

Fathers of a Still-born Past: Hindu Empire, Globality, and the Rhetoric of the Trikaal

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Undertaking a genealogical study of contemporary Hindu nationalism in India, this dissertation demonstrates how a new, metropolitan, and largely Anglophone version of cultural Hinduization is signaling a transformative shift in postcolonialism as political and aesthetic self-representation. The primary archive for the study ranges from foundational scriptural texts of the ‘canon of Hinduism’ and the writings of late 19th and early 20th century Hindu nationalists to traditions to the Anglophone political journalism of new-age Hindu intellectuals like Jay Dubashi, television productions of epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, and contemporary Indian writing in English. This constellation of texts reveals that if an important phase of global postcolonial culture was founded in the difference between center and periphery, then we are now witnessing new aesthetic forms which recode national peripheral space as in fact coterminous with the space of the metropolitan-center. It is precisely such a recoding that the contemporary literature of the Indian diaspora writes itself into, democratizing differences between national and imperial contexts by inducting the urban hubs of the Global South into a continuum of supranational terminals for the mobility of virtual capital. The study demonstrates how such formations overlap with the language of contemporary Hinduization, as the latter in its own way equates neo-liberal economism, militarization, and technologism with the ‘holy cows of Hindu scriptures.’ Deploying religion as a flexible adjustment of linguistic and visual signs, rather than a scriptural tradition, this new ‘rhetoric of Hindu India’ violently yokes collusive neo-liberalism and cultural

Hinduization on a single plane of normalized regularities. Such a plane of regularities promises a *post-postcolonial* culture which is no longer debilitated by theories of difference, whether between tradition and modernity, or nation and empire. In the face of this dangerous historical shift, my dissertation concludes that the task of the anti-imperial mind in our contemporary time is to destabilize such applications of political-cultural sameness. It is to return ‘difference’ to its philosophical beginnings in the indeterminacies of figurative language and to demonstrate how such indeterminacies are a refracting surface for the lived histories of capitalist-imperial unevenness.

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PREFACE

This project has been nurtured and energized by contributions from a host of people in Pittsburgh, Calcutta, and a handful of other places across the world. In my years at the University of Pittsburgh, I have had the opportunity to partake in a vibrant intellectual environment, provided by colleagues like J. Paul Narkunas, Richard Purcell, Henry Veggian, Brenda Glascott, Amy Borden, Kara Andersen, David Bartholomae, Eric Clarke, Kathryn Flannery, Ignacio Lopez-Vicuna, Dana Och, Sergio Villalobos, Anja Ulanowicz, Malkiel Choseed, Jeffrey Hole, Chris Warnick, Vladimir Padunov, Stanley Shoshtak, Rashmi Bhatnagar, Amanda Klein, Jen Lee, and Valerie Krips. Moutusi Maity, Prasanta Chakravarty, and Santanu Das have been friends who have always supported and taken interest in my work. I especially thank Amy Mueller, Elizabeth Bledsoe, Pratiti Ray Choudhury, and Shahana Srivastava for reminding me that there is a world of imaginative events outside my immediate academic circle. Arindam Dasgupta and Richard Debnath, I thank for being chums of the best kind. The latter endlessly indulges my passion for dance, music, and rhythm more broadly, while the former excites my ardor for colors.

Kirsten Strayer has been a friend, a listener, and an infinitely patient negotiator of the multiple dramas in my intellectual and personal life. I thank her more than anyone else for making my experience of life in the United States such a multi-faceted and enriching one. Hers is a companionship without which I would be lost. More recently, Meheli Sen has extended to me a friendship very rarely found, and I thank her especially for always unerringly being a part of the banality of my everyday life. Over phone conversations, e-mails, and now Face Book, we share an invaluable togetherness which exceeds our mutual interests in books, movies, food, and above all, other people. As myriad as our connections are, I look forward to growing with her as the years go by. Philip Webb is one of those rare

souls whom I loved almost instantly. Stolid, always there, and still remarkably playful, Philip inspires me to know that I can turn to him whenever I feel I have ‘messed up.’ Ayan Gangopadhyay can only be described as an absolute riot. Swinging radically between the most astute theoretical observations and the silliest of pronouncements, conversations with Ayan have taught me to know the sheer range of the mind and more importantly, to recognize my own performance of that range. Ambar Basu and Mahuya Pal have accepted my quirks and oddities without any question and have extended their home and hearth to me at perhaps the most difficult time of my life. I have grown to love them as family, and they me.

It would be presumptuous of me to attempt to thank my father, the late Dr. Bimalendu Basu and my mother Ms. Kamala Basu for their roles in my life. My mother has been and continues to be a kinetic influence on my world. Sharp, witty, and radical in her thinking, mamma has taught me to never stop imagining possibilities, and to never stop reading, even in bed. My father’s has been the single most profound influence on my being. He has shaped my thoughts without ever treading or even intruding upon them, and I believe it is this attitude that called into being the way of my writing. Thus above all, daddy, this dissertation is for you. My mother-in-law, I thank for the infectious energy she has infused into my recent years in Calcutta, and for the fact that this zest has spilled into her pride in my work.

My sister, Banani Saha and brother Biman Basu, despite being older than siblings usually are in modern nuclear situations, have always struck that perfect balance between sibling and surrogate parent. I have inhabited their lives in more ways than one, not only fitting into hand-me-down clothes, but also re-living their loves and their passions as I stepped into their hard-to-fill shoes at La-Martiniere and Jadavpur University. Rahul and Rohan Saha are much more than nephews. As they grow into splendid young men, they prove, if such does indeed need to be proved, that Bengal still thinks today, what India will think tomorrow. Tarak Saha has been that impossible bundle—father-figure, flamboyant brother-in-law, and ardent supporter all rolled into one. My uncle Mr. Noel Nag has been an unfailing source of inspiration and example and perhaps the only person who can even

partially fill Daddy's shoes. I also thank Niloy Nag for understanding, no matter how long we haven't talked, how I am presently doing.

Friends and mentors like Moinak Biswas, Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, Swapan Chakravarty, Kajal Sengupta, Bhaswati Chakravarty, Kalidas Babu, and Jayati Gupta have played crucial roles in my intellectual life during those formative years in Presidency College and Jadavpur University. I especially thank Kajal di and Kalidas babu for being the first ones to teach me to love literature and Bhaswati Chakravarty and Swapan Chakravarty for teaching me how to make this love an edgy one. Moinak Biswas taught me only briefly, but since then has gone on to become not only someone I greatly respect, but also someone I deeply love and cherish as a friend. Sibaji da's constellations of eccentricities have taught me more about the intellectual climate of Bengal than almost anything else in Calcutta has.

Paul Bové taught me to recognize my strengths and to hone them. At the same time, complete teacher that he is, he never allowed me to become habituated to my strengths as if they were fealties. His has been a poised support that constituted a veritable lifeline in the most difficult professional situations. Even the most casual conversations with Ronald Judy have always left me spellbound. His observations, and more importantly the manner in which they are articulated, have left a lasting impression on my thinking, suddenly flashing up at the most sensitive moments in my intellectual life, to find their way into my writing. Marcia Landy's contribution to the shaping of this project exceeds the parameters of an advisor-advisee relationship. Her seminars have almost uncannily grown with me, kneading themselves to the distinct occasions of my intellectual life, and remaining with me long after I was no longer taking courses. I look forward to yet again turning to her as my intellectual life evolves. Nancy Condee, I thank, for rescuing me at a time when all else had failed, and for giving me astute comments on my work, despite joining my committee at such a late date.

In the past ten years, Ratul and I have not only shared the rhythms of our everyday lives, but also the more profound measures of the mind. Strange as this may sound, my world after Ratul has come into being in straining against and resisting his thinking as well as in

being dazzled by and loving him for it. It is the theatre of this relationship, and this alone that makes the ordinariness of my daily life not so ordinary. I thank Ratul with all I have for demonstrating with and to me that our world can indeed be such stuff as dreams are made on.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

‘We have them too!’ I shouted back at him. In my country we have all those things too; we have guns and tanks and bombs. And they’re better than anything you’ve got in Egypt – we’re a long way ahead of you.’

I tell you, he’s lying, cried the Imam, his voice rising in fury. ‘Our guns and bombs are much better than theirs. Ours are second only to the West’s.

It’s you who’s lying,’ I said. You know nothing about this. Ours are much better. Why, in my country we’ve even had a nuclear explosion. You won’t be able to match that even in a hundred years.

It was about then, I think, that Khamees appeared at my side and led me away, or else we would probably have stood there a good while longer, the Imam and I: delegates from two superseded civilizations, vying with each other to lay claim to the technology of modern violence.

In an Antique Land: History in the guise of a traveler’s tale (235-236)

Opening itself to the challenge of how to reformulate postcolonial otherness in the perilous times of neo-imperial complicity, Amitav Ghosh’s 1992 travelogue deliberately underlines the capricious instability of an all too easily assumed fellowship between delegates from superseded civilizations. In so far as the almost infantile struggle between a fellaheen Imam and an Indian anthropologist disfigures and destabilizes the placid uniformity of postcolonial difference, this embattled occasion is an important frontispiece for Ghosh’s concerns. Yet the author does not

thrust such concerns at his readers without any preamble. On the contrary, deploying precariousness and caprice as rhythmic leitmotifs for his narrative, Ghosh very solicitously prepares his readers to encounter the languages and forms of postcolonialism as unstable and changeful things, caught between imperial complicities and anti-colonial insurgencies, and given to the fast changes and sudden extinctions called forth by an accelerated technologization of the globe. Like Ghosh's my own story too is of a tensile terrain constituted by wayward strands of the postcolonial, the anticolonial, and the neo-colonial, one overlapping with the other to the point of indistinction. It is a story of transformations and deaths, of the loss of older textures of language, of new syntaxes of being that press postcolonialism into an undifferentiated continuity with the imperium, and of archaic argots that fleetingly flash up to again interrupt such a dangerous regularization of difference.

Describing itself as “history in the guise of a traveler’s tale,” the first edition of Amitav Ghosh’s travelogue draws attention right away to an all too precarious binary between the truthfulness of history and the guile, as it were, of storytelling. In keeping with the complicit binaries so incisively setup in the subtitle, there are ostensibly two colluding narratives in the book. The more elaborate is one in which the Ghosh persona—an anthropologist from India traveling for research in Africa, India, and the United States—describes his experiences living in a fellaheen village in Egypt. In the shorter narrative (a version of which appeared in Subaltern Studies, Volume VII as “The Slave of MS. H.6”), this same persona pursues the wayward historical traces of the slave of a twelfth-century Jewish merchant as the latter traversed commercial routes from the horn of Africa to the Malabar Coast of India and from the British isles to America. Distinct forms of representation as they are, the historian’s archival reconstruction of the life of a twelfth-century slave, and the anthropologist’s travelogue about fellaheen (perhaps the oldest peasantry in the world) in contemporary Egypt seem to have little

in common apart from a shared reliance on the figure of the Ghosh persona as storyteller. Yet as his text unfolds, the author very carefully elaborates how the apparently unrelated worlds of these two narratives in fact imbricate and converge upon each other, such that history actually does emerge from and in the guise of a traveler's tale.

In an Antique Land begins plumb in the middle of the anthropologist's troubles in apprehending the traditional identity of fellaheen. Very soon however, these difficulties that had been specific to the anthropologist (who is also in this case the travelogue writer) begin to resonate in Ghosh's text with the difficulties that the academic historian faces in excavating the life of the subaltern slave, Bomma. After all, if it is near impossible to historically reconstruct the life of a slave precisely because histories as we know them are always told of the master, then in the same way, it is equally difficult to accurately capture essences and identities, for pressured by the unreliable business of time, they shift, modify, and transfigure themselves. The Ghosh persona for instance finds that the same villagers whose traditional selves he is professionally obliged to examine and document are themselves in a condition of flux. As the first children of Nasser's Revolution, these denizens have had to learn how to survive in a new political-economic order, and more often than not this has meant casting aside their old-world attachments—their essence if indeed it must be named such—and embracing a dominant vision of modernization and industrial progress. Thus, in much the same ways as the slave Bomma plays truant with the academic historian's search for the truth about his life, his loves, and his passions, so too the protean fellaheen—their lives kneaded and pressed into novel conditions of nation building—escape the traveling anthropologist's quest for custom-bound identities.

