20,000 armed Central Reserve Police were called in to aid state police in the protection of voters and polling stations. In a reversal of West Bengal trends, the number of Congress party seats increased and a non-communist Democratic Front Government was formed. The coalition collapsed by the end of June and President's rule was implemented, making New Delhi responsible for governance of the State. Violence against the Naxalites continued. Sumanta Banerjee cites police figures of 1,783 CPI(M-L) members and supporters killed between March 1970 and August 1971 in Calcutta and its suburbs, noting that this figure does not include the many killed inside jails and that unofficial sources claim the number was at least double (1980: 272). As if this steady and demoralizing war of attrition were not enough, the CPI(M-L) was soon plagued

by internal ideological struggle over events in East Pakistan. Within the year CPI(M-L) leaders would all be dead or in prison.

Conflicts in East Pakistan

In March of 1971 a liberation struggle against the Pakistani military regime broke out in East Pakistan after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League party which had recently swept the elections demanded East Bengali autonomy within Pakistan. Leaders of the secessionist movement escaped to India to set up a provisional government. Repression by the Pakistani army led to a mass East Bengali exodus. China which supplied arms to Pakistan continued to support Pakistani leader Yahya Khan and decry Indian interference. Recognizing the utility of retaining some control over the conflict in East Bengal, the Indian Government virtually opened its borders to allow East Bengalis to escape slaughter, and began training East Bengali commandoes known as the Mukti Bahini ("Liberation Army") on Indian soil. Somewhat disingenuously given the sanctioned extermination of Naxalites ongoing in West Bengal, on March 31, 1971 Indira Gandhi spoke in Parliament of the tragedy of East Bengal which had united all Indians "in grief for their sufferings, concern for wanton destruction of their beautiful land and anxiety for their future" (Banerjee 1980: 314). The establishment of a friendly government in East Bengal with Indian support would keep East Bengal out of China's influence and enhance India's reputation in the eyes of world opinion; indeed India's hand in the dispute with Pakistan was strengthened by the signing of a 20-year mutual defense treaty with the Soviet Union in August. Closer to home

it was crucial to secure defense of India's Eastern border and prevent the shelter of Naxalite guerillas on the run from West Bengal. Indeed Pakistani troops in pursuit of East Bengali commandoes began to engage in regular border skirmishes with Indian troops. By December war had broken out, and India formally recognized the Government of Bangladesh. The Indian army soon crushed Pakistani resistance in East Bengal.

In the elections of 1972, armed with socialist slogans and with the opposition parties in disarray, Indira Gandhi was able to capitalize on the army's victory. By June of 1975 in order to consolidate power at the center she resorted to overt authoritarianism, declaring a state of national emergency in which civil liberties were denied and measures were taken to suppress all dissent. 'The Emergency' lasted until 1977 when elections in West Bengal brought the CPI(M) dominated Left Front government to power for the first of three consecutive five-year terms.

Cultural Production and the Politics of Inclusion

As this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, Bengal's rich history of socio-political struggle has been marked by steadily increasing efforts to make politics inclusive of the province's diverse groups of people. Efforts to overcome class, gender, and communal conflicts and inequities, and to incorporate both populist and internationalist ideals have nourished engaged forms of critical cultural production and 'progressive' ideas that have played a central role in the social life of the city. The significance of this cultural production extends far beyond that of Shils' perceived functionalist metaphor – namely populist

impulses as balm for the guilty conscience of an Anglicized elite.

By maintaining an active and culturally sustaining intellectual fascination for Bengal's folk heritage, by functioning as conduits to engage popular interest in cultural movements from abroad, and by serving as a channel to communicate with mass audiences, educating and mobilizing for progressive causes both domestic and international, cultural producers and the arts in which they engage have played a crucial role in Bengal. From the *Swadeshi* period on, the artistic and cultural emphasis on the politics of inclusion have been at the very center of Bengali socio-political life and identity.

The second half of this work will analyze specific examples from media histories of three influential art forms at the center of Calcutta's intellectual life in order to address the world view and objectives of individual cultural producers and the socio-political discourses in which their works engage. While responding to local, regional, and national contexts and histories, their works also speak to the international standards of art and intellectual movements abroad.

Part II: Media Forms/Media Histories:
Articulating the Native and the Cosmopolitan

The second part of this study will examine the local histories of three selected media – theatre, the visual arts, and cinema – that have been central to Bengali cultural identity and loci of important debates over cultural politics in Calcutta. My focus here will be on the role these media forms have played in the city’s cultural, political and social life, and the manner in which they have functioned as conduits of foreign influences, of elements of “the new” and the innovative, in ways that have continually stimulated local cultural production and generated ongoing debate about the contemporary relevance of aspects of “tradition” – both Bengali and Indian.

A point I wish to emphasize, however, is that despite their enthusiastic reception of cosmopolitan elements, and their fascination with formal experimentation, Calcutta’s cultural producers always maintained a commitment to local cultural forms and to a sense of “Bengaliness” as a recognized and “felt” tradition. They continue to feel a sense of obligation that their work bring pleasure and insight to Bengali audiences and that it retain relevance to Calcutta’s socio-political context. They see their efforts as contributing to a heterogeneous tradition of Bengali creativity, a rich and culturally sustaining, politicized tradition that builds upon the “native genius” of indigenous arts and crafts and the production of local meaning, as much as a critical and selective assimilation of elements inspired by foreign contacts.

Each chapter of this section will begin with a brief discussion of the history of that particular medium in the Calcutta context, and the nature of local critical discourse

surrounding it, including, where evidence has been available, its reception by the Bengali viewing public. A discussion of critical reception, by both Western and Indian critics and audiences, the problems and issues of how to build and reach an audience, whether local, national or foreign, will also be included.

Following that, I will profile some individual cultural producers who work in these media, introducing them both as personalities in cultural context, and as participants in the socio-political and aesthetic discourse, both international and local, about the significance of their art form and its meaning and message for Bengali society and world culture. Although many of their works have drawn lessons from Western cultural experiences and traditions of “the modern,” their cultural production is primarily intended as a contribution to the project of Bengali modernity and a means to offer commentary, contribute insights, and generally to intervene in issues of local cultural politics.

My particular interest will be to analyze artists’ personal statements that speak to their creative aims and their communicative intentions. As will be clear from many of their remarks, the compulsion of these cultural producers to communicate with an audience, in as direct a manner as possible, in the hope that they might alter the spectators’ viewpoints, is an important aspect of their sense of mission. As we will see, this desire to communicate intelligibly has important ramifications for their choice of forms as well.

Through this discussion of Bengali art forms in socio-political context, it is my intention to examine the complex politics of representation in Calcutta and to highlight the manner in which art – with its utopian visions, its dreams of harmony, its ability to hold society’s irresolvable tensions and contradictions in a tenuous state of balance – provides a

statement of protest, if only to offer a momentary glimpse into a realm of possibility other than the status quo. As Henry Schwarz has noted in his introduction to Writing Cultural History in Colonial and Postcolonial India:

The discourses of art and culture are forced to be political, as resolutely as they state their separation from the world, and in the very act of enunciation attempt to clear a space that might be free of outside influence. The first indication of this appears in the appropriation of the foreign forms of expression imposed by colonial rule (1997: 28).

The chapters of this second section offer examples of these sorts of “space clearing” attempts by Bengali cultural producers, and will demonstrate their convictions about the absolute necessity of becoming free of the constraints of outside influences and the interventions of the other. I’ll leave the last word here on creative invention as agency (let’s call it “creative intervention”!) to two Bengali writers and social theorists Partha Chatterjee and Amitav Ghosh.

The project then is to claim for us, the once-colonized, our freedom of imagination. Claims, we know only too well, can be made only as contestations in a field of power (Chatterjee 1993: 13).

I am thinking also of Ghosh’s character Tridib from The Shadow Lines, the *adda*-loving intellectual remembered fondly for having imparted the lesson “that we could not see without inventing what we saw...if we didn’t try ourselves, we would never be free of other people’s inventions” (1988: 31).

Why Begin with Theatre?

The first of the chapters of this section will be on theatre, a move justifiable because

of the particular salience of theatre in the cultural memory of the city, and as a particular focus of Bengali ethnic pride. Bengali theatre will provide a frame that will concentrate the discussion, and furnish what is essentially a survey of the issues to be addressed throughout the second half of this study. The strategy of beginning with a treatment of theatre might also be justified chronologically, because dramatic performances easily antedate the other modern art forms in Bengal. But more important for our purposes here is the fact that theatrical history introduces major principles and controversies that carry over into all of the arts of Bengal.¹ The fact that the debates and discussions examined here would also apply to the literary, music, and dance worlds reveals the degree to which the arts in Calcutta have always served not merely as a reflection of the socio-political issues at stake in a given moment, as a traditional Marxian functionalist stance would view them, but as elements integral to the debate about those issues, and a means of “fixing” politically-charged moments within the collective memory. In this manner cultural production can provide

¹ The issues and ideas introduced here pertaining to Calcutta’s encounter with theatre, the visual arts, and cinema could be just as productively addressed in a study of the literature, music, or dance produced in the city. Already well aware of the enormity of the conceptual and organizational task I have carved out for myself, I have chosen to focus on the former of these media, due in part to my greater familiarity and personal appreciation for these art forms, not to say expertise. As for the latter three media, all of which have rich and illustrious Calcutta-based histories, and hordes of passionate Bengali and non-Bengali aficionados, I leave the discussion open to others more qualified than myself. A good place to begin an investigation of the social history of all six media in Calcutta is with Sukanta Chaudhuri’s 1990 two volume anthology. For music, fascinating efforts in this direction have been made by Sudipto Chatterjee, in both video and critical written work, on the popular Bengali songs of Suman Chatterjee (Sudipto Chatterjee 1998, 1997). For literature (especially modern Bengali poets) cf. R. Bannerjee 1989, Bose 1948, 1962, Dharwadker 1994, S. Dasgupta, ed. 1973, Seely 1990.

aides de memoire and points of comparison (then vs. now, us vs. them) to stimulate processes of collective self-reflection and assessments of the state of Bengali modernity and its future trajectory.

The recurring controversies across the whole range of arts in Bengal (the specificities of which will be discussed at length in what follows) may be summarized in these terms:

- 1) a conflicted allegiance to both the indigenous “authenticity” of “popular” folk forms, and the special allure and status of forms and methods that resulted from contacts with the West,
- 2) a determined instrumentality – a focus on addressing the question of which forms most effectively communicate an artist’s intended message to the targeted audience,
- 3) a struggle to overcome a contradiction that is presumed to exist between the goals of politicizing art and efforts at formal experimentation, within the recognized constraints of a given medium (cf. M. Bhattacharya 1989: 3).

Also included are issues of assessing “appropriateness” to the local (Indian/Calcutta) context, the impact of somewhat romanticized and idealized notions of “the people’s art,” and more critical discussions about what a more nuanced, contemporary representation of that might look like. The question that these artists are posing is, in effect, what might be gained and what lost in the process of devising such a construct as “the people’s art”? Which people? And how can urban intellectuals, who form the vast majority of the artistic community in Calcutta, claim to “speak for” them? How might cultural producers and critics serve as conduits for the transmission, both into and out of India/Calcutta, of cultural ideas of global relevance?

**Chapter Four: Calcutta's Public Theatre and the Propagation of Ideas:
The Legacy of Nil Darpan and Nabanna**

Scholarly debates on the origin, influences, and history of Bengali theatre, and analyses of its aesthetic, have argued inconclusively about the relative significance of three formative influences: classical Sanskrit drama, English theatre, and the traditional folk theatre known as *jatra*. As part of their mid-19th century search for the roots of tradition, and in an effort to rediscover indigenous high cultural forms in which to take pride, the Bengali intelligentsia took an interest in reviving classical Sanskrit drama. Sanskrit drama, which probably came into being in the second century B.C., had its origins in dance and music, and included the practice of studied gesture. But it remained closely allied with poetry in that it was at once idealistic and romantic; its objective and purpose was to please and instruct at the same time.

An extensive and learned literature developed about the Natyasastra, the foundational text of ancient Indian dramaturgy, and the indigenous aesthetic theory known as *rasa*, which described how the powerful effects of theatre were achieved in terms of its evocation of certain sentiments in an audience. The Natyasastra emphasized that the aesthetic experience of a performance was best understood, (and thus could be properly “tasted” [one definition of “*rasa*”]) by those who are learned, sensitive, wise and skilled in the arts (Richmond et al. 1990: 80). It distinguished eight basic sentiments in human experience (the erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, heroic, terrible, odious, and marvelous) and eight corresponding emotions or feelings (love, mirth, sorrow, anger, energy, terror, disgust, and astonishment) that would define a play and be the focus of an actor's performance (81). In principle, tragic endings

and the depiction of death were avoided, though tragedy could be introduced if not necessarily represented, in order to evoke the pathetic sentiment (*karuna rasa*). A particular goal was to move the audience by producing a sense of astonishment.

The intelligentsia that cultivated a taste for courtly Sanskrit drama spurned the popular rural art form known as *jatra* “as a degenerate form of entertainment fit only for the lower orders” (Raha 1978: 6). *Jatra* originated in religious ritual, and the name which means “procession” referred to the behavior of worshipers as part of a devotional cult. *Jatra* was a kind of community drama whose themes were derived from folk legends and epic stories, from the life of Krishna, the Ramayana or Mahabharata, and whose familiar heroes and distinctive aesthetic ideas appealed to the popular Bengali imagination (P.Guha-Thakurta 1930: 16). It developed in association with Bengal’s 16th century *bhakti* movement, attained great popularity in the 18th century with its sentimental religious plays and historical romances, and by the 19th century took on a more secular flavor with the introduction of heroic narratives and love themes (Richmond et al 1990: 242).

Describing the *mise-en-scene* of a *jatra* performance, Guha-Thakurta notes that it is the very simplicity of presentation that excites the imagination of the audience (P.Guha-Thakurta 1930: 21). The staging area is temporarily organized, by a cloth or carpet on the ground; spectators are seated on all four sides with only a narrow corridor left free for the actors’ entrances (Richmond et al 1990: 242). Female roles are acted by men, and the same actor may appear in a number of parts in succession. Dialogue is combined with music and songs, and a group of young boys known as the *juri* function like the classical Greek chorus, linking dramatic and musical moments, and taking the part of the audience thinking aloud.

Performances often ran from evening into the early morning, or from mid-day to midnight, so to hold the attention of the audience, there are moments of comical relief and farcical episodes. It was these elements in particular that drew the ire of the *bhadralok*. The temper of their moralizing discourse is a prominent and heavy presence in Guha-Thakurta's explanation of why *jatra* had fallen into "disfavour":

It is only natural that the grotesque obscenity and vulgarity with which the Yatras generally abound, should have met with condemnation from the advanced sections of the modern Bengali community (1930: 29).

Yet as Raha dutifully noted, *jatra*'s "unconscious pull" was one of the many handicaps that modern Bengali theatrical pioneers had to reckon with (1978: 16).

Theatre and Social Change in Bengal

From its very inception in the early 19th century the public theatre in Calcutta was seen as a forum for the propagation of ideas. Playwrights and producers became obsessed with the issues of social critique and reform, and the challenges of how to address and represent them theatrically, often in the face of bitter socio-political opposition and harsh censorship laws. A belief that intelligent and well-conceived drama could raise the social and political consciousness of the audience has been central to the vitality of the Calcutta theatre.

As Bengali lore recounts it, the Bengali theatre began in 1795-6 when a Russian visitor to Calcutta, Herasim Lebedeff, set up a playhouse and staged his own Bengali translations of two English plays, The Disguise and Love is the Best Doctor. After

Lebedeff's departure from India, his initiative was not taken up for another 40 years, when Prasanna Kumar Tagore built a theatre in his garden house just outside Calcutta in 1831 and produced a play translated from the Sanskrit. The first original Bengali play, Bidya Sundar, was staged in 1835 in the palatial North Calcutta home of Bengali aristocrat Nabin Chandra Bose, with a young actress in the title role (Raha 1978: 14; G. Sen, ed. 1990: 145).

A trend of aristocratic amateur theatre was thus begun, and its popularity grew as elites strived to increase their cultural capital by styling themselves as patrons of art and learning. The building of private stages and the production of plays before an audience of invited guests became a regular pastime for Calcutta's elites by the 1860s, and one widely covered in the popular press. It was that fertile era of intellectual inquiry and cultural production that has been labeled "the Bengal Renaissance," and for its many enthusiasts, the stage was immediately recognized as a platform from which to advocate issues of social reform.

Recognizing the limitations of having to translate Sanskrit and English plays, and in the hopes of initiating a new canon of Bengali dramatic literature which had not previously existed, the Tagore family began offering prizes to encourage the writing of original plays in Bengali. Prize-winning works, the first of which was a "social play on polygamy," were then produced in the Tagore's Jorasanko theatre in the courtyard of their North Calcutta mansion (Raha 1978: 15). Among the subjects stipulated in the prize-offering advertisements was "The Hindoo females – Their Condition and Helplessness" (16). As early supporters of public theatre, the Tagore family saw its utility not only as a healthy form of popular entertainment, but as an important medium to communicate the message of

nationalism, humanism, and morality (SK Mukherjee 1982: 540).

The person who is generally regarded as the first Bengali dramatist, Ramnarain Tarkaratna, wrote plays in the 1850s on the evils of the caste system (Raha 1978: 17). The preeminent theatre of the period was built in the Belgachia garden house of the Rajas of Paikpara, and it was they who encouraged the Bengali poet Madhusudan Dutt to become a dramatist.

Memorable experiences as guests in these private theatres of the rich created an incentive for the middle class to initiate their own amateur dramatic societies and clubs. The Bagbazar Amateur Theatre, whose members are recognized as having pioneered the Bengali public and commercial theatre, mounted its initial production in 1868 with a social comedy by Dinabandhu Mitra (1830-73) about a provincial's first visit to the city of Calcutta.

As demand for a public theatre mounted, a group formed the National Theatre and opened with a December 1872 performance of Dinabandhu Mitra's soon to become notorious play Nil Darpan (Mirror of Indigo). A protest against the exploitation of indigo plantation workers, the play raised a stir in the press and began to attract even a European audience. Its publication in English translation led to a famous incident in which the publisher, the Reverend James Long, was imprisoned and his bail tendered as a nationalist gesture by a Bengali aristocrat and patron of the arts, Raja Nabakrishna Deb. Describing an 1873 repeat performance, a leading British publication, The Englishman, offered this commentary on the play's "otherness" and exoticism:

The really conspicuous talent for histrionic art possessed by the Bengali cannot be seen to better advantage than in this drama (S.Chaudhuri 1990a: 188).

Ranajit Guha, in fact, has described Nil Darpan as "a loyalist play glorified as a manifesto

of petty-bourgeois radicalism,” explaining how its effectiveness at rousing the liberal outrage of its *bhadralok* audience, with their ideological mix of Indian paternalism and Western humanism, speaks to the contradictions of 19th century elite nationalism, its collaborative urges and its belief in the sanctity of the rule of law (Guha 1974: 16).

Socio-Political Issues of the Early Public Theatre

Despite the new popularity and “professionalization” of the stage in the late 19th century, there was widespread reticence among the cultural elite about the morality of the public theatre and its milieu. In particular, the hiring of actresses generated tremendous public debate that focused on the low origins of the women who were recruited, and the fear that contact with them would certainly corrupt the youth of Bengal.

Much to the detriment of the racy and authentic quality of popular Bengali art forms, an unfortunate historical linkage had occurred between Western education and the Victorian values that came to be associated with it. The result was that, in respectable homes, in order to keep the boundaries of what was seen as *bhadra* (respectable) and *abadhra* (common) rigidly enforced, popular and traditional forms of entertainment were now kept strictly out. As Rimli Bhattacharya notes, the problem that the public theatre presented was that it seemed to be blurring, even erasing these boundaries (in G. Sen, ed. 1990: 146).

Another social issue in the Bengali theatre of the late 19th century was the need to evade government scrutiny, which was accomplished by a clever masking of anti-colonial messages. Historical dramas were often used by cautious playwrights and producers as a

pretext and “cover” for an implicit contemporary political message. These grand, retrospective narratives also fostered historical consciousness by celebrating cultural heroes of the past, and thus met a community need by bolstering cultural nationalist pride.

The first law of censorship of the arts in India, the 1876 Dramatic Performances Act, was originally an ordinance promulgated by Viceroy Lord Northbrook, on the occasion of the Prince of Wales’ January 1876 visit to Calcutta, in response to a play that was viewed by the government as a public embarrassment. It empowered the Government to prohibit plays “which are scandalous, defamatory, seditious, obscene or otherwise prejudicial to the public interest” (S.Chaudhuri, ed. 1990a: 189). Even after Independence, this restrictive legislation remained part of the Indian Penal Code and provided a tool for police intervention in moments of political crisis (cf experiences of Utpal Dutt described below).

Early Figures of the Public Theatre

The figure most prominently associated with the early professionalizing, commercial trend of Bengali theatre is Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912). Early on, Ghosh dedicated himself to learning the business aspects of popularizing the theatre, making a name for himself in Calcutta’s middle class milieu by leaving a secure post as a bookkeeper to become a salaried manager at the National Theatre. In the course of his varied and illustrious career he established several of Calcutta’s most prominent commercial theatres, including the Star, the Emerald and the Minerva.

Ghosh was a theatrical jack of all trades, and is celebrated for his artistry as director,

actor, playwright, and composer of songs. He is revered in Bengal as an exceptionally versatile actor, renowned for introducing a psychological dimension to “tragic” character roles, such as the grieving father, previously unknown to Indian dramaturgy (Bharucha 1983: 24; Raha 1978: 49).

As a director, he rigorously applied himself to the training of actors, encouraging and inspiring a great number of actors and actresses, including his greatest *protégée*, the actress Binodini Dasi (1863-1942). As a playwright, he was an innovator of dramatic language; he authored more than 80 plays, ranging from the serious to the burlesque and the comic. His work was a successful fusion of two influences – the “English” theatre and *jatra* – that was much appreciated by the period’s theatre patrons. A number of emerging theatre companies were utterly dependent upon Ghosh as a source of new plays. In describing his works, Rustom Bharucha characterizes them as “loosely structured...episodic in form, full of conspiracies, coincidences, and supernatural interventions that rely on emotional climaxes and stirring songs for their effect” (1983: 24).

Later in his career, as he began to find the middle-class morality of the Bengali “social plays” tedious, Ghosh turned to the depiction of heroes and saints of Indian history and mythology. As a devotee of Ramakrishna, Ghosh’s view of life was idealistic, and as Bharucha notes: “There was nothing ironic about his reading of history”(25). One of his most successful historical plays about the emergence of British power in Bengal, Mir Kasim (1907), has been described as “a thrilling tale of heroism, intrigue and romance” (27). In it, Ghosh created a Bengali patriotic hero glorified for his courage in opposing British oppression, an effect intensified by his being given all the best lines. Bharucha pays

particular homage to Ghosh's grasp of popular conventions, his "mastery of commercial theater techniques – the building of the climax, the momentum of the action, the bravura of the characters, and the boldness of the gestures" (27).

In the course of an extremely successful career, Ghosh dominated the public theatre in Calcutta for some 40 years, receiving the adulation of both press and public. Raha describes the period over which he reigned as having witnessed the successful formation of the Bengali theatre-going public, the creation of a cultivated audience that expected more than mere entertainment, thrills, and vicarious emotion such as could be experienced in *jatra* performances:

By the time Girish Ghosh died the theatre had become a habit with the Bengali *bhadralok* and a part of his mental and imaginative furniture. It had endeared itself to a public which steadily swelled and included the high and low... Finally, it grew into a forum for propagation of ideas and instruction, a function it has served throughout its existence (1978: 73).

An acclaimed actor-director of a subsequent generation, Sisirkumar Bhadhuri (1889-1959), began his professional life with an M.A. in English from Presidency College. After seven years' experience, he audaciously gave up his post as lecturer in Vidyasagar College in 1921 to become a professional actor. By 1924 he had assumed control of his own theatre, the Natyamandir ("Temple of Drama"), where he produced his best work, although due to what Raha describes as "Sisir Bhaduri's thoughtless extravagance and his disinclination or inability to look after finances" the venture did not long survive (1978: 91).

He then joined the Art Theatre for a U.S. tour, the first time an Indian theatre group had been invited to perform on Broadway. Although their 1931 production of D.L. Roy's mythological play *Sita* ultimately received favorable reviews in New York (Bhadhuri's

portrayal of Rama in particular was appreciated by an audience unable to comprehend the Bengali dialogue), their message did not translate and the overall experience, marred by poor planning and cross-cultural miscommunication, was a disaster (Raha 198: 92).

As an actor Bhaduri had the power to mesmerize with his imposing presence and nuanced interpretations, bringing “a cerebral quality” to his work never before seen in the Bengali theatre, which had traditionally emphasized “emotional expressiveness, heroic gestures and melodramatic extravagance” (Raha 1978: 96). He was one of the first Bengalis to appreciate Brecht, and had one of Brecht’s plays translated into Bengali (101). On the stage, Bhadhuri maintained a Brechtian distance, not losing himself in his characters, but sustaining an objectivity that allowed him to observe himself acting (Bharucha 1983: 33; Raha 1978: 98-9). As Raha recounts, “his most famous roles...have become part of the history and legend of the Bengali theatre” (1978: 100).

But it was as an innovative director-producer that he made his greatest contribution to Bengali theatre, which from the outset had been actor-oriented. He insisted on introducing his view of “historical accuracy” and “authenticity” in costumes and set design, and often indulged in radical alterations and re-editing of the plays he produced. He got rid of footlights and added new dimensions to stage space. Staking a claim for theatre as a serious pursuit for an intellectual, he gave it new prestige and social respectability (Raha 1978: 100).

Unlike Girish Ghosh, Bhaduri did not himself write plays, and as a result he suffered both as actor and director from the dearth of good Bengali plays. As Raha notes: “His achievement was that he created good theatre out of mediocre and worse-than-mediocre

plays” (1978: 94). After the mythological and historical themes of his early career, he turned to the “social” plays of Girish Ghosh and the dramatizations of the popular middle class society novels of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, but his productions failed to address contemporary political and social realities. Although he recognized that the Bengali commercial theatre was on an unproductive trajectory, he was unable to discard legacies of the past. Throughout his career he both wrote and spoke about these missteps. As early as 1927 he questioned the paradigm of the English theatre and its utility for Bengal, and argued for the necessity of abandoning the picture frame stage and all the generic fictions and creative limitations it imposed:

We had made the mistake of imitating the English model, of forsaking our own truth for the falsity of an alien import. We have to rectify the mistake and go back to the ways of our own *jatra* (in Raha 1978: 103).

Again in a 1951 address, before an audience gathered to celebrate 30 years of Bhaduri’s dedication to theatre, he sounded a plaintive note:

If our theatre had evolved from the *jatra*, it would have been a different sort of theatre, a true national theatre. But our theatre has grown under foreign influences. However, we cannot wish it away. It is there. What I wanted to do was to build a National theatre. I have failed (in Raha 1978: 103).

Raha describes Bhaduri at the end of his life as an embittered man, hounded by creditors and playing to half-empty houses (1978: 103). As Bhaduri wrote, he longed for a theatre that did not have “to depend for its existence on the booking office,” and imagined a National theatre as a dreamlike place where:

...one can freely experiment and the people have the opportunity for seeing the best drama past and present, indigenous or adaptation or translation from our own and foreign classics (quoted in Raha 1978: 103).

But in the context of a Calcutta that had experienced famine, riots, and the

disruptions of Partition, Bhaduri, in the 1950s, was overtaken with a sense of failure and frustration. In the wake of such painful realities, Raha describes Bhaduri's discouraged realization in these terms:

...the theatre he had enriched and believed in was inadequate to cope with the maelstrom of socio-economic changes. It could neither portray the truth of the harsh reality of the lives of the common people nor provide wholly escapist fare (104).

The Indian People's Theatre Association: "Thinking With The People"

The question of how to respond creatively and collectively to the mass suffering that was being witnessed at close range in Bengal of the early 1940s was an important motivating factor behind the formation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). For artists and intellectuals, who were keen to focus public attention and mobilize to make a difference, the issue was how to reach a broad and popular audience and educate them about the political and economic issues that lay behind the all too evident current crises.

Conscious of Bengal's rich history of socially-conscious theatrical expression, creative intellectuals-turned-activists soon focused upon theatre as a facile mode of communication that might readily gain acceptance with mass audiences both rural and urban. They tried to envision a theatre that would not seem wholly irrelevant, either to the players or to the audiences they hoped to engage. Among Marxists, as Sudhi Pradhan recounts it, there was the recognition that art forms close to the people were "an untapped source of strength" that would open "the magic door to mass mobilisation" (1985[1979]: xvi). For many conscientious observers of the day, concerned about the relevance and

communicability of various art forms, yet whose “urban based life prevented them from reaching out to the people,” it was the IPTA that “showed them the way” (xviii).

Initially a branch of the Progressive Writers’ Association (the Bengal branch of which was known as the Anti-Fascist Writers’ and Artists Association), the IPTA had its beginnings in Bengal, “sometime after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour”[in December 1941] (Pradhan 1985[1979]: 287). According to an account of the organization’s origins published in the IPTA Annual Report of 1946, intellectuals began rousing the people in order to meet the exigency of “the external danger from the East” by composing songs of an anti-fascist character. With the “famine and pestilence [that] followed in the wake of war,” the report stated, the “need for unity against external danger and internal corruption” was recognized (287). As stated in the first IPTA Bulletin of July 1943, organizers intended the IPTA to be “the means of revitalizing the stage and the traditional arts and making them at once the expression and organiser of our people’s struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice” (quoted in Bhatia 1997: 432).

As a result of a conference held in Bombay in May 1943, in conjunction with the 1st Congress of the Communist Party of India (CPI), the IPTA emerged as an all-India organization. What many are quick to label a cultural front organization for the Communist Party evolved into a dynamic national theatre movement with varied, semi-independent and self-sustaining local manifestations that were overseen by a centralized organization that supported and advised them. The Bengal troupe toured Bombay, Gujarat, and Maharashtra collecting funds for Bengal famine relief, and creating awareness of IPTA as a movement. Seven of its members stayed on in Bombay as the nucleus of the IPTA Central Squad that

was formed in July of 1944. The squad received financial support from the CPI, although most of the members did not belong to the Party. The Annual Report of 1946 stated the official position:

As an organisation we belong to no party, we belong to the people of our country. The IPTA cannot be a forum to popularise the views of any particular organisation or political party through its cultural activities, while members of IPTA in their individual capacities may hold any political views and carry on any political work, as members of IPTA they have to abide by the principles and rules of IPTA which has a democratic outlook towards all (in Pradhan 1985[1979]: 274).

The report goes on to pledge cooperation with all who wish to revive the theatre in India, stating aims to “serve as a medium for all local writers and artists” and to be “a truly people’s theatre starring the people” (274). It concludes:

We, members of the Indian People’s Theatre Association, stand by all that has inspired our people in the past, pledge ourselves to carry this heritage forward for the service of our own people, in co-operation with all who espouse this cause (275).

Among the immediate objectives of the IPTA was the production of cultural programs for political meetings. The IPTA attracted a broad array of activists, writers, musicians, journalists, aspiring actors and playwrights. The group’s point of commonality was “a mood of social and artistic rebellion and an indeterminate allegiance to Marxist ideas” (Raha 1978: 128). With a passionate sense of mission and fervent rhetoric, it presented itself to be in alliance with the workers, and in conscious opposition to what Hiren Mukherjee once described as the contemporary theatre’s “cheap commercial glamour,” “pseudo-aesthetic posturing,” and “sobstuff” (in Bharucha 1983: 40). As dramatist and cultural critic Rustom Bharucha notes : “The IPTA was responsible for changing the very structure and conception of theater in various parts of India...[its productions] succeeded in conveying the exigencies of the historical moment to their mass audiences” (1983: 42).

Geeta Kapur describes the decade of the 1940s as “a period when the communist movement posed a real alternative in political and cultural terms” (1993a: 502). She sees the IPTA’s role as having presented an opportunity to break away from the innate conservatism of the Indian civilizational discourse and to give “the emerging, struggling tradition of the modern in India the possibility at least of not being trapped in the citadel of high art” (502).

The IPTA members took pride in their productions’ close affiliation with “popular drama,” making use of local traditions and *jatra* songs, and emphasizing the realism they derived from an attention to details of rural life and local dialects. Participants in this “people’s theatre” thrived on such direct access to the people’s experience, and stressed the importance of direct contact with the audience. The incorporation of popular songs encouraged audience participation and a collective spirit, and thereby “a comradeship against oppressive structures was forged” (Bhatia 1997: 441). IPTA productions traveled to remote rural areas and working class colonies; plays were staged in village and city courtyards, on street corners and in public parks.

The writing, production, acting, and direction of IPTA plays was carried out as a collective endeavor, thereby emphasizing that this popular theater was a political undertaking – thematically, aesthetically, and practically. Always informed by their objectives to intervene in the people’s struggles, the theatrical models and formalistic innovations the IPTA activists used ranged from “high” realism to “popular” social realism, from Brechtian methods to Bengal’s living folk and popular forms.

If IPTA organizers were somewhat cavalier about realistic conventions, it is Nandi

Bhatia's argument that they "subjected Anglo-European forms to open scrutiny," selectively appropriating them for their own needs, and tailoring them to what they perceived as their audience's demands (1997: 445). As a result of their affiliations with the Progressive Writers' Union in Europe, many IPTA artists had become aware of progressive theatrical traditions from abroad, including German agitprop theaters of the 20s and 30s, Workers' Theatres in Britain, Soviet Shock Troupes who propagated ideas of socialist reconstruction, and American Group Theatre of the 1930s. As Bhatia notes: "The IPTA adapted plays and formalistic devices from these theatres and shaped them according to the Indian cultural context," thereby creating a unique and innovative heterogeneous theatre (1997: 445).

Bhatia sees this selective appropriation of Western dramatic practices as a challenge to the status quo, and, by its imparting a specifically "Indian" character to the movement, a deliberate effort to advance a "counterhegemonic agenda" (445). Constituting what Bhatia describes as "a significant site of sociohistorical struggle," the IPTA's experimental model of cultural production, and particularly its "subversive attempts at interrogating existing power structures," has left a strong legacy for political groups in India (451).

Urban Cultural Workers Promote Folk Forms

In a fascinating account of what she refers to as the "spirit of the 40s," Malini Bhattacharya describes how the IPTA venues of political meetings and conferences of mass organizations brought about significant opportunities for cultural exchange between participants of different provincial and class backgrounds, as workers, peasants, and

members of the urban middle class gathered both to perform and to participate as active spectators. Spontaneous and reciprocal exchanges of form and content resulted, bringing participants – rural and urban, middle and working class – together. Local IPTA troupes produced regular cultural offerings in the form of dance dramas, shadow plays, and the teaching of new political songs. “[T]he artists lived frugally and practiced vigorously,” experimenting with new and traditional dramatic forms, and making efforts to encompass new content.

The Central Squad’s first souvenir program (February 1945) outlined the organization’s goal “to study, revive, and utilize folk forms in dance, music and songs,” making clear its aim of improvising on traditional forms so as to be able to make unfamiliar cultural experiences available to different regional audiences (Bhattacharya 1989: 18). The program set the organizational mission against a backdrop of contemporary cultural crisis:

In the prevailing crisis in the country, when the entire social life is disintegrating, our rich cultural heritage – handed down from generation to generation through folk forms – is about to be lost and completely forgotten. To preserve that heritage by holding it up before our countrymen, and also to utilise folk themes to portray new ideas and present day problems – these are the aims which the Squad has set before it (Pradhan 1979: 333).

The 1946 IPTA report’s section on Bengal, focused on the province’s unique character, praising the “richness and colour, variety and vigour” of “the folk art extant and popular among the rural masses” (287). It was noted that, before the coming of the British, Bengal, where the “classical tradition” was “least felt,” had “developed its folk forms of art almost to a perfection”(286). The following observation was introduced as a rally to creative energies: “Today among all provinces, [Bengal] is perhaps the richest in folk music, dance and drama” (286).

However, as the report lamented, IPTA cultural workers had failed to take advantage of these rich attributes of the province:

But, strange to say that even when we went to the masses, I mean the rural masses who form the bulk of the population of Bengal, it is always with forms of art that have come to stay in Bengal after our contact with the West (287).

In short, regret was expressed that due to an inability to make expressive use of extant folk forms in Bengal, and reliance instead on “drama, chorus singing, opera and dance,” “we spoke to the people in a language they did not understand” (287). The IPTA Central Squad had produced two polished artistic programs made up of songs, dance, and ballets. Spirit of India is described as a ‘patriotic pageant’ that showed the misery of the people under the ‘triple curse’ of imperialism, feudalism, and the new imperial capitalism; it “ended on a note of hope arising from the people’s unity” (Bhattacharya 1989: 19). The second program, India Immortal, used costumes made by Squad members from the designs of Calcutta artist Chittaprasad; it was a narrative of colonial exploitation and possible release from it, given in a ballet form. Although these productions were widely acclaimed, the Report suggested that in order to better convey progressive thought to the masses, the more familiar, “popular” forms of *jatra*, *kabigan*, and *kirtan* should be taken up.

To partially rectify these mistakes, individual IPTA cultural squads arranged performances of politicized renditions of traditional performance forms such as *tarja* and *kabi larai*, a humorous duel between poets consisting of extemporaneous verbal sparring in verse. By encouraging the poets to introduce “burning problems of the day,” it was thought that such performances could be “very lively and interesting and instructive.” Indeed, they were widely appreciated and became prominent features of the squads’ activities

(Bhattacharya 1989). As the IPTA office bearers summed up their efforts: “what we are trying to do now [is] to take more and more forms of folk art and put new and contemporary content into them before presenting them to the public” (292).