The remarkable analogy that is thus set up between the history of Bomma and the traveler's tale of subaltern villagers is supported and elaborated through yet another convergence whereby the historian attempts to unearth the forgotten lines of exchange between “superseded

civilizations” like India and Egypt. He begins to explore this point of contact by describing how through their medieval travels, Abraham Ben Yiju and the slave Bomma had staged the lively richness of Indian Ocean trade routes which were only much later made impotent by the rigid East-West bifurcations of Orientalist maps of the world. As he imaginatively reconstructs their voyages, the merchant and his man Friday become for the historian figural expressions of a bustling network of connections, encounters, and migrations that were once dominant forces in shaping global culture and economy. Encrusted thickly by layers upon layers of other emerging dominants, such a dynamic of once-significant affiliations may have fallen gradually more silent, but In an Antique Land endeavors quite doggedly to recover this forgotten text of the medieval world both as academic archive and as contemporary political force. The impulse toward archival reconstruction on one hand sets in motion a valuable historical endeavor of guarding against loss and forgetting. On the other hand, such a testament to increasingly subdued lines of movement that had once called into being the lush fabric of the Middle Ages is not merely an inert and unthinking monument to the past. Instead for the anthropologist-historian, this recuperated texture of economic, political, and social relations should have the power to inflect even present day geo-political mobilizations, for in bringing to light a different world of past affinities, it gestures toward a potential fellowship between contemporary actors on the postcolonial stage.

The theme of defending against loss and forgetting is one that Amitav Ghosh will return to time and again in the course of his oeuvre and perhaps most recognizably so in 1996 novel entitled The Calcutta Chromosome. As Bishnupriya Ghosh points out in “On Grafting the Vernacular: The Consequences of Postcolonial Spectrology,” here Ghosh probes certain ways of knowing the world that have become more and more obscure to the current global hierarchies of knowledge. Ostensibly a medical mystery, Ghosh’s 1996 novel is layered by multiple levels of

extinct genealogies which appear in the form of folk rituals, cultish religious practices, and the journeys of transmigrating souls. What had apparently started out as a medical thriller thus becomes all at once a disjunctive series of ghost stories, an alternative history of medicine, and in that sense, an imaginative historiographic project. While The Calcutta Chromosome is clearly Ghosh's most sophisticated negotiation with the ethical questions that are raised by atrophied ways of knowing, there is already an early testimony to the importance of this subject for his thinking in the uneven and recursive narratives of In an Antique Land. As the travelogue writer moves fitfully between Africa, India, and the Americas, he writes the political cartography of the medieval world into a contemporary model of living for antiquated societies, and the errant loopings of his movements act in this way as a refracting surface not only for his imaginative historiography, but also for the generic affiliations of his writing. Transgressing almost all categories from travel writing and fiction, to ethnography and academic history writing, the distinct strands of Ghosh's text infectiously infiltrate one another, confounding along the way the blunted boundaries of present day epistemological configurations. In short, In an Antique Land raises the question of atrophy not just in relation to fading worlds, their peoples, their antagonisms, and their amities, but also in relation to older literary and scholarly traditions that in escaping the apparent fixity of divisions like history and a traveler's tale contagiously mingle with one another.

I am arguing therefore that undertakings of recovery such as Ghosh's are particularly valuable to a larger intellectual effort, as well as to my own specific aim, to keep alive other manners of telling, other ways of knowing, and other critical apparatuses. But these recoveries are not important only because they raise crucial questions about the past. They are important also because they have remarkably energetic effects on the rejuvenation of the present. Indeed, whilst suggesting a possible commerce between societies struggling to come to terms with the

burdens of colonialism, they could also potentially constitute what Gayatri Spivak calls “stylistically non-competitive” interventions in the contemporary (“Teaching for the Times,” 483). That is to say, once opportunely launched into the very thick of a global market for non-Western cultural forms, these untried genealogies function as a stimulus for the constant small gags that interrupt and displace the packaged certainties of inflexible economies of knowledge. As we know Ghosh himself is principally committed to having his recovery of the past speak to the present whether such a conversation involves genres and the fixity of their boundaries or whether it involves more transparently political terms. But most importantly, even as he undertakes such a critical commitment to the present, Ghosh is keenly aware of the many dangers that accompany, even stalk, such a provocative project. This is why In an Antique Land is in fact not at its literary best when it merely engages in postcoloniality as an attempt to recuperate and restore the differential energy of fast perishing histories and decaying expressive forms. Instead the most challenging aspects of the text are those which point to moments of peril that suddenly flash up precisely when the anthropologist’s recovered archive of unrequited pasts and unheeded epistemologies mediates and crisscrosses the emergent occasion of contemporary economic and political actualities.

So far, I have employed Amitav Ghosh’s In an Antique Land as a prologue for the strife ridden world of my own dissertation. Trapped on one hand in a drive to erase capitalist-imperial histories of unevenness, and on the other, in an attempt to formulate alterity as a means of keeping alive anti-colonial epistemologies of comparison, the postcolonial milieu in India was already rife with foundational struggles to articulate itself. Amitav Ghosh however demonstrates how in the current dispensation of globalization, his struggle is rendered even more complex as the rush to smoothen the implacable asymmetries of the colonial experience coincides with a uniformity of otherness proposed by the neo-imperial traffic in cultural identity. Such a

regularized evenness cloaks the emergence of new inequalities, which masked as they are by this thick veneer of homogeneity, become in turn the platform for an unabashed congruence of imperially driven needs and desires. In such a condition, otherness itself becomes a suspect category, attaching itself to hardened notions of identity, and severing its connections with dissident thought, language, and practice. In the context of my own narrative, which I hope to develop in tandem with In an Antique Land, the emphasis on language is of utmost importance. The milieu I try to bring alive through a genealogy of contemporary Hindu nationalism in India is after all I believe, a dangerously powerful environment of language, and one that promises a shining new nation no longer debilitated by the archaic tongue of colonial thought or even the obsolescent argot of an anti-colonial response.

In Ghosh's text, the petulant struggle between the Imam and the Indian is one occasion in which the differential oneness of postcolonial identities and histories is pushed to its very limits. A too easily anticipated result of the recuperated archive of connections, difference in this encounter comes face to face with the concealed asymmetries and unabashed collusiveness of a shared vision of neo-liberal sameness. As a result, Imam Ibrahim of the fellaheen Village and the anthropologist persona from India competitively hurl derisions at each other solely on the grounds of which one has a greater claim to the western instruments of modern violence. The most unsettling aspect of this bitter transaction is not that these two representative figures vie with each other to monopolize the technology of violence as an indicator of national superiority. Rather, it is that even as the two characters rush at breakneck speed to the furious impasse, they appear to almost unstoppably arrive at an environment of semiotic pressures in which not only is such an altercation possible, but it is in fact staged as inevitable. Orchestrating the hurtling tempo of the dispute in a manner that makes it seem as if the climactic point was in fact impossible to elude, Ghosh's style thus demonstrates a persistent threat nestled amidst the

increasingly spectacular attempts to base possible postcolonial solidarities in a giddy exaltation of the uniformity of differential ethnicities and alternative histories. This lurking hazard draws our attention to the uneven vagaries of the neo-colonial traffic in cultural identity as they have emerged from and with a hardening of such multiple and heterogeneous autonomies into one tyrannical story of difference. But it continues to occupy and hold our attention through a gesture toward how the ruthless complicities of desire—as a more dangerous kind of oneness and uniformity—generated by precisely such neo-imperial dealings in alterity fuse in an unreliable concert with the effort to reclaim and make contemporary the obscure and marginalized narratives of postcolonial societies. The unreliability of this concert is important because it reveals the precariousness of referring cultural others to their cultural origins, as if origins were untainted by the clutter of history, or conversely, unaffected by the burdens of the contemporary. In the context of my own account of a dangerously normative Hinduization of culture and politics in India, it is paramount that the clutter and the burdens be kept alive, and especially in the space of language which is where [ethnic] cleansing has its beginnings.

1.1 THE IMAM AND THE INDIAN

During his stay at the fellaheen village, the Ghosh persona meets the local Imam twice—once when as an anthropologist, he hopes to study the Imam’s interest in traditional medicine and a second time when he is pushed to do so by the local village jester Khamees the rat. Even before the two meet for the first time, the younger inhabitants of the village have already told the visitor whom they call doktór Amitab that Imam Ibrahim was once “famous as a man of religion,” but “nowadays people laugh at his sermons,” for “he doesn’t seem to know the things that are

happening around [them], in Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Israel” (141). In other words, the Imam is becoming increasingly anachronistic in a world racked by situations that his learning from the village Quran school appears ill equipped to meet. Yet, since the anthropologist is interested not so much in Imam Ibrahim, the man of religion, but rather in Imam Ibrahim, the traditional medic, he is not in the least deterred by the youthfully cruel jests around this once-legendary figure. Little does he recognize however, that for the Imam, who is marginalized not so much by the banter of the villagers, but rather by an acute awareness of his own obsolescence, ya doktor’s overbearing interest in his folk remedies is in itself a cruel joke. “Why do you want to hear about my herbs?” he asks the Ghosh-persona when the two meet for the first time, “Why don’t you go back to your country and find out about your own” (192)?

The tetchiness of the Imam’s questions has to do not only with the gradual erasure of his own legitimacy in a rapidly changing economy, but also with the Indian doktor’s assumed status as investigative subject and his own position therefore as anthropologized object of inquiry. As David Scott points out in his compellingly insightful analysis of the encounter between the Imam and the anthropologist, doktor Amitab announces himself as “someone who, from the space of the absence of Tradition, goes in search of its plenitude and authenticity.” As representative of such an empty space of power, the visitor bears “the inescapable historical imprimatur of the West” vis-à-vis his native subjects (http://humwww.ucsc.edu/CultStudies/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol_5/DavidScott.html). Yet despite this self-assumed arrogance, the Imam’s view of doktor Amitab is somewhat different from his visitor’s own. In a paradoxical twist to the monstrous victory of the migrant postcolonial voice as vehicle of authenticity, Imam Ibrahim’s suspicions of the anthropologist’s credentials have to do precisely with his belief that Amitab functions as a representative of Indian cultural essence rather than a bearer of Western modes of inquiry. Is not the doktor from a centuries old

civilization like India, and if so, then is he too not a product of tradition? Why then must he turn to a fellaheen Imam for his investigation of medicinal practices of the past, when he could well examine similar remedial practices within his own civilizational heritage? Rhetorical as they are, the answers to these questions are clear. Imam Ibrahim has a more than canny understanding of the uneven values generated by the movements of bodies from national-peripheral space to the metropolitan space of the center. That is to say, he knows that the traditional knowledge of the periphery can only be legitimized when it is borne by migrant intelligentsia who also represent the investigative theory of the center. The obsolescent man of religion is thus able to very nimbly displace the superior positioning of the migrant postcolonial, forcing the latter to encounter his own national-cultural affiliations prior to their induction into the value forms of nativist authenticity.

Refusing to perform his ethnicity as a text for the metropolitan-migrant anthropologist, Imam Ibrahim attempts to raise himself to the station assumed by the doctor. Announcing his own almost forced unmooring from the authenticity of an obsolete past, he shows his Indian visitor a box of phials and syringes as proof of his determined turn to contemporary cures and his resolute effort to kill the past and forget all he knows about traditional medicine. The future lies not in herbs and poultices according to Imam Ibrahim, but rather in hypodermic syringes and modern medicine, and indeed “There [is] a huge market for injections in the village; everyone [wants] one, for colds and fevers and dysentery, and so many other things” (192). Yet, *ya doktór* finds that despite the Imam’s unabashed flaunting of phials, and syringes, the villagers remain skeptical of his abilities. His practice, they believe continues to smack of folk remedies, for as one of them cuttingly remarks to the Indian visitor, “he sticks in the needle like it was a spear” (142). This harsh analogy between a spear—which functions here as the sign of a deathly archaism—and Imam Ibrahim’s use of a needle brings a somewhat thorny problem to light for

the excavating anthropologist. If the quaint folk medic is to survive in the new economic order as anything more than a trite joke, then he must ensure that he can fact forget his faded ways of knowing. That is to say, even the most fugitive traces of traditional medicine must not taint a future of hypodermic needles. On the one hand then, it is precisely because of his traditional character that Imam Ibrahim is a value form to the professional anthropologist, committed as the latter is to keeping alive other knowledges and other epistemologies. On the other however, the responsible postcolonial intellectual cannot ignore the fact that this increasingly irrelevant folk medic is besieged by those very conventional customs that make him valuable to contemporary Western theory, for even the slightest traces of his traditional habit are now rendering him incapable of survival in the modern world.