Finding a Forum for the People’s Voices

One of the earliest recognized works of art in response to the socio-cultural crisis of Bengal’s famine was a one-act play, Jabanbandi (The Statement), about the pauperisation of a peasant family written by Bijon Bhattacharya, an early member of the Anti-Fascist Writers’ and Artists’ Association. It was staged as the concluding event at the AFWAA Second Annual Conference in early January 1944, with Sambhu Mitra directing and Bijon playing a lead role. Marxist cultural critic Hiren Mukherjee, in a report of the conference for the CPI Journal People’s War, praised Jabanbandi’s depiction of “the slow, unwilling degeneration” of the family in its trek to town in search of food, and “the toughness and simple nobility of the worker” who decides to go back home. Mukherjee offered this enthusiastic assessment: “Written in an idiom which is racy, of the soil, Jabanbandi is a play to cherish” (in Pradhan 1985[1979]: 267).

In an interview with Calcutta critic Samik Bandhyopadhyay, Bijon Bhattacharya was asked about his sources of inspiration, and he described the horrific scenes he had witnessed in Calcutta as famine victims descended on the city. Then and there he resolved to devote his talents to dramatizing the peoples’ suffering:

I saw the people dying like cats and dogs in the streets of Calcutta muttering, fumbling...What to write? What to do? How to do? Just to gauge the depth of their suffering?...I became sorry to see that the art-form was not strong enough to convey the depth of their suffering, their tragedy, their crisis. Thus I went on when I suddenly felt, if the people could speak for themselves, I could perhaps talk in their own terms, for I know the people very well, how they talk and laugh and think and convey their emotions...(in Bharucha 1983: 45).

Out of this early piece developed what was rapidly seen as a theatrical milestone, the IPTA's production of Bijon Bhattacharya's Nabanna ("New Harvest"), directed by the author and Sombhu Mitra. As Bhatia describes the narrative, a starving peasant family leaves their village for Calcutta and in the process come to realize the need for collective mobilization and to understand that the real cause of the famine must be attributed to international politics. Their experience teaches a lesson in basic human rights, and, as the title "New Harvest" suggests, offers hopeful signs of a reawakened consciousness.

Initial performances were organized to benefit the famine-stricken, and despite a lack of funds for theatrical rentals, nearly 40 performances were held in theaters and public gatherings "often to audiences of seven thousand or more" (S. Bandyopadhyay 1971: 239). In addition to performances in Calcutta, productions of Nabanna were staged for provincial congresses including a Kisan Sabha (farmers' organization) Conference in Burdwan, where 15,000 witnessed the show; the IPTA's 1946 Annual Report claims an aggregate audience for Nabanna of 40,000 (Pradhan 1985[1979]: 291).

The play itself has been characterized as "radical in form and content, terrifyingly honest in its use of language and stagecraft" (Bharucha 1983: 44). Undaunted by meager resources, actually making a virtue of necessity, Nabanna "blazed the trail of a new theatrical idiom;" its "contemporaneity" and its "thematic realism" were "inescapable"(Raha 1978:

129). Bhatia finds a challenge to imperialism in “the play’s violation of the conventions of ‘high’ realism presented in the ‘well-made’ play that dominated the metropolitan theater in India in the early decades of the twentieth century” (1997: 439). The play’s episodic structure was disruptive, “frustrating an interpretive closure,” as Bhatia notes. The rules of realism were violated; the action remained unresolved at play’s end. The impact of the production relied on the spectators’ recognition of the “sharply contrasting images of opulence and poverty” depicted “through the juxtaposition of the sumptuous wedding feast with the sad plight of the beggars” (439). It created empathetic identification while providing glaring evidence of the effects of colonial domination.

Relations within and between the IPTA’s Central and Provincial organizations were complicated and quarrelsome at times; as factions formed they became embroiled in controversies at once political and aesthetic, and there were constant disputes about priorities (cf Bhattacharya 1989). Bharucha blames what he describes as a schism between the ‘political people’ and the ‘artists’ – the former seen as pro-Party and led by Sudhi Pradhan, and the latter, on the initiative of Sombhu Mitra, vehemently resisting anything that smacked of party directives – for creating an irrevocable process of dissolution in the organization. Writing in 1979, from a still clearly embittered perspective, Pradhan rails against the Sombhu faction, arguing that because their approach was shallow in content, they tried to cover their deficiencies by insisting on spectacular techniques and forms. Some 35 years later, a detail that still goads him is that Sombhu, riding high on the successes of initial IPTA productions and protective of his directorial reputation and the need to maintain standards, refused to mount a revival production of Nabanna without a revolving stage, of which there

were only three in Calcutta and none in the districts (Pradhan 1985[1979]: xviii).

A 1946 report from Pradhan's collection entitled "Crisis in the Bengal IPTA," a copy of which was originally sent to the Bengal Committee of the CPI, detailed the divisive quarrel between the two camps, and urged the evolution of "correct theoretical, tactical and organizational decisions" (332). The document outlined the formation of "two separate tendencies" in the IPTA, one emphasizing the importance of technique, and convinced that the Party could provide no guidance where Art was concerned, and the other "parading their loyalty to the Party," and wary of bourgeois ideas, while remaining secure in the belief that art "in the service of the people" would in itself "attain a satisfactory form." In a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, the report noted an utter lack of concern on the part of the latter group that talented but disgruntled comrades, resisting regimentation, would withdraw their artistic expertise from the cultural front (in Pradhan 1985[1979]: 324-332).

Bhattacharya's version of the issues over which the IPTA foundered is of a conflict between those concerned about the mobility and accessibility of the theatrical message and its content, and those concentrated upon technical excellence and formal innovation. She argues that the Central Squad productions were never sufficiently flexible to accommodate necessary on-the-spot technical improvisations, and proved to be overly synthetic in their assimilation of folk forms so that local characteristics were too smoothed out to be recognizable to the general audience. Bhattacharya concludes by arguing that the productions often lacked the immediacy required to move the popular mind (1989: 19). While recognizing Nabanna as a breakthrough in the rendering of realistic detail, she sees it as limited in that its formal experimentation did not extend beyond the proscenium form

to explore other cultural forms more familiar to rural audiences in particular (19). For all its passion and “radical popular consciousness,” the movement was short lived. Sudipto Chatterjee has argued that the IPTA’s strength lay in its efforts at “cultural trafficking – between the urban and the rural, the intelligentsia and the peasant/worker,” and that this tenuous concord rapidly dissolved once the moment of political urgency had passed (S. Chatterjee 1999). By the end of 1945 the Bengal IPTA had ceased to function effectively, although the All-India organization continued to exist into the 50s, convening its eighth and last National Conference in Delhi in December 1957. Bhatia notes that after 1947 the IPTA began to lose its “mass character” (1997: 447). In the early 50s the organization was continually hounded by the autocratic censorship regulations of the new government. Often required to submit scripts for police review well in advance of production, the IPTA found it prudent to adapt European dramas in order to avoid the repressive tactics and threats. Because plays by progressive Indian playwrights were inevitably banned, European dramas could be used to camouflage and send covert anti-imperialist messages. Bhatia points to the “interesting irony” that plays by Shaw, and Ibsen, “subversive within their own context, became ‘high’ culture in the Indian context [and thus non-threatening] because of their association with the West” (1997: 457, fn36).

The IPTA’s lasting significance in Indian cultural history is undeniable, as it provided “the ground for a great many innovations in theater, cinema, literature and to a lesser extent the plastic arts” (Kapur 1993a: 502). As Geeta Kapur notes, “It made history by building a heritage through cultural work that was to nurture major artists for decades to come”(1993b: 35). Bengali film-makers Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak were both active

participants, and they often cited the IPTA experience as a crucial, transformative moment in their early artistic development.²

The splintering of the IPTA was actually a stimulus for the development of Bengal's non-professional, so-called "Group Theatre" movement in the '50s and beyond (Bharucha 1983: 54). One of the first IPTA offshoots was Bohurupee, which Nabanna's co-director Sombhu Mitra formed in 1948 in order to stake a claim for his own artistic autonomy, and fulfill a desire to explore more poetic forms of drama. Rejecting modes of naturalism, and other theatrical elements of Western importation, Mitra proposed an "Indian" way of doing theatre, focusing particularly on the plays of Rabindranath, as exhibited in a landmark production in 1956 of Raktakarabi ("Red Oleanders"). Bohurupee also earned praise for producing inspired Bengali adaptations of Western plays such as Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, Ibsen's An Enemy of the People and A Doll's House. Working through Tagore, Mitra hoped he might find a voice, a gesture that would authentically express the most intimate human feelings, indeed a manner of acting that would naturally express "the poetry of passion." He recognized that performing Tagore's dramas presented enormous challenges, but defended their relevance in the modern era, and their importance as a repository of indigenous cultural meaning:

Western critics find these plays difficult to understand... I often feel that the inherent character of our culture, its simplicity and its sophistication, is not easily comprehensible to Europeans or even to the Indian disciples of the Europeans. Tagore's plays do not use realistic characters, yet when we do these plays we feel they are real. He doesn't use common everyday language...Most of our actors find it difficult to perform these words...The words sound pretentious, they say (Sombhu Mitra 1971: 204).

² The work of Ghatak and Sen is discussed in Chapter Six.

Mitra lamented that contact with an Indian aesthetic, and its “endeavor to reveal the essence of beauty in beauty itself,” had been lost, yet he argued that despite the radical shifts in consciousness that resulted from Western interventions, “we can still respond and react to the Manipuri dances, to Tagore’s songs, and to similar ascetic and quiet modes of art” (204). Recognizing that it was “impossible to revive the ancient culture in a modern context,” he posed some fundamental questions for consideration:

As our industry uses a European model, should our culture imitate European culture? Or should we discriminate, accepting some aspects and rejecting others? On what basis shall we accept or reject? These are basic, practical questions for those who wish to be truly Indian artists (203).

Mitra also wrote about the fact that Indian actors, as a result of having become accustomed to doing realistic plays, had “lost their capacities for gestural and vocal rhythm”(Mitra 1971: 202-3). Directing a critical eye toward Western “action-oriented drama” in which “we are outsiders watching others’ behavior through an imaginary wall,” Mitra saw his work as introducing a “more contemplative ‘Indian’ drama” that allows the audience to “come closer to the character and move into his subjective world” (203). Describing his “legendary” work as an actor (“Mitra has no peer in the contemporary Bengali theater”), Bharucha refers to Mitra’s ability to convey through his voice the innermost feelings of his characters, yet he attests that “his critics sometimes maintain that he tends to lose himself in his lyricism” (1983: 241 fn58).

Well into the 1970s and 80s these non-commercial, non-professional, groups of Calcutta’s ‘other theatre’ produced some of the best theatre to be seen in India, bringing adaptations of Chekhov, Ibsen, Pirandello and Brecht to Indian contexts and audiences. They rejected the sentimental romanticism of Calcutta’s public theatre, experimenting in

theme, content and styles of production. They were proud of their use of dialect and vulgar colloquialisms, parading their “social awareness” and their overall lack of literary embellishment in the depiction of “stern reality” (S.K. Mukherjee 1982: 424-6). In this non hero-centered drama, the interest was focused on the community rather than the individual; characters tended to be representative types, and the raised fist was a common sight.

A great deal of interest focused on Brecht’s advocacy of “a theatre of argument,” as opposed to one of empathy, and Brechtian alienation effects became a popular novelty in the Bengali theatre (Mukherjee 1982: 429). In 1983 Rustom Bharucha could write: “Brecht continues to be the most popular playwright in Bengal,” noting that due to the recent dearth of good new plays, it was a common solution for Calcutta theatre groups to adapt “yet another play by Brecht” (201). Bharucha cites the acknowledgement of Dharani Ghosh, the drama critic for Calcutta’s prominent daily newspaper The Statesman, that however disagreeable to serious students of Brecht, these Bengali Brechtian adaptations did “satisfy the aspirations of the Bengali middle-class” with, as Bharucha adds, “their seeming acceptance of conventions and values that are ineluctably bourgeois” (Bharucha 1983: 201).

One much-discussed example was the 1969 Nandikar production of Tin Poyshar Pala (an adaptation of Three Penny Opera) in which the company’s star actor Ajitesh Bannerjee worked like a matinee idol, playing Macheath as a romantic bandit, in what Bharucha described as a “blatant commercialization of Brecht” (193). Bharucha criticized the production as playing only for laughs, with “countless burlesque situations, hilarious songs with innuendos and a consistently festive atmosphere” in which Nandikar’s actors “transform[ed] bourgeois vices into endearing characteristics” and the audience was too busy

enjoying the roles to be critical of the characters' attitudes (191-2).

Speaking at a seminar on Brecht at Calcutta's German cultural center, the Max Muller Bhavan, actor-director Ajitesh Banerjee defended his production as an attempt to situate Brecht in a "Bengali experience." Bharucha dismissed this reputed "Indianization" of Brecht as "not particularly analytical," claiming that while it made for some amusing character transformations (the god Shiva appeared in a tiger skin along with a Raj-era policeman in khaki shorts) it concentrated on external details rather than on principles or world views (193).

In an interview published in The Drama Review, Calcutta critic Samik Bandyopadhyay responded to this production with scathing commentary:

And now when suddenly we [in the Bengali theatre] have a production of The Three Penny Opera which simply goes in for wild fun, we regard it as a compromise, a betrayal. This production has no point when there is political violence in Calcutta...This is status quo theatre, which means nothing to a generation that thinks in political terms. This production makes us very angry, not merely unhappy (1971: 242).

Bharucha's discussion of these adaptations found particular fault with their failure to connect Brecht with "the political turmoil of Bengal and the life in the streets of Calcutta" (1983: 197). Instead of unsettling the bourgeois assumptions of its middle class Bengali audience, these productions catered to them, playing Brecht for entertainment value with a pretentious imitation of the formal aspects of the "epic theatre" (its placards, projections, addresses to the audience) allowing the narrative and spectacle to dominate. As Bharucha concludes:

...in Bengal, where the poverty of the people in the street and the dissensions among the bourgeoisie are so conspicuous, it is somewhat shocking that Brecht can be played for laughs (193).

In his monograph on the political theatre of Bengal, Rustom Bharucha showers particular

praise on the “striking and contradictory approaches” of the theatres of Utpal Dutt and Badal Sircar, noting that they “share a fundamental affinity in their level of energy and their relationship to the life in the streets of Calcutta” (189). It is the work of these two men, and the creative and energizing undercurrent of anger that is integral to their depiction of life in the city, that I want to address in the latter portion of this chapter.

Utpal Dutt’s Mass Appeal: Capturing Life as it Should Be

Born in Assam in 1929, Utpal Dutt received his initial training in the professional theater as an actor in the Shakespeareana International Theatre Company’s tour of India in 1947. The Company’s director Geoffrey Kendall was a stern mentor and demanded absolute dedication and fastidious attention to detail from his disciples.³ Dutt has written of the shaming reprimands and beatings he received when the guru was displeased (in Bharucha 1983: 242, fn1). Bharucha describes this early mentorship:

Not only did he teach Dutt how to project his voice, how to fence and strike postures of grief, how to change his facial expressions, he instilled in the young actor a sense of responsibility and discipline (1983: 56).

Soon after this tour Dutt formed his own troupe, The Little Theatre Group, for which he directed and acted in productions in English of Shakespeare and Shaw (Raha 1978: 133). Dutt’s own retrospective description emphasizes an attitude full of contradictions in which

³Kendall’s company served as the model for Ishmail Merchant and James Ivory’s 1965 film Shakespearewallah that captures a wistful end of the Raj mood with music by Satyajit Ray. The film depicts an English-directed company’s stubborn dedication to the life of (British) theatre that seems no longer to find a role in the socio-cultural life of modernizing India.

his alienation from Western learning predominates:

[I was] busy with useless English plays in Calcutta, fruitlessly exploring Shakespeare, Shaw and Odets, and devastated by my distance from the people. I was filled with hatred for the way I had been brought up, and refused to see the merits of a jesuitical education which had opened the world of books to me, including Marx and Engels, Rousseau and Voltaire, Hegel and Feuerbach. I considered myself a moron for being moved by Latin poetry and for being able to recite Virgil (Dutt 1982: 33).

Dutt found a way out of this dilemma through his affiliation with IPTA in 1950-51:

I was then a much disturbed person...I went about in quest of an identity and the IPTA's General Secretary and undisputed leader, Comrade Niranjan Sen, gave it to me by asking me to join his vast organization as Director and Actor...for about eight months I savoured the power of mass-audiences which alone can make theatre come alive (Dutt 1982: 33).

Dutt has described the IPTA structure in these terms:

The IPTA was the great parent body. It was a mass organization that exemplified the dictum that liberals must be drawn into the struggle. P.C. Joshi, then secretary-general of the CPI, was able to attract the greatest artists of the time...There wasn't a single writer in Bengal who wasn't proud to be associated with the IPTA...Unity was achieved under the slogan: "This anti-British, anti-imperialist struggle of the people" (in Gunawardana 1971a: 234).

Dutt vividly recounts his experiences with the talented members of the central Calcutta squad of the IPTA, learning "the magical business of communicating with 20,000 people at a time" and experimenting with new cultural forms: Mrinal Sen's shadow plays, Tapas Sen's lighting effects, Hemango Biswas's melodies collected in the countryside, and Bijon Bhattacharjee's dialogue – "every line of dialogue he ever wrote throbbing with the life of the peasantry" (Dutt 1982: 33). But Dutt's association was cut short as a result of what Dutt describes as a series of "idiotic" conflicts with party officials, "ignorant windbags, whose officiousness and high-handed methods have nothing in common with the Party's thinking" (32-4). He tells a story of his brazen 21-year old self, setting the scene of an act of deliberate

provocation against “the windbags” (“I was shocked to find they had not read even Lenin extensively”):

I enjoyed their consternation one day when I carried Trotsky’s “Permanent Revolution” into 46 Dharamtollah Street [the CPI/PWA/IPTA headquarters] the fountainhead of all progressive ideas at the time in the city. On being hotly questioned on this outrage, I explained, one could never understand Stalin, unless one first mastered Trotsky and Bukharin. There was only stunned silence in the room (33).

Later Dutt participated in a squad that produced a street corner play Chargesheet about communist leaders imprisoned without trial that ended with a slogan calling for their release. Seen as having crossed an unspoken line between party and cultural front objectives, the play drew criticism. Dutt’s mentor Niranjan Sen was chastised “for permitting the banner of the IPTA to be used for direct party-propaganda,” and Dutt became the target of a campaign of abuse that labeled him “Trotskyite” (Dutt 1982: 34). Bharucha adds that Dutt was “accused of drunkenness, arrogance, opportunism, even abusive language” (Bharucha 1983: 58). By his own euphemistic description, Dutt “was eased out of the organization”; in Bharucha’s account he was “blacklisted by the more doctrinaire members of the Party” (58). Dutt paints a dismal picture of self-pity:

...from a rehearsal, I had to walk straight out into the street, belonging to no organisation, no theatre, in fact no work (1982: 34).

Engaging the Audience

But Dutt had learned much from his experiences working with IPTA comrades. A particularly valuable contact was with Panu Pal, creator of the *pathnatika* (street corner play)

in Bengal. Pal was the mastermind behind the previously mentioned Chargesheet, the product of an IPTA group improvisation written and rehearsed overnight for production in Calcutta's Hazra Park. It was then performed in villages and working class colonies all over Bengal, "in markets, fields, squares, and most frequently, on trucks" (Bharucha 1983: 57), by a specially created mobile squad that Dutt joined. He was exhilarated by the experience and by the immediacy of this form of theatre as a mode of communication with the audience ("its direct analysis of political issues was a revelation to me"[Dutt 1982: 34]). As Dutt's career progressed, he continued to explore the form:

I have since written and played two dozen such plays, even developing them to full 3-hour performances and have reveled in them as an artist, not only as a political being. Critics there are who have contemptuously spurned these efforts as crude political propaganda and have written extensively on my naiveté. I wonder how a theatre-man can be entirely devoid of naiveté, of conviction, of zeal, and still survive...I am partisan, not neutral, and I believe in political struggle. The day I cease to participate in political struggle, I shall be dead as an artist too (34).

A second street-corner play was prepared by Dutt and Pal to aid in a by-election that they hoped would confirm the defeat of a Congress party boss. They developed the play while living for two months in a suburb inhabited by tailors and Bata shoe factory workers known as Maheshtolla, performing at factory gates and in private courtyards "where the wives of Muslim tailors, who were in purdah, could watch from behind curtains" (Dutt 1982: 36).

This encounter with the people was transformational for Dutt:

The exhilaration of direct political theatre naturally cannot be conveyed to one who is apolitical, therefore apathetic to the misery of the masses. But those who understand that life is greater than art, that the real starvation and the real heroism of the masses are greater drama than imaginary ones, will understand me when I say, that stint at Maheshtolla changed me completely, from an alienated, lonesome intellectual to a person, a living man, a part of a struggling mass (36).

Dutt recounts tales of street-corner plays interrupted by hoodlums and "hired gangsters of

the Congress,” of the exhilaration of performances “merging with an excited politically-conscious crowd,” and of opportunities to become intimate with workers while raising strike funds with performances that exposed alliances between big capital and the state (38-9).

For Dutt, it is only through audience participation that a play is made complete. As Dutt explains his practice-based theory of theatre, the audience is the catalytic agent for the unity of opposites required to attain that transcendent moment of theatrical success he refers to as “the Experience.” In achieving this moment that defines a great performance, which in Dutt’s view relies on the resolution of contradictions between falsehood and truth, between plan and spontaneity, the audience is “the deciding factor.” What Dutt has in mind here is a contradiction between the “falsehood” of the stage and the “truth” of drama, the aim being a dialectical synthesis. Citing his own personal theatrical experiences, of Brecht’s epic theatre in Berlin, of the Moscow Art Theatre’s Tolstoi, and of Olivier doing Chekov in London, Dutt describes the audience’s explosive response when a play “attains magnificence”:

...they react, they feel, they think, as they have never done before, and this mass-reaction is communicated immediately to the stage, and the Experience begins (Dutt 1982: 6).

The other contradiction refers to the actor’s work, between exhaustive rehearsing and well-memorized lines, and the necessity of appearing spontaneous and unpremeditated – “because surely he has to speak to the last row, without seeming to shout” (13). Here Dutt observes that “facing and trying to resolve this contradiction can be the most exciting work in the theatre” (13). Dutt points to a contradiction the actor must face between interpretation and representation, between interpreting the part and becoming the part. Dutt notes that on

the stage neither is possible:

One cannot altogether stand at a distance from his part and run a commentary on it, nor can one become another person... (14).

Speaking from his own acting experience, Dutt describes how this fusion of opposites is caused by audience reaction, and how it can come to the aid of an actor's performance. In one case, humbled by a rural audience's hostility to a womanizing feudal lord character, Dutt was forced to transform on the spot a portrayal that had played well as slapstick before an urban audience. He suddenly recognized that he had completely misread as farce a 19th century Bengali classic that now – before this audience – appeared “a frightening chronicle” (15). Sobered by the audience's reaction, he immediately abandoned the horseplay that he now saw as a shallow external approach, and forced himself to work from the character's point of view. If his audience would not laugh with him, he would portray their adversary in all his horror, as a class enemy engaged in maniacal revenge.

I was forced to share the lord's view of life for a short time. I saw life and his enemies as he saw them. And I also felt at final curtain that I had seen hell, the devious inner working of an oppressor's mind (16).

Bringing his analysis to bear on this experience, Dutt concluded:

This is what the Audience does to the contradictions of the theatre. They bring their actual life-experience to bear upon the stage. They react to plays from the standpoint of their own personal sufferings and have the strength to alter the values enshrined in a performance. The audience is the link between life and theatre (15).

Dutt goes on to say:

Since in all these contradictions, the Audience is the constant factor, it follows that its size and cultural level must also play a part in the resolution of the contradictions. The smaller the audience, ...[the] less is its power to influence and catalyze the contradictions on stage. Emotions, whether of joy or sorrow, are infectious, only on condition that the audience is large enough. A small audience is a silent one, as any professional actor knows. Therefore, those who believe in an elitist theatre are

actually cutting themselves off from the most important aspect of theatrical dialectics
– from their only link with society (18-19).

Proletarian Hero, Blemishes and All

In another example of lessons drawn from audience response, Dutt recounted a story about performing a play he had written about U.S. race relations and the 1931 Scottsborough Trial in Alabama (in Dutt 1982). The lead character as first written was an “over simple hero,” an uncompromising, idealistic lawyer defending his black client against a hysterical white mob. This portrayal soon collapsed before an audience that expected the lawyer to fight dirty, regardless of the side he was on. Discussing the audience's collective power, Dutt made reference to Brecht’s repeated revisions, especially his attempts to make his heroes more explicitly negative, as undoubtedly being “because of his Audience” (17). As Brecht was constantly aware, the audience was co-author; they had “been re-writing his plays along with him” (6, 17). Dutt’s message is that one must never underestimate the audience nor talk down:

The audience, as a collective, is wise in the ways of the alienated world they live in. To them compromises are a way of life, the only way to survive in an oppressive world (1984:17).

In this vein of paying tribute to audience perspicacity, with the slightest encouragement Dutt could go off on a tirade against communist theatre groups’ portrayal of the romantic revolutionary hero as “a super-human Captain Marvel...advocating war or peace according to the current party-line, laughing in the face of danger” (17-18). He saw in many of the IPTA productions glaring errors to be avoided:

In their plays, whenever the proletarian hero walked on stage, conflict and drama disappeared – an oversimplified, anemic, spiritless Symbol of Revolution gesticulated and spoke dull sermons (1971: 227).

These “absolute fictitious Good Men” of unattainable perfection not only made for boring theatre, according to Dutt, they had a destructive power to drive workers and peasants away from revolution:

To portray the proletarian hero as a giant without weakness or conflict is to tell the audience that it's impossible to be a revolutionary (229).

Dutt wanted to see complex and fallible heroes brought to life, shown – along with fellow workers (i.e. in relation to their class) – struggling to be better fighters and better men. (“A communist hero ought to be good,” Dutt argued, “but is he? Can he ever become perfect?” [18]). For Dutt the answer was clear:

An audience of workers and peasants, faced with a proletarian hero with many foibles but relying on his class for strength, understand him at once and realize that to be a revolutionary, one need not become perfect first (in Gunawardena 1971a: 229).

Questions of Form & the People’s Understanding – Brecht and Jatra

Asked about his debt to Brecht, Dutt would speak eloquently about “what he was trying to tell us” with his theory of alienation (namely “that modern theatre must make people think and not move them by emotion”) and of Brecht’s efforts to focus attention on the content of drama. Dutt spoke of what he labeled “Western conspiracy – conscious or otherwise” whose aim he saw as concealing the meaning behind Brecht’s theory. The result was that in the West it was Brecht’s methods that were taken up but with little attention paid

to the meaning behind them. Dutt explained what he saw as the utility of this Brechtian method:

Reading some Western critics, one would think that alienation was some kind of an actor's manual. That is not what Brecht said. He said that the actor must face his role squarely, not get lost in it...The actor must capture life not only as it is but as it should be. If he gets lost in a part he is merely presenting an attitude that belongs not to him, and not to the playwright, but to the character. But he must also directly present to the people his own attitude and the writer's attitude – which in my case is Marxist (in Gunawardena 1971a: 235).

Yet despite his admiration for Brecht and his contribution to revolutionary theatre, Dutt rejected the formal aspects of Brecht's epic structure as a style unsuitable to the Bengali context:

...the Brechtian style would interfere with our people's responses because they are used to another kind of theatre, and all forms must arise from the people's understanding... As I understand it, epic structure advances the action to a certain point and then halts, cuts it entirely and proceeds with another episode, or with the same episode in another light. This directly contradicts our people's expectations. They're accustomed to the dramatic atmosphere getting thicker and thicker, until it becomes almost unbearable. A Marxist believes that form is entirely a tactical question: how to get your ideas across most effectively (236).

Or as Dutt explained as he set out to expound his theory of revolutionary theatre and the experiences that led to its formulation:

...even after I was repeatedly exposed to it in Berlin, [Brecht] had always seemed to me to be too intellectual, too cerebral an exercise for an audience nurtured on the violence and mimesis of our folk theatre (Dutt 1982: 2).

Immediately following his expulsion from IPTA, Dutt returned to the Little Theatre Group and managed to convince the company that it must abandon its English productions and its intellectual audience. Making up for what he now saw as wasted years, he convinced the group to commit itself to the production of plays in the Bengali language for a predominantly working class audience. Thus dramatically transforming its agenda, the company toured the

countryside with a Bengali translation of Macbeth, and succeeded in reaching the villagers by drawing on the traditional Bengali folk theatre idiom of *jatra*. By “immersing Macbeth in the ritual world of *jatra* and by transforming Shakespeare’s language into a bold, declamatory form of incantation” the production allowed the rural audience to grasp the intricacies of the narrative, responding to it on the level of myth (Bharucha 1983: 62).

At another moment of crisis and personal transformation in the early 1970s, when Dutt became disillusioned with the Naxalite movement and the political isolation that his political theatre’s allegiance had brought about, he turned again to *jatra* for inspiration. While its conventions appealed to what Bharucha describes as “his Elizabethan sense of the theater,” he also discovered there “new structural devices and modes of communication” that could be used to rejuvenate the “people’s theater”(90-91). Dutt describes the *jatra* art form and the challenges it presents for actors:

Jatra is theatre in the round, and it's very loud. Everything is influenced by sight lines, visibility, and audibility. *Jatras* are frequently performed in villages without electricity. The carbide gas lamps which are used don't give much light, but the actors have to make themselves visible to a large audience, so the makeup is very heavy and the costumes are very colorful. The gestures and the stage business are stylized...[The actors] face a big problem: how to perform in a large arena and yet be realistic. The old *Jatra* actors – at least some of them – achieved a remarkable impression of realism, of absolute control, and yet they shouted at the top of their voices, but skillfully, so that it never seemed they were shouting (Gunawardena 1971a: 230).

He spoke with a respectful awe about his first contacts with *jatra* actors and their engagement in impossibly demanding tour and production schedules, traveling sometimes several hundred miles a day, staying with peasants, performing three and a half hour productions two or three times a day.

The *jatra* actor is remarkable, truly a people's artist, taking theatre to the masses in remote areas...they proved to me what Mao Tse-tung said about living close to the people (229).

While respecting this folk theatre tradition and its history, Dutt's intention was to use it for his own purposes. Early on he recognized the medium's awesome power and potential:

I had been deeply interested in [*jatra*] since 1951... had been bowled over by the directness, even brutality, of its impact on the audience...Its distinctive feature is its mimetic element, its robust and unashamed use of every emotion, every passion, every violence to subdue the audience to its own will. This is theatre as Magic...it seeks to dominate the audience's mind by sheer violence and brazen dramatics. It is theatre at its primitive best (1982: 145).

For nearly a decade, he dedicated his efforts to politicizing *jatra*, honing the techniques of sustained dramatic action and the frequent climaxes he felt were required to sustain the attention of working class audiences. His intention was to propagate political ideas, to make the audience reflect on the action presented before them, to make history a felt presence for a mass audience. Dutt put the form, and what Bharucha describes as "a canny understanding of its mechanics and conventions," (1983: 91) to good use, invoking it to communicate a range of ideas and political experiences and contexts:

We have done *jatra* plays on many subjects, including Lenin, the fall of Berlin, Vietnam, the indigo revolt of 1856-90, Mao Tse-tung, the Indian guerillas of 1944, the Punjab revolt of 1919, and several on current issues indicting the ruling classes (in Gunawardena 1971a: 230).

Dutt remained conscientious about his audience's desires, about presenting a political theater that entertained.

For eleven years, beginning in 1959, Dutt's Little Theatre Group held a lease on the Minerva Theatre in North Calcutta. In order to hold the venue, Dutt set about learning how to draw crowds and keep them coming, how "to heighten the visual properties of the theatre

to a point where the theatre itself would cast a spell on the audience” and thereby transmit its message (Raha 1978: 134). Beginning with Angar, a play about a coal mining disaster, and culminating in Kallol (which opened in March 1965), on the Bombay naval mutiny of 1946, both of which performed to packed houses, Dutt developed a style of spectacle that produced “an onslaught on the senses through the use of lights, sound, music, huge sets, a large cast and heroic acting” (134). Dutt later regretted ending Angar on such a note of despair, with no resistance possible. Though well aware that the audience responded to the “meticulous detail and awesome stagecraft” with which the scenes were depicted, Bharucha’s comment is that “There is something perverse about staging a calamity as a spectacle and applauding the climax where workers are shown drowning” (1983: 68). After having survived more than 1100 performances, in the context of political battles between Congress and CPI supporters that coalesced during border tensions with China, the theatre was attacked and trashed by a mob of “Congress rowdies” and the play was forced to close (Dutt 1982: 41-2).

Similarly, the production of Kallol, with its reproval of the Congress Party as an agent of imperialism, for compromising with the oppressors to betray the revolutionary struggle, led to vituperative reviews and editorials, calls for “social boycott.” In what was then a period of political tension over war with Pakistan, Dutt was actually detained without trial for six months in Calcutta’s Presidency jail. Dutt described his experience in prison:

...all the top leaders of the Marxist party were already there and there was a lot to learn from them. And then there were the fascinating convicts, murderers, bandits and completely innocent men sent to prison by conniving feudal lords. I filled two notebooks with interviews and for the first time I realized why Marx included the prison in his definition of state-machinery of repression...The prison is a weapon in class struggle, in the ceaseless war to maintain private property (Dutt 1982: 45).

Theorizing “Revolutionary Theatre”

Dutt’s constant admonition was that the practical objectives of the theatrical enterprise must be kept in mind:

A revolutionary theatre that does not aim at the revolutionary masses is a ridiculous contradiction in terms...The revolutionary theatre addresses these working masses and must adjust its pitch, tone and volume accordingly, and to hell with so-called critics who find our plays naive, melodramatic and loud (Dutt 1982:64, 70).

Without any qualms Dutt avers:

..the object of the [revolutionary] theatre is to rouse class-hatred, to make people angry, to make them want to fight...(30).

In Dutt’s assessment, the villain was indispensable for a political play, as the butt of ridicule, to provoke audience jeers. A working class audience has little use and less patience for lectures and sermons. They would tolerate dramatization of their imperfections, but they wanted to see familiar enemies humiliated, rendered comic, and ultimately crushed. They wanted to participate in the glory of the fight.

Dutt insisted that the political theatre must rely on politically developed actors, and “ceaselessly assail the thinking habits of its players”(29-30). It was a collective endeavor with a sense of shared mission:

We want to create plays, songs, ballets, to recapture for the people the important episodes of their past when they took up arms against landlords and the British army. We try to tell them nonviolence and passivity are recent interpolations, alien to their nature and history...the hope [is] that the strength of previous generations will reassure them that violence in a just war is their birthright (in Gunawardena 1971a: 227).

As for the notion of a pure and authentic “Indian” theatre, Dutt let it be known what a preposterous idea he thought it to be:

Some people have been talking about an Indian theatre in manner that we do not like, a theatre Indian in its very conception, approach and form. We think this is rather silly because the modern theatre is imported stuff; the first man to do a modern play in Bengali was a Russian called Lebedoff...we can never talk about an Indian theatre...It doesn't exist... Those who talk about it don't take theatre to the people... These plays are being done in Delhi for tourists, and for Indian government officials, who sleep right through the performance...these are the people who talk about an Indian form (236).

In Dutt's view the revolutionary theatre of Bengal must draw on indigenous models – *jatra* and the historical plays of Girish Chandra Ghosh. Dutt successfully revived a number of 19th century Bengali classics, notably Girish Chandra's Siraj-ud-daula, a melodrama about the emergence of the British Raj, in particular because he responded to its "patriotic sentiments, the unabashed emotionalism" and the archetypal treatment of historical figures as villains and heroes (Bharucha 1983: 63).

As a critic Bharucha recognizes the pragmatism and "intellectual sound-ness" of advocating these indigenous models, but as a Marxist, Bharucha is wary that these structures which rely on "the principles of empathy and emotional amplification" are insufficiently dialectical to support a political theatre (120). He urges a questioning about the function of entertainment in a theatre that claims to "preach revolution" and "rediscover history" and warns about entertaining the audience at the expense of enlightening it (121). Yet he recognizes that Dutt's exploitation of Calcutta's commercial theatre tradition was ingenious, and that he was most successful when he managed to be both entertaining and true to his revolutionary principles.

In writing about Dutt, Rustom Bharucha has posed questions about whether his comedic sensibility and theatrical nature trivialized his analysis of significant issues. Bharucha describes his theatre as "an odd combination of absurd histrionics and passionately

partisan political feelings,” noting that it is “most true to its revolutionary principles when it is also blatantly theatrical” (1983: 90). As Bharucha notes:

These ambivalent aspects of Dutt’s personality and dramaturgy cannot be easily reconciled. While acknowledging that Dutt overdoes his revolutionary rhetoric and his political posturing, I cannot deny the immediate impact of his plays on the working-class audiences in Bengal (90).