This first meeting between the Imam and his Indian visitor may not be the occasion in which matters between the two come to a head, but the exchange does indeed raise some rather troubling questions. Can Imam Ibrahim in fact overcome his anachronism and become modern without actually killing the past? If not, then how is it that the narrator himself as migrant postcolonial intellectual, can at once be a signatory for obsolete custom, as well as in the same breath, a fraternal representative of the inquiring Western mind in quest of other postcolonial traditions? The disturbing valence of these questions continues to burden the second occasion on which Imam Ibrahim and the narrator meet each other. As we know from the opening extract, this is the instance in which the already strained relationship is pushed to its very limits, and the two inexorably hurtle off to a tongue-lashing in which a competitive claim to technologized violence is the only possible axis of reciprocity. Indeed, what is noteworthy is that Imam Ibrahim ridicules his Indian visitor's traditions not through an assertion of fellaheen or even Egyptian superiority, but through the absolute measure of the West against which national achievement must be calculated. For the Imam, the rhetorical strength of the West is an

extension of that box in which half a dozen phials and a hypodermic syringe lie unused on a bed of soiled cotton. It is all that is foundationally opposed to an eminently forgettable world of herbs, plants, and poultices, and like in the case of the injections, it is where the future lies. In that sense it is Imam Ibrahim's response to the imprimatur of western superiority that the anthropologist brings to bear on their very first meeting. In short, it is his fitting answer also to the migrant postcolonial intellectual who when talking to "other postcolonials in other places" seems readily able to shed indigenous affiliations and assume a metropolitan air of disinterested objectivity.

Like the Imam, although far less overtly, Amitab too has been pushed to a corner by the perceived disparity between his professional and traditional associations, that is, between his affiliations with the metropolitan-center on the one hand, and the national-periphery on the other. During his stay with the fellaheen, the villagers' host of interrogations about the traditional practices of Hinduism has relentlessly plagued him, for paradoxically enough these questions are counter-anthropological, locating the anthropologist himself as object of investigation. Why do you burn the dead in your country, why do you worship cows, why are men not purified, who is your god, do you worship fire, are you communist, the villager's ask Amitab, suggesting that like Imam Ibrahim they too believe that the Indian anthropologist does not come from an empty space of power bereft of tradition. Ensnared by inquiries that make him seem as obsolete as the Imam, ya doktór has to come to terms with the idea that 'tradition,' when not-yet coupled with authenticity of the marketplace, can only be a cadaverous archaism preventing even bare existence in the novel conditions of the modern world. Unlike the man of religion, doktór Amitab does not face this problem of survival because in his case, the traditional knowledge he represents is buttressed by his legitimate training in modern theory, and this in

turn has been enabled and authenticated by his diasporic foray into the metropolitan centers of the West.

Because Imam Ibrahim understands this consolidation of value, he forces Amitab to encounter a 'tradition' which is legitimized by neither the voice of western inquiry nor the movements of diasporic intelligentsia. Once ya doktór does so, he is as obsolete as the Imam. It is precisely as a result of this likeness of obsolescence that the Imam and his Indian visitor must turn to their complicit vision of the imperium as the only authoritative yardstick of survival. After all, this power has come into being only by cleansing itself of the primitiveness of such things as herbs and poultices on the one hand, and cow worship and communists on the other. Thus, much as the man of religion kills the past, and only through the conduit of western modernity, turns to the future, doktór Amitab too latches onto guns, tanks, technology, and even a nuclear explosion, as the sole way to professionally legitimize himself as attested practitioner of a modern discipline like anthropology. Locked in battle for an authority that is endlessly deferred to their colluding tryst with the master, the Imam and the doktór arrive at an occasion in which the ruthless continuum of their economies of desire is unabashedly laid bare. The Imam in order to re-establish his waning authority must unmask the imposter anthropologist, reveal his traditional selfness, and hence show him wanting in relation to modernity. Similarly, in order to even begin to traffic with other postcolonials in other places, the narrator in turn must reveal that his indigenism can only promise returns because he is a metropolitan vehicle for the practice of western theory, and at the same time a representative of native tradition.

In a perfectly symmetrical situation, Imam Ibrahim and the Indian Ghosh persona (having shed his migrant-metropolitan aspect) would have first discovered, and then consorted over their shared-but-different histories, deploying these as a fulcrum for insurrection against the ruling race. Yet of course, given the irregular tectonics of progress and development, the

brotherhood of postcolonial selves is partitioned even before it comes into being—the figurehead of Western theory (the Ghosh persona) assuming an aura of mastery over his traditional subject (Imam Ibrahim) which the latter is understandably loath to concede. This is why when an equivalence of superseded pasts is forced to the forefront of the aggression between Imam Ibrahim and the Ghosh-persona, the result is a competitive claim to the resources of the modern world. No longer is it possible to think in terms of a consolidated defiance against the imperial master based in an essence of postcolonial difference. For given a situation in which two musty civilizations find themselves in the dire predicament of a tradition which has not yet been fully yoked to the value form of cultural origins, or buttressed by metropolitan knowledges, the only means of subsistence can be a congruent hungering for the technologized weaponry of guns, tanks, and nuclear bombs. The encounter between the Imam and the Indian thus becomes a chronicle of how when faced with the pressures of neo-liberal value forms that overlap with and maddeningly circle around older platforms for rebellion, contemporary interpretations of postcolonial alterity—whether that of traditional fellaheen or that of the migrant postcolonial intellectual – threaten to profoundly rupture from their dissenting anti-colonial beginnings.¹

¹ Even to the mind of Ghosh himself, the significance of these two encounters is apparent from the fact that after the appearance of In an Antique Land in 1992, relevant sections reappeared under the title “The Imam and the Indian.” Deliberately guileful, the instantaneous bifurcation and conjoining of the two figures-- the Imam and the Indian---calls attention to the vagaries of cultural, religious, and national identity formation. After all, why is not possible for the Imam to be conceived of as Indian in national and cultural terms? Or conversely, why is the bearer of Indian cultural identity affiliated only with the traditional practices of Hinduism and thus distinct from a man of religion in the Islamic tradition?

While extending a cursory nod toward the fading oppositional energies of a slogan like postcolonial otherness, Amitav Ghosh thus cautions against the congealing of difference into a self explanatory theory of moral and authoritarian arrogance. As many postcolonial scholars have pointed out, such a position would of course conceal a heterogeneous plurality of ways of knowing, genealogies, and desires by arresting them in a single, inert tableau of difference. But more importantly for Ghosh, a uniformity of this nature would disregard the burden of those pitilessly compatible neo-imperial urges that interrupt the narration of postcolonial otherness as a consistently unfolding tale of rebellion and resistance. However, even while gesturing toward an almost inevitable surge in such collusive aspirations, Ghosh is not cynical enough to suggest that they are in any way constitutive. That is to say, the coterminous cravings of In an Antique Land never ripen into a sovereign world in their own right, or an architecture of desire and mind that underlies and thus presides over all other desires and minds. Threatening to flash up only as occasional instances of peril and thus never palpably narrativizing themselves into a complete rhetorical stance, these moments in Ghosh's work are profoundly uncertain and radically hesitant. They demonstrate the gauche writhing of an idiom that has nowhere to go, the graceless choler of a language in which the absence of alternatives is expressed in a nothingness of possible directions for thought. Protesting the absence of other avenues into which the mind may essay, this is a nothingness in which Ghosh's characters appear to be trapped, the nullity of their petulance circling exasperatingly around and around its own petulant mores. Finally exhausted and emptied of all potential for mobility, the language environment of the Imam and the Indian threatens to become a petrifying gyre from which each participant must be wrenched away before being gulped down whole by it.

Clearly then, postcolonialism cannot be merely a lifeless archive of restorations and recuperations and indeed if it were to be so, it would be victim to a historicist inability to

encounter the present. At the same time however, the encounter with the present poses the dangerous possibilities of revealing new inequalities generated by the neo-colonial traffic in cultural identity and re-igniting old economies of desire, which despite such inequality are nonetheless unabashedly collusive. These collusive congruencies do not however mark only the desires of symbolic figures like the Imam and the Indian; rather they cast their net wider, yoking together the epistemological polarities of traditional knowledge and modern scientific inquiry, such that the former can only be authenticated when it is given voice by a legitimate representative of the latter. Because he is acutely aware of the dangers of such a dispensation, such unabashed collusion gives way in Ghosh's text to an inexorable poverty of language and a nothingness of possible directions for thinking. It is in this context that my dissertation inserts itself to propose that an anti-imperial valence for postcolonialism can only be energized if otherness were to be extricated from its reliance on ambassadorial identities and representative functionaries, and returned instead to its philosophical bases in language—that is, if difference as dissident thinking were to emerge not from a notion of essences, but from the relentless incommensurability between texts and their understandings. Perhaps only such an unyielding instability would allow us to see both the remarkably vulnerable poise of the 'Indian' Ghosh-persona's superior station, as well as the pitiless convergence between alterity and inequality in the Imam's situation.

1.2 A DHARMA OF DEMOCRACY

Undertaking a genealogical study of the discourse of contemporary Hindu nationalism in India, my own doctoral study has apparently little to do with the dangerously torrid affiliations

between history and a traveler's tale, between cow worship and atomic energy, or between indigenism and western theory. To be sure, if the spectacular rise of Hindu fundamentalisms in the sub-continental situation were no more than the beastly dominance of a normative Hinduness over the deliciously diverse aggregations of the Indian polity, such a discourse would elaborate itself in terms of purities and cleansings rather than contaminations and infectious infiltrations. Yet the narrative of my dissertation demonstrates how the textual landscape of contemporary metropolitan Hinduization may in fact be very firmly situated in a dense weave of collusive affiliations, resonant in many ways with those that In an Antique Land draws our attention to. Expressly manifest in a miasma of interfaces between distinct media of politico-cultural expression—journalistic writings, nationalist literature, Sensex indices, economic manifestoes, historiographic revisions, retellings of epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, and innovative currents in the current cinema of Bombay—Hinduization in its largely Anglophone late twentieth-century avatar is not a discourse of immutable beliefs and ossified ritual/scriptural practices. Instead, it is a slick managerial calibration of visual and linguistic signs which at the very level of grammatical and syntactical regularities, sets up diffuse and toxic points of contact between what Gyan Prakash has aptly named “the implacable opposites of colonial thought.” In other words, the lexis of metropolitan Hindutva does not attempt to either dialectically resolve or radically undo long historical contentions like those between tradition and modernity, religion and reason, self and other, or even history and a traveler's tale. Instead, bringing them into a lubricated proximity with one another, it threatens to undermine otherness as the intellectual energy spawned of the gaps between these long-standing polarizations, as well as difference as the rebellious pressure that had once energized anti-imperial struggles across the globe. As such, present day Hinduness is a technology of language that not only establishes the absolute archaism of these contraries to political life of an autonomous nation, but also tyrannically

authorizes itself precisely in the ability to generate liaisons where once there were chasms of radical difference.

This is not to say that when independent India quietly came into being “when the world sle[pt]” at midnight on August 15, 1947, and when the Young Republic was unambiguously put in place with the Constitution of 1950, there had been no attempt at all to address the possible impress of these binaries on the sovereign life of the nation (Jawaharlal Nehru, “A Tryst with Destiny”). Partha Chatterjee for instance shows that in the final, fully mature instance of the development of nationalist thought in India, what he calls, “the moment of arrival,” Jawaharlal Nehru’s diagram of sovereignty sought to transform tradition through a modern social-scientific regime of state ideology (132). But what Chatterjee does not sufficiently theorize is the fact that this was an important historical shift that was to take postcolonialism beyond anti-colonial nationalist theory, deploying it instead as a synonym for modernization and the erasure of capitalist-imperial asymmetry. Primarily, a new architecture of institutions embodying the spirits of progress and modernity came into being to do away with the lusty decadence of the feudal order and to plan and direct fiscal processes in order to equitably distribute social wealth. While some organs of power were thus made responsible for replacing distended princely purses with an evenhanded regime of the industrial middle class, other arms of the state were called upon to secularize law and the state, and to remedy fault lines caused by distinctions of class, caste, region, religion, linguistics, and gender. The massified grammar for the young sovereign state thus seemed firmly in place: traditional mores were to be overwritten by modern practices; myth was to be sacrificed at the altar of secular history; western industry was to usurp the place of eastern languor. Yet, scholars like Sumit Sarkar, Partha Chatterjee, Romila Thapar and Ranajit Guha have in different ways pointed out that despite such programmatic readiness, the Indian situation continued to be racked by the prevalence of multiple, shifting, and heterogeneous

autonomies of tradition. Only changefully allying with the uniform cohesion promulgated by state ideology, such autonomies gave rise to a politics characterized by spasmodic flows between the traditional and the modern. It was therefore not surprising that the developmental urges of the Indian context at once slumped back and raced ahead in an irregular syncopation, thus generating what has come to be termed an incomplete rather than a failed encounter with the novelty of the modern world.