Dutt died in 1993. In addition to his career in the theatre, Dutt is remembered for his extremely prolific film work as an actor in both Hindi and Bengali films (including both popular Bombay cinema and films by Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak). His spectacular film debut was in 1950 as the Bengali litterateur Michael Madhusudan, a role he repeated several times on the stage. He often took on lucrative film roles in popular Hindi melodramas playing tearful fathers or retired soldiers which he justified primarily as a means of financing his theatrical work (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994: 89). His second to last film was Satyajit Ray’s last film Agantuk (“The Stranger”) in 1991; his last was Gautam Ghosh’s Padma Nadir Majhi (“Boatmen of the River Padma”) in 1992. He also directed five films, including a 1979 Bengali film Jhor (“The Storm”) set in 1829 Calcutta about the Hindu College students of Henry Derozio and the conflicts between Western rationalism and Hindu tradition.

Badal Sircar’s Theatre: Keeping the Avant-Garde Relevant

Badal Sircar was born as Sudhindra Sircar in Calcutta in 1925, of Christian parents. His father was a history professor at Scottish Church College; his paternal grandmother was one of India’s first women physicians and quite well-read. Though he studied in a Bengali

language school, he spent leisure hours with his grandmother's collection of Western literature. Early on he developed a love of Shaw, Moliere, and O'Neill. Yet Sircar writes all his plays in Bengali and considers English "an entirely inappropriate language for the theatre to which he is committed..." (Banfield 1996: 118).

Without the revolutionary rhetoric of Dutt's theatre, Sircar's plays are motivated by "a passionate personal response to the injustices and oppressions endured in the lives of the poor and disenfranchised" (117). Central to Sircar's philosophy is "a recognition that responsibility for change must rest at an individual level before a collective response is possible" (117).

The most popular of Sircar's plays, Evam Indrajit, was written in Paris in 1962 while Sircar was training as a town planning engineer with a French government scholarship. As Bharucha describes it:

...there are moments of utter despair in the play which Sircar crystallizes with a laconic simplicity that is his forte as a playwright (1983: 135).

He explores the alienated consciousness of a young man of the middle class who is unable to realize his dreams and unwilling to accept the materialism and triviality of the bourgeois world around him. In this play Sircar developed an abstract mode of writing as a rhetorical technique that would become a familiar signature in later plays "where the words resonate ideas rather than personal feelings" (135). The actors' words juxtapose disparate comments spoken mechanically without comprehension as if by programmed robots. The central character engaged in anguished dialogue with parts of a fractured self becomes an expressive theatrical form in Sircar's work. It allows him to explore contradictions that arise when an individual attempts to confront a range of social expectations and obligations without

betraying a personal sense of responsibility. The importance of struggle “against the inertia of complacency and ignorance” is a theme frequently addressed in Sircar’s work (Banfield 1996: 117).

A Diversity of Influences

Sircar’s influences and concerns are multifarious; his artistic choices are informed by experiences both indigenous and Western. After his apprenticeship in Paris in 1962-63, he worked as a town planner in Eastern Nigeria in 1967 just prior to the Biafran war. In recounting his theatrical influences, he begins with an account of when he first came across theatre in the round in London in 1957-59. He toured and observed theatrical productions in the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and was much influenced by performances of Brecht and Gorky in Moscow and conversations with Grotowski on the concept of “Poor Theatre” (with its aim to impoverish theatre to the extent of reducing it to the unadorned body of the performer). These ideas and experiences proved extremely influential in the group discussions that led to the formation in 1967 of a theatre company Satabdi. Sircar describes how Grotowski’s concept in particular was discussed at length: “we wanted to utilise poverty and turn it into an advantage instead of a restriction”(1978: 26).

Another formative experience was a year spent in New York in 1972, working with Richard Schechner and the Performance Group of New York and with Julian Beck and Judith Malina of the Living Theater. Impressed with what he described as the “openly and frankly political” atmosphere he encountered among them, Sircar remarked:

They deal with basic political philosophy, with man's consciousness and responsibility. I did not realise it at the time, but later the sole purpose of my theatre was to become exactly that (41).

Sircar is pragmatic about what influences him; he assimilates creatively, critically and always consciously. Bharucha phrases it in this way:

Instead of distancing him from his own people, the foreign influence on Sircar has enabled him to create a physical language that reaches audiences more directly than the conventional theatre language of the commercial Bengali theater (148).

Despite what he sees as a recognizable American influence, Bharucha argues that Satabdi deserves particular praise in that it “remains fundamentally Bengali in its mode of communication” (148).

Questions of Form

In 1972, within five years of its founding, the theatre group Satabdi which Sircar had formed, made a clean break away from proscenium theatre. In Sircar's words:

The immediate reason was that of communication – we wanted to break down the barriers and come closer to the spectators, to take advantage of direct communication that theatre as a live show offers. We wanted to share with our audience the experience of joint human action...We concentrated on the essentials – the human body and the human mind (Sircar:1982b: 56).

Disenchanted with the structural barriers and “costly inessentials” of the proscenium, Sircar began experimenting. Satabdi performed in the open air in Calcutta's Surendranath (formerly Curzon) park, until charges by angry police bearing *lathis* [a stiff bamboo baton]

during “the Emergency” in 1975 put a stop to all such public gatherings.⁴ Performances continued in villages, college compounds, office canteens and hired halls. Sircar saw that whatever playing space was used was adapted to facilitate direct communication between actors and spectators which he saw as key. Satabdi’s productions used ordinary room lights, did without props, costumes or background music. When questioned about his methods Sircar responded:

We don’t think about techniques. We think about what we have to communicate and what is the best way of communicating what we have to say (in Bharucha 1983: 129).

Although Sircar’s “avowed uninterest” in form is frequently commented on (cf Banfield 1996: 118), Bharucha found such remarks to be somewhat disingenuous (1983: 129). Sircar himself has written:

This theatre is not an experimentation in form; we have no concern for taking theatre as an art from point A to point B. We nevertheless have to explore the best form to communicate our theme as directly, effectively and intensely as possible to our audience – through such exploration new forms often emerge (1982b: 57).

For Sircar, the theatrical experience is more relevant than narration of a story; physicality and improvisation is more effective than dependence on language. Satabdi performed not just in front of viewers, but among them, sharing their physical space. This intimacy and shared experience, the actors’ use of body language, as well as the free play of imagination the performances require of the audience sets the Third Theatre apart visually and conceptually from other theatre groups in Calcutta.

⁴ The “Emergency” declared by Indira Gandhi in June 1975 has been discussed in Chapter Three, p. 104.

Theorizing “The Third Theatre”

In 1974-75, Badal Sircar wrote a treatise explaining his work entitled “The Third Theatre” that was a runaway success when it reached Calcutta bookstalls. Sircar insists:

I had not intended labelling our activity...I was merely identifying an untested form. However the phrase has stuck on (in Nag 1993).

In The Third Theatre, Sircar wrote what he described as an attempt to trace a long thinking process that began for him with the 1969 transformation and reorganization of the theatre group Satabdi (1978). He described theatre’s suicidal competition with cinema, the pressure of rising costs and the audience’s decreasing ability and willingness to pay. In order to entice an audience that increasingly turned to cinema as a better entertainment value, lavish sets, costume and lighting and the casting of film stars in lead roles had become the theatrical norm. Sircar posed the question “Can we not make theatre a form of art that is quite different from cinema?”(1978: 14).

In most theatrical attempts to sustain the ‘illusion of reality,’ which aimed at the spectators’ identification with the character on stage, Sircar noted that the distance between actors and audience was actually increased, thereby destroying the link between performer and spectator. The supposedly ‘naturalistic’ speech and gestures that the actor is given are often in fact severely restrictive. Sircar’s desire was to take advantage of the value of live, direct interpersonal communication, what he saw as the principal advantage of theatre over cinema. And unlike cinema, theatre is not chained to capitalist reality, it is free from the clutches of big business and commercial interests. Sircar saw Indian city theatre’s unquestioned acceptance of the proscenium stage and auditorium as restricting and

weakening its potential to communicate. The expected separation between audience and performers in level, location, and light hits directly at the communication between them, and between the spectators themselves, both of which Sircar believes are of crucial importance in a live show.

Sircar made studied efforts to break through theatre's reliance on characters and story, and the idea that spectators should recognize and identify with the characters on stage, become involved in their problems and emotions. In Sircar's work, themes and types came gradually to replace them. The possibilities of using groups as opposed to individual characters was also developed. Words are addressed directly to spectators, rather than used as dialogue between stage characters. Physical acting is employed in place of, or in order to strengthen, spoken language (1978: 34). Sircar conceived of his plays as works in progress, with the whole group participating in their preparation and revision. Each play became a group creation: "we were not just rehearsing a play...we were confronting a script to create a live theatre out of it" (38).

In part to address India's historically given problematic that Sircar labels "urban-rural dichotomy," Sircar proposed the concept of a "Third Theatre." He received a Government of India Nehru Fellowship in 1971-73 for a project he called "Workshop for Theatre of Synthesis," a report of which was published in 1978 as The Third Theatre. In a later volume entitled The Changing Language of Theatre, Sircar wrote: "the culture of the cities found its roots in the Western soil and had almost a clear break from the traditional indigenous culture" (Sircar 1982a: 32). Sircar explained how these two cultures ran parallelly, and how two distinct kinds of theatre emerged: the city theatre serving the urban

intelligentsia, and the tremendously popular folk theatre entertaining the rural majority. Banfield describes them as “the twin and often intertwining roots of theatrical practice, reaching back more than 200 years” (Banfield 1996: 118). In the urban setting, theatre was imported from Britain, with ideas reflecting Western cultural roots. In the countryside, traditional rural theatre retained indigenous characteristics in both form and content, and made no use of a distinct and isolated stage. According to Sircar’s assessment :

[the rural theatre dealt with] mostly backward, sterile even reactionary ideas, unconnected with the problems of economic, social and cultural emancipation of the rural masses, while the city theatre propagated progressive ideas and values to a sophisticated audience that might be mentally stimulated but would not, could not, act upon them (1982: 34).

Sircar described the indigenous forms available:

The indigenous folk theatre of India, strong, live, immensely loved by the working people of the country, propagates themes that are at best irrelevant to the life of the toiling masses, and at worst back-dated and downright reactionary. The proscenium theatre that the city-bred intelligentsia imported from the West...has been used by a section of educated and socially conscious people for propagating socially relevant subjects and progressive values but it gets money bound and city-bound, more and more, so as costs go on rising, [it is] unable to reach the real people (Sircar 1982b: 56).

Sircar questioned whether the distinction between the urban Western-inspired theatre and the indigenous traditions of *jatra*, *tamasha*, and *bhawai* was deliberately maintained by a kind of “city snobbery” and the urban theater workers' idea of sophistication (Sircar 1978: 92). These ideas led to an exploration of possibilities of an alternative theatre.

Rejection of the proscenium stage served two important if disparate goals for Sircar. As Banfield notes, it was both a striving for “a more flexible and intimate playing arena” and “a refusal to be compromised by both the dramatic fare of bourgeois entertainment and the commercial ethos of the inheritors of the colonial theater in Calcutta” (Banfield 1996: 119-

20).

Based on an analysis and assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the folk and Western proscenium traditions of theater, the Third Theatre is intended to synthesize elements from each. “Historically there appears to be a need for a third theatre in our country – a flexible, portable, free theatre as a theatre of change, and that is what we are trying to build” (Sircar 1982b). Sircar describes his effort as a search for a new language to communicate more effectively in theatre, in order to do something about the dichotomy. His goal is to develop “an intimate theatre where an intense emotional communication is possible;” “a theatre which can go to where the people are” (Sircar 1982a: 36). Not limited to an urban audience of the middle and upper classes, its aim was to reflect the life and problems of the country’s working masses.

Writing in 1983, Bharucha praised Sircar’s efforts to depict oppression as “admirable,” but noted that “they have been somewhat limited by the middle-class milieu of his theater”(185). With success, “the Third Theater seems to have institutionalized itself...What was once daring has now become familiar...one can now begin to speak of a ‘Satabdi aesthetic’”(186).

During the 1980s the group toured in rural Bengal, enthusiastically adapting their theatre for “a countryside milieu.” Sircar described the context in this way:

Sometimes their unconditioned minds reveal interpretations which are extremely valid. Village folk may be illiterate and undernourished, but they possess ample sophistication and intelligence to comprehend art (Nag 1993).

Sircar enjoys the human contact of conducting theater workshops in rural areas and bustees, and thrives on the excitement generated:

I have won lasting friendships because of them [the workshops]. The process is so deeply human...These small sparks matter in the ultimate analysis. That is a role which a Khidderpore 'basti' girl or Barasat district's Ridyapur villager will more remember me for (in Nag 1993).

Sircar expressed this humble plea:

Theatre by itself will never change the world for the better, but let us allow theatre to stake a modest claim in the process of that change (1982: 37).

Bharucha describes the Third Theatre as "not explicitly political" (131), but representing a kind of radical humanism. It asserts its political independence and resists party politics, "dramatizing the contradictions of politics, their effect on the lives of the people"(132).

Sircar focuses on the callousness of the middle class and their capacity to watch the suffering of the people without doing anything about it...[yet he] never fails to appeal to their humanity...he is the least dogmatic of thinkers in the Bengali theatre (132-33).

As Bharucha notes:

[Sircar's theatre] is content with merely disturbing the consciousness of its spectators. One leaves a play by Satabdi acutely aware of the exploitation and injustices that pervade life in Calcutta and rural Bengal. Sircar makes his audience confront their indifference to the chaos and corruption that characterize urban life (132).

Lessons from Bengali Theatre: Connecting with the Audience & the Question of Form

Theatre in Calcutta has always been used as a forum for ideas, a means of raising the public's political and social consciousness. It has been an important medium to propagate ideas of social reform and critique the status quo. The work has also always demonstrated an important interplay between the local and the international, both in terms of topical

concerns and methodologies. The theatrical works of both Badal Sircar and Utpal Dutt were particularly successful in relating “seemingly distant historical events like Vietnam and Hiroshima to the immediate exigencies of Bengal” (Bharucha 1983: 190). Yet the miserable socio-economic conditions and deprivation of so many in the city and its environs have weighed heavily on the consciousness of the city’s artists, creating demands that the work they produce remain relevant to local concerns and context. Decisions made about theatrical form tend to reject avant-garde experimentation (recall Dutt’s aphorism that “all forms must arise from the people’s understanding”) and instead represent creative solutions devised to address local imperatives such as lack of resources, poor facilities, insufficient time for rehearsal, or pressing political dilemmas demanding attention.

Bengali artists thrive on human contact and it is with attention to audience response that their works are most effectively revised and transformed. As many of them see it, it is only through audience participation that art is made complete. What defines a great performance is the ability to establish that connection and the exhilaration of the focused interaction. The importance of direct and effective communication between actors and spectators is such that experimentation with form is done precisely to facilitate the intensity of that communication.

As Utpal Dutt described it, form is merely a tactical question, the issue is how best to get your ideas across. Theatre workers think of themselves as constantly searching for a better communicative language. All the elements of theatre – movement, sound, lighting, and theatrical space – are harnessed so as to impart the desired message most effectively. If the ultimate goal is imagined as the abolition of separation between audience &

performers, Sircar's group Satabdi made this a physical reality by performing among and between spectators, and by addressing the crowd directly.

Beyond merely having the audience identify with the characters and events depicted, Bengali productions make them reflect on the action depicted and characters portrayed, encouraging them to become acutely aware. To aid in this process the dialogue is often spoken directly to the spectators, not staged as conversation between characters. Attempts are made to disturb the consciousness and complacency, of urban middle class audiences in particular, and to encourage spectators to confront indifference in themselves and in society.

In performing before mass audiences in rural areas or urban slums the key is seen to be in not patronizing the audience or speaking down to them but treating them as though they fully possess the critical intelligence to comprehend art. By maintaining a wary attitude toward "the commercial ethos" and the alluring forms and genres of bourgeois entertainment, Bengali theatre workers have confronted the challenge of devising a visual, verbal, and physical language that communicates a message of critique even to audiences unused to reflective and analytical thinking. They craft their stories so as to be able to make history a felt presence and impart its lessons, working through the presumed contradiction between entertaining and enlightening, and creating art that succeeds at doing both.

Chapter Five: The Visual Arts in Calcutta: From Revivalism to Bengali Modernity

My intention in this chapter is to present a history of Calcutta's visual arts genres, focusing the initial part of the discussion on the cultural practices that emerged as a result of the interactive nature of colonial society and specifically the manner in which Bengalis reacted and responded to the ideological premises underlying British art education. I will introduce the divergent Bengali attitudes toward assimilating a Western aesthetic, and explain how the colonial context of art education created an oppositional aesthetic urge to focus attention on indigenous forms of both "high art" and folk art traditions. The tensions that played out in the visual arts between Western and Eastern/ indigenous forms, and between the status of high art forms and the significance of popular or folk art genres are common themes that continue to emerge across historical periods and artistic careers. Rather than treat the acquisition of Western techniques of draftsmanship and Renaissance perspective as a colonial imposition – or Bengali curiosity about early 20th century modernist ways of seeing as evidence of European cultural hegemony – I want to examine the appropriation of foreign forms as potentially empowering, as stages in a process in which cultural producers strive to free themselves from outside influences and attempt to envision an autonomous Indian or more specifically Bengali modernity.

From the Sacred to the Bawdy: A Folk Tradition Reacts to Colonial Society

I want to begin by describing an important popular and ultimately very influential genre of Bengali folk painting that represents "an indigenous sphere of tastes and practice,"

namely the Kalighat *pat* (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 18). Kalighat is the name of an important ritual center, temple complex, and pilgrimage site, located at what is now the southern edge of the city of Calcutta, that existed long before the British arrival in Bengal.¹ The paintings themselves are known as *pats*, and were an outgrowth of a folk tradition of painted cloth and paper scrolls used by itinerant singers to illustrate the mythological and historical stories they narrate from memory in a vast repertoire of song. The practice is still a lively art form in present day Bengal. These painter/singers, known as *patuas*, were and are today often migrants from villages in rural Bengal who come to Calcutta to collect donations and sell their wares. In the 19th century and early decades of the 20th they came to Kalighat to produce traditional folk genre pictures of religious themes and images of Hindu deities that would be purchased as souvenirs by pilgrims visiting the temple.² To facilitate mass production, they painted very quickly on flat sheets of machine-made folio-sized paper, rendering bold stylized forms with ample contours, making use of newly available European-style watercolor to achieve bright opaque colors and translucent washes. Flashy finishing details such as the emphasis on women's ornaments were often added in silver and gold

¹ The existing Kalighat temple was built in 1809 by the wealthy Sabarna Chaudhuri family of Barisal; an earlier temple dating from the 16th century stood nearby. The site has mythological importance as the spot where the little toe of Sati's right foot fell when Vishnu cut her corpse to pieces. The terrain is an old bed of the Ganges' bank that was cleared in 1775 by Major Tolly to construct the canal now known as Tolly's Nullah. Kalighat was linked to the city's center some 3 miles to the north by the 'Broad Road' which was often crowded with pilgrims traveling to and from the temple (M. Archer 1977: 139).

² Mildred Archer describes a sketch from the 1830s by a European lady Mrs. Belnos, now in the India Office Library, entitled "Interior of a Native Hut" that includes a Kalighat *pat* hanging on one wall, citing it as evidence of the humble circumstances in which these works of popular folk art were treasured and commonly displayed (1977: 140).

paint.

The skill and flair of the *patuas* kept the genre of Kalighat *pats* alive as a popular commercial enterprise until about 1930. They soon departed from rural folk tradition, adapting their traditional formulaic religious themes to incorporate foreign subjects and stories, and secular images from the changing urban environment in which they found themselves (R. Chatterjee 1990: 68). With wit and cynicism, and “a popular earthy mode of satire,” their images developed into a highly innovative genre of lampoons that gave pictorial expression to common Bengali proverbs, and mocked the westernized urban society of Calcutta and the *bhadralok* affectation of “respectability” (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 19). Images from Kalighat’s prostitute’s quarter, dancing girls and courtesans, voluptuous hookah-smoking women holding roses or combing their hair, were favorite subjects (M. Archer 1977: 142). As in other contemporary forms of popular entertainment – theatrical farces, comic literature and songs of the street culture – a particular target for satire was the degenerate nouveau-riche “babu culture” with its corrupted womenfolk and general licentiousness, at the center of which was the westernized man-about-town who kept ‘garden-houses’ and talked about emancipating women, with his foppish dress, English shoes and wavy ‘Prince Albert’ hairstyle (143). A lively peasant critique of urban sensibilities, the scenes the *patuas* depicted were often representations of loose morals, social evils, and scandals, a reverse world order with images of sexually aggressive women trampling and subjugating men, corrupt priests seducing married women, and a general breakdown of traditional hierarchical relations and values. The painters ably expressed

through caricature what they shared with their clientele of common urban people: popular culture's anxieties and alienation from the rapidly changing, westernizing values rampant in Calcutta's society under colonial rule. At the same time, these popular artists were in crisis over the loss of patron-client relationships that had provided secure remuneration under the traditional social order in the village context, and thus they made images that glorified and upheld the traditional Hindu social order (R. Chatterjee 1990: 67).



Fig. 2 In "Babu holding a Hookah" the *patua* has depicted an effete Calcutta dandy of the day complete with all the relevant and absurd details: his trendy "Prince Albert" hairstyle and elegantly draped shawl, his custom patent leather shoes, carefully postured on a European style armchair (Jain 1999: 139, fig.129).

Fig. 3 shows a voluptuous courtesan entertaining, her figure draped with bold lines and all her curves accented with shading (Jain 1999: 110, fig.104).



Figs. 4 & 5 offer absurd takes on the position of the babu at the mercy of feminine charms. In fig.4 a lounging babu dressed in an elegantly pleated *dhoti* finds himself humiliated and trod upon by his companion. But unlike the goddess Kali who demonstrated her shame after trampling her Lord Shiva, this “lady” appears gleeful. In fig. 5, “Victim of a Charmer,” the rose-bearing courtesan has transformed her doting admirer into a sheep.

Kalighat *pats* were also treasured by European visitors to Calcutta as exotic mementoes and examples of “native art.” Many found their way into foreign collections, and missionaries acquired them for the Baptist Mission and Christian Literature Societies as part of their research work (cf W.G. Archer 1953 and 1971, M. Archer 1977).³ They also hold a certain cachet for Calcutta intellectuals with a taste for a popular aesthetic, as part of a prideful celebration of Bengali cultural heritage; the best known holdings were those of Jamini Roy, Avik Sarkar, and R. P. Gupta. Publicity materials for a recent exhibition of Kalighat *pats* at the Bose Pacia Gallery in Manhattan repeated a story I had heard in Calcutta, namely that French painter Fernand Leger (1881-1955) had purchased several *pats* from returning French missionaries, and that they were a major influence on his aesthetic. A narrative such as this is testimony of European modernism’s debt to the Orient and its draw upon the folk-primitive. Significantly, it provides corroborating factual detail for arguments (as well as evidence of “native conviction”) that the transmission of transformative cultural ideas was by no means one way (West to East) and that Europe is beholden to its former colonial possessions for significant contributions to its identity construction and the emergence of modernism (cf. Said [1993] and Williams [1989]).

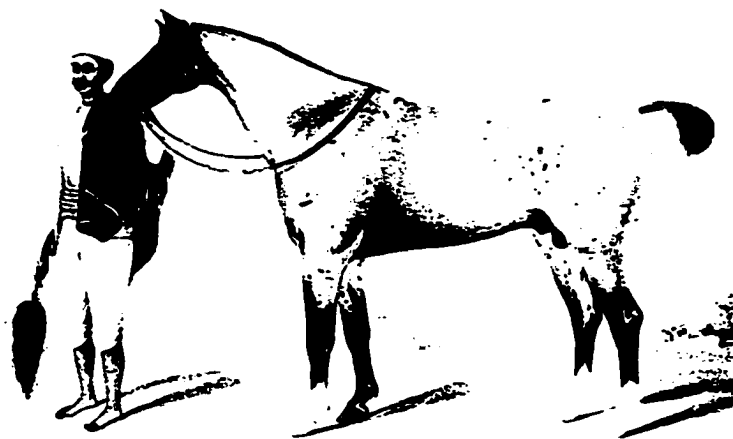
³ W.G. Archer began his collection of Kalighat paintings, all 43 of which are now in the India Office Library, during his tenure as a member of the Indian Civil Service. On a 1932 visit to Kalighat, Archer purchased several of Nibaran and Kali Charan Ghosh’s c.1880 paintings from the painters’ descendants and 16 others from Mukul Dey, Principal of the Government School of Art, Calcutta who had collected them c.1920. Archer also acquired at that time several late examples (c.1925) from the last of the line of family painters, Kanai Lal Ghosh, who was no longer painting, “the school having ended” (M. Archer 1977: 157). The rest of his collection was obtained on the London art market between 1950 and 1970.

‘Company’ Painting and the Copyist’s Eye for Detail

From the late 18th century, Calcutta was also a flourishing center of an overtly Western-inflected style of painting: the so called “Company Painting”.⁴ With the decline of Mughal courts at Murshidabad, Patna, Delhi, and Lucknow as sites for the patronage of artisans, a new genre of painting flourished with the rise of urban commercial opportunities and the power of Western taste and influence. Often descendants of traditional artisanal families from courtly ateliers, painters were lured to the city of Calcutta where they came to form a floating population of itinerant artists. ‘Company’ painters combined the exacting miniaturist skills of Indian classical “high art” painting traditions with a willingness to accommodate European buyers’ demands for Western pictorial schemes, learning the tricks of the trade to please the master, notably a careful framing of ‘picturesque’ views and conventions such as shading, perspective, and naturalized drawing (M. Archer 1977). These painters, most of whom remained anonymous, were employed to render detailed representations that would become treasured souvenirs of their Western patrons’ stay in

⁴ The “Company” referred to is the East India Company, a commercial and trading entity established in London in 1600 that directed the initial British incursion into India, initially trading in textiles and tea, later opium and indigo. By 1765 the Company had transformed its trading operations into a modern bureaucracy collecting land revenues and exercising civil jurisdiction in Bengal ostensibly on behalf of the Great Moghul, but actually financing further Company trade and eventual territorial conquest (Rothermund 1993:14-18). By 1856-7 exactions from Bengal contributed 44% of the total British Indian revenue (S. Chaudhuri 1990a). With a history of rapaciousness and excessive exactions, the Company lost its mandate in 1858 and the British crown assumed power and administrative control. Increased parliamentary involvement in Indian affairs added a sense of moral responsibility to colonial rule to supplement attention to economic expansion and the administrative and political imperatives of colonial rule.

India, documenting characteristic features of the colonial lifestyle such as houses, servants, and carriage horses, as well as 'natural history' drawings of exotic Indian flora and fauna, and local "ethnic types," trades, and castes.⁵ A recent description of Company School painting as "the artistic corollary of British imperialism... [which kept] generations of Indian artists and craftsmen subjected to indentured servitude by being forced to illustrate the occupation and oppression of their motherland by the British East India Company" nicely sums up many contemporary Indian critics' impressions of the genre, looking back now with the benefit of hindsight and a postcolonial consciousness (press release, Bose Pacia Gallery, NYC 12/98).



⁵ The majority of the India Office Library's collection of Company paintings was assembled between 1798 and 1804 by Bengal's Governor-General Marquess Wellesley.

Fig. 6 This "Company painting" of a prize pony and his fly-whisk bearing groom is by Shaikh Muhammad Amir of the Calcutta suburb of Karaya, a talented artist who specialized in depicting the houses and domestic staff of his British patrons (Chaudhuri 1990a: 138, fig 22.1).

The Western Aesthetic Becomes Ingrained

From the 1850s the British began to set up Western-style art schools in India to introduce methods of training in academic art that emphasized European stylistic elements. The curricula focused on the genres of portraiture, landscapes, and still-life, emphasizing techniques of illusionistic realism, the representation of the human figure, and the use of chiaroscuro and perspective that were intended to replace the flat color and decorative patterning then seen as characteristic of “Indian painting.” The new course of study included techniques of drawing and composition, the graphic rendering of perspective, and the careful adaptation of the new medium of oil to represent the Indian light. It was an entirely new enterprise that required not merely an imitation of European technique, but a new way of seeing .

At the time of the foundation of the Government School of Art in Calcutta in 1854 , as respectable Bengali *bhadralok* society was becoming familiar with the Western category of professional ‘artist,’ it became possible for there to emerge a new class of “gentlemen artists” whose families permitted them to receive technical and vocational training in preparation for a respectable career in the arts as an alternative to more customary office clerkships or university education. These first Western-style “gentlemen artists” of Calcutta envisioned high status careers painting portrait commissions for Bengali elite families, and were especially conscientious in attempting to insulate themselves from the bazaar painters and print-makers who made up Calcutta’s popular art market. Bombarded with competition between products of improving technologies, this market had seen the

“Company” painters give way to the challenge of engravers and trained draftsmen, eventually to be surpassed by Government School of Art-trained lithographers and eventually photography. By the middle of 19th century the two social categories of ‘artist’ and ‘artisan’ were already sharply differentiated and graded (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 12).

The traditional Bengali folk painters known as *patuas*, and the wood and metal engravers who served the Bengali book trade at Battala, did manage to retain a market niche among “bazaar” artists by adapting traditional iconography and conventions to new media and markets (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 13). The indigenous tradition of Calcutta graphics has received some critical attention, and an exhibition that chronicled the output of production centers at Battala, Chitpur, Bowbazar and Kalighat was mounted at Calcutta’s Birla Academy of Art and Culture in 1985 (Paul, ed. 1983; R. P. Gupta, ed 1986; Sarkar and Gupta in S. Chaudhuri 1990a:128-145)]. In describing these graphics Bengali critic Asok Mitra argued that already in 1875 in this “appropriate hoi polloi, non elite base” one saw a new pictorial language that was revolutionary:

A new way of looking at and treating pictorial surfaces, a new idiom of relating colour, coloured spaces and areas circumscribed by lines, a new diction of evoking the imagination had definitely emerged...(in R.P.Gupta, ed 1986: 91).

Well into the 20th century this Bengali graphic tradition remained part of the aesthetic environment of Calcutta’s popular culture, from common street posters to the illustrations from books in every middle class home, and would necessarily have influenced artists who grew up looking and drawing in the city, whether consciously or not.



Fig. 7 This Bat-tala wood engraving offers an apocalyptic image of the breakdown of the social and moral order: a spoilt and pampered wife being carried on the shoulders of her hen-pecked *babu* husband as he drags his ascetic old mother by a chain (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 30; Chaudhuri 1990a: 105, fig18.9)

In the 1870s and 80s, in keeping with their institution's practical, employment-oriented bias, the best Government Art College students were rewarded for their precision and skilled draftsmanship with prestigious Government commissions to produce finely detailed illustrations for scientific publications and catalogs, rendering documentary diagrams of human anatomy, Indian antiquities, wildlife, and botanical specimens (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 71).

Meanwhile among the local elite, Bengali *zamindar* collectors⁶ cultivated a taste for Western art and decoration as markers of the owner's status, style, and culture, purchasing whatever European art they could get their hands on, mostly second or third rate objects that had filtered through to the Empire, including furnishings, objets d'art, and painted portraits and copies of European masterworks.⁷ For some, an aversion to Hindu superstition and idolatry manifested itself in a complete distaste for "native art"(127). Curiously, these westernized visual tastes contrasted markedly with the ties of patronage and close cultural orientation these elites maintained with local Bengali and classical Sanskrit traditions in

⁶ *Zamindars* were the wealthy absentee landlords whose traditional role under agrarian feudal society (as collectors of land revenue for the Mughal ruler) was made into one of owners of private property under the British Permanent Settlement in 1798.

⁷ An obvious example of zamindari collections is a North Calcutta landmark open to the public: the "Marble Palace" built by philanthropist Rajendralal Mallik (1819-87) as his palace to the arts. A model in its day for all mansions to aspire to, it is "a mixture of exuberant Rococo and the three European classical styles" with a colonnaded carriage-porch, marble flooring, Venetian glass panes and chandeliers, floor to ceiling Belgian gilt-framed mirrors, a larger than life Queen Victoria carved in rosewood, and paintings of "the Italian, Flemish, Dutch and English Schools [that] cover every inch of wall space"(S. Chaudhuri 1990a: 177-8). On my first day in Calcutta I was invited to tour what I saw as its opulence and staggering bad taste and was relieved to find that my Marxist host was engaged not by questions of aesthetics but by his inquiries into the wages and working conditions of the uniformed (and unionized) security staff.

literature, theatre, and music (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 52).

In titling this section using a passive construction, “The Western Aesthetic Becomes Ingrained,” my thinking was partly informed by Gauri Viswanathan’s introduction to Masks of Conquest in which she lays out the distinction between the ideological intent of British literary education and that which she characterizes as outside the scope of her study, namely “an account of why Indians might want to believe the British ideology given their own intentions and of how they manipulated it and selectively reinterpreted it for their own purposes” (1989:12). While the institutionalized imposition of a Western representational system might readily be viewed as a form of colonialism’s cultural domination, for the Indian students, learning to reproduce that system was an empowering process; the skills were acquired with pride and enthusiasm, and the outcome was found worthy of praise all round and offered significant employment opportunities. My concern here is not to analyze the intentions on either side (in effect to pose the question of who was manipulating whom) but to recognize the outcome: the Western aesthetic did in fact become ingrained in many Bengali visual arts genres, and it then became a foundation upon which to build, against which to distinguish oneself, and a means to explore new ways of representing ideas and issues of contemporary relevance and local concern.

In 1876 the Viceroy, Lord Northbrook, founded and specially selected display items for an art gallery adjacent to the Government School of Art in Calcutta that was intended to expose students to “great art.” It was thought that this exemplary assemblage of plaster casts of antique Greek statuary, copies of Raphael, Titian, and the paintings of other European ‘minor masters’, would introduce the uninitiated into ‘the right way of seeing,’ so that they

might learn what was beautiful (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 64). An official document written by the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal announcing the gallery's establishment, was clear in its conviction that British educational policy would necessarily have salutary effects on colonial subjects, declaring "It would be hard to imagine anything better calculated to improve the minds of native youth than the sight of such a collection" (in Guha-Thakurta 1992: 65; Viswanathan 1989). Based on this exposure to European craft and methods, it was hoped that the students would then apply what they had learned to the representation of their own country, its scenery, architecture, and ethnic varieties (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 64).

The Emergence and Popular Reception of a 'Victorian Indian' Style

The effects of this indoctrination in the conventions of Western "Academic art" also began to surface in Calcutta's popular art market in the late 19th century, with a new genre of urban commercial art that adapted those conventions to representations of Hindu iconography. Government School-trained lithographers began to establish commercial enterprises such as the Calcutta Art Studio that took advantage of rapidly developing technologies of color printing to meet a new popular demand for representations with a realistic illusionist style, complete with shaded contours, shadows and other three-dimensional effects. The works they produced were early examples of what is now frequently termed "calendar art style" – mass-produced 'mytho-pictures' with loud colors, "the cheap tinsel glitter of ornaments and costumes," and flamboyant landscapes and palace interiors that became the standard ingredient of popular tastes (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 103).

Origins of the genre are generally traced to “a hybrid style produced for the British patrons and the anglicised elite” and specifically the work of Bombay-based academic painter Ravi Varma, who began to circulate oleographs⁸ of his paintings of Hindu mythology about 1890 (Uberoi 1990: WS-43). Gradations between Western-style pictures and traditional iconographies began to dissolve, as a new “Indian” iconography emerged in which female figures, their erotic appeal enhanced by illusionist techniques, were sentimentalized and legitimized by their role in mythological narratives as wife/mother/goddess (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 44).

⁸ An oleograph is a colored lithograph that uses a series of stones in the printing process to imitate the look of oil painting.



Fig. 8 This chromolithograph of a luxuriously draped Saraswati, the goddess of learning, rendered with a hefty three-dimensional frame hovering above a marsh-encircled lotus pond is typical of what became known as “calendar art style.” With pictures such as these that applied British academic realist conventions to depict Hindu iconography, incorporating shading, volume, perspective, and naturalistic backgrounds, ex-students of the Calcutta School of Art who formed the Calcutta Art Studio made a good business of their art school training. These images initiated a shift in the parameters of middle class taste that came to pervade Indian popular culture. This print was chosen as the cover of the first issue of the Tagore family’s literary magazine *Bharati* in 1877-78 and made a strong impact on the young Abanindranath (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 128).

Orientalizing Art Education

The Superintendent of Calcutta's Government School of Art from 1896-1906, E. B. Havell, was both an art educationist and ideologue. Influenced by William Morris and the anti-industrial ethics and craft idealism of the 'Arts and Crafts' movement, he was opposed to the distinction between 'fine' and 'applied' arts and initiated a reform scheme at the College in order to focus on design and applied arts, and especially Indian traditions of decorative arts. Combining a nostalgia for pre-industrial village life in which art had a place in daily life with an acute awareness of the destruction of traditional arts under colonialism, Havell took on the cause of reviving a range of Indian handicrafts, the promotion of handloom weaving and artisans' cooperatives, and personally studied the commercial feasibility of reviving traditional art industries (Parimoo 1973; Guha Thakurta 1992: 153). During his tenure the Government Art Gallery began acquiring "Oriental metal-work and textiles and ...some choice specimens of Mughal miniature painting" to accompany a major redefinition of the College's educational purpose (Guha Thakurta 1992: 153-4). Positioning himself as the savior of Indian art, Havell proposed in 1904 to sell the Viceregal collection of European art and use the proceeds to purchase Indian art; the decision became a matter of heated public debate (154).⁹

⁹ Opposition to Havell's decision stemmed not only from a more easily anticipated European opposition on the part of those who saw the Viceroy's gift as evidence of colonial philanthropy, but also from a more complex native point of view regarding the implications of colonial education policy and the 'benefits' bestowed. Havell's Indian opponents bristled at the idea that his reforms with their emphasis on technical training and 'decorative arts' were depriving Indian students of access to high art, and were thus an insidious way of obstructing India's progress in the arts.

In a highly paternalistic and possessive promotional effort, Havell then took on Abanindranath Tagore as his *protégé*, championing him as the only really original Indian artist to emerge under British rule, and appointing him in 1905 as Vice-Principal of the Calcutta School of Art (155). As a result of his association with the Tagore family, Havell's commitment to Indian art was colored by a strong undercurrent of idealized nationalist sympathies. Prior to his departure from India and return to England in 1905, he became increasingly involved in the study of Hindu metaphysics and the spiritual aspects of Hindu aesthetics. Drawing from the Silpasastras, a classic Sanskrit text on aesthetics, he focused on the idea that the artist should aim not to represent the appearance of objects as perceived by the senses, but should rely upon spiritual vision alone. Back in England, taking on a role as both 'authority' and 'sympathizer,' Havell published two influential and highly ideological volumes that became the major texts of a new Orientalist discourse about India's spiritualism and the significance of the classical past.¹⁰ A curious blend of polemics and connoisseurship, this new line of aesthetic theorizing made Orientalist reinterpretations of Indian art inseparable from an espousal of national identity.

¹⁰ Produced with the benefit of distance from the daily political wranglings he had encountered in Calcutta, Havell's publications, Indian Sculpture and Painting (1908) and The Ideals of Indian Art (1911), presented themselves as revealing the mysteries of India's "great art" tradition for a Western audience. They were soon wielded as weapons in the nationalist effort to defeat the enemies of Indian art, both Western and native (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 200).

The Indigenous Critical Response

In the urban environment of Calcutta, the new politically-conscious *bhadralok* culture was in the process of forming. As we have seen, it built upon the strengths of Bengal's modern literary culture and a passionate attachment to the Bengali language. Of particular importance for the discussion here was the fact that 'Art' was fast becoming a part of the high literary culture of Bengal, and there was a concentrated effort to consolidate *bhadralok* hegemony through the cultivation of a new 'artistic' taste (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 117, 136). With a strong sense of nationalism in the air, there increasingly arose a public debate about what might constitute an 'Indian' artistic sensibility. A consensus developed that "genuine 'Indianness' relied not merely on the content, but also on the form, spirit, and emotion (*bhava*) of a painting" (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 110). Critics who spoke for the cultural elite, a "select coterie of artists and ideologues," established themselves as chief arbiters of middle class taste and articulated a mission to develop an indigenous type of 'high art' (*uchcha shilpa*) that would transform mythological descriptions and literary metaphors from the classical Sanskrit literature into visual imagery (Parimoo 1973; Guha-Thakurta 1992: 129) .

Important periodicals that were widely read among the middle class, such as Sadhana, Bharati, and especially Ramananda Chatterjee's Pradip, Prabasi and The Modern Review, began to give prominent and regular place to reproductions, critical debates, and articles about the history and future prospects of Indian art.¹¹ A recognition that the visual

¹¹ Ramananda Chatterjee was the editor of Pradip from 1897, and then both the Bengali monthly Prabasi launched in 1901 and its English language counterpart, The Modern

arts had distinct advantages over literature in promoting national unity (given the nation's high rates of illiteracy and diverse regional languages) was evident even to this elite Bengali-centric discussion. Given the by now ingrained appreciation for Academic Realism, at the end of the 19th century Western-style oil painters like Ravi Varma and J.P. Gangooly were praised as the new modern Indian artists, and the ideal to be strived for in painting was a perfect combination of (Western) 'classical' form and 'Indian' theme, anatomical perfection and intensity of feeling (Guha-Thakurta 1992:133). Prabasi took up the banner and assumed responsibility for 'the visual education of the nation,' setting as its goal to instruct its readers in issues of aesthetics and to improve taste (Mitter 1994: 350). In the early years, the works of art chosen for reproduction included both European and Indian paintings, the selection based upon what the editor asserted was a universal standard, a sense of beauty and emotional appeal. As Bengali critic Asok Mitra has written:

It is difficult to overestimate the role of the Modern Review and Prabasi in 'putting across' the new art and educating the public in it. For sixty years they, almost single-handedly, conducted the educational campaign which was at once a crusade, gently yet actively training the reader to look at and take in modern painting and its ancient heritage (in R. P. Gupta, ed. 1986: 92).

In the first decade of the 20th century, when the battle lines over 'authenticity' and 'Indian' aesthetics were not yet drawn, early examples of a new genre of Indian paintings by Abanindranath Tagore began to appear alongside those of Ravi Varma in the pages of

Review, published from 1907. The name Prabasi refers to Bengalis living outside Bengal, and the journal published from Allahabad was intended to serve the large community of Bengali professionals working in North India. The influential and technically superb reproductions in all three journals were the responsibility of U. Ray & Sons, the firm of film-maker Satyajit Ray's grandfather. Extremely popular sets of reprints from The Modern Review were published and sold separately from 1912 as Chatterjee's Picture Albums.

Prabasi (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 145). Critics were then arguing that if modern Indian art was to progress there were certain standards to attain; proper training and the study of nature were essential. In a 1907 Modern Review article Upendrakishore Raychowdhury argued as a nationalist who was nonetheless convinced of the superiority of European art:

My nationality consists of a legitimate and affectionate pride in all that is noble in our national life and tradition, combined with sincere regret for our shortcomings and eagerness to remove them. It is this nationality that prompts me to advocate the study of European art as a means of improving the Art of my country (in Guha-Thakurta 1992: 216-7).

In a rejoinder, Bengali critic O.C. Gangoly insisted that all great art relied upon a specific ‘national’ and ‘race’ ideal. Art was not a matter of mere mastery of technique but must take root in the national temperament and innate ‘artistic sense’ of a people (217). Debate about the relative merits of nationalism vs. cosmopolitanism as the guiding principle of the country’s artistic development became a prominent theme in intellectual discussion. In a 1910 exchange in Prabasi, O.C. Gangoly’s defense of Abanindranath’s “extra-naturalistic symbolism” as characteristic of the Indian artistic temperament was met with sarcasm by Sukumar Ray in a devastating critique of the stereotypes of the ‘new Indian painting’ style – the expressions of dreamy abstraction on the heroes’ faces, the gesticulating spineless bodies, the pervasive mist. Ray expressed concern that, in the name of an appeal to ‘Eastern idealism’ and spirituality, a rejection of ‘Westernisms’ would entail a dismissal of practical issues of skill and technique. An insistence on ‘Indianness,’ he argued, could well stifle the development of ‘great art’ in the country (217).

This debate about the possible gains and losses to be incurred by rejecting Western techniques and forms, and the dangers and limitations of grasping at ideals of ‘Indianness’

and ‘authenticity,’ would resurface again and again in Bengal. Another early example of a strong internationalist perspective and an early celebration of modernism as a way of seeing and thinking is an article of Benoy Sarkar’s entitled “The Aesthetics of Young India,” written from Paris in 1922. In a series of lectures in European cities Sarkar had attacked “orientalist parochialism,” lamenting the fact that ‘Young India’ in rejecting the West had shut itself out from modern Europe’s “aesthetic revolution” (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 223; Mitter 1994: 380). O.C. Gangoly, who was still on the scene, responded that the time was not yet ripe for Indians to turn their backs on nationalism and fully embrace internationalism: “To make the exchange of cultures enriching and fruitful, India had first fully to ‘recover her own self’ (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 224).

This is a highly revealing remark that speaks to the felt sense among Bengali intellectuals that the spiritual and intellectual effects of colonialism are goading, and represent a festering wound. The questions about how India would “recover her self,” and what exactly was the nature of the damages inflicted, represent an anguished interrogation of history, of both the colonial experience and the requisite nationalist response by the very class who would seem to have gained most by the colonial encounter. How was “India” lost to begin with? And what exactly was she to recover? The question speaks to a longing to recover some lost power/essence (is it Bengaliness?, Indianness?) that is felt to be just out of grasp, a nostalgia that is at the center of this spiritual and emotional *bhadralok* aesthetic, a wound that it is believed only a prideful sentiment and a strongly “rooted” national art will help to heal. Once this initial healing process has been completed, this argument seems to run, only then will it be safe to move beyond nationalistic defensiveness, to think as

cosmopolitans, and to participate on a level playing field as equals in an exchange of world cultures. These important questions and musings have long plagued Indian intellectuals, and Bengalis in particular who imagine themselves at the forefront of national intellectual debate.

**Cultural Production and Critical Aesthetic Debate: Abanindranath Tagore
and the View From Jorasanko**

Like other gentry households in Calcutta, members of the Jorasanko branch of the Tagore family took an interest in Western art forms, trying a hand at European style painting in oils and watercolor, realistic drawing and life studies both in formal classes and with private tutors. Though the tastes they cultivated in the visual arts were predominantly Western, elements of indigenous art work (such as miniature painting on ivory) also engaged their interests. Abanindranath's memoirs describe the traditional layout of the mansion in which he grew up, with lavishly decorated outer rooms full of Victorian furniture, marble statuary, mirrors, carpets, and huge oil paintings contrasting with the inner rooms of the *andarmahal* (quarters for women and children), where an entirely different cultural atmosphere prevailed. There the walls and ritual spaces bore images of Hindu gods and goddesses, glossy prints of scenes from Indian mythology, and Jaipuri paintings and Kalighat *pats* that were not considered 'works of art' at all, but rather aspects of the daily rituals of life (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 230).

In 1904-6 the Tagore family was actively involved in the promotion of *Swadeshi* ideology for national self-esteem, with self-development and self-expression as the

bywords.¹² After a brief and unsatisfying period of Western art training, from which the primary lesson he drew was a romantic aesthetic notion that art should be a medium of individual self-expression, Abanindranath consciously distanced himself from the Western academic style. An important shift in his thinking came about as a result of visits from Japanese artist and cultural revival theorist Kakuzo Okakura. A productive artistic collaboration with a pan-Asianist flavor was sparked; Abanindranath began to work with Japanese techniques of ink wash and developed a real facility. Then, in a spirit of patriotism, hoping to restore “the lost language of Indian art,” he began to experiment with indigenous painting styles, notably Rajput, Pahari and Mughal miniature traditions, defining in the process a ‘New School of Indian Painting’ (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 189; Mitter 1982: 30). Insisting that the Indian artist must rely on his ‘inner eye’ to depict a feeling or ‘mood’ in painting, he rejected the rigorous training in life drawing previously considered obligatory for art students.

His efforts were reinforced by a movement of Orientalist art criticism that took on the important socio-cultural task of molding tastes and influencing discussion within the larger sphere of Bengal’s literary and intellectual culture. The most influential critics promoted a construct of ‘idealistic’ Indian art that was expressive, emotional, and intensely spiritual. Abanindranath’s characteristic “smoky wash of colors” and “wispy contours” were seen as uniquely suited to the rendering of abstracted ideals in place of mere physical form (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 193-4). His celebrated 1905 watercolor “Bharat-mata” (Mother India) was heralded as a new icon of Indian nationalism, and the first masterpiece of modern

¹² For a discussion of the *Swadeshi* period, its politics and cultural expression, refer to Chapter Three p 71ff.

Indian art (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 195; Archer 1959). What drove the creative process was an inquiring mind and a patriotic impulse. In the words of Bengali critic Asok Mitra, the modern movement in painting “received its most powerful stimulus...from the urge to feel and act patriotically and bring painting to the service of *Swadeshi* and nationalism” (1965: 6).



Fig. 9 “The Passing of Shah Jahan” (1902) is a fine example of the interest in Mughal themes and style that Havell inspired. Abanindranath’s rendering has reproduced the elaborate period architecture and decorative detail in oil, and significantly introduced *bhava* (emotion) in his depiction of the Great Mughal’s last hours as he gazes longingly at the Taj Mahal once built for his dead queen (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 243-4, fig 56).



Fig. 10 Abanindranath consciously directed his new 'Indian style' painting to produce this romanticized nationalist icon of a haloed Bharat Mata [Mother India] (1905, originally conceived as Banga Mata [Mother Bengal]). It is a mythic and allegorical image but with a sentimental appeal, presenting mother, daughter and goddess all at once, offering her bounty of food, learning, clothing and spiritual salvation (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 255).

Carrying on the work of his guru Havell, Abanindranath also produced some influential polemical prose. Several of his articles appeared in Bharati and were published in book form in a 1909 volume entitled Bharat-Shilpa. Abanindranath's writings praised the indigenous art heritage and sought to shame his countrymen for their neglect and abandonment of the Indian tradition as muse. Invoking the highly loaded image of "a chaste Hindu bride who had been cast aside for a *mamsaheb* [Western woman]," he urged that the indigenous muse "be restored to her rightful place in the home and heart" (201). In the wake of the *Swadeshi* experience, as was the case for many Bengalis, reservations about terrorist activities, and the violence of forced boycotts of British goods of which poor Muslim traders often bore the brunt, created an urge to step back from politics and fostered a sense of defeated idealism among the Tagore family. The sense of nationalist spirit and patriotic commitment that remained was channeled by Abanindranath into the realm of aesthetic production and debate.

Abanindranath was soon joined in his efforts by other Bengali advocates of the 'New Indian painting,' including his students Nandalal Bose and Asit Kumar Haldar, a painter and regular contributor of Bengali articles on Indian art and aesthetics to journals like Prabasi and Bharati from 1911-13. Having made a pilgrimage to the painted caves at Ajanta which they saw as "the epitome of India's artistic and religious past," these two artists began formulating an interpretation of tradition and a conscious aesthetic that could be mobilized for the nationalist cause.¹³ They embraced the flat perspectives of Indian miniature painting

¹³ Located in the state of Maharashtra, northeast of Bombay, the Buddhist caves at Ajanta and Ellora depict the story of Buddhism through carvings and sculptures dating from 200 B.C.-650 A.D. Satyajit Ray would make a similar journey in 1941 with three other students from Shantiniketan. He has described how that tour consolidated his

and the vibrant earth-tone palette of Ajanta, while referencing the stylized line and volume rendering of the Kalighat *pats*. They began building a construct of an Indian ‘idealist’ aesthetic, drawing connections and finding affinities of imagery and style between the timeless beauty of the classical heritage and the living traditions of the Bengali folk (210). Highly conscious of its calling to restore lost identity and independence to Indian art, the premise of their movement was a peculiar linkage between patriotism and the cultivation of a particular aesthetic sense, in effect honoring the Motherland by developing a refined sense of the indigenously beautiful.

In the Tagore family home at Jorasanko in North Calcutta, the *dakineshar baranda* (south veranda) became a central point of pilgrimage for all who wished to learn about art in Calcutta. Abanindranth and his brothers Gagenendranath¹⁴ and Samarendranath along with a select group of students met there on a regular basis in an atmosphere of informal camaraderie and shared inspiration, working, discussing, and meeting a range of local and international visitors. From about 1911 they began referring to these art salons as the Bichitra Art Club. In order to harmonize their surroundings with their shift in style and taste, the household premises had been completely renovated in order to assume an “Oriental”

awareness, so that he “began to feel his roots as an Indian artist” and to appreciate the qualities of eastern art which, when pressed, he defined as “a sort of symbolism and a looking for the essence rather than the surface” and “an eloquent use of very small details” (in Robinson 1989: 50).

¹⁴Gagenendranath was active as a painter from 1910 to 1930 with synthetic and experimental work that showed both Japanese and cubist influences. He was best known for his satirical drawings and political caricatures published in the Modern Review and in book form in his 1916 Birupa Bajra (The Thunder of Ridicule) and Reform Screams in 1921. At Jorasanko he set up a lithopress that inspired many students with an interest in printmaking.

atmosphere. Ideas for the interior design were drawn from Indian classical and folk art forms. In place of the heavy Victorian furniture, Abanindranath and Gaganendranath designed and saw to the construction of an array of furniture of indigenous materials, including low stools with cane weaving of tribal inspiration. Oil paintings, both European and Abanindranath's own early works, were replaced by a newly acquired 'Oriental' collection of Mughal and provincial miniatures, Tibetan scrolls and manuscripts, and indigenous carvings and sculpture.



Fig. 11 Nandalal Bose's lively sketch captures the relaxed "Oriental atmosphere" of the art salons at Jorasanko and includes the artist, the Tagore brothers Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, and Samarendranath and the critic Ananda Coomaraswamy (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 276).



Fig. 12 & 13 In 1915-16 Gaganendranath broke away from the pressure to produce 'Indian style' painting and created some hilarious satirical caricatures of the hypocrisies and cultural contradictions of contemporary Calcutta society. Fig. 12 "Ballroom Dance/Wrong Combination" is meant to shock with its image of a very forward Indian lady engaged in a close dance with a red nosed European in tails (Tuli 1998: 191, fig 125). In Fig 13, a 1917 caricature entitled "Metamorphosis," a westernized Bengali attempting to "pass" in order to ride in a "Europeans only" carriage is caught in the act by a railway official (W.G.Archer 1971: Pl.89).

Apart from their primary mission of national regeneration through the arts, the Bichitra regulars also shared a range of international empathies. Important debates centered around Kandinsky's 1912 monograph On the Spiritual in Art and their exposure to Expressionist and Futurist painters such as Feininger, Klee, and Kandinsky. After a visit from Anna Pavlova of Diaghilev's Russian Ballet, everyone was discussing the Russian approach to the stage. In 1922-23 Gaganendranath and Rabindranath organized a highly influential exhibition of the German Bauhaus Group in Calcutta. Gaganendranath's later work showed the influences of Italian futurism and cubism.

By 1915 Abanindranath had resigned from his post as Government Art School Vice-Principal to devote himself full time to their movement. He continued teaching privately under the auspices of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, a group formed by Orientalist connoisseurs that had been established in Calcutta in 1907 (Parimoo 1973: 40; Guha-Thakurta 1992: 277). The Society organized highly influential "taste-making" exhibitions, juxtaposing works by modern Indian painters with late medieval miniatures to make important evidentiary statements about the continuity of tradition (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 198). In 1914 the Society organized an exhibition of what was termed the 'New Calcutta School' with more than two hundred works that traveled to Paris, London, Chicago, and Tokyo (280). Equally important in terms of Indian national exposure were Society exhibitions that took place in Madras in 1916 and Madras and Bangalore in 1918. An important addition to these exhibitions was the sale of high quality printed reproductions which became "the main agent in disseminating a taste for the new 'Indian style' in middle class society" (281).

The art movement that Abanindranath initiated, and of which he was the reluctant 'guru,' has come to be known from an all-India perspective as "The Bengal School." It is seen in retrospect as a fusion of Western and Oriental techniques – combining stylistic elements from late pre-Raphaelite and Art nouveau paintings and Victorian book illustration with those of Muhgal and Pahari miniatures. As an attitude, a kind of "ideological catalyst," it has come to be known as "revivalism" and is criticized for its escapist romanticism (Parimoo 1973: 132). His disciples, some more skilled than others, carried on his spirit of synthesis and experimentation, and as they took up posts as heads of major art schools around the country including Lahore, Allahabad, Lucknow, Delhi, Jaipur, Madras, and Mysore, they spread an awareness of 'The Bengal School' and its syncretic methods and nationalist impulse throughout India.

As for Abanindranath himself, by the 1920s he became disenchanted with the propaganda role for art and retreated into what Partha Mitter refers to as "his private universe of images" (Mitter 1994: 380). In a series of lectures to students at Calcutta University, he acknowledged that the nostalgia for the past inherent in the concept of 'revivalism' had become an unnatural obsession and he was critical of art that had lost touch with reality and become detached from everyday life (380). Once his work had shed its "didactic element," the portraits and self-portraits he produced in 1927-30 were remarkably frank, revelatory and wise; several were exhibited in New York at the Bose-Pacia Gallery in February-March 1999 (Mitter 1994: 380).

Jamini Roy

Jamini Roy (1887-1972) was a modernist pioneer of the 1920s, who discarded his mastery of European easel painting and academic portraiture to draw inspiration from Bengal's living folk traditions and tribal art forms. In reaction against the insularity and elitism of the Bengal School, he longed to capture a sense of popular vitality, and so turned to the work of Bengal's *patua* artists and Santhal tribal themes. Delving into the artistic traditions of the city and countryside, exploring *pat* and scroll paintings, Vishnupur terracotta carvings, Calcutta's 19th century graphic tradition and the paintings from Kalighat, he strived to resurrect their creative energy, and through his explorations of folk forms, to devise a highly personal idiom. His achievements were recognized by Bengal's cultural elite as a profound spiritual revival, at once local, universal and modernist (Asok Mitra in R. P. Gupta, ed 1986; Bishnu Dey in S. Dasgupta, ed. 1973). In the words of Bengali critic Tarun Mitra:

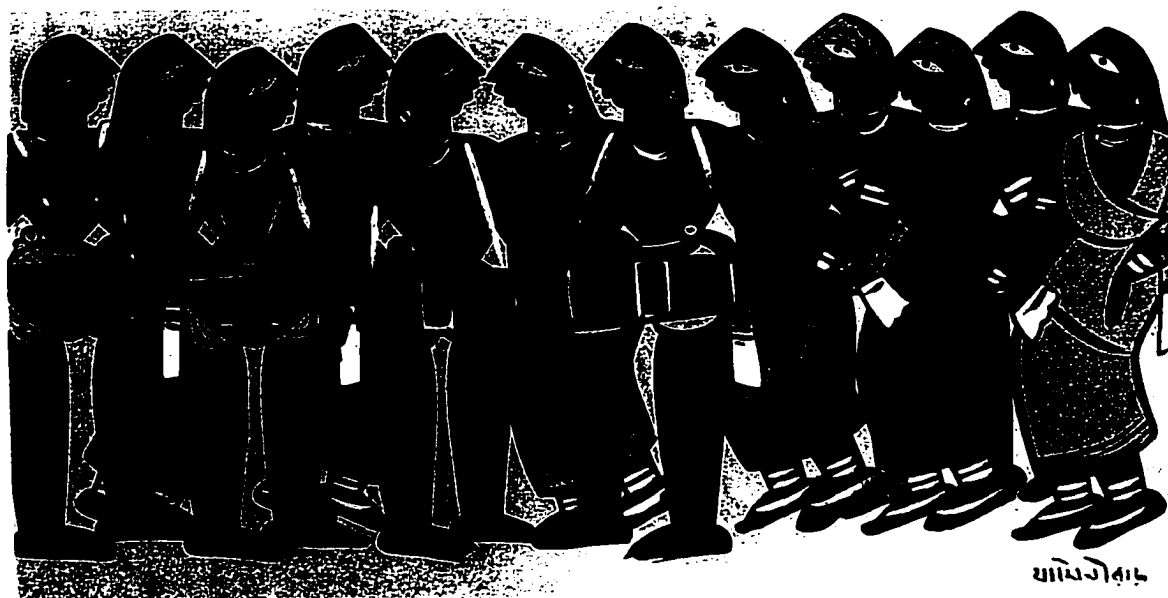
[Jamini Roy] solved for himself the crucial problem of all conscious artists of the time: how to assimilate the legacies of modern western art and yet retain an Indian identity; in other words, how to become a 'modern Indian' artist (in S. Chaudhuri 1990b: 264).

With an urge to simplify, and in the belief "that an indigenous artistic expression required its very own medium," Jamini Roy chose to work in the cheap materials of village craftsmen, taking up a limited palette of colors derived from locally available materials: indigo, rock dust, egg white, chalk, tamarind seeds, alluvial mud and the vermilion used ritually as in the parting of married Hindu women's hair (Mitter 1982: 34). He used canvas that was locally spun cloth coated in mud, cow dung, and whitewash (Tuli 1998: 192). For

him “folk culture assumed the character of protest,” “a means of defying the upper-class ethic (Dey and Irwin 1944). His experiments became a philosophical quest for the essence of things, a nationalistic striving to capture Bengaliness through simplified form, clear cut angular lines, clean colors and earthy substances. Bengalis recognize his work as a “celebration of an ideal of simplicity and harmony in social life, and the life of the spirit in vital contact with tradition” (Chidananda Dasgupta in Art Mosaic 1990). The Bengali *bhadralok*, struggling to preserve their standards of integrity despite their lack of means, saw in his work a rich humanism and a sensuous appreciation of life (Dey and Irwin 1944).

Jamini wanted his art to be easily available and inexpensive, for the whole collectivity not merely for the affluent (Tuli 1998: 192). The Bengali painter Paritosh Sen wrote that it was Roy’s “fond desire to see at least one painting of his hanging in every Bengali middle class home” (in Art Mosaic 1990). In an essay entitled “The National Identity,” Bengali critic B.C. Sanyal speaks to the work’s significance for Bengalis’ collective sense of identity, recounting an experience of suddenly coming across a Jamini Roy painting in a living room in Santa Fe, New Mexico:

At once I felt I had come home in an alien land. The overpowering impact made me feel nostalgic...the totality of the rendering...touched the chord of native belongingness in my being (In 25 Years 1972: 3).



Figs. 14 & 15 Jamini Roy's folk inspired images became icons of Bengali cultural nationalism. His 1927 "Santhal Dance" captures the rhythm and vigorous community life of the tribal Santhals in the earth tones of their region (Tuli 1998: 192, fig 127).

Aesthetic Experimentation in Shantiniketan

By 1920 an important institutional alternative to the Government School of Art was established by the founding of Kala Bhavan [Hall of Art], the school of fine arts at Visva Bharati, the university Rabindranath Tagore founded in 1918 in Shantiniketan, a hundred miles to the northwest of Calcutta in the district of Birbhum. One of the University's three original departments, the others being Music and Indology, the school was designed as a free and informal atmosphere in which to create, as part of a wider non-conformist experiment in education. Defining the University's philosophy, Tagore had written "Visva-Bharati acknowledges India's obligation to offer to others the hospitality of her best culture and India's right to accept from others their best"(Dutta and Robinson 1995: 220). The institution's Sanskrit motto was "Where the whole world meets in one nest." Tagore presented the idea of Visva Bharati to the world in the context of a 1919-1921 fund-raising tour to South India, Europe and the USA. In a speech during the early South Indian phase of the trip he offered this insight into his pedagogical philosophy:

I believe that the shock of outside forces is necessary for maintaining the vitality of our intellect...European culture...is rousing our intellectual life from the inertia of formal habits. The contradiction it offers to our traditions makes our consciousness glow (222).

As background, he explained the theory behind his educational program, voicing a note of caution in describing what he saw as the ideal relationship between the national and the foreign:

...foreign education tends to occupy all the space of our national mind and thus kills, or hampers, the great opportunity for the creation of new thought by a new combination of truths. It is this which makes me urge that all the elements in our own

culture have to be strengthened; not to resist the culture of the West, but to accept and assimilate it. It must become for us a nourishment and not a burden (222).

At Kala Bhavan “the Shantiniketan ethos” was driven by a cultural nationalist agenda that drew its inspiration from the living traditions of village India, the vitality of tribal life, and the spiritual importance of immersion in Nature (Tuli 1998: 192). The radical curriculum that developed in Shantiniketan during the 1920s and 30s in which the political and cultural were fused, generated an aesthetic on the interface between nature and culture and between regional specificity and critical internationalism. What was brought into existence there has been described as the formation of a new Indian sensibility (with a “double reference to both the regional and the international”), a new national culture with international validity (Willemsen 1989: 22). The collective project was to reformulate ‘Indian’ and ‘modern’ idioms through a direct engagement with the natural environment and the physical realities of form, and with an inclination to appropriate the ‘popular’ (Tuli 1998: 195). For young artists, enlivening their practice by cultivating an openness to world art movements, especially those representing critical or counter-cultural impulses, was seen as the ultimate test of the living tradition. To contemporize tradition and render it internationally viable would only be to strengthen it.

Abanindranath’s student Nandalal Bose (1882-1966) was head of Kala Bhavan from 1921 to 1951 and is credited with some pioneering experiments in modern Indian art. He created some striking images incorporating the Indian tradition, woodcuts being his particular *forté*. His illustrations to Rabindranath’s Sahaj Path, a Bengali language primer for children, are especially loved by Bengalis.



Fig. 16 Nandalal Bose's woodcuts for Rabindranath Tagore's classic Bengali children's primer Sahaj Path are simple yet eloquent homages to the beauty of Bengal, capturing the spirit and rhythm of the landscape and people.

Also derived from popular sources were the images Nandalal created for the posters Gandhi commissioned for the 1938 Indian National Congress meeting at Haripura;¹⁵ they are often cited as an important milestone in the successful merger of aesthetics and politics in India, and Asok Mitra labeled them “astonishing” (in R. P. Gupta, ed. 1986: 93; cf. Guha-Thakurta 1992; Mitter 1994).



Fig. 17 This ecstatic image of a drummer is a Haripura poster of Nandal Bose's now in the National Gallery of Art, New Delhi (Tuli 1998: 99, fig 38).

¹⁵ The 51st session of the Indian National Congress held at Haripura in Gujarat (Western India) marked the retirement of Congress President Jawaharlal Nehru and the selection of Bengali politician Subhas Bose as his successor. Although the Congress right wing was then in control of the Congress organization and Working Committee, the platform rhetoric at Haripura took a distinct turn to the left. Strongly worded anti-imperialist speeches were delivered before an audience of more than a quarter million people in a temporary village constructed of bamboo and date-mats. Incoming President Bose stressed the international context of Indian nationalism, and drew parallels with Palestine and Ireland in attacking British 'divide and rule policy' so evident in the 1935 Government of India Act that established separate communal electorates and had marked a turning point in Muslim politics in Bengal. The Congress resolutions emphasized India's refusal to be party to imperialist war or to permit the build-up of the Indian army which was "not a national army" and whose increased armament would only strengthen imperialism (Wolpert 1996: 233; Gordon 1990: 348-53).

Nandalal is also remembered for inspiring some brilliant students including Benode Behari Mukherjee, a painter (1904-80), and Ramkinkar Baij, a sculptor (1906-80), both of whom “bent European techniques and ways of construction to express rural landscapes and common people at work and play” (Mitra in R..P. Gupta, ed. 1986: 93). Ramkinkar’s 1938 outdoor sandcast sculpture “The Santhal Family” is recognized as a modernist icon with a peculiarly Shantiniketani cultural nationalist twist (Tuli 1998: 199).



Fig. 18 Ramkinkar Baij’s joyful and beautifully textured “Santhal Family” is permanently installed in the garden at Kala Bhavan in Shantiniketan (Tuli 1998: 199, fig 132).

Benode Behari Mukherjee was film-maker Satyajit Ray's painting teacher during his years at Shantiniketan and about whom Ray made a documentary called "The Inner Eye" in 1972. Ray's biographer Andrew Robinson has described it as "a small masterpiece...quite simply the finest short documentary about a creative artist I have seen" (1989: 280). Always of poor sight, Mukherjee went completely blind in 1957, though he continued to actively create and produce art. He was then 54 and had a strong body of work to his credit including some stunning murals painted in Visva-Bharati buildings at Shantiniketan. Ray has described arriving at the Kala Bhavan student hostel in 1940 and seeing a village scene Mukherjee had painted on the ceiling, "in glowing colours, full of trees, fields, ponds, people, birds and beasts...Such painting did not seem to bear any relation to Oriental Art as I knew it" (in Robinson 1989: 51). But the mural for which Mukherjee is best recognized was painted ten years later, also in Shantiniketan. It covers three walls and depicts the lives of India's medieval saint-mystics, Kabir among them, many of whom came from humble artisans' backgrounds and preached love, tolerance, and anti-hierarchical thinking. Calling it "the most noble and effective work of art created in India this century," Ray describes it in these terms:

The whole composition shows a remarkable cohesiveness. Saints and devotees, cities and mountains, rivers and trees and people, all fuse into an organic whole and make it a profoundly original and valid conception of the theme. There are resonances of other styles and other periods. But all the influences have been assimilated into a synthesis that bears the unmistakable hallmark of Binode Bihari Mukherjee (52).

In the creation of these monumental works, Mukherjee was able to synthesize his awareness of Western art and his knowledge of Indian painting with an appreciation of Japanese painting traditions gained during a 1937 trip. Ray's film is a tribute to Mukherjee's spirit,

communicating how despite his handicap he responded to his surroundings, developed a new awareness of space, how ultimately he achieved a synthesis that became “a perfectly satisfying unity” (282).

Indian Modernism: The View From Bengal

Modernism in Indian art was the result of inner dissatisfactions, at once ‘idealistic and romantic, intense and iconoclastic’ according to Mala Marwah (17 Painters 1988: 11). After the Bengal School, modern Indian art was “marked by a conscious distancing from the revivalist concerns of the previous generation” and a forging of contacts with modern Western art (R.Siva Kumar in Trends & Images 1993). Contact with modern and international concerns is seen to have freed Indian artists from the restrictive perspective of indigenesness. However in Bengal, unlike in other regions of India, a strong sense of pride in local history, a form of Bengali cultural nationalism, created the impetus for artists to “to claim for their [Bengal School] predecessors, though often somewhat apologetically, the role of modernist pioneers”(Kumar in Trends & Images 1993). Siva Kumar, professor of Art History at Kala Bhavan in Shantiniketan, finds continued evidence of this legacy in “certain sensibilities” of later generations of Bengali artists, notably a “romantic predilection” and a taste for the “imaginary and the fantastic.” This will become evident in the works of Bikash Bhattacharjee and Jogen Chowdhury discussed below, for whom an engagement with the surreal mutates into social criticism.

The Calcutta Group

In Bengal of the 1940s, when the devastations of famine and war were everywhere shockingly visible, art acquired a new social and political orientation. Earlier efforts to politicize the public through radical anti-fascist mobilizations merged with a populist and humanist response to the famine whose “visual impact...stirred the city’s artists as neither war nor politics could do” (Tarun Mitra in S. Chaudhuri 1990b: 265). Artists from Calcutta and Shantiniketan expressed their anguish in a socially responsive expressionism, an initiative that distinguished their work from that coming out of Bombay, which was spared the direct impact of the war. The presence of Allied troops in Calcutta expanded the young artists’ Western contacts and intensified the heady wartime atmosphere; the background music was American jazz and the talk was of revolutionary artistic developments attributed to the school of Paris. The rich cultural ambience of Calcutta provided tremendous scope for creative development:

...the crosscurrents of internationalism, and the undercurrent of the Bengal School, coupled with socioeconomic problems of the big city gave the young progressive mind sufficient food for thought. Calcutta became the arena where battles were fought (25 Years 1972: 21).

Emerging out of this context of upheaval and discontent, and responding to the local environment and to each other, a group of young artists in Calcutta gathered together in 1943 to form what they called “The Calcutta Group.” They described themselves as “a new modernist community,” uniting under a common, innovative aesthetic program, forming

what they saw as India's first unified response to international modernist values.¹⁶ With a guiding motto that "art should be international and interdependent," their goal was to "launch an art of change" to ensure that Indian society could make a contribution to the "brave new world of modernism" (Sundaram Tagore in Trends and Images 1993). Part of their mission was to create art that would respond to the absurdities of the prevailing socioeconomic and political situation; art they believed ought to be used for cultural regeneration, to effect meaningful changes in society (Tagore in Trends and Images 1993). Identifying with the nationalist cultural politics of the moment, their work provided strong commentary and an entirely new social content.

In terms of the local art scene they were motivated by a desire to shake off tradition and what they saw as vestiges of the revivalist escapism and stylized sentimental idiom of the entrenched Bengal school aesthetic. They sought to liberate their art from narrative and the conventions of literary allusions, and make art that was anti-nostalgic, anti-sentimental and subversive of hierarchies. One of the group's founders, Prodosh Dasgupta, argued in 1990 that the Bengal School "trend" lacked strength and vitality, and by the late 30s had become "a corrupt practice in the inept hands of [Abanindranath's] followers" (in Art Mosaic 1990). He described the Calcutta Group's sense of mission invoking a typical cliché: "in order to break free from the traditional bond, it became imperative to usher in the winds of change" (in Art Mosaic 1990). A published statement of the group's aims offered

¹⁶ The Calcutta Group founders were Rathin Moitra, Nirode Muzumdar, Gopal Ghose, Gobardan Ash, Prankrishna Pal, Prodosh Dasgupta, Paritosh Sen and Subho Tagore. In 1947 another important collective of modernists known as the Progressive Artists' Group came together in Bombay (the best known of whom are M.F. Husain and Souza). Their contacts with European refugees who had come to Bombay after the war brought to their work strong influences of German Expressionism that were not seen in Calcutta.

the following:

It is better that we consciously and discriminatingly choose and integrate foreign influences with our national style and tradition; for otherwise, influences, unconsciously imbibed might distort rather than enrich our art. This is the ideal motivating the 'Calcutta Group'... (in Tuli 1998: 198).

From their very first exhibition the group is described as having “shattered the last clinging residue of romanticism and nostalgia from their paintings...signs of a new tension, a struggle for style, experiments towards a new idiom, were increasingly evident in their work” (Santi Chowdhury 1975). Sundaram Tagore praises their path-breaking progressive vision and the trials they sustained in forging a tradition of modernism:

In a period of severe economic shortages, political chaos and spiritual doubts, for the artists to even create a stroke on a canvas was an heroic attempt – there were no clients for modern Indian art, except for a few Europeans and a small coterie of westernised Indians...Indian artists perceived art to be cathartic, healing, and transcending the problems of their time (in Trends and Images 1993).

Their movement was given strong intellectual support from the respected poet/critics of Calcutta Bishnu Dey and Sudhindra Datta, and together they engaged in dialogue with visiting international scholars including Stella Kramrisch, E.M. Forster, and John Irwin (Tuli 1998: 198). Their discussions referred freely to Eastern and Western art and professed the portrayal of social issues to be a major concern.