A quickly changing scenario notwithstanding the arduous struggles of modernity as well as the many striations that they point to, have not suddenly disappeared from the Indian political situation. Fierce strife for instance still continues over the foreignness of insurgent regional groups that doggedly resist assimilation into a constitutive pan-Indian fabric, over how the primitiveness of the caste system may be corrected by reservations in the higher education system, or even over whether the god-like heroes of the great 'Hindu' epics are indeed historical beings or not. Yet while such aching pangs of becoming modern continue to plague the health of the national fabric and the intellectual vigor of postcolonial otherness is blunted by a neo-colonial traffic in cultural selves, the battered terrain of the strife has been almost furtively crossed, overwritten, and transcoded by a new political idiom. Part of the newness of this idiom is that it makes no effort to ideologically redeem the agonistic narrative of the modern. Instead the new lexis of national becoming generates Hindu India as the effect of aphoristic, fragmentary and discrete intimacies between precisely those ancien binaries (primitiveness and civilization, nature and culture, and east and west) that had defined the story of modernization. Punctually inserting liaisons as unknown as these into the existing political vocabulary, contemporary Hinduization demonstrates how a neo-Aryan mythography can be transparently coincident with the managerial intelligences of global capital. On a smoothly regulated plane of normalized equivalences such as the one generated by present day Hindutva, these resolute binaries appear

so easily and unabashedly collusive that no longer does the primitive have to be ideologically overcome by civilization, and no more does religion have to buckle under the burden of reason. Thus India's emerging prominence in the global information revolution, its drive towards complete liberalization, and its fragile status as a subaltern military power central to U.S interests in Asia can commingle paradoxically with the language of an emerging Hindu nation which is at once resplendent in its newness and in the same breath venerable in its antiquity.

In order to follow the traces of this quickly transforming milieu, the story of my dissertation begins in the present political situation and traces its antecedents back to the heat of the Indian independence movement in the early part of the last century. This was a time when early Hindu nationalist ideologues like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar produced a nationalist literature culled carefully from the priestly pieties of high Hinduism. As a particularly symptomatic occasion of such a textual fabric, Savarkar's work—and in particular his 1923 pamphlet, Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?—has been hailed by the mascots of contemporary Hinduization as the very fountainhead of their own theorizations. Yet, despite his present quite celebrated status as the founding father of modern day Hindutva, the principal affiliations and impellings of Savarkar's oeuvre are in many ways distinct from the idiom of Hinduness in its current incarnation. In his 1909 history The Indian War of Independence, 1857 for instance, Savarkar deployed that most quaint of Oriental philosophies—the karmic cycle of life and rebirth—to combat the sovereign power of the Crown, and what was perhaps its most powerful cultural-pedagogical tool—English historiography. In contrast to what he called English historiography, Savarkar's iterative cycle of life and rebirth constituted history as a series of repetitions, recurrences and re-enactments. The former the author implied was untrue because it was based on the notion of time as an irreversible arrow which incinerates and consumes every obstacle in

its path. In other words, robbing what has come before it of all vital life, such an arrow of time, in Savarkar's opinion posed as an illusory and therefore deceptive icon of emancipatory progress. The only way therefore to counter such a false, yet imperially ascendant notion of time was to write a true history in which time emerged as the effect of cyclical lives rather than the deterministic linearity of life and death.

Combating imperial domination by taking note of the impossibility of translating certain indigenous forms of cognition into European concepts, Savarkar's history of 1857, while being symptomatic of early Hindu nationalism, is markedly distinct from the work of his new age heirs. For instance, even though a present day Hinduized commentator like Jay Dubashi deploys a deathless cycle of karmic lives as the central illustrative conceit for his 1985 book, Snakes and Ladders: The Development Game, he does not imagine a contentious encounter between this most quaint of Oriental philosophies and the imperial authority of world history. Instead, in using a board game historically derived from karmic philosophies of life and rebirth as an ontological principle for the romping antics of privatization, Dubashi transparently equates the most recognizable clichés of Brahminical scripture and the contemporary logic of multinational capital. In other words, if the early Hindu nationalists had struggled against the authority of the Crown by teasing out ways of knowing and manners of telling that were inherently and hopelessly different from imperial epistemes, then present day commentators are generating India as an emerging global power precisely by collapsing the intellectual force of such untranslatable distinctions.² This is why much like Jay Dubashi, a contemporary group of often

² In deploying symptomatic texts like V.D. Savarkar's The Indian War of Independence, 1857 to challenge Jay Dubashi's Snakes and Ladders: The Development Game, I am not suggesting that Savarkar's work is a symptom of radical secular nationalism. On the contrary, the problem with the former's rather intriguing elaboration is that it is bound

think-tank based public intellectuals, filmmakers, historians, political demagogues, economists and journalists enact a syntax and visuality of being whereby the globally dominant forces of economism, militarization, and technologism are made to reside quite comfortably alongside the holy cows of Hindu tradition. As what is left of the public sphere in contemporary India is made flush with the columns, pamphlets, images, and spectacles composed by new age Hindu raconteurs like Swapan Dasgupta, David Frawley, L.K. Advani, Sooraj Barjatya, Arun Shourie, and Francois Gautier, the lived experience of imperial unevenness that had called into being the comparatist grammar of a nationalist project of autonomy, is now becoming increasingly extraneous to the political becoming of the nation.

Once a contributor to the distinguished corpus of subaltern historiography, and now media-mascot for new-age Hindutva, Swapan Dasgupta for instance, in essay entitled “The Notion of Dharma,” translates the Hindu trope dharma (which may be loosely rendered as “religious law”), into a seamless enactment of what he calls the “fundamental commonality in democratic expression” (<http://in.rediff.com/news/2003/dec/08swadas.htm>). Conjuring a synergy between this seminal trope from Vedic scripture and perhaps the most commonly bandied category of contemporary foreign policy, the effect of Dasgupta’s writing is not very different from the regularity of Jay Dubashi’s prose. After all, the latter too neutralizes the differential energy of the gap between tradition and modernity by equating an endless cycle of life and rebirth with the managerial intelligence of global capital. Similarly, in a journalistic

to karmic ritualization and to the transcendental authority of a sovereign strengthened by his or her claims on an endless circle of live. Indeed, in his later pamphlet Hindutva: Who is a Hindu (1925), Savarkar was to very specifically attach this notion of karmic martyrdom to his proposed architecture for a sovereign Hindu state.

column entitled “Are Brahmins the Dalits of Today?” Francois Gautier, a Delhi-based correspondent and writer claims with great élan that Brahmins are the real Dalits of contemporary India, while at the same time arguing that “History (like journalism) is about facts and first-hand experiences”. Gautier thus violently harnesses the technology of first-hand journalistic reportage on the same plane of equivalence as the narrative of the historian, mediated though the latter is by an unverifiable temporal gap between past, present, and future. At the same time, in diagnosing present day India as a context in which the priestly class of Brahmins is syntactically coincident with the lower caste Dalit, he further strengthens this earlier equivalence by subjecting an entire and extremely dense history of brutally striated Hindu caste hierarchies to the force of first-hand journalistic fact. More specifically, he writes that “55 per cent of all Brahmins live below the poverty line—below a per capita income of Rs 650 a month. Since 45 per cent of the total population of India is officially stated to be below the poverty line it follows that the percentage of destitute Brahmins is 10 per cent higher than the all-India figure” (<http://www.rediff.com/news/2006/may/23franc.htm>).

The almost naturalized value that is accorded here to first hand journalistic reportage is important not only because it is a terrifying marker of the increasingly commonsensical privilege bequeathed to ethnographic witnesses even in the study of literary texts, but also because it emphasizes how, despite its myriad and apparently heterogeneous formal affiliations, metropolitan Hindutva submits itself wholly and absolutely to what Sara Suleri in 1991 had called ‘the story of journalism’. According to Suleri, journalistic narratives necessarily occur in the absence of precedent, and impelled as they are by the novelty of surprise, history appears in them perpetually new. Thus, even though it manifests itself in a veritable miasma of interfaces, as I have mentioned, between epic re-tellings, motion pictures, historiographic revisions, nationalist literature, and economic manifestoes, contemporary Hinduization is in this sense

homogenously journalistic. Unlike Amitav Ghosh's writing where the boundaries between ethnography, travel writing, fiction, and academic history blur into the beginnings of an intricate weave of lost, palimpsestic histories, Hindutva in its metropolitan avatar resolutely forecloses the emergence of such tentative tales. Instead, under the auspices of contemporary Hinduization, the border crossings between epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana on one hand, and manifestoes like The Road to Ayodhya on the other, merely serve to demonstrate how the antiquity of the epic form is perpetually new, but only in the journalistic sense that Suleri describes. That is to say, in intersecting with the contemporary form of the manifesto, the epic does not signal a point of entry into forgotten epistemologies, but rather coincides in absolute terms with the novelty of the present, closing thereby the pauses and gaps which would have been gateways to the distances and differences of its own pastness.

Unlike the perilous moment of contact between the needs of traditional fellaheen and the desires of metropolitan-migrant postcolonials in Amitav Ghosh's In an Antique Land, intimacies such as these—between Vedic scripture and neo-liberal markets, between Brahmins and Dalits, and between dharma and democracy—are not presented as threatening in any way. In fact in a grotesque twist of discursive strategies, what used to be construed as the dangerous liaisons which momentarily flash up to interrupt a uniformity of postcolonial resistance have now become part of a platform of commonsense on which precisely such liaisons are recognizable as signs of legitimacy. In other words, the new India is an authoritative formation precisely because it can reterritorialize the contemptible collusion between nativist authenticity and western theory as ontogenetic intimacies between the long standing polarizations which had once called into being colonial thought and its anti-colonial response. Indeed, it is the ability to endlessly multiply such liaisons on almost every register of politico-cultural expression that enables the new Hindu nation (as compared to other superseded civilizations) to be post-postcolonial, that is,

to be able to collusively write itself into, rather than interrupt and displace an emergent imperial order of economism and technologization. In fact, this is a new imperial order that can validate the concealment of the inequalities generated by such an economic dispensation precisely because it shuns the very need to resolve them. This is also why there is nothing hesitant, occasional, or gingerly about the collusive traffic in the idiom of the new Hindutva. Instead, the encounters between tradition and modernity, self and other, and primitiveness and civilization are tranquilized and flattened on a single, verifiable plane of commonsense. As such they are arrogant, tyrannical, and profoundly confident of themselves as the harbingers of a neo-imperial tongue which can democratize even the most distinct epistemic agencies and thus call into being a sovereign world undivided by the insurgent pressures of unevenness and difference. The pithy and elliptical zones of syntactic collusion generated by the lexis of contemporary Hinduization are thus the successful instances of a technology that flexibly manages the disruptive potentials of a language that used to be marked by the asymmetries of colonial experience, and that thus forecloses the possibility of evoking and invoking a radical texture of elsewhere and others.³

³ Martha Nussbaum recently published The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future where she interviews key members of the contemporary Hindu Right in India – Devendra Swarup, K.K. Shastri, and Arun Shourie – and thus many of the same figures whose writings my dissertation engages. Nussbaum's work however is a social-scientific documentation of Hindu fundamentalisms, emphasizing fantasies of purity, the programmatic transformation of history text books for children, and the funding of such projects by diasporic Hindu communities. In contrast, given its debt to literary studies, my own research emphasizes the new environment of language that neo-Hinduization has created and in doing so draws attention to a far more 'liberalized' and in that sense insidious register of normative Hinduizations.