When it came to issues of style and content these young artists of the 1940s were engaged in a delicate balancing act. While portraying troubling issues of contemporary social relevance, they were self-consciously, even aggressively, assuming the modernist idiom (Appasamy in 25 Years: 7). They were “acutely conscious of the effect of style on content” and saw themselves as engaged in “a historical argument with tradition” (Marwah in 17 Painters 1988:). Seeking legitimate form for a new ideology, they placed

“overwhelming emphasis on technical and formal qualities” (10-11). As Keshav Malik describes:

The treatment of space was recognizeably new, despite the surface thematic ‘Indianness.’ We now had the two poles of the West and East teasing out the old Indian content;” they “combine a semblance of modernity with an apparent interest in the sons of the soil” (in 25 Years: 29-30).

After five years of hard struggle the group came to be recognized by critics and connoisseurs as “trailblazers” and “pioneers of a new epoch in Indian art” (in Art Mosaic).¹⁷

The influence of Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, and Cubism brought about a new aesthetic norm in post-war India. As Sundaram Tagore notes:

Paris, with its bohemian life and international ambience, became an obsession for them, an obsession partly motivated by the desire to gain access to the international art market.

The experience of going abroad to study art, often with the benefit of postwar French Government scholarships, the chance to experience immersion in the intellectually stimulating atmosphere of Paris, soaking in the aesthetics of the School of Paris and seeking cultural allies in the West, became a weapon in later artistic battles on the homefront. “Paris of Sartre, Stravinsky and Picasso is the centre of our days...” declared the Calcutta Group (quoted by Tagore in Trends). Nirode Mazumdar (1916-1987), one of the founding members of the Calcutta Group, went to France in 1946-47; Paritosh Sen followed in 1949. They returned full of new ideas, having acquired a “foreign finish,” armed with a new dedication to internationalize Indian art. Their Parisian experience became “their new aesthetic ammunition” (Sundaram Tagore in Trends 1993).

¹⁷ The group, which grew to include more than a dozen members, lasted a decade (until 1953), an extraordinary duration given the factionalism and fissiparous tendencies characteristic of Calcutta’s associations.

There is little consensus about their successes, and assessments of their results in assimilating Western modernism raise many questions about the artistic identities they tried to assume and the feelings of alienation they may have experienced. At the time they were certainly challenged and criticized as Western, rootless, and thus suspect. One appreciative critic marveled that although these painters came “heavily under French influences,” this “did not seem to cause any conflict in their minds” (Malik in 25 Years 1972: 30). Another remarked that a confusion between a belief in the social purpose of art and the notion of ‘art for art’s sake’ resulted in conflict, a blurring of genres, and “a bizarre amalgam of styles” (Sundaram Tagore in Trends 1993).

Nirode Mazumdar, who had wrestled with the problem of painting since the 1930s and his art school training under Abanindranath Tagore, remained convinced of Indian taste and tradition as an abstraction to be understood and discovered, both outside and within, and that it should be up to the artist to locate and interpret how that spirit is expressed in life (Sarkar 1973-4 I:10). Believing it was the artist’s duty to communicate, Mazumdar chose to remain figurative in order to communicate more directly. In France he became friendly with Brancusi, and while he succumbed to the urge to borrow, he made it a goal to ‘Indianize’ in order to maintain roots in Indian culture. His aim was to derive content from Indian philosophy, culture, and history, integrating them, yet at the same time striving to be contemporary (11). He was drawn to cyclical notions of life’s renewal from Indian philosophy, working with the Himalayas and the River Ganges as ideas, and images of the Great Mother as creator, preserver, and destroyer, striving to reach a kind of metaphysical painting. Because he believes that mass culture deprives human beings of their dignity, he

has also devoted energies to researching folk religion and culture and incorporated these findings into his work. Sandip Sarkar described him as a “modern man who speaks the language of ancient mythical lore...[as] a sort of defence mechanism against the Western impact” (12).

Paritosh Sen

Like many middle class Bengalis, Paritosh Sen, who was born in Dhaka, East Bengal in 1918, was initiated into the world of art by means of purusing color plates in the popular monthly Prabasi. When his family refused to support his desire to attend art school, he ran away to study in Madras with a hero of his, the oft-published painter Devi Prosad Roy Chowdhury. There he was joined by other Bengali compatriots, including Prodosh Das Gupta and Gopal Ghose, with whom he would later found the Calcutta Group. Their guru’s special attention to draftsmanship and his “extraordinary regard for anatomy” provided an important foundational legacy. Their lessons consisted of extended life study sessions, working from live models indoors and sketching trips to the surrounding countryside. Within three years, Sen was himself published in Prabasi with a realistic if rather traditionally romanticized rural scene of women carrying water jars in a palm grove. After graduation he was employed as an art teacher in Indore where access to the English principal’s reproductions of modern European masters such as Van Gogh, Cezanne and Gauguin stimulated his experiments with form. These explorations increased and intensified during annual trips to Calcutta where he thrived on the city’s atmosphere of political and

intellectual ferment, met other young painters, and learned about Western culture and modern art from Allied soldiers stationed there.

Together with his art school colleagues Prodosh Das Gupta and Gopal Ghosh, and Nirode Mazumdar whom he met in Calcutta, Sen founded the Calcutta Group in 1943. They first came together to share their outrage and find a way of responding to Bengal's 1943-44 famine. In response to the famine scenes he witnessed Sen produced drawings full of anger and anguish that would become a prominent feature of much of his subsequent work.

After the war he managed to scrounge the wherewithal to travel to London and eventually to Paris where he studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He copied masterworks in the Louvre, drawing for hours at a stretch "with monastic discipline." As he studied and looked at all the art Paris had to offer, he saw himself as engaged in a process of unlearning; he did not paint for a whole year. He spent time in the cafe society of left intellectual circles where he made the most of current fascination with Nehru's India. He met the Huxley brothers, Brancusi, and eventually Picasso to whom he was able to show an entire year's work in 1952. The intellectually stimulating atmosphere of Europe provided Sen with the impetus and inspiration for "a complete break with the past," allowing him to make the leap to another level of artistic expression (Santi Chowdhury 1975). New forms, colors, images emerged.

Yet perhaps, one could argue, the break with the past was not so complete after all. Sen's work, as Chowdhury is quick to emphasize, "remained unmistakably Indian, dominated by a kind of nostalgia for the timeless India with which he was familiar" (1975). As Sen told Neville Tuli "I have always been interested in the human condition and so

abstraction never took root as an idea” (Tuli 1998: 209). His works remained figurative and depicted characteristic themes – “women with large liquid eyes holding fruits or flowers...a musician enveloped in a self-generating trance”(Chowdhury 1975). Yet the paintings completed in Paris demonstrated a new restraint, a kind of intellectual discipline that Chowdhury argues is evidence that Sen had made “a dialectical leap”(1975). Narration was abandoned, resulting in a greater structural clarity; superfluities and clutter were dispensed with. The degree of skill and control over his medium that he acquired provided an essential basis for the beginnings of a mature style (Chowdhury 1975).

Returning to India in 1954, Sen paid his dues working as an art teacher in “the blue hills of Chotanagpur” – a period of rural exile during which an enchanting landscape and the enthusiasm of Adivasi (tribal) students was some compensation for a grave and debilitating illness. At last able to return to urban life, Sen began teaching in the newly established School of Printing Technology at Jadavpur University in Calcutta. Newly married, he and his wife settled in a Bengali middle class locality in South Calcutta. It was an island of familiarity, contrasted by surrounding slums that were inhabited mostly by Bihari laborers who pulled rickshaws and transport carts and carried “head-loads” for a living. Sen would wander in the hazy evening streets, observing, listening to the songs and drumming, appreciating the “fantastic store of vitality, with the strength that community and tradition had imparted to them” (Chowdhury). The sights and sounds might also call to mind for the artist their polar opposite -- the lifestyle of Calcutta’s decadent bourgeoisie. Though his youthful anger had mellowed to an amused tolerance, he remained alive to the contrasts of Bengali society, “taking expressionist, witty, and satirical views of the scene by turns”

and the exploration of these contrasts continued to inform his work (R.Siva Kumar in Trends & Images). In the words of Santi Chowdhury:

It is not often that a painter was able to give so much of himself in his work...Here was wit and humour and painterly skill absolutely flawless.

In the early 60s he went again to Europe, with the aid of a French government fellowship, where he was influenced by the new trend toward abstraction, as well as by “the desire to be relevant to Western eyes” (Parimoo 1975: 97). Returning to India in 1964, he exhibited some large canvases, monumental in style with strong effects of color and brushwork, many drawings, and witty collages (97). He left again for Europe and America in late 1969 with two year’s travel subsidized by prestigious grants from the French government and the Rockefeller foundation. This trip introduced him to Pop art and the works of Marcel Duchamp; en route home he “enriched his notions of public art” while stopping in Mexico and Egypt.

Returning to Calcutta, he was confronted with a city in chaos. The economic situation was desperate, the politics divisive and violent. For Sen, the trauma of urban violence was compounded in its personal impact as he discovered the involvement of some of his former students of whom he’d been particularly supportive. Unable to communicate with them and unable to adjust to the social climate, he sunk into a year-long depression. He managed finally to work himself out of this period of despair by producing a new series – a few dozen large canvasses and sculptures around the theme of a cyclist fleeing an accident. Depicting his own face as the face of everyman in confrontation with violence, there were elements of defeatism, of fright and inescapable confusion. “There was no optimism or attempts at easy resolution in any of the paintings,” notes Chowdhury (1975).

Exhibited in 1973, these canvases represented the end of the artist's third decade of work. They were distressing works for a distressing time.

Looking over the work, Chowdhury praises Sen's painterly skill and adroitness, and points to "remarkable integrity" as the significant line of continuity. He sums up what he sees as the artist's guiding philosophy:

...a painter cannot live in a vacuum...A painter has to struggle just like any other member of society and let his art derive from life. He must contribute in a concrete way to the society in which he lives (1975).

For Sen, part of the satisfaction of dedicated teaching was as a means of staying embedded in the society. As a painter he strives continuously "to enrich his idiom for more meaningful communication" (Chowdhury 1975). That social engagement is an important incentive for his work, and a constant motivation in his public and personal life.



Fig. 19 Sen's 1983 "Boy Chopping Chicken in Market" is a keenly observed portrait of working-class daily life in which brutality has become normalized. The youth crouches at work in the claustrophobia of a tightly enclosed space, transistor radio blaring, methodically slicing the throat of a terrified bird on a *boti*, the sharp blade mounted on a board traditionally used in Bengali kitchens for vegetable chopping. His shirt is rendered as a collage – no cubist café still-life, but an assemblage of local news stories of curfews, police firings, and ethnic violence. His slender, but muscular, long-limbed body is rendered naturalistically, but his face has a primitive quality, an enticing outline reminiscent of folk painting style, to depict his transfixed gaze. Sen urges us to stop for a moment and consider what this boy's world view is like, immersed in harsh quotidian realities, yet forced to become insensible to the violence and suffering around him (Tuli 1998: 270).

Somnath Hore

Among the Bengali artists with overtly political commitments, the so-called “painters of protest,” perhaps the most outstanding is Somnath Hore. As a socially conscious artist, he is thematic even when he is very abstract. Though primarily a printmaker, he is remembered for his early World War II-era sketches of the victims of Japanese bombing in Chittagong, East Bengal, where he was born in 1921, and for a whole series of woodcuts and sketches made during the famine in 1943. These dramatic early impressions created a profound awareness in the young artist of man’s hypocrisy and moral depravity, and of the exploitative socio-economic forces at work against those most lacking in defenses. A student of Calcutta’s Government College of Art from 1945-49, he was an active student leader of the undivided Communist Party until he was forced to go underground in 1950. His early woodcuts depict social life with passion and intensity – casual street scenes with subjects drawn from everyday life, portraits of the destitute, the focused energy and optimism of peasant resistance meetings. Their expressionism – jagged black and white contrasts, bold lines, exaggerated skeletal structure – has been described as “a deep empathic identification with a social situation” (Dube 1983/84: 19). The images of these victims of war and famine, drawn from Somnath’s personal experiences while traveling in Bengal, developed a universality, triggering off what was to become the obsession of all his future work as an artist and a pioneer in India’s graphic arts movement. The image of ‘wounds,’ an *idée fixe* of the endless reenactment of man’s inhumanity and social failings, has been central to Somnath’s work. Sarkar describes him as “a poet who is obsessed by

suffering” (1973/1974(V): 12). Bleeding gashes and stab marks, palpable evidence of the violence and destruction perpetrated against the human body, are molded out of hand-made paper pulp in white relief prints that evoke human tears and gaping flesh wounds in a powerful series entitled “Wounds.” As Dube describes him:

Somnath is perhaps one of the few Indian artists who have had the courage to remain in direct contact with social reality, without retreating into dialectical, intellectual or romantic sentimental postures (1983/1984: 19).

The imagery of ‘wounds’ became, for Somnath, a direct, pictorial means of relating his experience. It entails an abstraction of experience, in which all emotion is drained away, all objectivity is lost. His graphic work stylizes the human form, depicting an armature of bone that is highly sculptural in conception. The skin appears barely able to contain the jagged underlying landscape of hollows and protrusions. These are risky stylistic choices, yet they succeed in Dube’s eyes, because they are “completely transformed by deep compassion and feeling” (1983/4: 19).

During the period 1958-1967, when he was in charge of the Graphics section at Delhi’s College of Art, Somnath steadily perfected his printmaking techniques incorporating the latest technical innovations, and he continued to exhibit his lithographs in Calcutta at the Gallery Chemould. In 1960, Somnath joined with an important group of painters and sculptors to found Calcutta’s Society of Contemporary Artists. Intended as a means to promote its members’ creative and innovative work and seek national and international recognition, the SCA has enjoyed remarkable success and longevity, extending into its fourth decade. In 1968 Somnath became head of the Graphics department at Kala Bhavan, Visvabharati University in Santiniketan.

In the course of a 1973 interview published in Frontier, Somnath discussed the history of the assimilation of Western art in Bengal, noting that after World War II it was a “necessity... strongly felt” and “an inevitable and welcome departure” (Sarkar 1973-4(V): 11). As Sarkar paraphrased it, Somnath was well aware that “this imitative stage is not over, it will end as soon as we include Western art in our tradition. Then the question of imitating will not arise” (11-12). According to Somnath’s characterization, during a period of transition, when everything is in flux, many artists will blindly imitate, while others will put up a struggle to find an identity but still remain at a fairly superficial level without understanding the depths of the problem. The European experience must be integrated, and it is the structural quality of painting and sculpture that has to be fundamentally understood. As Somnath expressed it: “painting at the deeper level is abstraction” (12).

Somnath Hore’s paper-pulp print entitled “Wound 49” provided an impressive cover illustration, as well as suggesting the overall theme, for a February 1993 exhibition organized by Calcutta’s Center of International Modern Art (CIMA) entitled “Wounds.” The show was organized as a call for artists to respond to the horrific events across the nation that resulted from the December 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. (These are mentioned only obliquely in the catalogue as “our national anguish”, and “the violence, trauma and suffering of the last few months”). On an otherwise blank introductory page, the catalogue offers this dramatic statement of its rationale:

This exhibition represents the response of India’s leading artists to the trauma of our times. It is both an expression of anguish at the wounds of the recent past and a re-affirmation of the need to heal those wounds (Wounds 1993).

As the preface forcefully goes on to state: “The wounds and the trauma of the recent past

have left their mark; but now is the time for healing.” In the catalogue essay entitled “Fighting the Forces of Darkness,” Ella Datta drew the viewers’ attention to the manner in which Calcutta artists of the 1940s had reacted to the turbulent times of famine and the nearby WWII theatre of operations by creating “images of human devastation”:

For the first time, the painters shifted their gaze from the usual subjects--mythical, historic, or romantic portrayals of rural India...It must have been a shock for viewers. Till then contemporary Indian painting was engaged in creating beauty (Wounds 1993).

Whether ideologically motivated or not, she noted, artists active in those turbulent days felt compelled to respond to the images of destitution that confronted them as starving masses of people flocked to the city of Calcutta in search of sustenance no longer available in rural areas. As Datta also makes clear, the creative response of Bengali artists to an intense period of social stress made them part of an international trend. To exemplify the sentiment she quotes an angry statement of Picasso’s with which Calcutta artists of the period would undoubtedly have agreed:

No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war...[against] brutality and darkness (in Wounds 1993).

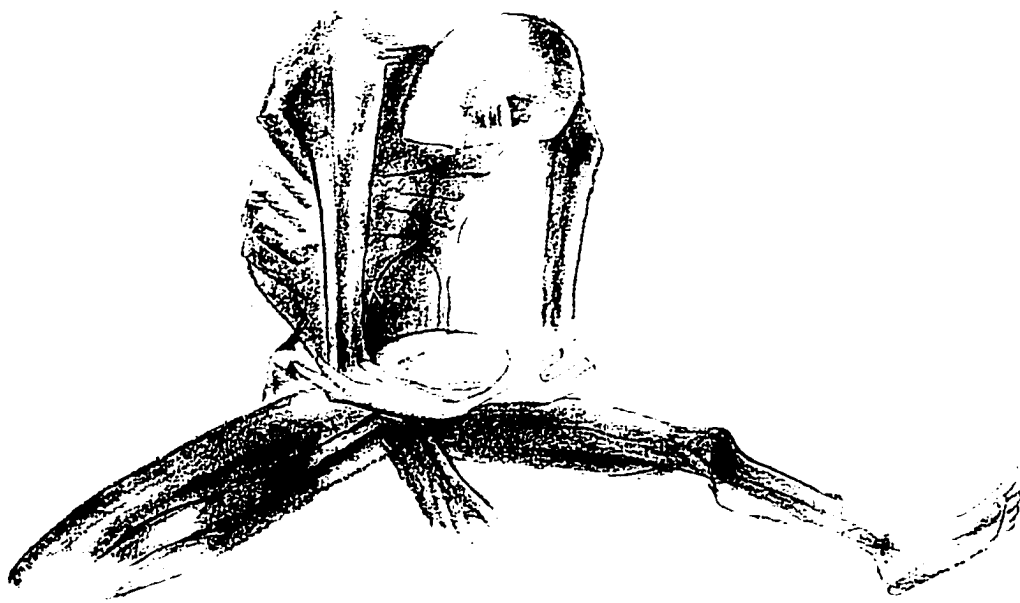


Fig. 20 Hore's drawings of famine victims communicate a powerful image of misery and hopelessness. Rendered as expressionist sculptural forms, their naked, ravaged bodies stand in for a life of which nothing now is left. "Hunger" is a lithograph from 1977 (R.P. Gupta, ed. 1986: 26).



Fig. 21 Hore's early woodcut "Group meeting" (1953) portrays a far more optimistic moment, a time of inspiring all night meetings held in rustic peasant huts in which eager words were exchanged and a brighter future was envisioned (R.P. Gupta, ed. 1986: 13).

Jogen Chowdhury

Although Jogen Chowdhury was born in Faridpur, East Bengal in 1939 and lived and worked in Delhi for many years, “the real source of his subject matter” according to Bombay-based artist and critic Gieve Patel is Calcutta: “Calcutta is palpably present...The city makes its presence felt even though Chowdhury never depicts buildings and streets” (Patel 1985: 12). Chowdhury’s childhood was spent in a South Calcutta colony for East Bengali refugees, and he describes learning to paint by hurricane lantern because they were without electricity. He graduated from Calcutta’s Government College of Arts and Crafts in 1960 and later earned a scholarship to study in Paris – an exposure that he describes as sudden, bizarre, and disorienting.

Chowdhury’s works portray posturing human figures with a satirical overtone and a keen social awareness, using a “psychographic style that materially transforms the painted objects” (Siva Kumar in Trends 1993). The figures are presented against a neutral ground, rendered with cross-hatched lines and convoluted outlines that “enclose gross, corpulent, misshapen bodies that sag and bloat” (Kapoor 1988: 17). In Patel’s description, Chowdhury depicts “lovers, politicians and business moghuls...unhampered by the dragging weight of their corporeality,” “devising fantasized shapes to depict a completely different kind of reality”(1985: 12). Sometimes, as Paritosh Sen notes, the forms are so exaggerated that the figures look like “human atlases” (in R. P. Gupta, ed. 1986: 99). Kamala Kapoor sees them as “withering depictions of the human condition” and claims that even in Chowdhury’s “whimsical and romanticized” dream-like early work “there were glimmers of his

developing acerbity and biting satire” (17 Indian Painters 1988: 17). They make powerful visual statements that must be interpreted as an indirect form of protest (Arun Ghosh in Trends and Images 1993).

Although Chowdhury’s images have no decipherable narrative content, it is clearly human problems that interest him, and the viewer cannot but be affected. His reliance upon autobiographical elements makes him something of a satirical diarist (17 Indian Painters 1988: 17). As Kamala Kapoor explains: “The result is an all round experience that is at once disconcerting, brilliant, weird, embarrassing, perspicacious, ludicrous and strangely empathic” (17).

Patel explains how “Bengaliness” remains a tangible element of his work, offering this interesting assessment of his aesthetic in terms of its roots in popular culture:

There is such a thing as a Bengali graphic sensibility, unmistakable but difficult to describe. It is partly derived from the resurgent sentiment of the nationalist movement. This sensibility is present...in many Bengali posters, in magazine illustrations, and even in the script of the Bengali language. In Chowdhury, the sensibility is amply present, but the resurgent sentiment is replaced by something zany, oddball, as if Bengali sentimentality were doing a double-take on itself (1985: 12).

Kapoor also finds a characteristic “Bengaliness” in the social analysis and scathing critique that is the subtext of Chowdhury’s imagery. Intriguingly, Kapoor argues that perhaps the “grotesquerie” in Chowdhury’s art should be seen as the artist’s means of bridging that gap between his culture and the age, a way for the cultivated Bengali sensibility to cope with the vulgar realities of the present moment (17 Indian Painters 1988: 18). Chowdhury’s is an ironic, and culturally inflected Bengali view of the world:

An age overtaken by avarice, corruption and degradation, where money in the absence of other values reigns supreme. And a culture which harkens back

nostalgically and yearningly to the slow motion, refined and sentimental ambience of yesterday's Bengal (18).

In the catalogue of the celebrated 1981 "Place for People" exhibition of post-independence artists held in Bombay and Delhi, a statement of Chowdhury's demonstrated his emphasis on the emerging artists' sociopolitical motivation and consciousness of the local:

It is most essential that our painters represent the unique reality, nature, life, and psyche of our own experience... We can create an art that perhaps no other group of people in the world can, because of our unique situation. This also includes the situation where the whole society is distorted, caught in the midst of social disbalances and haphazard efforts of development...I strongly feel, that already a breakthrough is in the process and it will, in the coming decades, cohere into an original and significant activity. These artists are open-minded and observant of art movements taking place outside India, and know that it is necessary to be aware of them...Technical elements of painting may be in some instances accepted internationally, but I see no reason to be part of the international trends (in Tuli 1998: 253-4).

Chowdhury's position was that young Indian painters bore a responsibility to move in a completely new direction, to start a 'new tradition' based on study of the past, and recognition of tradition as part of the experience and environment of the present. To create independent and significant works of art, talented young Indian painters would have to problem solve and draw meaningful things from East and West, past and present, society and the inner self, relying on intelligence, judgement, consciousness, feeling and sensitivity.

Speaking in more strictly personal autobiographical terms, Kapoor wondered whether the traumatic experience of Partition, and the insecurity it engendered in a small boy uprooted from his home in East Bengal might account for what she sees as the mature artist's "iconoclastic rage" (17 Indian Painters 1988: 18). Kapoor concludes:

Whatever it's root causes, this grotesquerie is right on target, and with it Chowdhury topples myths and icons, laying bare the affectations, pomposities and hypocrisies of today's social milieu as well as the frailties and foibles of the human race. The artist catches the world in flagrante delicto. That he does it with a telling insight, tinged with irony and empathy, diffuses the ensuing discomfort, but not quite (18).

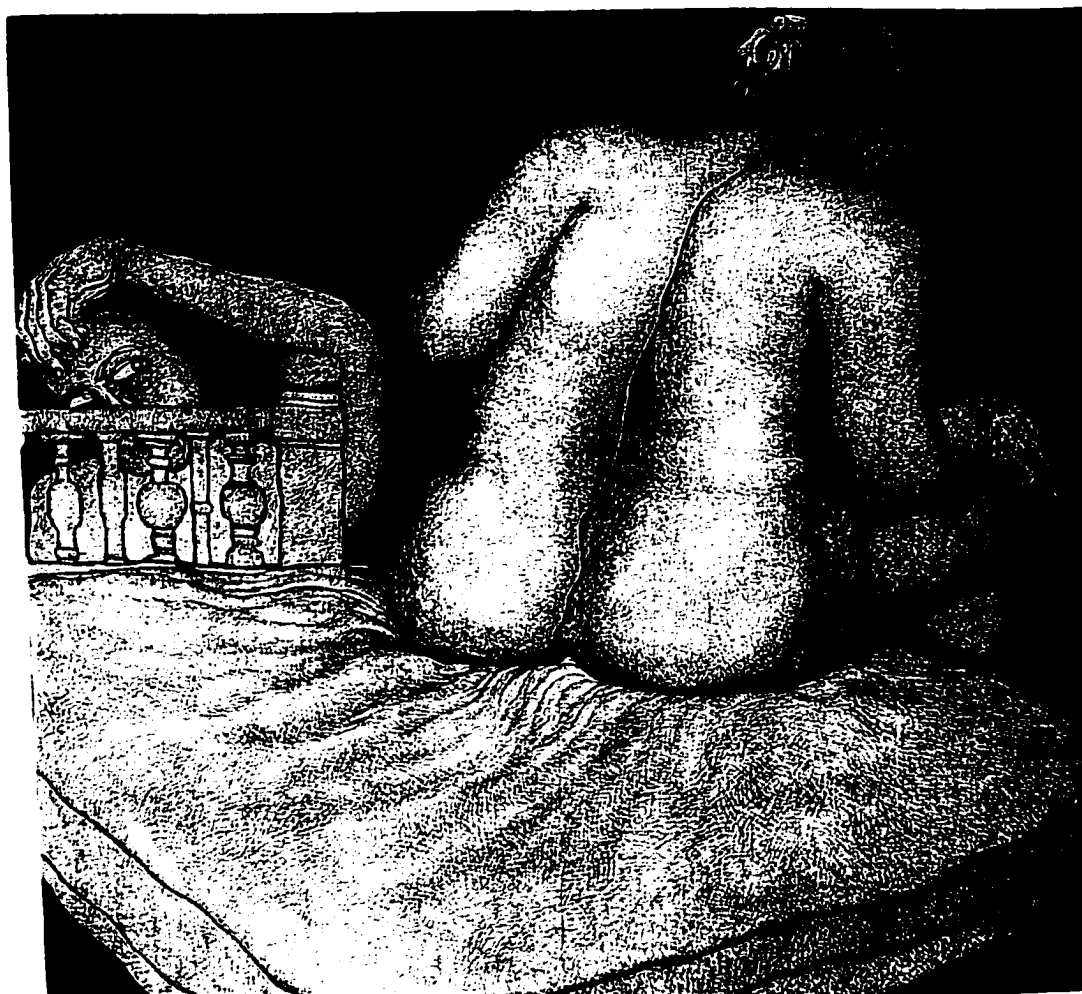


Fig. 22 Many of Chowdhury's images speak to a very Bengali sense of the allure, the power, and terrifying mystery of the feminine. In "Couple (Life II)" the husband places himself at a distance to gaze at his carefully coiffed wife, scratching his head in confusion and kneeling somewhat in awe. Although we are not privy to the events of this particular moment, it is evident that even after this couple's long life together she still surprises (R. P. Gupta, ed. 1986: 85).



Fig. 23 “Lady in Front of a Mirror” alludes both to classical Indian miniatures of the lady adorning herself, preparing to meet her lover, and to Kalighat *pats* with their images of courtesans and their dangerous power to seduce. Here the tresses released and breast exposed have an especially pornographic voluptuousness (R. P. Gupta, ed. 1986: 81).



Fig. 24 Chowdhury's "Neo-Babu in Coloured Tie" portrays the confusion of young Indian masculinity, with its ambivalences about Westernized identity and the working world. This young man is all too aware of the privileges of his background and the bright future so many assume for him. Yet he wears his Western suit uncomfortably, and his hunched shoulders and weary face betray his misery. Something of his "real life" – a poem scrawled on the back of an office memo? theatre or film tickets? a love letter? – work their way out of his pocket, reminding him that he does have something to look forward to. Will there be no end to the drudgery? (R. P. Gupta, ed. 1986: 90).

Bikash Bhattacharjee

In reaction to the obsession with abstraction introduced by followers of the 'School of Paris' aesthetic, Bikash Bhattacharjee, who was born in Calcutta in 1940, chose to look back at the colonial cultural heritage to rework the legacy of portraiture in the Academic Realist tradition. Yet as painter and critic Paritosh Sen has noted, the fact that Bikash employs a thoroughly Western academic technique does not make his works any less Indian:

...his paintings are largely the expressions of not only an Indian mind but, specifically, that of a Bengali. The subject matter, the imageries, the atmosphere, the light, even the colours have a direct relation with the experience of living in this nightmarish city called Calcutta – where thousands of people cook, wash, eat, sleep and make love on the pavements...where decadent middle class values make every Bengali an incurable cynic; where the wretched of the earth and the sickeningly opulent live in stoic tolerance of each other, and where the sanctity of the word "culture" has suddenly assumed an unprecedented importance in the eyes of the nouveau riche (in R.P.Gupta,ed 1986: 96).

Bikash shares with previous generations of Bengali artists their aims to portray a distinct Indian reality, but whereas they had drawn inspiration from the holism of rural life, Bikash's goal was to depict the stark social reality of the urban context. Gieve Patel describes his Calcutta oriented images, "the crumbling buildings, the street boys, the politicians, the whores and the idle wealthy," in these terms:

Bhattacharjee has been spoken of as the academic painter who fascinates by the unacademic quality of his images...His response to the brutality of the city he portrays is to recreate it out of a lewd plasm that sniggers at each object it impersonates(1985:12).

His preoccupation with rendering the human form, and especially the marks and traces inflicted by social circumstances and passing years, make a strong statement of his art as an expression of his social conscience. The rich textures and tones, the intricate play of

light on surfaces – decaying wood, peeling plaster, stone, brick, textiles, human skin – are characteristic of his style both in oils and in watercolor. The result of Bikash's figurative experiments are unsettlingly surreal depictions, mainly from the middle class milieu of the city to which he belongs, executed in a straightforward naturalistic style complete with chiaroscuro and illusions of depth, often evincing biting social satire. The surreal images are inspired by his fascination for Calcutta and its milieu – the coexistence of beauty and squalor, nostalgia and horror, courage and despair, hope and suffering. He treats portraiture with the utmost realism; his subjects are generally all too familiar – men and women “whom we seem to have seen somewhere” in Paritosh Sen's apt phrasing (in R.P. Gupta, ed. 1986: 98). Yet he “gives a twist to the expression” that “makes us sit up and think about the fast-eroding values of a society in which we live” (98).

Bhattacharjee succeeds in transforming material reality in an unexpected manner; his observations are rendered with intelligence and imagination, and a trace element of the bizarre or the grotesque is added in a manner that both disturbs and surprises. Many of the paintings resonate with a sexual undertone that makes for a powerful effect, displaying an “uncanny power to present a world of deceptivity and revelation” (Sundaram Tagore in Trends & Images 1993). There is often an uneasy element of fear in his paintings; he expressed the bloodshed and turmoil of the Naxalite period of the 1970s in paintings with face-less, eye-less figures that appeared in evocation of a terror stricken mood. Puzzling visual devices such as cast off, broken toys or walls – treated as frames or as barriers, dividing space horizontally or vertically, often marking significant boundaries between inner and outer worlds – are treated with a certain ambiguity that makes for odd juxtapositions.

His representations succeed in transforming the visually ordinary into the extraordinary and mysteriously symbolic.

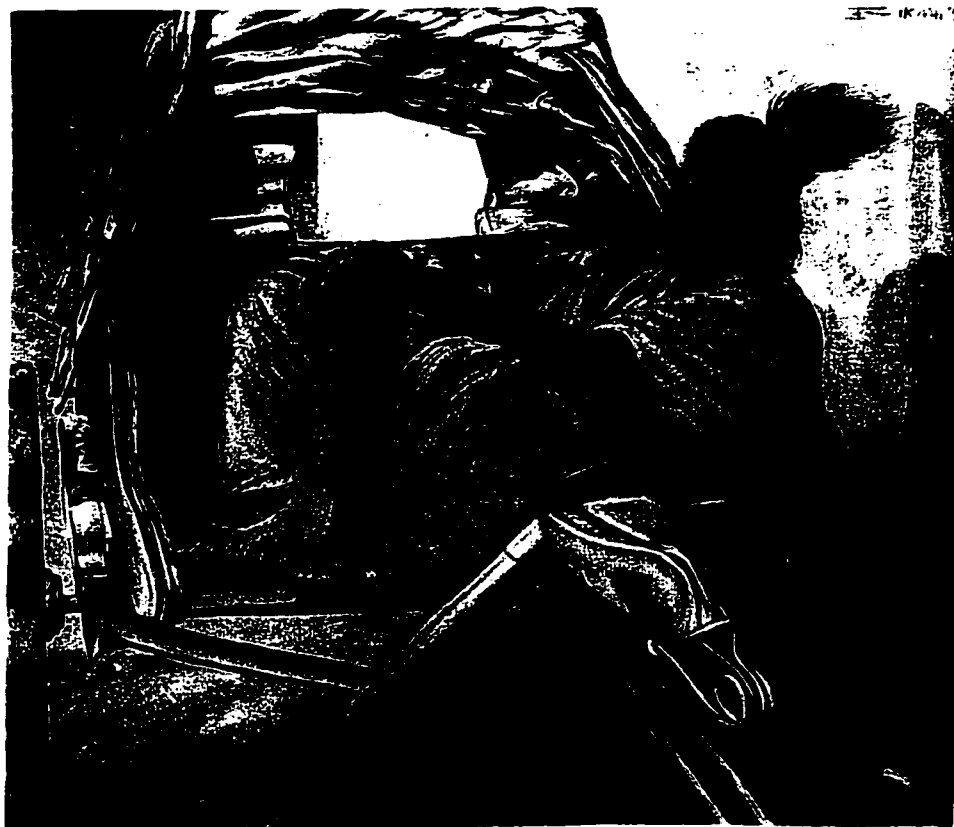


Fig. 25 In Bhattacharjee's 1983 "Krishna Swami" a rickshaw-wallah rests languorously, a profitable morning's work presumably behind him, with an attitude more of an august, bearded emperor swathed in golden robes, than a sweaty and grizzled oppressed laborer. Although the subject matter calls to mind the 19th century 'Company' painters' documentary 'types' of Indian castes and tradesmen, Bhattacharjee's sensitive realist portrait is disarming in its individuality. The unexpected and surreal detail of a peacock feather placed jauntily in his hair, sparks our curiosity about Krishna Swami's emotional life – his sense of himself, his aesthetic sensibility and sense of the comic (R.P. Gupta, ed. 1986: 56).

Present Directions in Modern Indian Art

By the 1960s, the Oriental/Occidental distinction that featured as a common organizing principle of art exhibitions in India had disappeared “at least in major venues”(Malik in 25 Years: 30). “As the new art became familiar it did not seem ‘foreign’ to some at least of the new generation;” quantitative changes were soon transformed into qualitative ones (30). Heritage and handed-down styles were not disowned outright, but subjected to questioning. But out of this eagerness to experiment came what Malik laments as “the itch for originality at any price”(30). He offers what amounts to an Indian critique of a Western avant-garde mentality:

So instead of valuable human experience reflected in a work of art we often get a startlingly sensational experiment or invention. This inventiveness has taken over effective substance and lasting communication...The liberation from fixed forms and rigid cultural demands has been turned into licence. The experience that such art provides is...untouched by reverberations of significant values...it humours the viewer in a passing, temporary fashion (31).

Writing in 1972, Malik urged that Indian artists “acquire a greater intellectual responsibility, boldness, and the strength to get out of beaten paths” and overcome the dependency on Western art. And making a plea for new directions in art education, he remarks:

At the moment unfortunately, we still are in great thrall to the west for the prime moves, for the cues, the fertilising ideas... This rather dismal colonial condition need not persist...(32).

The need to forge an ‘Indian’ image is also recognized as an important factor in marketing work to an audience that seeks an indigenous identity (Sundaram Tagore in Trends).

It is possible here to speak in only the broadest terms in characterizing Calcutta’s contemporary art scene. Certainly the thematic and stylistic spectrum has broadened, and

changes in format and scale have been introduced. Artists struggle with new media, adapting “alien methods” to their own environmental situation, and striving for “the personal stamp.” Notable innovations have been made, particularly in graphic arts and site-specific installations, such as Vivan Sundaram’s 1998 exhibition Journey Towards Freedom that enshrined in Calcutta’s Victoria Memorial Durbar Hall bits of railway track, traditional ritual sculpture, jute bags, books, vintage photographs, video recordings and a 70 foot scroll, using the space as context for a personal reconstruction of Bengal’s role in imperial history. Although Sundaram’s exhibition marked a dramatic break from audience expectations in viewing genres of modern art like easel painting and sculptural forms, some Calcutta viewers discovered resemblances to familiar ritual constructions such as Bengal’s traditional puja pandals – they too are multi-media, can be walked through and present a range of stimuli to be experienced (P. Ray 1998: 21). These new aesthetic developments have been paralleled by changes in the artists’ self-image and in the organization of the “art scene” and patterns of patronage (R.Siva Kumar in Trends). Diplomatic missions in Delhi and Calcutta, and public and private institutions have begun actively collecting contemporary art. Like their predecessors, many young artists travel for study abroad, motivated in part by hopes of gaining access to international art markets. They go to see as much European and American art as they can, and to draw inspiration from dynamic foreign artworlds of dealers, patrons, critics and connoisseurs that are still unknown in India. The tension between the desire to create an avant-garde form and the urge to maintain an indigenous expression still remains an ever-present conflict. Success in building an appreciative and critical audience at home has been slow in coming.