1.3 PLAYING PERSEPHONE WITHOUT HADES

As an event of figural expressions, literature dwells in a thickening which turns against itself from within, mortifying and shattering itself, reduplicating itself in its own body, and becoming in the process a ceaseless and unyielding reverberation of elsewheres and others. It can only be telling then that despite its finesse in forging and constituting a new political tongue, Hindu nationalism in its current avatar comes to us without a literature. Not only are gargantuan belletrists like Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, and Munshi Premchand silent to the archival legacy that metropolitan Hindutva hails as its own, they are inert when they do speak, their literary impulse blunted, their loins girded from birthing contemporary heirs. For craftsmen like Madhusudan, Bankim, Rabindranath, and Premchand indigenous mythographies were to be continually energized and re-energized, often at the level of literary guile and entertainment, to generate the eros of an idiom marked by the perpetual polarizations of imperial disparities. In other words, literariness for these men meant figuring language as the titillating place where they could stage their dissent in the face of the imperium—by parodying, troping, punning, and equivocating, and by letting the bastardy of mongrelized creations vie against the purity of received terminologies. More often than not this meant revolutionizing the Sanskrit/scriptural imaginaries—which were at the very thick of the tradition/modernity debates of the time—by impaling them precisely on those more than familiar binaries of colonial thought, and forking them from thereon into a seething density of uncontrollable partitions, unreliable doubles, and unyielding disfigurements. For such men of letters, literature came into being with precisely such flights of signification, with the proliferation of indeterminacies, and with a fattening of pauses of meaning in which every

communicative possibility between already formulated selves and others is persistently interrupted.

In contrast, the contemporary prophets of Hindutva adopt a principle of strict economy, and deploying their journalistic propensity toward acquiring an absolute thinness of communication, horizontally conflate the potential of language to turn upon its own body and to ream and distend the anarchic gaps between sense and signification. In their hands, the scriptural tradition is prostrate before its mere referential functions. That is, it is used to signal obsolescence merely as an algebraic step towards proposing that pastness is no longer obsolete precisely because it has coincided in an insipid agreement with the novelty of the journalistic, first-hand present. As the consolidated whole rendered by such a scriptural landscape, religion is neither the primitive binary to a civilization of reason, nor is it therefore to be understood in reference to dharmic archaism, or the quaint cyclical lives of karma, or even an antiquated world peopled by gods and goddesses and temples and priests. Rather, for the practice of present day Hindutva, religion is precisely that technological innovation which promises to sanitize the ravishing aspect of language—as a tantalizing place of partitions, separations, and distances. It is that application which in bringing about arrogant coincidences between past and present neutralizes the opening up of time and history as effects of the semantic indeterminacies of language. In short, it is that which forbids and forecloses the emergence of literariness as the inability of language to coincide with itself, and thus, of literariness as the deferred otherness of language from itself.

Yet, despite such a dire prognosis for literature, the body of fictional and non-fictional work designated by the term ‘Indian writing in English’ is paradoxically one of the more profitable commodities in the increasing culturalist and identitarian air of the global literary bazaar. The success story began well after the time of the nationalist litterateurs of the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us, the term “Indo-Anglian” was coined to describe the phenomenon of Indian writing in English. Developed in the 1950s by the Writers Workshop Collective in Calcutta under the directorship of P.Lal, the nomination itself was to quickly fall out of use, but the writing it designated only found dramatic advantage when it intersected about a decade later with the growth of what Spivak rather cuttingly calls metropolitan cultural studies in the able hands of Stuart Hall. Under patronage from the Birmingham School, Indian writing in English became on the one hand one of the most dazzling value-forms of an authentic postcolonial alterity, and on the other, quickly followed the triumph of the metropolitan-migrant voice as the only possible bearer of such authenticity. This latter was of course to very soon become one of the most valued commodities in the global academic and literary marketplace. Indeed, the stage was set when the increasingly privileged status of novels of South Asia/India in English converged with US multicultural educational reform, with the institution of black and ethnic studies, with the publication of Orientalism (1978) and with the emergence of postcolonial studies as a field of study in its own right.

The rising fortunes of Indian writing in English intersected and overlapped not just with other auxiliary formations of knowledge, but also contrapuntally with waves upon waves of diverse postcolonial migrations, and therefore with the coming into being of global cosmopolitan identities unmoored at last from essentialist affirmations of Eurocentrism. The textured language of this writing could not in turn remain untouched by such a delicate filigree of mobilities. Gayatri Spivak notes that one of the most significant effects of such a tectonics was that “what had been an upper-class, upwardly mobile, or upwardly aspiring private relationship to the vernacular in national peripheral space” was transformed (“How to read a culturally different book,” 128). Publicized instead as an affirmation of ethnicity in the

metropolitan space of the diasporic postcolonial intellectual, the vernacular as such was to become part of a discursive strategy in which The Satanic Verses (1988) according to Spivak is the classic acme, and G.V. Desani's All about H. Hatterr (1948), the pioneer. For Spivak, Desani's is a formation in which the novelistic environment called forth by an authorial Queen's tongue suitably peppered with havens of indigenous oddity, is replaced by one in which English is reterritorialized as one of many regional argots through a sustained translation of the vernacular into standard storytelling practice. This struggle between linguistic powers is thus in a manner, resolved for Hatterr, just as it is spectacularly celebrated for Gibreel Farishta (The Satanic Verses), and only wearily repeated for Sartaj Singh and Ganesh Gaitonde (The Sacred Games, 2006) who appear at a time when this struggle, as we shall see, is already belated. Of course, as Spivak points out the conflict between languages is most palpable in an early formation like R.K. Narayan's Guide (1958) where the English of the dialogue especially between a national underclass is almost always angular and wooden. Predating what Spivak calls the "hyper-real scramble for identity on the move ("How to read a culturally different book," 128)" Narayan's novel particularly in its relation to the Bombay film version of the same name (Guide, 1965) is worthy of attention precisely because "the violence of the translation of the English novel into the national language (not the appropriate vernacular) forces into the open the rivalry between empire and nation, English and Hindi, and the rivalry in between" ("How to read a culturally different book," 142).

These concerns—the enmity between English and Hindi, between Hindi and the vernacular, and consequently between nation and empire—are however prior, in fact in an absolute sense, to a new formation such as Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake (2003). This is because as I argue, Lahiri's novel inaugurates and is the symptom of a register of writing distinct from the ones that Spivak discusses. The first and perhaps most glorious phase of Indian writing

in English had emerged in an isomorphic alliance with the delicious diasporas freed by the loosening of colonial power. In contrast, Lahiri's first novel is called forth by the increasing possibility of repatriates coming home from what used to be metropolitan-migrant centers for diasporic postcolonial intelligentsia. With the quickly escalating proliferation in the global south of multiple techno-managerial franchises and the swollen economies enabled by a restive advance of multiform silicon valleys, not only has a space been carved out to lodge the returning flock, but more importantly this space is no longer coded as national or even peripheral. Instead, it has become just one more terminus in the radiant circuit of gregarious capitals which constellate to form an increasingly planetary vision of a shared neo-liberal present. Shifting between events in Calcutta, New York City and Boston, The Namesake is on the one hand a rather fatigued culturalist telling of the struggles of Nikhil Gogol Ganguli, born to first-generation Bengali immigrants, and therefore caught between conflicting worlds and competing ways of being. On the other, and far more interestingly, the novel relates the story of Gogol's mother, Ashima, who while apparently little more than an irrepressible symptom of Bengaliness, is in fact the principal figure who rewrites the erstwhile national-peripheral space as part of an emerging global-metropolitan nexus of brilliantly showy capitals. Indeed, it is only in Mira Nair's English Language film The Namesake (2007), and only something of an accident that Ashima's crucial role comes to surface, for played by the Bombay thespian/star Tabu, Gogol's mother becomes in a manner perform the most significant face of the narrative.⁴

⁴ Mira Nair's choice of Tabu as the actress who would essay the role of Ashima was something of an accident. Self-admittedly, the director had "wanted a Bengali [for the title role]." But both Bengali actresses Rani Mukherjee and Konkona Sen Sharma had to turn down Nair's offer because of scheduling problems, and finally Tabu was roped in. For Nair, 'authenticity' as she points out in several interviews, is very important, and to have a Bengali actress play the role of Ashima would have been deliciously authentic. Yet one wonders if in that case Ashima would have emerged as anything more than an

After the death of Ashoke, and in a “solitary, somewhat premature version of the future she and her husband had planned when he was alive,” Ashima decides “to spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States” (275). Her return to the homeland is not, however, by any means a function of nostalgia or that intense craving for lost models of living that she had experienced when she first arrived in Cambridge hard on the heels of a traditional arranged marriage. Instead, Ashima’s decision to travel to Calcutta is dependent on the opening up of possibilities rather than on the slow and agonizing shutting down of options often associated with the return of expatriate populations in the face of retirement, old age, and death. After all, in Calcutta, Ashima plans to live in a “spacious flat in Salt Lake [and] there she will have a room, the first in her life intended for her exclusive use” (275). For Gogol’s mother then, the Calcutta she will pretend Persephone to is “foreign” not because she has built her life elsewhere for thirty-three years, but paradoxically enough, because it now affords her a register of opportunity that Ashoke had to seek, far away in the haloed portals of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. More importantly, the city Ashima chooses to reside in six months out of every year will not remain unmoved by the signatures of mobility that she brings with her, for “She will return to India with an American Passport. In her wallet will remain her Massachusetts driver’s license, her social security card” (276). Being the chosen city because it is on the verge of an intoxicating induction into the glittering chimera of a globally shared neo-liberal reality, Calcutta will in turn be made more splendid by the comings and goings of Mrs. Ganguli and her like. Like Ashima who “true to the meaning of her name will be without borders, without a home, a resident everywhere and nowhere,” Calcutta too will become coterminous with Boston and New York City, its differences democratized by the benevolent wand of supranational

irrepressible symptom of ‘Bengaliness’ and therefore whether she would have become what I go on to chart as an important fulcrum in the narrative.

capital and by the poised passages of residents who are at one and the same time also non-resident (276).

Ashima may not be the most veracious representative of a young, energetic, MTV generation techno-managerial class, but she is nonetheless a most effective topos for the revision of national-peripheral space as in fact an urban transit center for the flexible travels of the postcolonial beau monde. Not only is Ashima older and wiser than youth Gogol's age, but also she is touched with just the right strokes of Bengaliness—a love of sandesh, pantuas, saris and all are part of her being—such that she will be able to tranquilize the rash buoyancy of her American passport, her Massachusetts driver's license, and her social security card. On the other hand, her affiliations to her home in Boston are carefully torn away from the dry legalese of federal documentation and carved with a wonderfully silken tenderness. So lovingly does Ashima think of how she will miss the library, the women she has worked with, and going into Cambridge with her daughter to see old movies at the Brattle that there seems little danger that Calcutta will swallow her in a pit of cultural or familial parochialism. Once distinguished by the distance between the nostalgic value of the national-periphery and the opportunity afforded by metropolitan migration, Calcutta, Boston, and New York City could now replace one another, for they have been made increasingly coincident by the venerable discernment, yet youthful energy of Ashima's lithe motilities. These glittering hubs—Calcutta having been only recently accepted into the lustrous fold—are the beckoning exhibits of a global grid of spaces which like Ashima herself are now gossamer, unbound from the archaism of distance and difference, and thus without striations, borderless. Indeed, it is precisely such an undivided continuum that the language of normative Hinduness writes itself into, grinding uneven histories into a numbing sameness, erasing the disparities generated by a shared vision of neo-liberalism, and leveling postcoloniality to meet an enduring possibility of the planetary scope of empire.

In an Antique Land warps and desecrates such an unperturbed constancy by rupturing the apparently settled cohesion of histories, genealogies, and epistemologies into a veritable plethora of unfulfilled divisions, partitions, and separations. These lines of flight fork away from each other and again converge upon themselves only to poison their own uniformity and yet once more cleave into the inexhaustible depths of a language unable to be faithful to itself. For instance, in Ghosh's hands the plenitude of fellaheen tradition now hobnobs with the modernity of Nasser's revolution, now unveils the pitiless collusions of the neo-colonial traffic in postcolonial selves, and now itself intersects with the increasingly technologized vision of an apparently shared, rather than collusive, neo-liberal reality. Similarly, the rigid borders of history and a traveler's tale disfigure and mortify themselves so that the two seem to emerge from and with one another. In fact it is precisely in their convergences and bifurcations that these two categories can call forth a critical history of the present. Similarly, the pressure of contemporaneity generated in the final encounter between the Imam and the Indian betrays history, even the past itself as still unresolved, still being made, still open to the presences of the unheeded, the untried, and the unexplored. The Indian—who is at once a representative of traditional knowledges as well as the metropolitan-migrant bearer of western theory—is made to confront his tradition prior to its induction into the circuit of metropolitan exchange and distribution, and prior therefore, to its market-worthiness as something other than an obsolescence that prevents survival in the modern world. Unlike doktor Amitab of In an Antique Land however, Ashima is as we have seen remarkably comfortable both as the bearer of a Massachusetts drivers License and a social security card, as well as the symbolic figure of traditional Bengaliness. Under the dispensation of metropolitan Hindutva, she does not have to encounter tradition as the deathly marker of an archaic incapacity, for the new and the old are no longer in conflict with one another. They are regularized on a single plane of sameness.

In Ghosh's textual landscape however, no desires are allowed to tranquilize themselves into hardened regularities and no epistemic cogencies can be democratized into a level story of difference, for postcolonial brotherhoods are haunted by the specter of neo-imperial collusions, just as the congealing of alterity is loosened by the force of otherness as dissident intellection. To be sure, so strong is this tendency to destabilize habitual fealties—whether between the anthropologist and his object, or between different postcolonials in different places, or even between the congruent desires of neo-colonial peddlers—that it is almost as if In an Antique Land is motored by interruption itself as literary conceit. Yet, naming interruption as literary or designating it a conceit does not mean that such an impulse can dwell lonely in recognizable forms of literature, bandied though they may still be as significant value forms in the global marketplace of letters. It is only the poverty of a language with nowhere else to go—a poverty that Ghosh unabashedly bares in the nothingness of the linguistic brush between the Imam and the Indian—that forces the force of such a conceit into the epistemic uniformity of literature.

At least in the context of metropolitan Hindutva, to disentrail the pressure of interruption as conceit from the yoke of institutional literature is to meet this monstrous phenomenon in its own domain. It is more specifically in the pages of my own doctoral narrative, to blast open the alignment of dharmā and democracy by opposing the militarized dharmā of the Bhagavad Gita to the infidelity of dharmā in the Bhagavata Purana. It is to chance upon Rabindranath Tagore's radical recoding of Upanishadic doctrine, to demonstrate how he dissents against imperial sovereignty by bastardizing the purity of received scripture, and to use the poet's manner of language to assail Dubashi's economistic transcription of the cycle of life and rebirth. It is to wield Savarkar's comparatist verve against Gautier's journalistic conflation of difference. In short, it is to de-technologize religion as that application of language which has

spawned the violently equalized continuum of dharma and democracy, of karmic cycles and supranational capital, and of Calcutta, Boston, and New York City.

To do so would involve first faithlessly betraying the idea that scriptural textures can call forth a most profoundly worldly notion of time and history, at least in so far as they are the topoi for disrupting and displacing all alignments between sense and signification. To do so would also involve understanding that professing one's loyalty to the institution of literature could also mean overlooking how the language of literature can be in continuity with the planetary scope of neo-liberal sameness. In the absence of literature as the one safe haven where selves and others are constantly put into motion without ever placidly resting as fully constituted subjects, one must be able to discern such energies from amidst a toxic miasma of inter-generic and inter-textual fabrics of worldliness. Such fabrics may include the delicate weave between the contemporary devastation of a sixteenth-century mosque and the deployment of a Toyota automobile as the symbolic representation on the one hand of the newly inaugurated free-market in India and on the other, of the mythic chariot of war that guided by the god Krisna traversed the battlefield of the Mahabharata. They may include the serpentine texture of connections involving a virile and racy historical romance, the karmic cycle of life and rebirth, and the dying, but still fervent poetic strains of the Urdu ghazal. Or, they may even involve the labyrinth of linkages between figurations of the lusty, bucolic goat-herd god of the Hindu pantheon and a contemporary pattern of democratic expression in the Indian situation. Having these adjacent realities converse with each other without either feeling the agonistic need to dialectically resolve them, or allowing them to settle into one, undifferentiated plane of regularities is not a task merely for the literary critic. As I tell the story of my dissertation, I hope to demonstrate that this is a task for the anti-colonial mind in our contemporary political occasion.

2.0 EPIC COLUMNS AND NEO-ESSAYS

After a thousand years of decline and near-fall, the Hindus are rising again, not as a race, not as religion, but as a vibrant political system.

Jay Dubashi, The Road to Ayodhya (1992)

Posing as the harbinger of what Dileep Padgaonkar has called “India’s [imminent] second republic,” Jay Dubashi’s 1992 collection of essays promises to messianically usher in a new generation of political Hindus, resurrected, phoenix-like, from what the author flamboyantly diagnoses as the dying embers of their thousand year long decline and near-fall (Pantham 181).⁵

⁵ An engineering graduate from Mumbai, with a doctoral degree from the London School of Economics, Jay Dubashi has been politically associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and more generally with the political right wing of Hindu nationalism for several years. He is also a core member of the economic think tank of the party. In his book he mentions especially The Times of India (with which Dileep Padgaonkar is associated) as the most anti Hindu paper in the country, despite the fact that Padgaonkar’s critical analyses of Hindutva as a discourse that “has altered the terms of the political discourse and perhaps even laid the grounds for the creation of India’s second republic,” only confirms his own messianic promise. Dubashi himself writes regularly for several English language publications in India, and has especially been associated with the India Today group. Apart from The Road to Ayodhya, Dubashi’s significant work includes Snakes and Ladders: The Development Game, a collection of essays that first appeared in India Today between 1977 and 1984, and a

Unlike the predictions of the canonical texts of high Hinduism, however, Dubashi's neobrahminical articulation of successive epochs of decline, fall and rise, is not accompanied by a corresponding formulation that presents us with an iconic origin or starting place for what he characterizes as the Hindu fall from grace. Instead, in order to arrive at the author's intended starting point for the dark ages of Hindudom, readers must either already have a commonsensical familiarity with Dubashi's historical associations and intellectual genealogy, or perhaps, simply be prepared to start counting backwards from the momentous transformation he assures at the threshold of the twenty-first century. In the course of the essays in The Road to Ayodhya, Dubashi associates his intellectual universe quite explicitly with that of Indian historians, politicians, and journalists who variously proposed that the decline of Hindus began in the eleventh century (this is also the approximate date one would arrive at if one were to count from the twenty-first century backwards) when Mahmud, sultan of the kingdom of Ghazna (998-1030) repeatedly led his forces to attack the northwestern provinces of modern-day India.

Originally comprising modern Afghanistan and the northeastern part of modern Iran, Ghazni's empire grew as a result of his aggressive conquests and by the time of his death had come to include most of the contemporary Iranian landmass and parts of northwestern India. The

single essay in a collection entitled Hindu Temples: What Happened to Them (1998).

The central thematic trope that allows for a suturing of the essays in Snakes and Ladders is a board game that is commonly familiar to every man and woman in the subcontinent, from child to octogenarian, and Dubashi uses this game as a trope to write a paean to India's experience of economic liberalization. For Dubashi, the game of snakes and ladders provides an ontological principle of development that can in one fell swoop dismiss the burden of the relentless critique of neo-liberal economic policies, which in the context of the Indian market, have surged forward ever since 1991. I will look more closely at Snakes and Ladders in Chapter III of the dissertation.

Sultan was particularly attracted by the opulent treasures of a renowned Hindu temple in the city of Somnath on the western coast of India, and in 1024, after he had already completed a series of incursions into what constitutes modern Indian territory, Mahmud led his forces on one last expedition across the Arabian Sea and successfully marched his way into the Somnath temple. Many historians, and especially those with whom Dubashi associates himself, have argued that Mahmud's repeated forays into the subcontinental landmass, and in particular his pillaging of Somnath, exposed the porous borders of the western frontiers to further military invasions, finally resulting in the consolidation of more than five hundred years of Moghul supremacy. Although he does not explicitly point to this historical juncture as a moment of origin, Dubashi's overt references at various points in the course of the book clearly suggest that for him, the thousand-year descent of Hindus continued through the entire Moghul period and blindly plumbed the dark depths of British Raj. Paradoxically, he demonstrates this fall reached its nadir in the postindependence period, when despite being the proud bearers of political autonomy, Hindus were unable to extricate themselves from the oppressive clutches of what the author calls a slave mentality engendered by hundreds of years of foreign domination.

Before going on to unravel the tangled web of Jay Dubashi's textual universe, I would like to clarify the stakes for my own narrative in so far as it calls upon The Road to Ayodhya to mark its beginnings. Unlike Dubashi's collection of essays which in its very title pledges to map what appears to be a linear road to the present, the story I am about to tell begins smack in the midst of things. For both my own tale as well as Dubashi's tableau, however, Ayodhya is a signature of the present. A relatively small city in the Faizabad district of the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, Ayodhya became in the 1990s a volatile stage for perhaps the most defining spectacle of the new political system of Hindus that Dubashi prophesies. Journeying back in the literary imaginary to Valmiki's Ramayana (one of the earliest Indian epics, variously dated

between BC 500 and 100, and attributed to the mythic single author, Valmiki) Ayodhya is credited as the seat of King Dasharatha who graced by the gods, sired the epic hero Rama. Ever since Valmiki's text, the city has accrued multiple associations having to do with the rather profound, sometimes discontinuous, and often deeply conflicting influences of Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam, all of which are again intermittently choked by contentions that these mongrelizing trespasses were in fact preceded by Rama's prior and therefore original claim to the territory. Between the time of Valmiki's Ramayana and the late decades of the Twentieth Century in which Jay Dubashi tells his story, not only has Ayodhya been overrun by a myriad interests, but also in dialogue with the nationalist movement for autonomy, the mythic Rama has been transformed into the specifically Hinduized and historical human-divine to meet a colonial demand for monotheistic veracity. As we shall see, the tale that Jay Dubashi tells in The Road to Ayodhya proleptically calls upon precisely this Hinduized version of the historical Rama to defend his birthplace against Muslim Invasion, and more broadly perhaps against the admitted secular grammar of the post-independence Indian state. Without going into an elaboration of the many strands of mongrelization that Dubashi neglects to mention, my own story meets The Road to Ayodhya on its own terrain. Demonstrating how the author employs Ayodhya as a fulcrum not only for the historicity of Hindu gods, but also for the changing history of Indian political forms as they developed in the postcolonial condition, the chapter finally arrives at how Ayodhya is generated as a geophany for an emergent imperial scenario, only now beginning to take shape.

One would think after having drawn up such an epic panorama of the Hindu fall from grace, in the above extract, and having in particular emphasized its relation to conquest, Dubashi's tableau would devote a great deal of demagogic energy to fiercely attacking specific periods of foreign rule—on the one hand, the reign of Mughal Badshahs, and on the other, the

more modern governance of the Crown. Yet our author has little time for decadent sultans and emperors, and even less time for enlightened British sahibs. In fact, the entire dramatic potential of The Road to Ayodhya is directed solely toward the era of postindependence Indian politics, and more specifically toward the contemporary scenario. The effects of British colonialism appear only in occasional flashes as the flippantly anglophile affiliations of contemporary Indian heads of state and traces of Moghul domination only spectrally haunt the landscape in the form of what Dubashi calls “pseudo-secular” forces ready to genuflect before the bidding of the minority community’s vote. Given that the four decades or so after independence occupy the spotlight of Dubashi’s tableau, the most important figure in the procession of scenes is Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India and the man who gave his name to a political phenomenon retrospectively signaled in The Road to Ayodhya and elsewhere, by the term, Nehruvianism.⁶ In fact, so important is Nehru to Dubashi’s drama that the long

⁶ According to Partha Chatterjee (Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World), in the final, fully mature instance of the development of nationalist thought in India, what he calls, “the moment of arrival,” Jawaharlal Nehru’s work served to firmly secure nationalism within the domain of a state ideology. Nehru’s doctrine of nationalism sought its legitimizing principle in a conception of distributive social justice, but given that such a form of welfare could not be produced within what he considered an antiquated and decadent setting, incapable of dynamism, the need of the hour was to develop a new architecture of institutions embodying the spirits of progress and modernity. According to Nehru’s interpretation of the terms of the twentieth century, progress or modernity entailed bequeathing primacy to the sphere of the economic, for it was after all only through a systematic reorganization of economics that the nation’s resources could be distributed in a manner that would ensure social justice for all. Moreover, modern social sciences had shown that such a reform of the economic

temporal span of Hindu decline that the book uses as its organizing principle is released from its attachment to particular periods of foreign rule—its unfolding in time as it were—and congealed

structure of society could not be undertaken without a central directing role on the part of the state. The colonial state in accordance with its imperial interest would never take up such a role, and in Nehru's narrative, the Crown was in fact the very adversary that consistently acted as the chief impediment to all nationalist attempts at restructuring. Thus, the principal political task before independent India was to establish a sovereign national state, which once instituted, would stand above the particular interests of all competing groups and classes in society. Taking an objective third-person view in accordance with the best social-scientific procedures, this body would plan and direct fiscal processes in order to equitably distribute social wealth and ensure justice and welfare for all. The challenge for the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Nehru therefore lay in finding the means to balance the continuing dominance of more traditional systems of power in India with the uniform political architecture of such a sovereign state. The Congress System emerged from this challenge as a coalitionary model based on precarious and continually shifting alliances between a proliferating mass of autonomies and it is precisely this catastrophic balance of power, along with the Congress Party's version of socialism that that the Hindu Right was to consider the Nehruvian model. Of course, what the right-wing faction of Hindu politics failed to consider was the fact that the Congress System was not a monolithic entity and that in the decades after independence it slowly emerged as something completely different from Nehru's party. This is to say that, even though by the late 1980's, the Congress party was becoming more and more a right-centrist force—decisively refashioning the quasi-socialist part of its image, by advancing discontinuous phases of liberalization—it continued to be discursively generated by the Hindu right in the opposition, as an obsolete vessel for the last vestiges of a pseudo-secular and antiquated Nehruvian socialism.

in its entirety into a contemporary cartography saturated to different degrees by what Dubashi considers the disastrous legacy of Nehru and his breed.