**Lessons from the Bengali Visual Arts:
Strengthening Tradition Through Openness to the World**

The visual arts in Calcutta have offered Bengali cultural producers a venue to assess and reflect on the state of tradition, a place to comment with wry humor on social behavior and customs deemed worthy of disapproval or to express horror at political misdeeds, often with a surrealist tinge. A political impulse has characteristically driven the creative process, and painting in particular has often been harnessed to serve nationalist ends. The prevailing interpretation of what constitutes 'tradition' is often mobilized to serve as muse for what is deemed the properly 'authentic' Indian/Bengali aesthetic. This idealized aesthetic is characteristically a kind of hybrid that contains elements of both the classical heritage and living folk traditions; a clear linkage is often assumed between patriotism and a particular aesthetic sense. There is a strong sense that one can best honor the Motherland by developing a refined sense of the indigenously beautiful. For many, there is a sense of compulsory allegiance to taste supported by tradition, and a sensibility based on the recovery of endangered forms of traditional arts is consciously cultivated.

It is along these lines that the work of Jamini Roy is especially celebrated. He was a modernist pioneer engaged in a profound spiritual revival; that this represents no contradiction for Bengalis is indicative of the fluidity (one might even go so far as to say ongoing spiritual content) of Bengal's vernacular modernity. For them it is important that art be culturally and spiritually sustaining, as well as being exciting and innovative, and that in the words of B.C. Sanyal it should "touch the cord of native belongingness" (in 25 Years:

3). Jamini's work fed a Bengali longing for the life of the spirit in vital contact with tradition, and a nostalgia for a sense of simplicity and harmony in social life that many feel has been lost in the contemporary era. Yet the work was formally experimental, and he made his quest for essentials a personal stamp, drawing his creative energy from the beauty and rhythm of "the people," using clear colors, clean lines and earthy substances.

What becomes an intriguing element of the Bengali modernism outlined here is the way the notion of tradition is broadened and enriched and actually seen as being strengthened and given depth through contact with the foreign. While appreciating the Bengal School's cultural nationalist impulse, and the latter day relevance of the political statement that was made, cultural producers soon recognized the restrictive nature of their revivalist concerns and saw its perspective of indigenism as unacceptably limiting. The characteristically Bengali modernist ideology, that might well trace its origins to the "Shantiniketan ethos" and to Rabindranath Tagore's humanitarian and poetic legacy, recognized that contact with a diversity of cultural ideas and the contradictions that necessarily result would most readily inspire experimental and creative thinking. The enthusiasm of the Calcutta Group's maxims that art should be international and interdependent, that it should be used for cultural regeneration and to effect meaningful social change followed closely upon these ideas. The objective of Bengali modernity has been to aim for a kind of effective synthesis: an openness to European experience and a recognition of influential aspects of Western art, especially those expressing a desire for change and a more just society, while holding a traditionally-grounded aesthetic of difference close to the heart. A conscious and discriminating choice is made to integrate

foreign influences within the national style, and an acknowledgment is made that the tradition can only be the richer for it.

Chapter Six: Cinema in Calcutta: Communicating a Local Message to World Culture

The cinema from its very inception in Bengal, was an exuberant modernist enterprise, a peculiar mix of technology, politics, art, and professionalism that captured imaginations, and both made and destroyed fortunes and social reputations. Its welfare depended upon technological advances made mostly in the West, the sufferance of government censors at home, the vagaries of foreign contacts and the fickleness of capital investment schemes. From an aesthetic point of view, by conscientiously positioning themselves in dialogue with European, Japanese, and Hollywood film models, the creators of Bengali “art cinema” are careful to distinguish their work from the popular Bengali melodramas produced in Calcutta’s studios at Tollyganj, as much as from the Hindi-language action films and song-and-dance extravaganzas coming out of the Bombay megastudios collectively known as “Bollywood.” Yet however eager they are to familiarize themselves with the latest foreign techniques, however much they wish to make a mark on the world cultural scene, their content and imagery, and the message they are driven to convey are wholly infused with the local. Thus although they learned about the formal structures of cinematic narrative by watching European and Hollywood films, Bengali film makers feel a compulsion to tell Indian stories and use the medium to contribute to local tradition, specifically to a Bengali intellectual and aesthetic tradition that has focused on generating and developing an alternative, distinctively Bengali, modernity. Bengali film maker Satyajit Ray, who often cited his love of Western musical forms as a source of inspiration for his cinematic forms, always spoke candidly and explicitly about his debt to Western aesthetic traditions:

I am fully aware now, thanks to my Western critics, of the Western traits in my films. They have so often been brought to my notice that I can name them: irony, understatement, humour, open endings, the use of leitmotifs, a fluid camera and so on. These elements are never used consciously. It is not as if I find myself saying: Ah, now for a bit of British understatement. They are used intuitively to best serve the needs of the subject matter in hand (quoted in Armes 1987: 231).

As Ray wrote to a friend in 1989:

If I have succeeded as a film-maker, it is because of my familiarity with western artistic, literary and musical traditions. Add to that my observation of Indian life, and you have my prescription (in DasGupta 1994: 163).

Ray's observation of Indian life is based on an appreciative indigenous "eye" developed in the course of the aesthetic education he received within his cultured family and at the poet Rabindranath Tagore's university in Shantiniketan. As Ray recognized, the synthesis of East and West to which he aspired could only be realized by someone with feet in both cultures, someone sensitive enough to address issues of both form and content in such a way as to achieve a balance. Already in 1958 he had written an essay entitled "Problems of a Bengal Film-maker" that outlined his commitment to the local context and desire to educate the local audience:

...working in Bengal, we are obliged morally and artistically to make films that have their roots in the soil of our province...having in mind the nature of our audience and the resources at our disposal, we are further obliged to aim at an overall simplicity of approach...If the simple-but-serious approach can develop into a movement...there is the possibility that the taste of the public can be moulded to accept the new and reject the old (Ray 1976: 42).

The dilemma facing all Third World artists, as Sengoopta articulates it, is how to celebrate one's own culture with uncompromising fidelity but without being imprisoned by it (1993: 254). Ray, who claimed he was only really creative sitting in his chair at home in Calcutta, faced this quandary head on. He, like so many other Calcuttans I have known, expressed

unqualified love for his city with all its contradictions and gritty edges. Clearly there is something about the Calcutta context that enlivens and inspires. As Ray insisted:

There is something about creating beauty in the circumstances of shoddiness and privation that is truly exciting.

The fact that Bengali film makers brought the struggles and beauties of Bengal to the world's attention, while earning Western praise for the sensitivity of their portrayal of "universal humanity" is a source of very great pride for the Bengali people.

A Brief History of Film-making in Calcutta

Among the early pioneers of Bengali film-making, Hiralal Sen (1866-1917) began his career by exhibiting imported bioscope shows in wealthy households, and learned film-making as an assistant to a Pathé crew shooting in Calcutta in 1900. In 1905 Sen made a Swadeshi documentary of an Anti-Partition demonstration at Calcutta's Town Hall that, as Samik Banerji notes, "seems to have been India's first 'political film'" (in S. Chaudhuri 1990b: 294). He also produced a documentary on the Delhi Durbar of 1911 that the British would not allow to be screened.¹

India's first fictional feature was the mythological film Raja Harischandra, produced in Bombay in 1913 by Dadasaheb Phalke (1870-1944) who went on to produce

¹ The Delhi Durbar of 1911 was a ritual-laden imperial assembly where King George V had himself crowned Emperor of India and had leading Indian princes kneel in homage before him. As a "royal boon" he revoked Bengal's Partition, but at the same time announced the transfer of the capital to Delhi – a move intended to insulate Viceregal authority from provincial pressures and a devastating blow for Bengal (Sarkar 1989: 143; Cohn 1983).

over a hundred films. The first Bengali feature, also a mythological, was made in Calcutta in 1917 by J. F. Madan, a Parsi businessman who headed a giant film distribution corporation and became a major exhibitor. The film industry in India had come into being in the context of rapid and increasingly diversified World War I-era industrialization; wartime profits were productively invested in film production and the steadily expanding urban working class provided the bulk of the cinema audience.

From 1922 in Bengal, and 1923 in Bombay, the Government of India made efforts to regulate the industry, imposing an entertainment tax on film and formalizing censorship with political issues of primary concern (Armes 1987: 109). An official government body, the Indian Cinematographic Committee, reported in 1927-28 on the high profits made by the Indian film industry, noting that because low production costs could be recovered in a single run in a major city, “even an indifferent film yields a fair margin of profit” (108). Although only 15% of the Indian market was met by Indian films, Indian film production already exceeded that of Britain, with Hollywood films constituting the bulk of the 85% import sector (108). Indian films were in high demand, and although an exhibitor would pay more than for a Western film, larger attendance would ensure greater profits (112).

Designed for an unsophisticated mass audience, the early silent films were mainly filmed plays; they related familiar mythological stories, relying on action stunts, acrobatics, and dancing to hold the spectators’ attention. Live narrators often read title cards aloud and provided a running commentary of events on screen to aid audience comprehension (109). Furthermore audiences were quite familiar with the mythic tales being depicted and could easily anticipate the unfolding events. As a result Armes argues there was little incentive to

develop a specifically visual storytelling language or the tight narrative continuity that was evolving in Hollywood silent cinema (109). The distinctive Indian musical film form that emerged with the advent of sound can be traced to these characteristics of the silent era films and the manner in which they engaged the early Indian film audiences and their cultural knowledge of popular culture traditions (Armes 1987).

The first important Bengali film producer was Dhirendranath Ganguli (known as “D. G.”) (1893-1978), who originally trained as a painter in Calcutta’s Government Art School. Early on he developed an interest in photography, acting and make-up, and a great love for Charlie Chaplin. He set up the Indo-British Film Co that produced three silent features in 1921-22, the first of which, Bilatpherat (“England Returned”), initiated the popular genre of the romantic social comedy (S. Chakravarty 1993: 40). The film satirized the failure of recently returned Indian graduates to readjust to their homeland after educational stints abroad, and portrayed the mixture of stigma and awe with which society treated them.

In the late 1920s, D. G. teamed up with four Bengali aristocrats for his next venture, British Dominion Films Ltd., a company, that as Samik Banerji describes, “drew cinema out of the commercial entertainment discourse to re-locate it, at least formally, within the nationalist discourse that was defining itself in Bengal” (in S. Chaudhuri 1990b: 296). In his choice of subject matter D. G. aimed at Bengali *bhadralok* sensibilities and his company produced the first filmed versions of Saratchandra Chatterjee’s extremely popular novels. He discovered two actor-directors who would become central to “a typically Bengali *bhadralok* cinema” (296). Pramathesh Barua (1903-51) projected the struggle of the

individual against social orthodoxy in melancholic love stories, presenting an archetypal character of the self-marginalized rebel whose debauchery and transgressions provided a titillating contrast for the audience familiar with his personal history as a young raja (296; Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994). Debaki Basu evoked an ambience of faith, providing a warning against *bhadralok* secularist pretensions (296).

The first Indian sound films were released in 1931 and the effect was to bring into relief the linguistic divide in the vast film audience. The Hindi-speaking audience, though by far the largest, was less than half the Indian population (Armes 1987: 111). Big-budget all-India song-and-dance genre films that were made in Bombay in Hindi language (actually a Marathi-speaking area) came to serve a unifying national function. These popular fantasy films (which came to be called ‘masala films’ after a composite spice mix used in Indian cooking) were characterized by an artificially created pan-Indian aesthetic and a film style based on predictable plot lines, regular character types, and clear moral contrasts designed to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries.² Characters were usually without identifiable local roots and often given intentionally ambiguous names so that their identities in terms of community or place of origin remained indistinct; stars invariably used Hindu-sounding professional names. While Bombay earned renown as the site of ‘the world’s largest film industry,’ regional production centers, especially Calcutta and Madras,

² The tremendous popularity of Bombay cinema in Africa and the Middle East is indicative of ease with which these narratives and moral parables translate. See for example Brian Larkin’s explanation of the fascination for Indian popular cinema among the Hausa in Northern Nigeria in terms of its offering a fantasy of “parallel modernities” alternative to the West – images of modernity all the more appealing because they were “mediated through a concern for maintaining traditional social relations” (Larkin 1997: 433) .

carried on making smaller budget films in local languages. Successful regional films were often remade in Hindi for the all-India market.

The system of filming with recorded playback songs introduced in 1937 fueled further development of India's musical film genre by facilitating separate career trajectories for film stars and playback singers. The omnipresent sound of playback singer megastar Lata Mangeshkar's high pitched voice came to represent the Indian norm for feminine beauty in music. She is alleged to have recorded over 25,000 film songs; a 1989 compilation listed 5,066 Hindi songs between 1946 and 1989 (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994).

With the appearance of the new sound technology, Birendranath Sircar (1901-80), a London-trained civil engineer, son of an Advocate General applied himself to the mechanics of film-making and set up the organization that dominated Calcutta cinema throughout the 1930s and 40s. His film production company, New Theatres Ltd., produced "socially conscious" and literary-based films that upheld traditional personal and family values, striking a note of idealism and modernity with themes about the introduction of science and technology (S.Chakravarty 1993: 88). Active from 1931 to 1954, New Theatres surrounded its film-making in a "cult of respectability," drawing on only the best talents in all stages of the film production process, and devising a program of wholesome popular entertainment with songs and stars as the principal attraction that soon became formulaic. Samik Banerji highlights the personal combination of idealism and professionalism that Sircar necessarily drew upon in order to build up an experimental art industry. Yet despite its "technical competence and productional discipline" the

organization was nonetheless a commercial failure, and as Banerji would argue, citing “the banality of most of the New Theatres films,” it was also an artistic one (in S. Chaudhuri 1990b: 298).

What was it, Banerji asks, in the culture that evolved under colonialism in Calcutta that held Bengali cinema back? In part the answer lies in the model it adopted, namely the 2nd-rate Victorian theatre that became such a fad in mid-19th century Calcutta. Banerji offers this critical explanation of how these unfortunate theatrical roots were carried over into the new cinematographic industry:

It was a theatre grotesquely inhibited about using the body as a medium of expression, and therefore totally given over to emoting through verbal modulations and facial expressions. Words – often facile and pretentious – with ‘emotional’ faces and songs for relief, became the staple of Bengali cinema (298-99).

In the 1930s the *bhadralok* audience became fixated upon an emergent Bengali nationalist discourse (in contra-distinction to that of Gandhian politics) and avidly followed the modern movement in literature. In the meanwhile cinema, despite its pretense of commitment to “the legitimate theatre” and the literary talent it drew upon, seemed to offer only antiquated ideas.

It was what Samik Banerji describes as “the overall internationalization of Calcutta culture in the War Years” that transformed Bengali cinema. The war economy meant increased returns at the box office, and a larger number of working class patrons increased the demand for lighter entertainment. The investment of illicit wartime profits in films and the rise of the independent producer was responsible for the demise of the studio system (Chakravarty 1993: 42-44).

An enormously successful populist film of the day was Bimal Roy's socially conscious and overtly nationalist Udayar Pathe ("Awakening") made for New Theatres in 1944. Making symbolic references to both Bengali and international traditions of social reform, it depicts the milieu of a class-conscious activist intellectual, presenting him as nationalist hero. The story contrasts the polarized social worlds of rich Anglicized industrialists and poor wage-earners in a moral parable with a message of hope at the end as the industrialist's daughter abandons her finery to join the people (Chakravarty 1993: 89-91). Satyajit Ray has praised its timely theme, admirable moral stance and use of unknown actors in lead roles. The film was soon remade in Hindi, and Chakravarty notes its significance as a realist film that embodies "pre-independence moral passion and visionary zeal," transposing its Bengali ethos and sensibility to an all-India level (91).

In another populist effort to focus national attention on Bengal's struggle, the IPTA transformed its successful theatrical production Nabanna into a Hindi film, directed by K. A. Abbas, Dharti ke Lal (literally "Red Flag," but released with the English title Children of the Earth). Despite some brilliant performances, Banerji describes the film as "a sad testimony," remarking on its lack of sensitivity and its failure to take up the challenge to Victorian dramaturgy that Nabanna had initiated (in S. Chaudhuri 1990b: 299).

The founding of the Calcutta Film Society in 1947 by a group of young film enthusiasts that included Satyajit Ray and Chidananda DasGupta inspired the city's intellectuals through discussions of "serious" cinema and screenings of cinematic treasures such as Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin, Flaherty's Nanook of the North and Louisiana Story that the society managed to acquire. Among the inspired was Nimai Ghosh, who

made a film in 1951 entitled Chhinnamul with what Bannerji describes as “ruthlessly authentic documentation” of the Partition and the influx of East Bengali migrants into specific sites in Calcutta such as Sealdah railway station and the refugee camps in the south of the city (299). He made use of non-professional actors, and despite protest refused to incorporate the usual songs, drawing instead upon the talents of IPTA members and actual refugees, none of whom had ever been on camera. The Russian film-makers Pudovkin and Cherkasov who saw the film on a visit to Calcutta wrote a complimentary letter to Ghosh:

...a genuine realism comes into its own for the first time in Indian cinema with your outstanding film, and we hope that Indian cinema will develop now in that direction (300).

An important milestone event for Calcutta film enthusiasts was Jean Renoir’s 1949 visit to the city for the shooting of his film The River. Future film-makers Nimai Ghosh and Satyajit Ray enjoyed extensive and fruitful conversations with him; Bansi Chandra Gupta, who would become Ray’s art director, made sets for the film, and cameraman Ramananda Sengupta, who later worked for Ritwik Ghatak, received invaluable experience and training in the course of the shooting.

The next major film event in Calcutta was the 1952 International Film Festival, which was most Calcuttans’ first exposure to Italian Neo-Realist cinema, the films of DeSica and Rosellini and the work of the Japanese master Kurosawa. Building on lessons and responses drawn from the already familiar Soviet cinema of the 20s, the festival experience created an unprecedented excitement and demand for more aesthetically stimulating cinema. Mrinal Sen has described his experience there, long before he ever worked in cinema, as feeling a kind of “‘contagion’ spread in the air,” “running...from one

theatre to another religiously watching the wonder that was post-War world cinema” (in S. Chaudhuri 1990b: 300).

This new demand for cinema as a critical and expressive “high art” form bore fruit in Calcutta of the mid-50s in the work of Bengali film-makers Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen. Arguing that it was this Soviet and Italian neo-realist inflected cinema that could best reflect the complexity of the postcolonial disillusionment experienced in Calcutta, Samik Banerji describes the new Bengali cinema’s rich potential:

[It was] a cinema that could look closely, critically and ironically at the changing social and political scene from the distinctive sensibility of a city and a class created by colonialism yet struggling continuously against it both internally and externally (300).

Thus was initiated a movement that is described using metaphors of waves, the first of which was made up of the work of Ray, Ghatak and Sen whose motivations, aspirations and cultural production will be discussed in the second half of this chapter. Significantly for our purposes here, Samik Banerji characterizes the outcome of these first and second waves of Bengali film-making as particularly Calcutta-centric:

[There has] by now evolved a Bengali cinema that is essentially a product of this city with its sentimental attachment to a community life, its artistic and intellectual predilections, its not too strident radicalism, its internationalism, its inspired amateurism that allows it to play with technology. The city has almost always been at the centre of the typical ‘new’ Bengali film...

Satyajit Ray

Born in Calcutta in 1921, Satyajit Ray was brought up in a culturally distinguished Bengali family who were early members of the Brahmo Samaj, a reformist community that combined Hinduism with Christian forms of worship and embraced a puritanical ethic to modernize traditional Hindu society. His paternal grandfather, Upendrakishore (1863-1915), was a pioneer half-tone printmaker and book publisher, owner-manager of a printing firm known as U Ray & Sons that he founded in 1895,³ and a frequent contributor of scientific and theoretical articles to British print industry journals. He had a good ear for music, played the flute and violin, and wrote songs for Brahmo Samaj services. He wrote, illustrated, printed and published books for children, including a classic collection of Bengali folk tales, using the everyday language of Calcutta that was an important milestone in the de-Sanskritization of Bengali prose writing. In 1913 Upendrakishore began publishing a children's magazine Sandesh that aimed with humor and variety to appeal to urban children by popularizing science and presenting stories from Hindu mythology in a manner that demystified them and drew connections with everyday experience (Mitter 1991: 151). His grandson Satyajit later revived the magazine as a site for his own popular illustrations and to debut his detective thrillers and suspense stories to a young audience.

Satyajit's father Sukumar (1887-1923), had written plays and patriotic songs during the Swadeshi era, and in his early 20s studied and wrote criticism on photography. In 1911, just prior to the First World War, he went to London to further his photographic and

³ See the discussion in Chapter Five of the central role U. Ray & Sons' color plates played in the formation of Bengali middle class taste in art.

printing skills, where he was joined by his friend Rabindranath Tagore on a round of social visits with London's artistic, literary, and religious circles sympathetic to Indian culture. Two months after their departure for India in 1913, Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize. In 1922 Sukumar became the second Indian member of the Royal Photographic Society. He played a central role in convening some famous Calcutta literary *addas* including the Nonsense Club and the fondly remembered Monday Club, a witty, versifying collective whose members were invited "in the interest of plain living and high thinking, teas and biscuits"(S.Chaudhuri 1990b: 227).

Sukumar shared the Ray family passion for children's literature and won a devoted Bengali audience with his now classic nonsense rhymes and inventive illustrations, keenly satirical and deeply rooted in Bengali behavior (Robinson 189: 23-4). They introduced a new kind of comic drawing that synthesized fantasy and a sharp observation of real behavior, mingling the surreal with the mundane, the magical with the real, and introducing outlandish characters such as the colonial hybrid "Blighty Cow" and comic vignettes of critical social satire such as "Law Under Section 21" that outlined the imposition of fines for tripping (Mitter 1991:153). His puns and alliterations ingeniously juxtaposed Bengali and English, in a clever melange that "made perfect sense in the bilingual colonial milieu of urban Calcutta in the early decades of this century" (153). They were published in book form, now the Bengali classic Abol Tabol, and in the children's magazine Sandesh. Sukumar died when Satyajit was only three years old, and Ray's mother, Suprabha, who was an accomplished singer of Rabindra Sangeet (the poetic and devotional songs of

Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore) and a sculptor in clay, raised him in her brother's large extended family household.

After graduating with honors in Economics and Physics from Presidency College in 1939, Ray went to Tagore's university in Shantiniketan for what he describes as "my most important formative years." There he studied painting for three years with Nandalal Bose and Benode Behari Mukherjee.⁴ After a study-tour of the art and monuments of Central India, Ray left Santiniketan in 1942, obtaining work in Calcutta as a commercial artist with a British advertising agency D. J. Keymer & Co. He also began designing book jackets and doing illustrations for Signet Press, including a 1946 edition of Bibhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhyay's novel Pather Panchali. He was soon considered one of Calcutta's leading graphic artists, and in 1950 Keymer's sent Ray to London for advanced training in drafting and illustration. On that trip he was able to see nearly a hundred films in four and a half months. In particular DeSica's Bicycle Thieves struck him as a revelation: "I came out of the theatre my mind firmly made up, I would become a film-maker"(in Robinson 1989: 71).

Ray immediately wrote a letter to his future art director Bansi Chandragupta communicating some of the inspiration he drew from watching Bicycle Thieves:

The entire conventional approach (as exemplified by even the best American and British films) is wrong. Because the conventional approach tells you that the best way to tell a story is to leave out all except those elements which are directly related to the story, while the master's work clearly indicates that if your theme is strong and simple, then you can include a hundred little apparently irrelevant details which, instead of obscuring the theme, only help to intensify it by contrast, and in addition create the illusion of actuality better (in Robinson 1989: 72).

⁴ See Chapter Five for a discussion of the art school Kala Bhavan and the work of these artists.

On the return journey by ship to India, full of inspired ideas, he began writing the script and making drawings for a film version of Pather Panchali. Upon his return to Calcutta, he wrote a review of Bicycle Thieves for the Film Society Bulletin, which, as Robinson notes, “seems virtually to be describing his own film to come”:

Simplicity of plot allows for intensive treatment, while a whole series of interesting and believable situations and characters sustain interest...For a popular medium, the best kind of inspiration should derive from life and have its roots in it. No amount of technical polish can make up for artificiality of theme and dishonesty of treatment. The Indian film-maker must turn to life, to reality. De Sica ...should be his ideal (in Robinson 1989: 72).

The five year saga of the film’s completion began with weekend shootings with a rented 16mm camera when Ray was still working full time for the advertising firm. Their procedure defied local film-making conventions and all advice and expectations by successfully shooting outdoor scenes on location in a nearby village with inexperienced actors and crew. When the initial sequences they managed to complete failed to impress local producers sufficiently to have them risk investment capital, Ray pawned his wife’s jewelry, redeemed an insurance policy and sold his art books and records. Eventually he secured the financial backing of the Government of West Bengal and a commitment for a screening at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where the film had its world premiere in April 1955 as part of an exhibition of Indian culture.

With a nod of approval from Nehru, Pather Panchali overcame opposition from the Governments of India and West Bengal to its depiction of Indian poverty and was screened at the film festival in Cannes where Ray was awarded a prize for “Best Human Document.” London critic Lindsay Andersen published an effusive account in the Observer, offering this graphically orientalist homage:

Cannes 1956 has discovered a new masterpiece of poetic cinema... You cannot make films like this in a studio, nor for money. Satyajit Ray has worked with humility and complete dedication; he has gone down on his knees in the dust. And his picture has the quality of intimate, unforgettable experience (in Robinson: 104).

The following year Aparajito (“The Unvanquished”), the second of what was to become known as the Apu trilogy, was also screened in Cannes. Ray was stunned to receive the Golden Lion award before an appreciative international audience that included Henry Fonda, Maria Callas and Toshiro Mifune. The trilogy, completed in 1959 with Apur Sansar (“The World of Apu”), chronicled a Bengali Brahmin family’s migration from their destitute village in search of livelihood in the city, first in the holy city of Benares. After the death of his father, the boy rejects the family’s traditional vocation of the priesthood and leaves his mother behind in the village to go and study at the University in Calcutta and become a writer. The fact that these films of Ray’s, seen in the West as poignant tales of India’s modernization, began to draw international attention had important implications for Bengali cultural nationalist pride as well.

The Bengali Response

Once Pather Panchali was released in Calcutta, word soon caught on and the cinema houses began to fill; Bengali *bhadralok* audiences returned for repeat viewings, reveling in what they now describe with words like “furore” and “sensation.” They became participants in what would become an annual Bengali ritual: catching the latest Ray film and joining the public discussion about its merits, both as a reflection of Bengali social

mores and as a contribution to world culture. Ray's film is thought by many to have brought about a radical shift in consciousness, completely transforming taste among the *bhadralok*. Suddenly filmgoing became respectable and at least the "right sort" of non-commercial cinema, devoid of popular formulae, came to be appreciated as an art form and a new object of intellectual and aesthetic inquiry. At a time when Calcutta's Tollyganj Studios were producing on average 50 films a year, mostly melodramas and mythologicals, Moinak Biswas describes how the *bhadralok* settled on a new "high art" distinction:

This taste became firmly dismissive of all the vulgar codes of music, dancing, costume and histrionic panache. Suggestion and subtle wit, economy of expression and lyrical understatement became hallmarks of cinematic literacy (in Sukanta Chaudhuri 1990b: 303).

To understand how Ray's films spoke to a Bengali audience, it is instructive to turn to the writings of Bengali critics. Chidananda DasGupta has written that although Ray lacked direct experience of Bengali village life, his "rich appreciation of Indian tradition" created within him a significant "urge to discover his people" (1994[1980]: 20). Through the medium of his film, Ray was able to communicate the learning process that the making of Pather Panchali had represented for him, and, as Dasgupta emphasizes, it was a significant rediscovery "on behalf of his somewhat westernized generation of the educated middle class, [of] how the other half lives" (20). According to Moinak Biswas, Ray's classic form of humanist realism offered the urban Bengali audience that was increasingly cut off from the countryside a way of framing rural reality that was at once an acceptance and a refusal of that reality (in Sukanta Chaudhuri 1990b: 303).

In her discussion of the realist aesthetic in Indian popular cinema and its "'idealist' thread," Sumita Chakravarty labels realism "a mark of value," a sign of 'authenticity' and

sincerity on the part of the film-maker (1993: 80). “The appeal of realism in popular culture...[was] the call to an empathic identification with the underprivileged” (81). She argues that in 1950s India, realism was a nation-building tool, predicated on the idea of projecting images not of what Indian society was, “but what it should be” (81). As such, that invocation of realism speaks to the intelligentsia’s process of formulating a national identity and the politics of self-representation. Chakravarty brilliantly distills her ideas into this creative aphorism: “Realism is the masquerading moral conscience of the Indian intelligentsia...” (81).

Ray’s creative efforts clearly addressed some shared need, as Chidananda Dasgupta attempted to explain further:

The modern educated Indian needs to find the umbilical cord linking him with his own tradition and with the common man and thus save himself from being a refugee. Ray’s first film showed the way for an exorcism of his guilt of being privileged (Das Gupta 1994[1980]: 21).

What Dasgupta also sees as significant is the fact that Pather Panchali demonstrated that cinema could evoke the progressive values already appreciated as an integral component of the other contemporary arts in Bengal, especially literature and theatre, namely realist narrative, social awareness, and compassion for the individual human being (Das Gupta 1994: 26). Das Gupta neatly summarized the Bengali view of the global significance and impact of Ray’s innovative “encounter with regional reality”:

Pather Panchali marked the baptism of Indian cinema in both its cinematic language and its Indianness...(21).

The Nature of Aesthetic Experience – An Indian Perspective

While Das Gupta praises the “progressive values” of Ray’s cinema, drawing parallels with other treasured Bengali art forms, a recent assessment has presented an Indian critical take on the aesthetic values that Ray’s representational innovations evoke (Cooper 2000). What enabled Ray “to both represent and present” Indian life according to Cooper was the inspiration of the emotion-centered form of the *rasa* theory.⁵ Just as in the classical Sanskrit theatre tradition, in which the visual and aural collaborate to arouse the spectator, Ray’s filmic language asks the spectator to savor each scene and actually “taste” the quality of the emotional nuance evoked (21). Cooper argues that in Ray’s early films “what is represented is a *dominant state of emotion* and the actions performed by the characters are subordinated to this prevalent emotional tone”(21). His analysis of the Apu Trilogy emphasizes the principle of *camatkara*, which he glosses as “the epiphany of wonder”(24). Cooper details the audience’s immersion in this sensation of “inner fullness” as they appreciate the spectacle of Apu’s imaginative engagement and enthusiastic discovery of the world (24).

But, as Ray learned, in order to be sure of gratifying his literature-devoted Bengali audience, it was important to be meticulous in honoring his source. Unlike Pather Panchali which had kept close to the original text, Aparajito irritated those familiar with the novel for its divergence from Bibhuti Bhusan’s original. Even more significantly, the broader suburban audience was shocked and distressed by Ray’s portrayal of the mother-son

⁵ See Chapter Four pp. 111-2 for a discussion of *rasa* theory.

relationship which, as Ray describes, was “so sharply at variance with the conventional notion of mutual sweetness and devotion” (Ray 1976: 42). Such “liberties” with his source material, and challenges to traditional Bengali social convention, cost Ray money in the market at home.

Elaboration of a Working Method

The method Ray developed for his film-making, and every aspect of the film production he oversaw, was intended to serve the needs of his source material. His technique – lighting, set design, camerawork, dialogue – would always evolve directly out of what he saw as the requirements of the subject matter in hand. As Robinson expressed it: “A film must have organic cohesion growing naturally from its original inspiration”(1989: 306). Camera movements would reflect the characters’ emotional states, their relationships with others and to the space around them. Objects in a shot would be carefully chosen (Ray was famous for spending hours combing Calcutta’s auction houses and second hand stores) and judiciously placed to reveal the character of their owners. Ray makes us highly sensitive to his characters’ reactions to what they see. Armes described Ray’s method as building up strands of plot using “a mass of brilliantly observed and often very funny details” (Armes 1987: 232). Ray referred to this intuitive method as “the revelation of large truths in small details” (in Robinson 1983: 78).

Ray himself maintained: “The best technique is the one that’s not noticeable”(78). If his technique is unobtrusive, and what appears on the screen often startling in its

simplicity and immediacy, it is because his methods of working were precise and disciplined. His ideas were always carefully-considered and committed to paper long before shooting; this well-developed shooting script was then carefully orchestrated and improvised on the spot. Robinson writes of the impression that Ray's "technique is somehow 'old-fashioned,' in keeping with his moral outlook...his temperament and feeling for tradition and continuity in life" (306-7). When asked about his "so-called classicism," Ray is said to have responded:

If classical implies an orderly unfolding of events with a beginning, a middle and an end – in that order; a firm rein applied to emotion; and an avoidance of disorientation for its own sake, then I will be only too happy with the label (308).

As Ray explained to Robinson:

I do not think spontaneity is incompatible with careful planning and careful film-making... A film that gives the impression of spontaneity is in nine cases out of ten the result of a high degree of discipline applied to an imaginative process that is sustained to the last stages of making a film (in Robinson 1989: 308-9).

Because Ray's interests extended well beyond what he recognized as the "rather limited field" of his entirely urban upper middle class experience, in order to address other milieus of which he did not have first hand knowledge he relied on the work of those who did. For his village-based stories (Pather Panchali, Aparajito, and Distant Thunder) he relied on the writings of Bibhutibhusan Banerjee. For the seedy urban lower class world depicted in The Middle Man he relied on the novelist Shankar for the authentic details, for "he had been to such places and spoken to such women" whereas Ray certainly had not (Robinson 1983: 217). In addition to descriptions with an eye for rich visual detail, he always chose stories with an intriguing psychological dimension. The characters he favored

are struck with doubts and crises of conscience, caught in moments of indecision, and many undergo a total inner change in the course of the story.

The Question of Audience

The success of Pather Panchali and Aparajito at European film festivals opened a whole new dimension for Ray; he suddenly realized that “a Bengali film-maker did not have to depend on the home market alone” (Ray 1976: 42). Due to the loyalty of the Bengali middle-class audience, his films always recovered their costs at the local box offices, but to ensure producer profits the small overseas “art house” market became disproportionately important. But this reliance on the audience abroad to solve grievous financial problems created new dilemmas. Writing in 1958, Ray summarized his somewhat sanguine view of the matter:

...our approach must be cautious and honest. There is no reason why we should not cash in on the foreigner’s curiosity about the Orient. But this does not mean pandering to their love of the false-exotic (42).

As Ray saw it, it was the Bengali artist’s responsibility to address Western misconceptions and ignorance about India:

A great many notions about our country and our people have to be dispelled, even though it maybe easier and – from a film point of view – more paying to sustain existing myths than to demolish them (43).

Yet Bengalis pridefully insist that Ray’s films are made for them, and, as Sengoopta has written, not with a view toward pleasing the West:

...the Western market never influenced Ray's choice of subject or style. He was always delighted when his films won appreciation or audiences abroad, but he never made films with an international audience in mind (253).

Ray himself offers this explanation of his motivations, explaining how his film-making process has grown out of the context in which he works:

I don't think of the Western audience when I make my films. I am thinking of my own audience in Bengal. I am trying to take them along with me, and this I have succeeded in doing. At the beginning, this audience was extremely unsophisticated. They were used to trash or the naive Bengali film. You had to take them along slowly... I can't do all that Bergman and Fellini do. I don't have their audience and I don't work in that kind of context. I have to contend with an audience that is used to dross... I am forced by circumstances to keep my stories on an innocuous level. What I can do, however, is to pack my films with meaning and psychological inflections and shades, and make a whole which will communicate a lot of things to many people (in Gupta 1982: 29).

Ray's work offered a new and different way of looking at reality. The influence of the Hollywood format is evident in the unfolding of plot in Ray's storytelling, and indeed Ray's serious interest in cinema began with the taking of scribbled notes in the dark on the cutting of US movies back in the mid 1940s (Robinson 1989: 315). He also makes use of Italian neo-realist techniques in his establishment of a "concrete setting." Misra describes the camera:

...literally waiting for the 'texture' of a setting to unfold before moving on, in a very measured tempo, to link the inanimate objects, symbols, etc, with the actions of the character...this form was used by Ray to pack a simple story line with elements of history (Misra 1992: 1052).

It was what Ray labeled as one of his "preoccupations" to achieve as much density as possible within a superficially simple narrative structure (Gupta 1982: 29). Ray explained his thoughts on narrative:

I merely present certain incidents, and through the incidents and through the reaction of people to the incidents, certain facts emerge. Fairly complex facts,

because there are always two sides to a thing...That's how I like to present my stories, without making any kind of bombastic propaganda statements. They're stories first and foremost, they're tales, shall we say. I believe in plot. Because India has a great tradition of stories. And it makes for a kind of orderliness which helps an audience which is not used to intellectual subtleties. And yet it affords you to be subtle in other things (in Das Gupta, ed.1981: 127).