Early on in his book, Dubashi presents Jawaharlal Nehru as the protagonist of his drama, and the occasion he invokes is one that, for the first time in fifteen years after independence, united a substantial opposition against Nehru's vision of politics:

The 1962 war [with China] changed [everything].⁷ People began to wonder whether Nehru had not taken them for a ride. They also did not like the way Nehru had tried to create a family dynasty, on the lines of the Moghuls. Nehru was not the last Englishman in India, as somebody has said. He was the last Moghul and tried to create a Moghul dynasty of his own. (37)

What is intriguing about this extract is that despite starting out with what could potentially be a rather sophisticated critique of the political role that the Nehruvian cabinet played in engendering war with China, Dubashi deftly employs a conjunctive adverbial phrase—"They also did not like the way Nehru had tried to create a family dynasty, on the lines of the Moghuls" (my emphasis)—to syntactically maneuver his way out of a critical assessment of war, and affectively attach to it, an attack on the person of the prime minister. Nehru, according to Dubashi, is in the habits of his person and in his commitment to family lineage (along with its

⁷ The 1962 border war with China was a water-shed moment in the rise of Hindu nationalist forces in the Indian context. Because the ill-equipped Indian forces were routed in the war, Nehru was immediately attacked by the right wing of Congress for his non-alignment policies. Even though the Congress won the general elections, the rise of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (the predecessor of the BJP) as a liberal constitutional party (unlike the many extra-parliamentary units of Hindu nationalist outfits) signaled a formidable merging of industrial pro-liberalization forces with those of Hindu communalism, in collective opposition to Nehru.

inescapably dynastic tendencies), the last of the Moghuls, rather than the last Englishman in India as “somebody” said. The meaning signaled by Nehru thus consists in its repetition of another sign, the Moghuls, but rather than establishing a relationship of anteriority between Nehru and the Moghuls, Dubashi’s stylistic exercise brings about an absolute coincidence between the two. Not only was Nehru the last of the Moghuls to establish a dynasty of his own, but more significantly, he was “the last Moghul who established a Moghul dynasty of his own.” In this syntactical disposition, and in others of its kind throughout the book, the brazenly redundant deployment of Moghul in both its noun and adjective forms ensures that the irreconcilable temporal distance between Nehru and the Moghuls is subdued to a flash of simultaneity, in which the two signs immediately concur with each other to the effect that what is erased and obfuscated is the emergence of difference as the fluidity of time itself.

Elsewhere in the text, still simultaneously manufacturing and attacking the personality cult of a man, Dubashi suggests that for him Nehru, steeped in his Cambridge education and what he calls its foolishly secular ethos, is indeed closer to being a Britisher than an Indian-Hindu or a Moghul Badshah. Even the term Nehruvian Raj, Dubashi proposes, is his own bitterly sardonic reference to the transparent identification that he sees between British Raj and the system of governance practiced by “Nehru[’s] men” (20). For Dubashi, then, Nehru is in the same instant both unabashedly British and the last of Moghuls: thus, a tyrannical triumvirate emerges—Moghuls-Nehru-the British—in which each sign is merely a perfectly symmetrical repetition of the other and the instantaneity of transparent coincidences displays a possible elimination of the constitutive void between a sign and its semantic gravitation, and therefore of time in its incarnation of difference, distance, and discontinuity. Yet what is even more interesting is that The Road to Ayodhya does not approach its climax merely with the generation of this triumvirate as the arch enemy of Hindusthan; instead the program of transparent

identifications begins to form a clearly discernible pattern, for as Dubashi's drama extends itself, the web of simultaneous affiliations grows wider and wider and an emerging network of concurrent adjacencies spreads its inalienable tentacles to gradually embrace the entirety of world history:

History has its quirks, but there is method behind the madness. I said in my last column that November 9, 1989, would go down in Indian history as one of those dates that actually make history. I was not aware at the time that on the very same day the first brick of the Ram Shila foundation was being laid at Ayodhya, the Berliners were removing bricks from the Berlin Wall. While a temple was going up in Ayodhya, a communist temple was being demolished five thousand miles away in Europe. If this is not history I do not know what is.

The two events one at Ayodhya and the other at Berlin are not unrelated. They are like the two events in Einstein's relativity theory which appear totally unconnected but are not.

They mark the end of the post-Nehru era and the beginning of a truly national era in India on the one hand, and the end of the post-communist era and the beginning of a truly democratic era in Europe on the other. History has rejected Nehru in India and also overthrown communism in Europe. It is not an accident that the two events are taking place at the same time....

....The men who presume to think what is good for the man in the street are the most dangerous species and should be locked up in asylums. Jawaharlal Nehru was one such man. He knew what was good for you and me, just as Stalin and Hitler did, and for almost twenty years went on forcing his ideas on this hapless country (18-19).

As we see in the above two extracts, and these are only two of many, Dubashi's sovereign concentration of the epochal decline of Hindus into his congealed will to present the Nehruvian system of governance as the lowest ebb of the Indian political tide, sets the tone for the syntactical orchestration of world-historical events in his arena. Having been identified with both groups of foreign conquerors who at different times reigned supreme over the subcontinental landmass, not only is the prime minister of the Young Republic the central prop of Dubashi's drama (Nehru is a principal protagonist in almost every one of the essays that make up The Road to Ayodhya), but more importantly, he appears as an almost diabolically magnetic persona, gradually attracting a host of international figures and phenomena as diverse as Stalin and Hitler on the one hand and Moghul dynasties and the Berlin Wall on the other. The Nehruvian vista that Dubashi sets up in the course of his writing is thus populated by a veritable surfeit of peoples and events, all attaching themselves to the Prime Minister in ever multiplying frequencies of instantaneous association—here Indian Marxists hobnob with Moghul Sultans, who are in turn of the same ilk as Nehruvian Raj:

Indian Marxists outdid Marx. M.N. Roy calls the Arab empire a magnificent monument to the memory of Mohammed. According to him, "Islam had already played out its progressive role before it penetrated India." And the Royists, now under the garb of radical humanists, are still preaching the same outrageous gospel. (5)

Here also, the sixteenth-century Moghul emperor, Babur (who is as we know coincident with Nehru), consorts with Adolf Hitler and, coupled together in an intimate rivalry, they vie for our attention as bloody conquerors, Nehru's quasi-socialist program for independent India occupies the same platform as the colonial power of the British Crown (the term "Nehruvian Raj" is identified with British Raj), and Lenin and Stalin are the same person with agendas not very different from Nehru's blueprint for India's postindependence national state: "Stalin merely

built on the foundations laid by Lenin, just as Nehru tried to justify his model by invoking, of all people, Mahatma Gandhi” (107).

Wild, potentially anarchic, and grandly epic in its scope, this astounding array of actors is tamed by Dubashi’s style in two principal ways. First, each figure and event is presented with an economy so strict, and a discursive thinness so absolute that the sheer freight of proper names— Nehru, Hitler, Stalin, Lenin—is considered enough to transmit (rather than signal) meaning to a docile and terrorized reader. Thus, with a great deal of earnestness, language erases itself merely in what it says and to whom it speaks, and as a consequence, purports to play the purely horizontal role of transmission, never besieged by striations that might reveal it in its own right as a medium, or worse still, open up the gaping wound of its own intangibly dense image as a duplication of phonetic elements rather than the signified itself. Secondly, with every turn of phrase, Dubashi’s syntax violently arrests each of these transmitters of meaning, and like Porphyria’s lover, transforms them into decorative death masks for his vast tableau of cadaverous collectibles. Once they have been brought under the same comprehensive databank, these links are affectively affixed to each other (for instance, Babur becomes synonymous with the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya, as well as with Nehru, Hitler, Lenin, and Stalin) in a structure of simultaneities that is immediately coincident with itself, erased of even the slightest clamor of discontinuity, and grandiloquently designated not only as the very essence of history, but in fact as the only possible history (“If this is not history, I don’t know what is”).

If the enemy on Dubashi’s stage appears in the company of a breathless procession of international figures and phenomena, then the battalion that the author conjures up to wage war against such a formidable foe is equally if not more full. From the Lord Krishna to the Goddess Durga, from the heroic warriors of the Mahabharata to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, from the cultural Hinduness upheld by contemporary right-wing journalists like Swapan Dasgupta to

what Dubashi terms the ‘political jewishness’ of Albert Einstein and from V.S. Naipaul to Charles de Gaulle, the range of links called upon to confront Nehruvianism and its effects is almost overwhelming not only in its plenitude, but more so in its obfuscation of degrees of difference. Our author seems to have little difficulty in composing a sentence that with a flash of élan declares that “If it is right to pull down [hypothetical] Hitler columns in England, and Lenin mausoleums in Soviet Russia, I do not see anything wrong in pulling down a Babur monument in India (81),” or that “the human rights activists [who are identified with Nehruvianism] cannot see a gutter without seeing a Hindu there. They are like Kansa who used to see [Lord] Krishna everywhere (24),” or even that “India is a very different country after Ayodhya, as different as Russia after 1917, or France after 1787 (120).” Much like the one I described in the last paragraph, the absorbing aspect of such a panoramic spread is not that it is replete, full to the brim and then some; it is not even that it violently yokes together apparently disparate events and personae (although this is indeed significant), but rather that it stylistically performs its tableau as a system of instantaneous simultaneities, deigned to be identical with the sum total of world history. In fact, the only striation that is accepted in an arena such as this, is that between friend and foe (Dubashi titles the second section of his book “Ayodhya: Friends and Foes”) or, to use a phrase that has more recently become somewhat infamous, we could perhaps say that the only permissible wedge in Dubashi’s structure of simultaneities is that which is capable of dividing his actors according to the simple logic of “with us” or “against us.” On one side, if Nehru is coincident with Moghul emperors at the same time as he is synchronous with Lenin, then Lenin is immediately identifiable with Stalin, who in turn is instantaneously concurrent with Hitler. On the other side, Ayodhya in 1989 is identical with the fate of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and France in 1787 at the very same moment as it coexists in a perfectly symmetrical alignment with the Goddess Durga as national deity, with the politics of Albert Einstein and V.S.

Naipaul, and with Lord Krishna and his modern-day devotees as the fullest realization of the promised political system of the Hindu pantheon. Not surprisingly, straddling a proscenium where language is disburdened of its semantic indeterminacies and becomes instead an infinite chain of transparent identifications, Dubashi pronounces that although history may appear to be full of accidents and somewhat quirky, it is really profoundly methodical, deliberately designed, and as such, I would hazard to say, in a relationship of absolute sovereignty with its constitutive category of time.