This sense of 'Indianness' was carried further by Ray's friend, critic Chidananda DasGupta as he summarized the worldview revealed in Ray's films:

Ray's work has more than a trace of traditional Indian "fatalism." It has a sense of detachment, a distance from the event. It is imbued with the sense that no man chooses the time or place of his birth or the circumstances that surround it. It is within the circle predetermined by these that he struggles to exist, to make something of his opportunities. The nobility of man lies in the effort itself (1994[1980]: xii).

Yet it is this very distance and detachment of Ray's philosophical outlook, as much as his lack of anger, that earn him an attitude of dismissiveness among the radical youth of Bengal. They perhaps cannot appreciate that Ray's detachment, as DasGupta has put it, is "combined with compassion [in a manner that] makes it possible for the artist to see a wider arc of reality and to combine largeness of canvas with fineness of detail" (xiii).

Even as they are well aware that in watching a Ray film there are a thousand details and bits of cultural information that they are not privy to, Ray's method and vision are admired by many Western critics – (while those not aware merely complain that the films are too slow). Before turning to a description of some of Ray's Calcutta-based films, I want to include some commentary on Ray from critics of the Western popular press. Writing in New York's Newsday Joseph Gelmis observed:

Watching a Ray film is like looking through a telescope focused on the relationships of a small group of characters. The shots are composed and connected with an irresistible flow...there is, in the interplay of characters, action and lyricism, emotional violence, humor and grief (1995).

Gelmis then goes on to neatly summarize what I see as typical of the more sensitive Western appreciation of Ray's work:

He was the archetype of the artist who finds the whole world in a leaf of grass. His films are universal paradoxically, because they are so true to their roots and local culture: Ray demystifies the Indian zeitgeist, puts us into the sandals of his characters (1995).

And this lyrical observation of American film critic Pauline Kael's is cited enthusiastically by DasGupta as an example of a Western critic who "got it," if only intuitively (and unlike the Bengalis who while focusing on the trees tend to miss the forest):

...the images are suffused with feeling and become overwhelmingly, sometimes unbearably, beautiful. The emotions that are immanent may never develop, but we're left with the sense of a limitless yet perhaps harmonious natural drama that the characters are part of. There are always larger, deeper associations impending; we recognize the presence of the mythic in the ordinary. And it's the mythic we're left with after the ordinary has been (temporarily resolved)...In Ray's work what remains inarticulate is what we remember...(in DasGupta 1994[1980]: xvi-xix).

Films on Calcutta

Mahanagar, completed in 1963, was Ray's first film examining life in contemporary Calcutta. Set in c.1955, it depicts the daily life of a struggling lower middle class family, unable to make ends meet on the salary of a single breadwinner. In the claustrophobic atmosphere of the family's dingy three room house it communicates much about the emotional ethos of the Bengali joint family and the generational clash of values that are a constant element of modern life in a still traditional society. Ray carefully captured the feel of their workaday world, including the opening and closing shots which detail Calcutta's

battered trams and broken street lights. Typical music and radio programs, which Ray had carefully outlined in his shooting script, waft into their cramped and crowded rooms from adjoining flats.

Although much of the texture of the relationships is lost on non-Bengali viewers, the central issue of women's employment outside the home, and the resulting conflicts of personal and familial responsibilities, is a universal one easily recognized here. Madhabi Mukherjee gave a wonderfully expressive performance as the wife Arati, who, as she earns income and experiences new relationships outside the family sphere, develops a newfound sense of autonomy and confidence that wounds her husband's pride and generates household tensions. Amaresh Misra describes her role as typical of Ray's characters who appear as thinking and feeling autonomous human beings who nevertheless correspond to a particular historical social type or trend (Misra 1992: 1052). As an example of an individual character made to bear the historical contradictions of the period, he singles out a scene from Mahanagar in which "an apparently inconsequential act of a traditional woman applying a lipstick [can] take on the contours of a social event interlaced with a variety of meanings" (1052).

Ray's films are exceptional for their empathy with strong female characters, and this is clearly a legacy of Rabindranath Tagore and his profound influence on Ray's thinking. Based on Tagore's 1901 semi-autobiographical novella Nastanirh (The Broken Nest), Ray's 1964 film Charulata, which Ray has admitted is his personal favorite because it came close to perfection in communicating his vision, is a case in point. The central character Charu, played again by Madhabi Mukherjee, is in the process of becoming a woman of the new

modern type that was central to public discussion in late 19th century Bengal – intelligent, curious about the outside world, eager to develop her talents, drawn to literature. Her journalist husband is the archetypal Bengal Renaissance man, full of dreams and passionate political debate, unable to give her the love she craves.

The story centers on the relationship she develops with her husband's younger brother as he thrills her with his attention and encourages her to write. This affection between a young wife and her brother-in-law, a traditionally-accepted bond of Bengali social convention, becomes amorous here, taking on an illicit thrill that is clearly dangerous. Ray was fanatical in his attention to detail in recreating the historical period, researching political debates of the day from the Afghan war to British debates about the Press Act and Gladstone's reelection, and recreating period street sounds and elaborate interiors typical of Calcutta's upper classes of the 1880s. Ray composed the entire musical score, as he had for Mahanagar, but here, as seemed appropriate to the story, he experimented with fusing Indian and Western music. Ray wrote variations on two Tagore songs that served as recurrent themes, one incorporating a Scottish tune the poet had first heard in England. He also composed music tinged with the folk tunes of the Bengali countryside, as Charu's memories of her village childhood inspire her to write an autobiographical essay.

After completing Charulata, Ray wrote an article on composing for films in which he argued that film music "did not have to maintain caste" by trying to shut out western melodies, structures and instruments (Robinson 1983: 316). His inspiration was the rural *jatra* performances he had attended in the early 1950s, in which musicians made daring and

experimental use of imported instruments such as violins, clarinets, cornets and piccolos to accompany the performers' booming voices. For conjuring certain moods, Ray loved to use elements from well known ragas, occasionally shifting from one to another to introduce tension, in a manner that would be deemed impermissible in a classical performance. An occasional wrong note might also be introduced to achieve a dramatic effect. Ray's intention was for the music to accent the flow of images without being too distracting, and to be subtle enough not to underestimate the audience's ability to grasp the scene's essential mood. He wanted to engage the interest of both Indian and western viewers, while expressing the mixture of influences in the characters' experience, the nature of their 'cosmopolitan consciousness' (Robinson 1983: 317-8).

A Shift to the Contemporary Era

In the early 1970s Ray made a trilogy of films about contemporary life in Calcutta, all of which communicate the stress of the city's life on young, educated men. It was a period of economic and political crisis in the city; Calcutta was in a state of dramatic economic decline as a port and industrial base, and strikes and student unrest had become common.⁶ Ray's disgust and disillusionment are clearly evident in what he had to communicate. Unused to open political demonstrations, Ray had made a fondly remembered gesture of leading a silent procession to protest the Government's imprisonment without trial of food movement demonstrators. His image was soon plastered

⁶ This period has been discussed in Chapter Three p. 98ff.

around the city on Anti-Congress billboards sponsored by the CPIM [Communist Party (Marxist)]. A Communist-dominated United Front Government was elected in Calcutta in February 1967, in 1970-71 Calcutta fell prey to all out urban guerilla warfare.

After making two films that had distracted him with their distance from Calcutta's tensions (a musical comedy based on a story of his grandfather's that quickly became part of Bengali popular culture for children, and a story about a group of Calcuttans on holiday at a forest rest house), Ray felt compelled to use his medium to address the changes he was witnessing in the city. A recent work by Bengali novelist Sunil Ganguli struck him as the perfect vehicle, and he went into production immediately. In a letter written at the time, Ray expressed his nervousness about possible public reaction to this 1970 film Pratidwandi ("The Adversary"), noting that it was "the first truly contemporary film made here" and "the most provocative film I have made yet" (in Robinson 1989: 204).

The Adversary's central character, Siddharta, is an intelligent and frustrated young man, constrained by social responsibilities and unable to find decent employment. The film opens with a scene of one of Calcutta's horrifically overcrowded buses carrying Siddharta to yet another job interview. In the context of the interview, in which Siddharta is asked to identify the most significant world event of the last ten years, his response – the 'plain human courage' shown by the Vietnamese people in the face of American aggression – dismays his interlocutors who suggest the moonlanding as the preferable option. When Siddharta tries to justify his opinion ("you see no one knew they had it in them"), a shocked and angry bureaucrat, in no mood to tolerate the boy's moralizing, shoots back "Are you a Communist?," clearly sealing Siddharta's fate. Scenes from his subsequent aimless

wanderings in the city are depicted, clearly offering no relief for his troubled state of mind: a crowded student hostel, a cinema hall that instead of offering relaxation is subject to a bomb blast, an annoying group of Western hippies in the park cooing about the wonders of the Orient, a drunken friend who tries to fix him up with a prostitute. Ray has the images go into negative to dramatize Siddharta's revulsion. By chance he meets a girl, and they develop a relationship, walking and talking in the city, that provides some solace. In one memorable scene, they are in an enormous empty space at the top of one of Calcutta's tallest modern buildings, overlooking a mass political rally with loudspeakers blaring incomprehensibly in the park below. He clearly feels an affinity for the girl, and they vow to stay in touch whatever happens. In a final interview scene, exasperated by the interminable wait (in which Ray depicts him visualizing his fellow aspirants turned to skeletons) he snaps and erupts into uncontrollable fury, overturning furniture and smashing everything in sight. Afterwards, city walls covered with political graffiti give way to blurred rural landscape seen from the window of a moving train; Siddharta has surrendered to circumstances and is forced to leave the city for a job in a provincial town.

The next film of the Calcutta trilogy, Seemabaddha ("Company Limited") of 1971, centers on a rising young executive, one of the city's western-oriented commercial community who are scathingly referred to by the Raj-era term as box-wallahs. Their lives revolve around office cocktail parties, the company flat, country clubs and racetracks. Distant explosions in the city streets below – bombs? gunfire? – are barely audible and do not concern them. Ray clearly views their world as somewhat immoral; ambition easily corrupts them. As always, Ray is interested in examining the processes by which his

characters come to realizations about themselves. In Company Limited it is a rather sudden visit from an old home town friend that causes the central character to recognize how much his corporate aspirations have changed him.

The plot centers around the deliberate provocation of a factory conflict, staged in order that a workers' lockout can be declared just in time to avoid stiff penalties for non-delivery and meet the terms of an otherwise unfulfillable contract. In the course of the unrest the seniormost factory watchman is badly injured in a bomb explosion; sick jokes are made about the appropriate condolences management ought to send. When the central character Syamalendu, the perpetrator of the whole desperate scheme, is rewarded with a long-coveted directorship, the silent judgement of the visitor, and his own crisis of conscience, renders his victory a pyrrhic one.

During the shooting of Company Limited from March to May 1971, as Satyajit Ray told an interviewer: "bombings and shootings had become part of the fabric of everyday life" (Robinson 1989: 205). Naxalites had turned parts of South Calcutta into "liberated zones"; they were living and storing ammunition in the editing rooms and film studios at Tollyganj, forcing two of the largest including New Theatres to close down. For the next few years Ray turned his attention away from present day events. In 1972-73 he made a film he had long wanted to make about the Bengal Famine of 1943-44, calling it Asani Sanket ("Distant Thunder"). He then made a detective film for children Sonar Kella ("Golden Fortress"), and a documentary tribute to his art teacher in Santiniketan, Binode

Bihari Mukherjee titled The Inner Eye.⁷ Complaining in a letter about the deteriorating quality of life in Calcutta at the time, Ray wrote: “I find the contemporary scene doesn’t lend itself to crystallization. And since the really important truths cannot be told for obvious reason – it’s best to leave it alone” (in Robinson 1989: 206-7).

Again it was the discovery of a new Bengali novel, Jana Aranya (“The Middle Man”) by an author known as Shankar, that refocused Ray’s interest on events and characters in the city, providing him with an opportunity to tell a story that, as Robinson describes “chimed with his mood of bleak cynicism at the time” (207). As Ray told Robinson he saw this project as “right and necessary...valid to the Calcutta of those days” (207). His film of the same title was completed in mid-1975 just as Mrs. Gandhi declared the Emergency. It could not have been a more controversial moment to come out with this rather scathing depiction of a Congress politician. One scene even included a sinister caricature of Mrs. Gandhi drawn on a wall in Ray’s own hand.

The film is about petty corruption and the gritty ambience of small-time clandestine and unscrupulous business rackets. Darkness pervades both the mood and lighting of its scenes and their disturbing reality. The story begins as two undistinguished college graduates seek a way to earn a living. Somnath rents desk space from a street-wise mentor and begins a small enterprise as an “order-supplier” – buying commodities cheap and selling at a profit. Sukumar settles for driving a taxi. Somnath’s occupation as a middleman, a *dalal* in Bengali, rapidly shades over with grim irony into the term’s slang

⁷ For a discussion of Mukherjee’s place in the Bengali art world and Ray’s tribute to him see the discussion in Chapter Five p. 204 ff.

connotation as a procurer of women. Thwarted in his efforts to obtain a suitable woman of experience for an important client, he is horrified to discover that the most promising of the new prospective candidates is the sister of his friend Sukumar. As he delivers the sullen and determined girl to the client's hotel, his realization of the level to which he has sunk – a point of total corruption – is complete.

A Cultural Hero & Popular Icon

On the 23rd of April 1992, after three months in a Calcutta nursing home, Satyajit Ray died of heart failure, and the entire city went into mourning. It was a matter of tremendous pride for Bengalis that the American Academy of Motion Pictures had just recognized Ray's career and production of more than 30 films made over nearly four decades with an Oscar for Lifetime Achievement. His acceptance speech, videotaped at his bedside in March, had been broadcast as part of the awards ceremony. The day of Ray's funeral was declared a public holiday by the Communist led-coalition government, and it was estimated that one million people gathered to witness the passing of the flower-garlanded flatbed truck that bore his open coffin. Thousands brought flowers and filed past his body as it lay in state outside Nandan, the State of West Bengal Film Society auditorium, under the logo Ray had designed. Many commented that the last time a comparable crowd had amassed in Calcutta's streets was for the funeral of another Bengali icon, the poet Rabindranath Tagore in 1941. As Paul Levy, a journalist for the London Observer, wrote:

It is difficult for outsiders to understand the intensity with which [Ray] was loved by Bengalis...He was the best selling author in the Bengali language and the largest royalty earner in India (Levy 1992).

Levy then went on to quote prominent Indian journalists he'd spoken with, including the editor of Sunday, India's largest weekly news magazine, Oxford-educated Vir Sanghvi, who told him: "To the people of West Bengal it is as though William Shakespeare and John Lennon died on the same day." Calcutta's daily newspaper Telegraph printed an editorial, engaging in a by now customary mourning of Bengal's loss of self respect: "Satyajit Ray's death on Thursday was not merely a national tragedy, it was a Bengali disaster" (in Levy 1992).

Mrinal Sen

Born in Faridpur, East Bengal in 1923, Mrinal Sen was one of 12 children in a large household that was always full of visitors and political discussion. His father was a staunch nationalist and a lawyer, "an esteemed champion of the champions of lost causes," and because many of his clients were patriots with secret society connections, the house was frequently subjected to police raids (Hood 1993: 6). Sen was first arrested at the age of 8 for shouting seditious slogans, and was later active in the Faridpur branch of the Student Federation of India, the youth wing of the Communist Party. Sen was sent to Calcutta to study physics at Scottish Church College in 1940, but was soon drawn into Marxist politics in what was then "a hotbed of the radical students' movement"(12). He was arrested and held for a week on suspicion of liaison with the then illegal Communist Party in 1941. The

following year he supported the Party's "People's War" strategy, praising Britain's alliance with the Soviet Union, and boycotting Gandhi's Quit India Movement.

In 1943 Sen witnessed the pitiful influx of famine victims into the city and warrants that the shame and horror of "every day stepping over seven or so dead bodies" was a formative influence on his life outlook. That same year he joined the IPTA, with whom he traveled throughout Bengal developing his trademark shadow plays, supporting himself with work as a journalist and teacher. Asked to reflect on the Communist Party's influences on him in his youth, Sen replied with the nostalgia of hindsight:

In the 40s, it was too easy to know who our enemies were, and thus it was more or less along agit-prop lines that our whole aesthetic grew. That aesthetic played a very important role in that period...(in Puri 1984).

He has remained committed to left political causes all his life, though without party affiliations and always preserving his right to criticize the Left.

Sen's interest in cinema began with a scientific curiosity about sound technology, and a job as a technician in a film studio. Participation in the Calcutta Film Society movement led to inspiring encounters with Soviet films of the 20s. He began to read up on film aesthetics, writing film criticism and a book in Bengali on Charlie Chaplin.

Early Films

Sen completed his first film, Raat Bhore ("Night's End"), for which he also wrote the script, in 1956. He now describes it as "a stupid film" and "a deserved flop." After such a disappointing debut, it was not until 1959 that Sen ventured to direct another film.

Neel Akasher Neechey (“Under Blue Skies”) is set in Calcutta of the early 1930s and its primary character is a poor Chinese merchant. Though it was based on what Sen describes as “a conventional, sentimental story,” his aim was to convey a political message of cultural resistance and internationalism. He wanted to convey that “our struggle for national liberation during the British rule was inseparably linked with the world-wide struggle against fascism”(Sen 1977: 89). The film was well received and though he now sees it as quite crude, he stands by its politics, which earned him some acclaim as a political director.

In 1960 Sen made Baishey Sravana (“Wedding Day”) about a lonely traveling salesman who finds happiness in marriage to a teenage bride until an accident lames him. When the 1943 famine strikes, it takes on a leading, off-camera, role in the story. The poverty that is at the root of their unhappiness is given a neo-realist portrayal – “It was a cruel time. I wanted to make a cruel film...” – satisfying Sen with its “raw intensity” (Sen 1977: 96, 136). Though a commercial failure, the film was screened at the Venice film festival, where Sen was seen as a promising talent and given financial backing for his next venture.

World Cinema as Inspiration

In early 1965 Sen saw Truffaut’s 400 Blows and Jules and Jim in Bombay and their monumental impact on him was immediately apparent in his film work and cinematic thinking. Stylistically experimental, in his very next film Sen tried his hand at freeze frames, jittery camera movements, and pace and volume changes. His 1965 Akash Kusum

("Up in the Clouds") is a story about a young lower middle class Calcuttan caught up in the stresses of city life and its social strictures as he tries to bluff his way to success in a competitive business world and win the hand of an affluent girl. Although Sen was satisfied with it, and has described it as "a kind of gleeful exercise on a formal plane," he would later argue that the complexity of the theme and its urban setting were perhaps too great an expository burden for the film to bear (Sen 1977: 96).

Sen has often spoken of his reverence for socially engaged cinema, and the inspiration he has drawn from European, African, and Latin American film. "[I]n spite of its capital-oriented structure," he finds world cinema replete with examples of "a revolutionary orientation to film-making" by which he means a growing awareness of socio-economic and political concerns and "an intense urge to communicate and to mobilise opinion" (in Sen 1977: 97). Sen describes himself as "trying to associate with world events" and "continuously trying to free myself from anything that is parochial in us"(97). Village Voice film critic J. Hoberman once jokingly referred to Sen as "a fixture on the European film festival circuit," making it all the more curious that his films have been so rarely screened in New York (Hoberman 1984).

At home in Bengal, Sen is occasionally derided for his international proclivities. Reported in the press as having said "I have no great love for Bengali films," Sen drew an enormous amount of local criticism: "my colleagues in the studios got furious... they hurled abuses against me." Speaking derisively of fanatics who labeled him "anti-Bengali," Sen criticized the narrowness of this sort of attitude of blind cultural nationalism, which he describes using the epithet "parochialism":

How, may I ask, can my critics force me to love Bengali films simply because they are made in the Bengali language? Isn't this kind of an attitude our national malaise? Isn't this to be combated on all levels? And intensely hated? (100).

Using Borrowed Aesthetics Against the Grain

In an interview with critic Sumit Mitra in 1972-3, Sen expressed his utter lack of patience with convention-bound Indian cinema and his desire to defy the Establishment's rules "with a vengeance, if necessary":

Now is the time when we must strike at the existing structure of our industry, now is the time to challenge the so-called unalterable laws of film aesthetics (in Sen 1977: 91).

Attributing the industry's reluctance to break new aesthetic ground to its fear of financial risk, he alleged that glorifying arguments regarding both formal and thematic approaches were being produced in defense of the status quo and labeled 'Indianness' (Sen 1977: 91). As a means of addressing the poor quality of film production in India, "the huge lot of rubbish we still continue to put on celluloid," Sen posed a rhetorical question:

Could it be true, if I may ask, that too much of such allegiance to the high-sounding concept of 'tradition' driving us to the point of servility, was what had stopped us from looking 'objectively' into this new medium? Could it be true that we needed traces of iconoclasm to be able to accept this superb bastard art (Sen 1977: 104)?

Writing for the film periodical Jump Cut, critic Udayan Gupta praised the fact that Sen's politically committed cinema was setting itself apart from what had become the norm in Indian cinema, "trying very hard to rid itself of commercial trappings and commerce-oriented formulas":

He is trying to transform film from the purely mindless entertainment that it is in India into a medium that provokes and raises the level of audience consciousness (Gupta 1976).

As Gupta observed, it was Sen's striving to combine social relevance and formal innovation that had made him something of a "cult hero"(1976). Sen identified important political lessons in what he described as French New Wave cinema's successful "frontal attack," arguing that their "showing the medium as a continuously growing entity and freeing the tools from the rules of the Establishment," was not only a grand technical victory but a major political act (1977: 92).

By Sen's own admission his two subsequent films that explored Calcutta's socio-political scene, "look like pamphlets at places" (1977: 92). As the American critic Derek Malcolm saw it, with these films, an already "experimental director threw caution and orthodox narrative cinema to the winds"(in Wakeman, ed. 1988: 1013). Interview (1971) has been described as "a tragic farce on the lingering colonial attitudes in India" (Mitra in Sen 1977: 95). Udayan Gupta characterizes it as a satirical and "extremely stylized film built around a very simple incident" – namely, the failure of an unemployed Calcuttan to obtain a Western suit for a job interview. The film, which combines fictional narrative with *cinema verité* type documentation, begins with historical newsreel footage depicting the removal of imperialist statues from Calcutta's public spaces, and makes pointed commentary on the Victorian morals and colonial attitudes that still persist in Indian society. The epilogue speaks of the need for popular action.

Sumit Mitra saw Sen's next film Calcutta '71 (1972) not only as a celebration of Sen's "love affair with French cinema of the early 60s" but as evidence that film "is also a social document – a thing which is no less effective than a weapon" (in Sen 1977: 95).

Realism and the Partisan Attitude

Sen is incensed by the depiction of poverty in Indian cinema, arguing that by maintaining a safe distance, cultural producers have made people's suffering acceptable, even admirable, by endowing it with moral qualities, giving it a respectability, even a nobility. "What is missing is the outrage," argues Sen – the requisite righteous anger about the immorality of poverty and the obscenity of its ramifications such as child labor, begging, death by starvation.

Sen prides himself on what he describes as his partisan examination of reality. He is highly critical of those who present themselves as portrayers of 'reality,' but who then speak from a detached view, "just sitting on the fence," and escaping involvement. What is required, Sen believes, is a "deeper analysis of the reality," an appetite for redefining social events, and an insistence on commitment (Sen 1977: 99). Sen explained the philosophy behind his mode of operation:

...as I employ myself to examining the reality around me, I cannot help being partisan...I feel strongly about things around me and I try to project my observations as powerfully as I can through my medium...The point is to develop in oneself a definite social attitude...to embrace a faith in absolute political sense (Sen 1977: 97).

By linking together five stories of "grinding, ruthless, unrelenting poverty" in Calcutta '71, it was Sen's aim to show the physical side of hunger, to show "how poverty

debases human beings,” underlining the fact that over time, the physical look of hunger remains the same. Udayan Gupta described it as a jarring story, “jarring because it removes the veil of romanticism from India’s poverty” (Gupta 1976).

The film’s episodes, five days spread over 40 years, show people in extreme situations, doing what they need to do to get by – families coping, teenagers smuggling, a young man attempting to justify his anger in a Court of Law. A young man of 20 addresses the camera, speaking from his experience of having lived a thousand years; he functions as a chronicler of history, ultimately urging the need for social change. Sen explained the political conception behind Calcutta ‘71:

Poverty is the most vital aspect of the Indian history. But it is not enough to look at it with mere objectivity. It is necessary to look at the gruesome phenomenon dialectically. Physical look of hunger is the same throughout ages, it is the mind that changes. This is what I wanted to capture...the changing mood, from cold acceptance to cynicism, bitterness, and then to anger (Sen 1977: 93).

Sen is fascinated by this range of perceptions that people move through, arguing that this final stage – to anger and violence – “can become very creative in the process” (in Gupta 1976). For Sen, the all-too-common glamorizing of Indian fatalism is not only absurd, it is a cowardly avoidance of responsibility:

We have always been trying to make poverty respectable, and dignified. This has been a tradition which has been handed down to us from generation to generation. You can find plenty of this in Bengali literature. As long as you present poverty as something dignified, the establishment will not be disturbed. The establishment will not act adversely as long as you describe poverty as something holy, something divine (in Gupta 1976).

Encouraging his audience to learn from these representations, rather than telling them what to think, Sen again showed his debt to Brecht. Calcutta ‘71 screenings at Calcutta’s Metro

cinema became a major rallying point for radical students and a site of constant police surveillance (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994: 384).

The Question of Audience

When asked about his sense of responsibility to his audience, Sen offers this observation:

I sincerely aim at...in politicizing or in involving the spectator...To be frank, our film-makers have failed miserably in grooming spectators. But of course, it is a two-way traffic. The spectator is also supposed to inspire the film-maker (in Sen 1977: 98).

Asked a question about the Indian film audience and their perceptions, Sen answered:

How do I know the expectation of a film audience unless I experiment? My method is one of trial and error. The Indian audience was once used to a certain kind of film, with songs, dances, and trite stories. Then Ray came along and proved that his kind of film could also be popular...(in Downing, ed 1987: 172).

Sen says that he is gratified that people are angered and disturbed by his films, some even enough to walk out spewing epithets such as “anti-social”:

In my films, I have found that people who have not liked them are still quite shaken up by them...This kind of reaction could not have been evoked by the standard Indian film...I feel that possibly I’ve made a point somewhere, somewhat differently and effectively perhaps... (in Gupta 1976).

This was precisely his intention in making Padatik (“The Footsoldier”), the third film of his Calcutta trilogy, as Sen describes:

I wanted to make a disturbing and annoying film, not an artistic one. And it did disturb and annoy because it told the truth about the Left while remaining firmly against the Center and the Right (in Wakeman, ed 1988: 1014).

The protagonist is a young extremist recently escaped from police custody who, following Communist party directives, takes refuge in the apartment of a young woman who has in her own way defied society by leaving a marriage and choosing to live independently. As the dialogue follows the permutations of their conversation, a basis is provided for an unstinting analysis of the Left and all its fissures. Although the guerilla fighter has encountered terrible hardship (partly as a result of faulty directives we later learn), his faith in the Party remains unshaken. Yet he questions the leadership bitterly and uncompromisingly. Sen describes the political moment that he felt compelled to address (“like tight-rope walking between slandering and self-criticism”[Sen 1977: 140]):

...the Left movement was lying low and the leftist parties were in disarray, losing perspective, and in isolation, at a time when there was a need for unceasing self-criticism....there are so many factions even in the most extremist left party...But to my mind, it is important to raise these issues. It is suicidal, detrimental, ruinous not to discuss these issues (in Gupta 1976).

In response to the film, an impassioned discussion sprang up in Frontier, an important Left journal of the day. A significant contribution came from Bengali economist, Ashok Rudra, who favorably viewed Padatik's contribution to the debate, and urged that the film be assessed politically, given the recognition that “artists and intellectuals are necessary to the revolutionary movement to analyze the social reality with a view to changing it, and to raise the consciousness of the masses” (Rudra 1973). In providing a synopsis of the film, Rudra marvels at the effectiveness of its single setting:

It is sheer genius the way Mrinal Sen succeeds in projecting the shadows of the political happenings of the wide world into the deliberately chosen narrow camera focus restricted to the inside of a posh flat (1973: 13).

Sen's declaration of commitment clearly resonated with Rudra as both film viewer and as a Left political being:

Mrinal Sen has, in his latest film, made a clear declaration of faith: that under present-day Indian conditions there cannot be any revolutionary programme other than that of armed struggle...Mrinal Sen has opted for revolution...[and] he can be of great service to the cause of revolution on the cultural front (11).

Rudra recognized Padatik not merely as a brave political tract, but as a compelling social document and an important work of engaged cultural production:

Mrinal Sen has had the courage of portraying characters, with sympathy and approbation, whose real-world counterparts are right now rotting in different jails, or are still being hounded by the police, or are out of jail but being avoided by their friends and neighbours for fear of provoking the wrath of the police. He has raised questions, through the self-searching of his hero, that are being actively discussed by all revolutionaries outside and inside prisons (12).

His final assessment must have been immensely gratifying for Sen:

Mrinal Sen has gone over, not just as a person, but as an artist. He has made his art political,...using it as a political weapon...I do not know of any film-maker in India which has made such use of the cinema as an instrument of political action, who has so totally committed his art to his revolutionary politics (12).

For as Sen believes, films that provoke do have an effect, and despite what some left-wing cynics claim, political film-making and cultural production in general does not diffuse radical energy but rather concentrates it. Certainly Sen would argue that political passion spent in art does not go to waste; rather such works, and the reactions they generate "help develop a radical cultural climate"(Gupta 1976). It is in this heady atmosphere that cultural producers thrive and create documents that secure themselves a place in social memory.

“The Reality of the Present is Steeped in the Memory of the Past”⁸

In 1980 Sen made a film Aakaler Sandhaney (“In Search of Famine”) that told a story about a film crew that goes to a village to recreate the famine of 1943. Sen’s film is about the excitement and hazards of film-making, and reflects his choice to make low-budget films – with their modest living conditions and the conviviality of hard work as the cast and crew live, work and think together as a team – a conscious part of his aesthetic. Sen explains how his prepared scripts evolve on the set, in response to the locations, and the actors’ creative improvisation:

I always follow a method marked by austerity...On the one hand I take chances, on the other I remain austere. I mobilise non-actors, amateurs and also professionals and put them also to live an exhilarating commune life. I work on a loose script and quite often go beyond it and improvise. I even allow my actors to build their own lines...Making a film is a continuous process of evolution to me (Retrospective 1980: 20).

But the film is also about the reaction of contemporary villagers to the cinematic production in their midst and to the historical period being recreated. Full of ghosts from the past, the decaying *zamindari* mansion in which the actors and film crew take up lodgings provides a vaguely disturbing setting. Indeed quite often in Sen’s films architectural ruins, evidence of decay and disrepair, serve as a visual metaphor, a means of addressing questions that interest him greatly about how the past persists in the present (Hood 1993: 106). As these city intellectuals play a guessing game to compare archival and contemporary photographs of starving peasants, the film speaks to how the past and the

⁸ The line is one of Mrinal Sen’s quoted in Hood 1993: 106.

present interpenetrate each other in people's lives, with the continued existence of poverty and exploitation underlining that connection. It also makes clear the obligation Sen feels, as a film-maker and a social being, to use his medium to communicate his understanding of what he sees as the dominant facts of his times – poverty, famine, social injustice. As Sen expressed his thinking in an interview in the early 1980s:

...I have tried to get away from painting pretty pictures – pictures of poverty, pictures of rural life. It is very important for me to make things look unpretty, to keep the rough edges. I don't want to remain a perfectionist or a traditionalist. That's not my intent. My intention is to communicate as effectively as I can, to provoke the audience (in Downing, ed. 1987: 172).

Towards a Narrative of Place, Based on Non-Events

Asked about his radical, overstylised tracts of the 70s, Sen stands by his attitude and objectives at that time:

Well, I have no regrets about what I did. It was necessary for me to grow through these phases...I used to say that I am not ashamed of using film as a propagandist pulpit. I am a pamphleteer ...(in Puri 1984).

Sen is often said to have “mellowed” after the 70s, moving toward a clearer narrative, and an interest in exploring the individual and the complexities of human relationships against a social setting. Sen describes the transformation in his films as one of taking a more introspective turn, though he claims to be as angry and bitter as before:

In the latter part of the 70s...when a Marxist government was installed, immediately they became complacent about their activities and that is the time I felt like shouting. But, then I thought, now is the time to go into myself, to pull myself by the hair, to point my accusing finger at myself... now I am trying to find my enemy inside me. So when people say I am receding from the political scene...I say, yes, I am going deeper into the human soul (in Puri 1984).

In these later films Sen tried to capture revelations through the reality of mundane human interactions, through reactions, exchanges of looks, casual conversations, even silences. He defined this new approach to narrative in these terms:

I am trying to build my scripts on the apparent non-essentials, or, to be more precise, on non-events, on the non-dramatic, on the mundane, on everyday experiences of life... (Sen and Bandyopadhyay 1982: 54).

As Sen explained his thinking:

We are running away from life, when making a film, staging a play or writing a novel, when we try to hinge on a dramatic situation, which is nothing but an evasion...my wisdom grows through these inconsequential events...Why not build my script on these non essentials...?...I try to pick out small things from everyday happenings, the daily life, and try to give them a shape, lead them on to a point...(50).

This technique, which became an essential aspect of Sen's film-making aesthetic, was formulated from lessons drawn from a lifetime of watching film both in India and abroad. Sen happily recalls the excitement with which he first watched Italian and Mexican cinema, and his early struggles to comprehend the unfamiliar imagery and symbolism. Sen sees this entirely new visual learning as an important way of intellectually extending our experience – a contribution to our understanding of the world that good cinema readily provides.

Foremost in this philosophy of Sen's is the importance of capturing the feel of one's milieu. It is his belief that if one is able to communicate its physical reality, it allows the spectator to identify, and reach into a more universal dimension conveyed by the experience. In a 1982 interview, Sen outlined his philosophy, and gave a vivid impression of the extensive comparative study of world cinema that has informed his opinion and trained his "eye":

The safest and the most effective way to reach the international audience is to be strictly national in your approach in the sense of capturing the physical feel of your milieu (though I have my reservations about the so-called 'national cinema,' or even about whether there can be any thing called a 'national cinema'). While I can see the soil and the light and the air of a particular country quite often in a film from Poland or Hungary, growing into my own experience, the West European film makers suffer from a lack of a national milieu, they don't seem to know where to hold on to...The situation is different in the Third World scene. I sit up and make respectful note of the Third World cinema with its strong evocation of a sense of place, becoming physically palpable with its people, with their emotions and attitudes and relationships...(Sen and Bandyopadhyay 1982: 53).

On a more cynical note, Sen has also drawn some important conclusions about what film makers should not do. As international film festivals are growing increasingly accessible to Third World film-makers, Sen is extremely wary of what he sees as "a propensity to focus on the exotic with an eye on the Western audience" (Sen & Bandyopadhyay 1982:53). In this vein, Sen makes a derogatory reference to the films of "some of our South Indian directors," noting that, as soon as he had exited the cinema with some foreign companions, "incorrigible Indian that I am," he communicated his skepticism about the "reality" portrayed there, assuring them that he had found it as alien as they had. Citing evidence of other Third World films he'd seen, that were merely an accumulation of rituals and externally exotic elements, Sen offered this observation:

...it is also very important to see that you remain faithful to that area, that you do not invent. When you try to resurrect the obsolete, you merely play up to the gallery (53).

Sen likes to cite the example of audience reaction to his film Ek Din Pratidin ("One Day Like Another" or sometimes titled "And Quiet Rolls the Dawn") to illustrate his point about how the audience can ascertain universal truths when provided with sufficient context. This 1979 film portrays the daily life in Calcutta of a petit bourgeois family of

seven, struggling to preserve its bourgeois values despite the context of its decaying tenement housing, and the sole support of a single wage earner. The chaos that ensues when the working daughter does not return one night (and concern for her safety gives way to concern for family respectability) is a vehicle for Sen's critique of Indian middle class prudery and conformism, as well as for exploring issues of personal independence and women's rights as individuals.

The contrast in audience response to this film has been extremely informative for Sen. As opposed to an audience in Europe or the United States, spectators in India are anxious, and feel it is important to know what happened to the girl. How did she spend the night? As Sen relates: "Even when I tell them I have no right to know what she was doing, that I have no unhealthy curiosity about a young woman's private affairs, still they insist on an answer." He remembers an Indian gentleman who spoke out, saying "Mr Sen, it is very important for us to know what happened to the girl." Sen reports that he responded "My dear sir, I made the film for you to see and suffer. You'll suffer because you'd never get the answer." Sen offers this assessment:

My Indian audience living in the milieu in which it is set would naturally ask that question, for they cannot accept any breach of the norms of existing morality. They have to be assured that the young woman has not committed any 'wrong,' any immoral act – the 'immoral,' in its turn exclusively identified with sleeping with a man (Sen and Bandyopadhyay 1982: 51).

Sen notes that the European spectator, for whom this is an irrelevant question, still recognizes that the issue raised is one of male chauvinism, and given the careful elaboration of context, the pressures of the social, moral and economic constraints can be seen and felt.

Sen's 1982 film Kharij ("The Case is Closed"), presents the story of the death of a servant boy in a middle class Calcutta household, accidental on the face of it, yet clearly a result of negligence and ill treatment. The film's shots of neighbors gathering, seeking news of the crime, have a documentary air about them. As Village Voice critic J. Hoberman describes:

The movie gives you a visceral sense of Calcutta's smoggy neighborhoods; it casually revels in the human variety of an Indian crowd...(Hoberman 1984).

Sen's focus is upon the employers' reactions – guilt, hypocrisy, denial – as they are unable to admit their responsibility, or face the prying eyes of neighbors and the sorrow of the boy's father and friends who come for the funeral. The film has been described as "one of his most trenchant attacks on middle-class complacency and self-deception" (Wakeman, ed.1988: 1016). Another servant boy who works for the landlord appears from time to time, without speaking, his function is as a catalytic agent, to hasten the reaction between husband and wife. His appearances embarrass and disturb the protagonists, and give them a sense of guilt. For Sen, he also serves the purpose of making apparent to the audience "the existence of a whole faceless population, the menials who sleep underneath the staircase or just about anywhere, and go on living...(Sen and Bandyopadhyay 1982: 57).

Describing Kharij as one of Sen's films that deal with Calcutta and its uneasy relationship with the Bengali countryside, Hoberman provides this commentary:

Calcutta is the ultimate urban nightmare, and not the least fascinating aspect of The Case is Closed...is watching how director Mrinal Sen acerbically normalizes this awesome environment...The Case is Closed is less a tract against child labor than a study of how the middle class rationalizes the misery that surrounds them (Hoberman 1984).

Hoberman continues:

The imagery is deliberately pared down, but the details are fantastically rich; Sen is a pamphleteer of a very high order...The Case is Closed is masterfully controlled, nearly a legal brief. The camera placement is crucial – the audience is being set up to judge itself...This is a film where you can never rest easy; the movie is choked with unexpressed anger (1984).

Hoberman describes the dead boy's father when he arrives on the scene as "the inconsolable other," "frightening [in] his accusatory meekness." The scene when he returns from the cremation ground is carefully crafted, and Sen is wholly conscious of the audience expectation – "because of the stock responses, the stock situations that we weave." It is assumed that there will be a confrontation. Sen sets up the audience's anticipation:

As the father comes up the stairs, you hold your breath...[And Hoberman adds: "their (the householders') fear is a tangible presence. We wait for (the father) Haran to explode..."] ...and he just says goodbye. Now this is how I try to project reality and talk about dignity, the quiet dignity of the victims (in Puri 1984).

Sen recounts how friends have asked him: 'Why didn't you allow this man to slap the face of the employer?' Sen's carefully considered response clearly shows the influence Brecht has had on his thinking – namely that to give the audience the satisfaction of that is to make a revolutionary cinema that is based on "wish-fulfillment militant style." Seeing that slap – the bad guy getting his due, the anti-hero receiving his just reward – the middle class audience then goes home happy, and treats their servants the way they have always treated them. Sen insists that this is a formula to be avoided, being as much a kind of escapism as the commercial cinema (in Puri 1984).

The point that becomes interesting for Sen is to depict how in middle class life confrontation is typically avoided, or in fact how the well-established system of social relationships and behavior suppresses it. Sen strives to construct his scenarios to be

reflective of this agonizing but customary avoidance. It is challenging, because the audience has been trained to expect a dramatic dimension, but it is also compelling because it is more faithful to reality, closer to life. Sen's scripts create situations that function as turning points in the narrative; he chooses happenings that could have happened, and do happen, any other day, but the event [the woman's failure to return, the servant boy found dead] makes them look different on that day. In such moments the characters become aware of the unconscious playacting in which they are engaging. As Sen explains

When I do not know how to face the reality, how to combat the reality, when I'm consciously trying to escape the confrontation, I tend to playact, and enter into a game of win-or-lose with those closest to me. Behind the facade of seriousness, I find all this quite funny. But this is what we do. This is what we are preserving all our lives. If I can expose this, if I can bring this to the surface, I think I serve a valid social or moral or even a political purpose (Sen and Bandyopadhyay 1982: 56).

Sen continues:

I try to concentrate on the middle class to which I essentially belong. I try to show them in their state of crisis, in their playacting, in the way they get caught at their playacting – and I am interested in them because they are not insensitive, They face a moral crisis only because they are not insensitive (57).

Mrinal Sen is an engaging and charismatic personality, a passionate debater and eager confrontationalist. My own observations and informal meetings with him at cultural events in Calcutta left a strong impression that corresponds quite well with a description journalist Anjali Puri published:

Sen's personal style has always been ebullient. He is articulate, almost overwhelmingly so, given to dramatic statements, significant pauses, metaphorical turns of phrase and a fund of anecdotes about himself and other people whom he refuses to identify (Puri 1984).

Sen has worked out what he refers to as “a scheme to keep myself in circulation, without any compromise with my conscience” by trying to capture “pockets of minority spectators” both within and outside India (Puri 1984). As he told Anjali Puri:

Sometimes...I feel I am a fool to even have thought I could reach a wider audience. But then, some of my films have proved to be accidental successes and many, many are popular failures...nowadays even I have become something of a marketable proposition. My films do sell (1984).

Ritwik Ghatak

Born in Dacca, East Bengal in 1925, Ritwik Ghatak grew up the youngest of nine children in a large, literary, landed, Brahmin family, on the eastern banks of the Padma River. An elder brother had trained in England and worked as a documentary cameraman in Indian cinema. Ghatak became actively involved in Marxist politics c.1943 and he began writing short stories. In 1946 he joined the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) while studying literature in a provincial college and acted in several theatrical productions. At Partition in 1947, like millions of other Bangals, as East Bengalis are referred to, he became a refugee in West Bengal. After his graduation with an M. A. in Literature, he began working full time for the IPTA's all-India Central Squad, acting, writing, and producing theatre. He appeared in Bijon Bhattacharya's 1948 production of Nabanna. He translated Brecht's Galileo and Caucasian Chalk Circle into Bengali and took these and other IPTA Central Squad productions on tour to towns and villages. Although he spoke with enthusiasm about rousing and inspiring an audience of four or five thousand in these open air productions, he felt the actual impact of theatre to be inadequate and began

thinking of the larger reach a cinema audience could provide. In 1949 he broke away to work with Sombhu Mitra's Bohurupée Group (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994: 95).

Ghatak began his first work in film in 1950 as an assistant director. In 1952-3 (the same year Satyajit Ray began work on Pather Panchali) he wrote and directed his first feature, Nagarik (The Citizen), completing it on a shoestring budget as a youthfully enthusiastic collective venture, with an inexperienced cast and film stock he got for free. The film was never publicly screened in his lifetime and was only released in 1977 a year after his death, in a print reconstituted from a moldering negative discovered in a Calcutta film lab 25 years after its original production (Hoberman 1985).

The film's story revolves around its protagonist's inability to find the job he imagines will ease the terrible constraints on his extended family and allow him to marry his beloved. When his father's death results in the loss of the small pension that barely sustained them, the family is forced to move to a wretched tenement. The look and tone of the film, as well as its appeal to an ideal of collective action, betrays the obvious influence of the IPTA aesthetic; Village Voice critic James Hoberman labeled the film "a naturalistic slum drama" and described it as "static, stagey and earnest – punctuated with street montages of Calcutta and the sounds of "The Internationale" (Hoberman 1985). In a review written for the film's release, Marxist theatre worker Safdar Hashmi praised its sophisticated use of deep focus as a means of emphasizing the characters' relation to their Calcutta environment. In addition, Hashmi argued that the innovative use of sound, as "a conscious part of the whole design," provided commentary and analysis on the depiction of scenes in a manner that was entirely new in Indian cinema (Wakeman, ed.1988: 388).

After a series of bad experiences working in Bombay on Hindi films in the commercial cinema, Ghatak returned to Calcutta in 1958 to work in the Bengali film industry. There he soon completed his second feature, Ajantrik, a satirical film about a man's obsessive connection with a machine – the ramshackle taxi he drives in a provincial town on the Bengal-Bihar border.

The following year he made Bari Theke Paliye ("The Runaway"), the story of an impressionable 10-year-old boy who flees from village life and a strict schoolmaster father to seek adventure in the city of Calcutta. With his indomitable spirit, his encounters with a number of eccentric urban characters – many of whom seem to serve as allegories of human suffering – become signposts on his path to self-discovery. Recognizing at last the cruelty of the city, he returns with relief to his father's arms.

In 1960 Ghatak made what many see as his masterpiece, Meghe Dhaka Tara ("The Cloud-Capped Star"). A sympathetic portrayal of a lower middle class East Bengali refugee family living on the outskirts of Calcutta, its more implicit message is a searing critique of social conditions in Bengal and the all-consuming bourgeois aspirations of the economically deprived. Ghatak addresses the quintessence of Bengal's social life and value system, namely the rift between individual Bengalis' cultural aspirations and dreams of self-realization, and the concrete reality and deprivation of their actual material conditions of life and work. At odds with the demeaning day to day struggle for survival is a palpable longing for the sustaining richness of now eroded traditions that once held people together.

The film's protagonist, Nita, as the family's sole breadwinner, is forced to give up her studies to support the family. As the story progresses, her persona takes on a mythical

dimension, not only as the image of self-sacrificing womanhood, but as a symbol of the beloved Bengali goddess Durga, an archetype of the feminine principle, whose varied aspects – nurturing, sensual, and cruel – are represented in the film’s female characters. In Hoberman’s eloquent description, Nita “embraces her fate with a kind of voluptuous self-abnegation, [and] by the time she recognizes the futility of her sacrifice, she no longer has the strength to reorient her life” (Hoberman 1985). She eventually succumbs to tuberculosis in a Himalayan sanatorium, but not before she is depicted, her voice echoing through the canyons, still willfully declaring “I want to live!”

Meghe Dhaka Tara makes stunning and symbolic use of traditional Indian music, particularly the songs of Rabindranath Tagore, juxtaposed with dramatic sound effects. The film reaches an expressionistic climax at a moment when Nita discovers her sister has betrayed her by luring the attentions of the man with whom Nita had been in love. Recurrent cracks of a whiplash signal her shock and emotional crisis. Vocal music is integral to the story; a brother whom Nita profoundly loves and respects envisions a career as a professional singer, and applies his efforts to little else. The songs set a constantly shifting mood for the film that ranges between hope and despair (Malcolm 1982).

The most sublime moments of the film are those which most intricately interconnect music, sound, and image (Malcolm 1982: 186). Ghatak makes creative play with cinematographic composition and scale “pushing things smack at the camera, staging action deep within the frame” so that “the movie is as formally exciting as it is emotionally absorbing” (Hoberman 1985: 52).

After Meghe Dhaka Tara, Ghatak made Komal gandhar (“E Flat”) with a number of autobiographical allusions, particularly its depiction of the hero’s anguish at his post-Partition separation from his home on the banks of the river Padma, and its evocation of the mood of suspicion and factionalism between companies such as Ghatak had experienced when the IPTA was in decline in the early 1950s. The elaborately structured script is meant to allude to divided minds, divided leadership, and ultimately a divided Bengal (Hoberman 1985: 52). Released in 1961, the film was a box office failure and infuriated the radical sensibilities of many former colleagues; despairing, Ghatak retreated to drink.

His next film, Subarnarekha, named after a river in East Bengal, was completed in 1962, although not released until 1965. It communicates the spiritual uncertainty and dreadful sense of waste and betrayal that was felt by so many Bengalis as a result of the Partition that was the price of Independence. In Ghatak’s life the event of becoming a *bastuhara* (a Bengali word for someone without a home and thus devoid of the basis for cultural existence) manifested itself as an emotional trauma from which he was never able to recover (J. Bhattacharya 1985: 189). After an opening scene in a socialist refugee colony in 1948 Calcutta, the camera wanders up and down the banks of the river of the film’s title, coming across the remains of an abandoned World War II airstrip. Suddenly a personification of the Goddess Kali, actually a wandering folk entertainer known as a *bohurupee*, looms upon the screen. Here the mythical, the historical and the contemporary natural world overlap and interpenetrate.

When the story shifts to Calcutta the seamier aspects of life are introduced. East Bengali refugees, once highly politicized, are now disillusioned and argue drunkenly. The

main character, who goes in search of a prostitute, discovers his beloved sister to be working as one, as a result of which she resorts to suicide. After Subarnarekha, Ghatak would not make a feature for another ten years.

In 1965 Ghatak spent a year as Vice-Principal of the Film and Television Institute at Poona, and despite his alcoholism and reputation for arrogance and unreliability, he played an inspirational role there as mentor to some gifted students such as Mani Kaul, Ketan Mehta, and Kumar Shahani, who became important film-makers in the next wave of Indian cinema.

After Bangladeshi independence in 1972, Ghatak was invited to return to his homeland as part of a government initiative to launch a national film industry. The result of the visit was Titash Ekti Nadir Nam ("A River Called Titas") about the dissolution of a fishing community along the river's banks. The shooting proved disastrous, as the crew was uncomfortable with Ghatak's improvisatory methods; Ghatak was in terrible shape, and after collapsing on the set was diagnosed with tuberculosis.

Ghatak's films often seem very uneven, lacking in stylistic consistency, veering as they do between pessimism and optimism, alternately angry, romantic, melodramatic. Ghatak took upon himself the task of "working through" melodrama, and cited Kurosawa and Mizoguchi's transformation of Noh and Kabuki in arguing that "a truly national cinema will emerge from the much abused form of melodrama when truly serious and considerate artists will bring the pressure of their entire intellect upon it" (Wakeman, ed. 1988: 390). Ghatak is quoted as having made the pronouncement "No national art can be built without reclaiming tradition," and as Malcolm argues, it was the constant pressure of these

reclamation efforts that gave Ghatak's films their "undercurrent of turbulence and what some consider their melodramatic weaknesses" (Malcolm: 186). Yet despite their articulation of suffering, all his films contain a note of affirmation, that life goes on, and is worth living. Ghatak frequently spoke of what he insisted was "the right and privilege of the artist to take the leap from the ridiculous to the sublime" (Wakeman, ed. 198: 390). Ghatak's leaps were not always successful, but as Derek Malcolm wrote: "Ghatak consistently went for broke, and his failures are often as exciting as others' successes" (1982: 187).

In his final film Jukti Takko ar Gappo ("Reason, Debate and a Story"), made in 1974, Ghatak gave a virtuoso performance playing Nilkantha Bagchi, a grizzled and emaciated alcoholic intellectual. The character is obviously based upon himself, with a name that alludes to a familiar folk tale about the Lord Shiva's throat having turned blue after he saved the world by drinking poison. Geeta Kapur describes Jukti as "a film about a failed life," with the author, Ghatak, interrogating his lived history and narrativizing the self in a mock-autobiography (Kapur 1989: 179). His character has, in effect, taken up the burden of swallowing whole histories of cynicism and despair. The story links a group of wanderers – an unemployed engineer, an East Bengal refugee, a penniless Sanskrit teacher – and recounts a series of dramatic encounters in the landscape of contemporary Bengal. They witness a tribal folk dance in which the goddess Durga slays a demon and fall victim to a violent confrontation between a landlord and his poor tribal tenants; ultimately Nilkantha is fatally wounded in a gun battle between Naxalites and the police and dies

splashing the lens with drink. The film makes for a fascinating if at times obscure epitaph (Malcolm 1982: 187).

Geeta Kapur describes Ghatak in 1974 “at the end of his tether, his health and sanity disintegrating.” He was driven by a compulsion to intervene as an artist, “if it was the last thing he did,” to comment on the politics of a nation “on the brink,” to voice his anguish at the disarray and sectarianism of the Communist Party, and work out the problematic of praxis (Kapur 1989: 180). She tries to unpack the obscurity and complex layering of *Jukti* by analyzing how Ghatak combines play with mythic material, and hallowed figures of the Indian tradition such as the wandering poet-saints, with questions about how to represent the contemporary that is in the process of becoming. Kapur characterizes Ghatak’s dilemma as “how to figure the archetypal into the contemporary so that it burns with the mortality of the historical subject”(182).

Kapur points to the significance of Ghatak’s presence and his play with the image of himself, by analyzing the extent to which his acting draws on a repertoire of devices acquired during his IPTA theatrical experience, making explicit citations to the gestures of Bengali folk dramas, especially the masked *Chau*, a tribal dance about which he had made a documentary in 1970. By dismantling his gestures, making them playfully absurd, “the head and limbs working separately, puppet-like,” he combines the heroic and comic aspects of traditional Indian mythic characters, mimicking the gestures of the *jatra* actors, but also turning the joke upon himself as a melodramatic actor (184). His self-parody and use of unconventional cinematographic framing devices (extreme angle shots or occasions when his head appears to float in space) are expressionist gestures that, as Kapur argues, raise

questions about identity, the social, and how the subject is articulated into history (185). And by thus devising his own Brechtian alienating devices to break the spectators' spell, by defying optical expectations of figures in space, Ghatak makes us feel uneasy, and forces us to become conscious of the relationship into which cinema-watching draws us.

In assessing Ghatak's contribution to Indian cultural politics, it is best to examine local admiration for his films and to judge the impact of his personality and aesthetic vision on the students whose lives he touched. Ghatak rarely gave interviews, and thus evidence of his own self-justification is hard to come by; theories of how he saw his aesthetic contribution and his sense of political responsibility as an artist must be accepted second and third hand. At least one clear statement has been preserved of his political objective and his opinion of the social utility of art:

I have no right to indulge in art unless I am able to bring into sharp focus at least one facet of the acute crisis facing our country. Most of my films are humble efforts to come to grips with that (in Malcolm 1982: 187).

Internationally Ghatak's films are held in high respect. Complete retrospectives were held in New York in 1985 at the Museum of Modern Art and in 1996 by the Film Society of Lincoln Center. Film theory debates, especially those on "the Third Cinema," frequently single out Ghatak's last film Jukti as an important contribution (cf. Pines and Willemen 1989). Such discussions highlight the ideologies and the consciousness that are characteristically espoused in these "Third World" films (the impulse towards "historical lucidity" for example), as well as the degree to which they may be said to espouse "nationally specific forms" (Willemen in Pines and Willemen 1989: 13-15). Specifically, Willemen's discussion invokes Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope" (referring to a

genre's distinctive way of organizing time and space), to highlight the idiosyncratic nature of the temporal and spatial dimension of the films, with "their intricate interweaving of historical, biographical, natural and emotional temporal rhythms, not to mention musical and speech rhythms, in spaces disrupted by edges and boundaries themselves condensing historical and symbolic meanings" (16). These complex and highly evocative constructions, at once rhythmic and spatial, were the distinctive components of the highly individual cinematic language that Ghatak saw himself as working to formulate – one "which would say less and suggest more, should give fewer references and bring about more memories" (www.calcutta-on-net.com/millennium/movies: 3).

Lessons from Bengali Cinema: Texts That Secure a Place in Social Memory and Communicate to the World

Bengali film-makers who aspire to make cultural contributions beyond the commercial entertainment sphere have consistently used their medium to make cultural and political statements of local relevance, that are also intended as contributions to world culture. The documents they produce evoke Bengal's rich aesthetic and intellectual tradition, especially for local audiences, by referencing the classical heritage, Indian mythology, history, and folk traditions. When they provide commentary on the relevance of this tradition for contemporary life, they locate cinema at the very center of nationalist discourse and regional cultural debates.

Although Western financing and attention at international film festivals helps to ease budgetary woes, and Western critical praise is certainly desirable (in fact many film-makers

emphasize its contribution in their growth as artists and communicators), it is in engaging local contemporary debates and earning the regard of local audiences that success is measured. Indeed a primary impetus for the work of Bengali film-makers has been to demonstrate the social contribution of their message, and to achieve the favorable community recognition that comes of it.

The methods used by Bengal's film-makers to claim the attention of local spectators have included a range of populist efforts: styles of film-making that recognize the appeal of realism in popular culture, frequent use of non-professional actors and careful choice of locations and outdoor shooting (especially in city streets) wherever possible. Identification with the underprivileged members of society and efforts to document human suffering have been a primary focus in constructing film narratives. For films to have the desired social effect, the Bengali ideal is that they should be provocative documents that stimulate discussion, contribute to a radical cultural climate, ultimately securing themselves a place in social memory.

The first wave film-makers Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and Ritwik Ghatak thought of themselves as building a national art by reclaiming tradition, and though their definitions of what that tradition consisted of varied with their personal, political, ideological and experiential understanding, for all of them it was a hybrid mix of indigenous and foreign elements. Their work combined elements of high and low culture of both East and West, indigenous folk music and Western classical, gestures inspired by *jatra* actors and Brechtian alienating devices. Each devised a highly individual cinematic language that resonates historically, culturally, socially, and makes important political and aesthetic statements. In

the specificity of settings, the range of lighting effects, the integration of art and music with moments of everyday life, and the experience of silences pregnant with meaning, their films convey a palpable sense of being there, and an “Indianness” in what Satyajit Ray once described as “the revelation of large truths in small details.”

Chapter Seven: Conclusions: The Politics of Cultural Production in Calcutta and the Creation of a Bengali Postcolonial Aesthetic

I went to Calcutta to study how Bengalis envision their city and its history, to understand how their sense of cultural identity as Bengalis might be influenced by their experiences of urban life in the rapidly changing postcolonial city. I wanted to collect insiders' socio-cultural views of present day Calcutta, as well as accounts of how these views differed from their memories of the past. I wanted to listen for what they might tell me about how Bengali conceptualizations of the past influence the present. Though I began in earnest to interview city planners, architects, historians, and civil servants in charge of government planning about "the changing face of Calcutta" and how it differed from the past, I came away instead with a fascination for the way art for Bengalis can be a repository of representations of history and its lessons – as well as a forum for debate, a creative response to, even a way to intervene in – the complexities of the Calcutta context. I was impressed by the manner in which cultural production – its creation, its consumption, and the ambience of participation and intellectual discussion it generates – serves as an important form of sustenance for many Bengalis.

In reviewing my intellectual path from an interest in how the Bengali community in Calcutta reflects on its history to an emphasis on the city's cultural production, I am conscious of how it echoes Amit Chaudhuri's remarks quoted in Chapter Two (p.35):

...to be interested in a canon, you have to be interested in how a nation or community sees itself. You have to be interested...in how a nation sees its own historical process...

Among my objectives in this work has been to communicate my appreciation for Calcutta's modernity and its aesthetic "canon," and to analyze the underlying principles, norms, and historical foundation for these criteria and standards of judgement. I hope that I have done

more than merely communicate why I find this Bengali canon intriguing, and that by explaining how it articulates with the Bengali sense of collective selfhood, their notions of modernity and the nation, I have been able to demonstrate what it means for “them” and how. The creative and productive convergences that typify the Bengali postcolonial aesthetic and “alternative modernity” outlined in this study rely on a processual notion of Bengali tradition as a constantly evolving practice of engagement, of translation, and assimilation. The inspiration behind the encounter might be described in short hand form as the confidence and creative drive to link up avant-garde decisions about aesthetic form with local exigencies, to select the most appropriate form from whatever source – high or low, East or West – in order to communicate a timely and locally necessary message. The significance of this case study for present day discussions in the literature on postcolonial cultures and “alternative” or “vernacular” modernities should by now be evident, as, I hope, is the significance of these works as a contribution to world culture. I hope, in short, to have shed light on what the lessons of the Calcutta experience might mean for us all.

My discussion of the socio-cultural utility of art in Bengali society, and the creative and discursive output of Calcutta’s cultural producers and critics, has attempted to characterize the formation of a postcolonial aesthetic and explain its importance as a repository of a culturally significant Bengali sense of history. Establishing a rapport with the past is vital to Bengali intellectuals, not only in formulating a collective identity as a community, but in establishing a sense of self. As a result that sense of “the presence of the past” and the very different ways individuals have of reflecting on that notion, of recognizing its influence in their everyday lives, and of finding pleasure in representing it artistically, in stories and in images, necessarily influences their creative work. This historical consciousness and a strong will to keep alive some personal linkage with tradition are, in

short, what define “Bengaliness” for members of the cultural elite.

Although Calcutta intellectuals are familiar with the global cultural discourse about postmodernism and eager participants in some aspects of its aesthetic – its fascination with surface and spectacle, its heteroglossia, its love of parody – there are other characteristics of the postmodern mentality that they cannot be said to exhibit: they are neither uncritical in their adoption of technology, nor is there “an absence of historical awareness” (Crapanzano 1991: 434). This difference in Calcutta – where the past is still an active presence – in comparison with other dynamic cultural centers in the developed world, must be read as evidence of the lingering effects of the colonial experience in the social memory.

As Vincent Crapanzano has written:

For the postcolonialist the past evokes the imposition of a history, no doubt in alien form, that has been used, paradoxically, in the failed struggle to overcome that history, that imposition... The past of postcolonialism is the past of *Aufhebung*. It cannot be overcome. It cannot be controlled by citation...It is too painful...it calls attention to difference – difference framed in equality – and the locus of power that perpetuates that artifice of equality (434).

For Bengalis, “history” and “tradition,” are emphatically not evacuated of meaning, but rather serve the culture as “authoritative reference points” in both collective and individual efforts to make sense of the world (434). While it would clearly be overstating things to argue that Bengalis live easily with “traces of the past,” it is the familiarity with those traces and sensuous enjoyment of them that enriches experience and the quality of life for most Bengalis.

If Bengalis are enthralled by history, with an aesthetic of nostalgia that looks backward, constructing “a picture of ‘those days’ when there was beauty, prosperity and a

¹ An example of clear evidence to the contrary is that, on those rare occasions when communal violence erupts in the city, community sites of religious antiquity are targeted precisely and become the so called “trouble spots” of the moment.

healthy sociability,” or to the era of nationalism when there was “courage and inventiveness” (Chatterjee 1997: 210), perhaps they are ensnared by that history as well. As Partha Chatterjee has written with just the requisite touch of angst, in a self-reflective, historically-conscious and thus (or so it seems to me) very Bengali voice: “Ours is the modernity of the once-colonized...[it] cannot but be deeply ambiguous”(1997: 210). He then goes on to say that this sense of attachment to the past “is the driving force of our modernity,” and rather than being back-ward looking “it is our attachment to the past which gives birth to the feeling that the present needs to be changed, that it is our task to change it” (Chatterjee 1997: 209). This contradiction between the political will to envision a better future and the all-too-familiar recognition of the inexorability of global power relations as forces targeting and victimizing the (once-) colonized is the defining feature of coloniality as an attitude of mind. What would it take to initiate the transition to postcoloniality? Is it merely a question of that move for which O.C. Gangoly,² writing in 1922, feared the time was not yet ripe, namely having the collective self-confidence to turn away from nationalism and fully embrace internationalism? Or does it require one brave ambiguous step further? As Partha Chatterjee explains:

...we know that to fashion the forms of our own modernity, we need to have the courage at times to reject the modernities established by others (1997: 210).

So as not to be smothered by others’ claims to cultural superiority, and the presumed preeminence of Western cultural impositions, the nation must venture to imagine itself in its difference, with a confident historical awareness in tact. The process of decolonizing the imagination begins with a deepening respect for the complexity and historical trajectory of

² Cf. Chapter Five p.184-5 for this critic’s contribution.

tradition. But inherent in Bengali postcolonial modernity is this sense of ambiguity to which Chatterjee alludes. It derives from the felt contradiction between the valorization of insurgent forms of art presented in the latest forms, and an uncompromised conviction that there is still inspiration to be drawn from a reasoned pursuit of Indian/Bengali tradition. The assumption acquired from the West that cultural producers must position themselves in the ranks of the avant-garde and strive to *épater le bourgeois* must then be brought together with a respect for tradition and an appreciation for all its multi-faceted and hybrid elements. But this ability to juggle both the old and the new, the local and the foreign, the elitist and the popular, and keep all the balls in the air as it were is a kind of acrobatics in which Indian intellectuals excel.

As I write this I am reminded of a very different metaphor Ashis Nandy once used to characterize what he refers to as “Indian culture” (an entity which I would emphatically claim does not exist):

The uniqueness of Indian culture lies...in the society’s traditional ability to live with cultural ambiguities and to use them to build...defences against cultural invasions...the culture itself demands...a certain permeability of boundaries (1983: 107).

While he surely had in mind a map of the subcontinent with arrows indicating successive waves of invasions – Aryan, Islamic, European – and their subsequent incorporation, he accounts for cultural survival using a functionalist metaphor, depicting the ability to live with ambiguity as a kind of surrounding and protective membrane both elastic and permeable. He presents it as an omnipresent and transhistorical adaptive feature of “the culture.” The relationship that the peoples and cultures of South Asia have had with outsiders is clearly more complex, more nuanced and processual, and mutually constitutive as I have tried to show for the Bengali case.

The themes I have addressed in the presentation of the individual media histories

have emphasized a culturally-significant sense of play with tensions between “West” and “East” (and how these constructions are thought of and made use of). Bengalis consistently make conscious comparisons between “us” and “them,” contrasting what “they” do well (areas designated worthy of careful study) with important areas in which “they” are found to be lacking. It is the identification of those gaps that leaves ample place to elaborate the ongoing vitality and rewards of “tradition” and “authentic” Bengalianness. Is Bengali modernity, then, about cultural elaboration within those spaces deemed significant but not yet dominated by the West?

Cultural producers looking back today show respect for their predecessors’ phases of tutelage during which Western innovations were enthusiastically studied and emulated. The memory of the once-colonized is long, and when Western forms and categories are employed, the question as to the degree to which they are made use of with a critical ironic distance, in “a structurally parodic fashion,” or merely in an emulative way is an important and highly relevant one to analyze (Crapanzano 1991: 440).

In tracing the histories of “authentic” tradition one can point to moments of emphatic oppositional initiatives, when Western modes were cast aside in favor of a rediscovery of indigenous traditions in both high art and low/“folk” art varieties. At other times non-Western traditions were celebrated and creatively explored as possible means of evading the oppressiveness of Western schooling. In their search for inspirational “authentic” elements that could be reassimilated and utilized again, cultural producers had to assess the distinct connotations and decide whether to quote from high art forms or “folk” art ones, or discover a judicious way of combining them, for clearly very different allegiances were evoked.

These same questions confront contemporary cultural producers in crafting their aesthetic today; if the work is to accord with the standards of the historically and politically-

conscious Bengali modernist canon, they must be must addressed. Similarly, just as artists make conscious decisions about high vs. low in referencing “tradition,” the question of whether Western quotation is done in an emulative or parodic fashion (and with how much tongue in cheek) must also enter in.

Overall there is a strong pull to give a specifically Bengali character to the work, and offering a message that will spark the interest and secure the attention of the local audience is an important motivation. But there is often a desire to reach an external audience as well, an audience known to be seeking authentically “Indian” art forms. This can make for very different strategies of collective and self-representation. Forms are devised to speak for the nation, “authentic” ways are found to present theatre, stories, images, or whatever it might be, with a poetic ambience that is suggestive of mood and history. But “self-respecting” Bengali cultural producers always return full circle and make efforts to ensure that their work communicates effectively locally and remains relevant to the Calcutta context.

I am well aware of the romanticism involved in depicting Bengal’s artists and intellectuals as modernist cultural heroes and recounting narratives of their endeavors to cling to a sense of “authenticity” as a kind of armor against the onslaught of Western modernity, political tensions, and socioeconomic change. Yet they have certainly served their society by repeatedly demonstrating that Bengali tradition remains a meaningful and relevant source of inspiration for contemporary cultural production. Their efforts offer to the population at large an important form of solace and a sustaining sense of pride in Calcutta’s cultural heritage that provides ballast and strategies for coping.

In my conversations with Bengalis about Calcutta’s history and their perceptions of the city, I was especially taken with the strong sense of attachment and “belonging” they expressed, despite the hardships that are frequently experienced in day to day activities.

Indeed bureaucratic wrangling, transport debacles, and other urban obstacles provided an endless source of jokes and tales of triumph over adversity. But I began to take particular notice of their allusions to cultural events and to particular works of art that had shaped collective memory, and fostered a strong sense of social identity and Bengali cultural pride. It was this sustaining collective sense of “we Bengalis” and “our rich heritage” as speakers recounted anecdotes of cultural history that led me to appreciate the significance of the art forms and the media histories discussed here. More immediate still was my experience while residing in Calcutta in 1991-1993 of watching the city come to terms with the death of a beloved cultural hero, Satyajit Ray, and the local outbreaks of arson, rioting, and communal tension following the destruction in December 1992 of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. In both instances comparisons were drawn in stories and in images with past events the city had undergone. Speakers, journalists, and film-makers drew parallels with the city’s grief and funeral crowds at the death of Rabindranath in August 1941, and compared current events with the geography and “feel” of previous incidents of police curfew and communal violence. On these occasions I witnessed and participated in community meetings, public demonstrations of inter-community neighborhood solidarity, and a flurry of discussions, writing, film screenings, art, poster, and photography exhibitions organized by city residents and organizations to cope with the loss and sense of crisis. I was continually impressed by the compassionate, socially conscious, and intellectually-engaged audiences, and their ability to confront trauma through collective aesthetic experience, armed with an eye for detail, a sense of irony, and their love of satire.

Now as a means of concluding this investigation I want to draw some comparisons across the media whose histories I have discussed, to examine commonalities in the cultural producers’ objectives and their modes of operation.

The prevailing situation of Bengali cultural politics in the early decades of the 20th century determined that there was in fact a genuine contradiction between those possessed by a determination to study European forms as the models to emulate and those whose nationalist affinities drove them to reinterpret tradition in order to mobilize it for the nationalist cause. Critical debates centered around issues of the formation of an audience for the arts and an articulation of the philosophy behind a perceived need to carefully mold public taste along socially and politically-conscious lines. The ideology of the Bengal School painters that emphasized an essentialized sensibility of Indian spirituality, and studiously explored non-Western painting traditions and Japanese ink wash techniques, soon gave way to the more expansive Santiniketan ethos of informed synthesis of East and West that saw international cooperation as actually strengthening indigenous culture. Rather than produce poor imitations of popular Hollywood genres, Bengali film-makers of the 50s drew inspiration instead from Japanese cinema especially the works of Kurosawa, or from the critical “edginess” of rough and street wise Italian neo-realists. The dedicated practitioners of Calcutta’s Group Theatre movement took up the challenge of mounting both critical Western adaptations and Bengali or other Indian regional productions, but with a taste for the slightly subversive, and always relying on determinations of local relevance as the predominant aesthetic criteria.

The third quarter of the 20th century saw the formulation of a sense of Bengali modernity as a collective project, a progressive enterprise that would come to produce “the postcolonial aesthetic” that it has been my intention to characterize here. What had intervened in the interim was the eye-opening devastation of the 1943-44 famine and Bengali intellectuals’ recognition of their inability to respond to the crisis, a sense of lack and a tremendous regret that familiar art forms were insufficient to portray the harsh realities of

common people's lives.

Having drawn inspiration and an optimism about the utility of art from progressive anti-fascist artists' and writers' collectives in Europe, the Progressive Writers' Association and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) formed major institutions with nationwide political and aesthetic agendas. Building upon the enthusiasm of local popular response, the IPTA members mined diverse regional traditions with an infectious sense of commitment, establishing organizations that were motivated by the need to mobilize, educate and make a difference. They would see to it that theatre would address the needs of the nation, and that cultural producers would be trained to carry on the requisite message of compassionate social documentary and critique.

Practitioners of Bengali modernity made sure that the pursuit of cosmopolitanism and international empathies actually became a nationalist agenda. As part of this new initiative, Bengalis would pridefully cultivate a sense of entitlement, seeing themselves as having equal rights of access to global cultural forms. To this way of thinking a nationalistically-inspired rejection of Western culture would amount to a dangerous form of self-denial. Such constraints would limit the development of Bengali culture and be a sure way of reducing it to an irrelevant provincialism.

Cultural producers selected forms, whether Eastern or Western, indigenous or foreign, and used them intuitively to serve the needs of the subject matter in hand. In accordance with the dictates of local agendas and aspirations, Bengali cultural producers reserved the right to accept or reject Western cultural forms, to implement them in unadulterated form or to combine them. Yet there remained a sense of obligation that the works produced should ring true, that they be obliged to emit an "authentic" Bengaliness, a sense of being rooted in the soil of the province, even if the intellectuals who produced and

commented on them could no longer boast of such pure and “authentic” credentials. The purveyors of Bengali modernity reserved the right to mobilize this cultural field of difference and found great innovative strength in doing so. In asserting their nation’s claims to modernity, they were local disseminators of an internationalist ideology and a message of progress that nonetheless emphasized the richness of vernacular versions and local initiatives. The works they produced and the ongoing *addas* that inspired them were part of a conversation that blended an understanding of modern, Western values with a rich appreciation of Indian tradition; it was equally at home with Leger as with Kalighat *pats*, with Brecht as with Chhau or Manipuri dance forms, with Brancusi as with Rabindranath, and with Godard as with jatra. The postcolonial aesthetic evinced by Bengali modernity is about having overcome a cultural sense of lack and a reliance on Europe or America as the source for the prime moves and fertilizing ideas. In this scenario what might be described as a tension between the desire to create avant garde forms and an urge to nurture indigenous expression has been successfully balanced.

As I write the final lines of this conclusion, I am thinking about Ashis Nandy’s observation that “All interpretations of India are ultimately autobiographical” (1983: 80). Just as I, now too many years’ hence, have tried to do more than merely romanticize about the ‘those days’ of my fieldwork, imagining all the ways things might have gone differently, so too, by offering analysis and evidence of the circumspect nature of Bengalis’ emulation of the West, and of their own internal critique of their romanticism and longing for cultural authenticity, I have tried to move beyond romanticizing about ‘those days’ of Bengali modernity, in the sincere hope that these historical reflections might point the way toward a better future – for all of us!

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