2.1 TIME'S VICTIMS

The absolute passage of time, the sense of a radical rupture with the past, and the invigorating air of a new beginning liberated in revolutionary breaks from all that came before it, were all in different occasions fodder for slogans that masqueraded as the revolutionary heralds of multiple waves of modernity, each arrogantly pronouncing itself to be without precedent. The moderns, as Nietzsche cuttingly remarked in his essay on “The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life,” suffered from a surfeit of history, the overwhelming feeling of being the grey-haired legatees of the world-process, and the irremediable illness of historicism. The more they understood their rupture with the past in terms of Copernican revolutions and clean epistemic breaks, so radical that nothing of yesterday survived in them, the more they attempted to privilege the objective and disinterested uncovering of lifeless facts and the more they put such scrupulously additive memorabilia on display in purely decorative museums. Historians painstakingly reconstituted the past little by little, more carefully, insofar as they were convinced that its vital life had been gulped down whole by the quintessentially irreversible arrow of time.

Furious destruction was thus followed by an equally furious impulse to save, capitalize, and accumulate what could only be a lifeless monumentalization. Yet despite meticulously attempting to accrue such corpselike shards of the past, the moderns were continually plagued by the horror of an eliminated past returning in all its vitalistic force. They anxiously whispered about such a possibility in their salons, their parliaments, their town councils, and their book clubs; they called it the return of the repressed, a barbarous archaism, and feared that it would cause a slide back into the dark ages. Recoiling in distaste and moral consternation from anything that offered even the slightest whiff of the foul and uncanny pre-modern, these men and women however, spawned a considerable breed of antimodernists who challenged their progressive understanding, with notions of a voyage back in time, a feeling of communion with the pure and unsullied origin of mankind, and a return to the natural order at the expense of the civilized social order. This schema was valuable, the rearguard antimodernists said, primarily because it would stem the tide of degeneracy and decadence that inevitably follow upon modernity's philosophical and political conceptualization of inevitable progress.

Ever since the advent of colonial rule, and more specifically ever since the beginnings of English education in the subcontinent, Indian politics, literature, cultural practice, and criticism have almost inescapably given into precisely such a dialectic of tradition and modernity. From Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Prachina O Nabina to Rabindranath Tagore's Home and the World, from the spinning wheel as Gandhian oracle to Jawaharlal Nehru's promise of industrial modernity, from the dharma of the village panchayat to the law emblazoned in the constitutional state, and from quasisocialist philosophies of statehood to frenzied invocations of Ramrajya (the ideal state of Lord Ram), the subcontinental response to colonial incursion continues to be understood largely in terms of its adherence to what has become an essentially fatigued historicist debate about modernity and its discontents, and about the dialectical relationship

between desi (native) and angrezi (European) affiliations.⁸ Indeed, one may still argue from either end of the suit about the leanings of Dubashi's book, for while on the one hand, the author appears to urge readers to revisit what seems to be a primordial purity of Hindudom (the golden age of the Hindus after which they began their decline), on the other, the work presents itself as resolutely modern, at least insofar as it stubbornly advocates a revolutionary break (via the claim to pull down the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya and build a Ram Temple over it) with its own legacy of Nehruvian formations. Yet it is precisely such an infernal oscillation between the two poles, and the terrifying possibility of Dubashi's book being peopled by both the premodern and the modern at the same time, that compels us to consider tradition and modernity, the modern and the anti-modern, if you will, as in fact false binaries of thinking. Indeed, sloganistic diktats—of time as an irreversible arrow that eliminates all obstructions in its path and of temporal movement as an absolute passage that cannot accommodate the thickness of heterogeneous

⁸ A satirical essay written by perhaps one of the most critically charged thinkers of nationalism in the British-Indian context, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's (1838-1894) "Prachina O Nabina" was in many ways the foundation for the by-now familiar imagination of the Indian woman as the mother of the nation. Chattopadhyay achieves his task by setting up a binary opposition between the woman who relies solely on traditional values and her newer counterpart (vis-à-vis whom she is satirized) who is a synthetic figuration of educated awareness and timeless values – a combination, capable of construing her as the nurturing emblem of an emergent national consciousness. In Home and the World Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), extends Bankim's trope to figuratively express his female protagonist as an educated inner sanctum or ethical home for timeless-traditional values that are in a dialectical relationship with the worldly reality of what Partha Chatterjee has called the "colonial population state."

durations—were held in common by the modernists and the antimodernists at the same time. That is to say, if the moderns understood the passage of time in terms of its killing of the past, and if they saw themselves as Promethean superhumans after whom there could be no looking back, then the antimodernists too were the image of Attila, in whose path no life may grow. The only difference between the time of the modernists and that of the antimoderns was that the latter reversed the direction of the former and promised to return mankind to a pristine past rather than surge forward by way of the revolutionary achievements of civilization. As the telos of the return, however, such a past was uncontaminated precisely because in the course of its journey backwards the irreversible arrow of time had consumed all the glorious monuments of modernity so that none of its effects survived. There was not much to choose therefore, between the ontology of time forwarded by the modernists and that proposed by the antimodernists. In both discourses, time continued to be understood as a linear force that with insatiable appetite devoured everything in its path. It was denied an access to thickness, and consequently, an ability to accommodate durational antinomies, heterogeneous occasions, and the distinct rhythms of asynchronous temporalities.

The epic drama of The Road to Ayodhya invites its own rather dangerous extrication from the oppressive clutches of the dialectic between tradition and modernity, or to put it differently, between the progressive impulse of the babu and the nostalgic energies of the nativist. Despite suggesting a return to the golden age of the Hindus, Dubashi clearly pronounces that the messianic rise of Hinduness will be quintessentially different from its originary greatness—“After a thousand years of decline and near-fall, the Hindus are rising again, not as a race, not as religion, but as a vibrant political system.” If at its source Hinduness was understood as a religion and a race, then our author proposes that in the contemporary moment it will be able to cast aside its age-old affiliations and ascend to greatness purely as a political system. Yet

even after he has claimed to have extricated Hinduness from the narrow shackles of a primitivistic return to religiosity, Dubashi's political landscape continues to be peopled by gods and goddesses—Lord Krishna, Lord Rama, the mother-goddess Durga, and the local Maharashtrian favorite Lord Mungesh – temples and mosques, and indeed much of the paraphernalia of ritualistic Hinduism—ascetic shankaracharyas, teetotaler brahmins, the Gita, frequent invocations to dharma, and so forth and so on ad infinitum. If this assemblage of ritualisms and values was to be understood in terms of its relationship of pure anteriority to the political and cultural practices dramatized by Dubashi, then one could of course argue that The Road to Ayodhya proposes an antimodernist return to the golden age of Hindudom. But as we have seen, the text succeeds precisely in severing the past from its nostalgically revered piety, and in syntactically displacing it into a setting where the premodern and the modern simultaneously run amok in a grotesque farce around time itself. On the other hand, Dubashi's obstinacy in heralding a revolutionary break with the Nehruvian paradigm and therefore his possible claim to the time of the moderns, which lunges forward by way of epistemic ruptures and absolute disjunctions with the past quite unceremoniously falls by the wayside: Jawaharlal Nehru, the effects he generated, the forces he unleashed, the alliances he made, and the personae he attracted are all vitally significant and almost seductively alluring parts of Dubashi's stage. In other words, that which The Road to Ayodhya claims to have eliminated, and that which Dubashi assures us has been abandoned and even annihilated, is so absorbing a part of his drama that it is difficult to see his work in terms of its revolutionary rupture with Nehruvianism. Thus, rather than jealously guarding the borders of his writing against an uncanny return of time's victims and their clandestine infiltration into a political domain decisively emancipated from its own past, Dubashi unabashedly flaunts them as very much a part of his contemporary design.

The past seems to rather comfortably cohabit the same material space as its antagonists, who are despite this fact, the millennial heralds of a new beginning.

While attempting to liberate itself from the foul and bewildering morass of its own immediate historical legacy, The Road to Ayodhya is at the same time smug in its belief that Hinduness as a revolutionary political system will precisely render it unnecessary to do so. Nonetheless, this is not to say that the text presents itself as a radical renewal of time in which durations thicken and we have a proliferation of multiplicitous temporalities. In other words, Dubashi's is not a tableau that awkwardly displays epic surfaces intermittently punctuated by novelistic depths, or desperately attempts to achieve a coincidence, no matter how uneasy, between the past of Hindu heritage and the present reality of global influences. Rather, on close examination, The Road to Ayodhya appears to be a postulate in time on the very possibility of eliminating historical time and its constitutive categories (past, present, future, relationships of anteriority etc.) from a principal role in historical-political visions. It is of course true that the story posits as its organizing principle what seems to be a fairly well-regulated, and indeed, familiar program of periodization—the golden age of Hindudom is followed by decline, a near-fall, and finally, the promise of an inevitable rise. Yet such periods are something of a ruse concealing a structure of simultaneities, which is by its very definition incommensurable with the logic of periodization. The successive periods that Dubashi deploys in laying out the project of The Road to Ayodhya are thus themselves archaisms or profoundly anachronistic interventions in a landscape that is not committed in any way to the absolute passage of time and its consequent emancipatory potential as the principal architecture of a political metanarrative. In retrospect, even Dubashi's lack of interest in identifying a starting point for the Hindu dark ages and his concentration of the temporal decline and near-fall of Hindus into a contemporary cartography, saturated as I have said, with different degrees of Nehruvianism, then appears to be

only predictable, given the author's attempt to overcome what we might, for shorthand call, a politics of time.⁹

The politics of time could be conceptualized, albeit somewhat schematically, as existing in an intimate intersection with emancipatory metanarratives, and with a principal political fervour for liberation. This is to say that if the moderns and antimoderns understood time in terms of its absolute passage, and its elimination of all that came in its path, then such a conceptualization allowed them to think of emancipatory energies in terms of their capacity to engineer clean breaks from an oppressive condition that has always already been left behind, and therefore overcome. Formulated in this way, freedom, independence, liberty, and emancipation emerge, not as the naturalized universals or paradigmatic signposts of historical development with which we have become familiar, but rather as profoundly historical terms or situational weapons that, beginning in the eighteenth century, were generated in the West in confluence with a very specific epistemology of temporal relations. As I have tried to show, such an epistemology enfigured time in terms of its capacity to annihilate everything that came in its path and therefore understood this force as an emblem of distance, difference, and indeed, absolute disjunction. The exercises of thought tied to such an epistemology had to covetously guard their territories against the furtive incursion of that which had been left behind, for if indeed time's victims were allowed to seep into the protected discourses, either modern or primitivist, then their sheer discontinuous potential would render chaotic a controllable field of possibilities, and contingency would reign supreme. Thus while the notion of time as an

⁹ Bruno Latour uses the phrase "the politics of time" in his paper ("Emancipation or Attachments: The Different Futures of Politics" presented at a conference entitled, "Modernity and Contemporaneity : Antinomies of Art and Culture after the Twentieth Century" held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania between November 4-6, 2004).

irreversible arrow undoubtedly entailed the figural destruction of the life-like quality of the past it claimed to have overcome and left behind, at the same time, it sustained the possibility of difference in the very idea of distance and disjunction. While Dubashi's tableau seems to herald its own liberation from the clutches of Nehruvianism, or Leninism, or Stalinism, or even the foreign influence of the Moghuls and the British, the truly dangerous potential of the text lies not in its impulse to overcome or kill this or that obsolete political "ism," but rather in the fact that it quite successfully flirts with the possibility of liberating itself from precisely such an epistemology of time. However, spelling the supreme hazard of such a liberation is the fact that, intoxicated with the heady possibilities of its own exercise, it eliminates not only the notion of time as an irreversible phenomenon, but in the same stroke does away with the very idea of temporal distance, and consequently, the possible energy of difference. Thus, Lord Krishna, for instance, can comfortably co-exist alongside modern-day Hindus in one, transparent, flexible scheme of links without gaps or lacunae, not only because time is no longer irreversible and therefore the past can coexist with the present that it has become, but also because what has been erased and obfuscated is the anarchic potential of a past, ontologically and epistemologically distant from present formations.

The conceit of temporality as a specific relation to time did not emerge in a philosophical vacuum where the high priests of truth meditated on the issue in the grand isolation of their private temples. Rather, it was generated in a contiguous relationship with what was to become an almost ubiquitously circulated economy of print capital, and one of the iconic signposts of

modernity.¹⁰ With the dawn of print in sixteenth-century Europe, the relationship between past, present, and future changed to a considerable degree, not only because of the sheer volume of extant material that began to accumulate, but also because sorting and sifting through this immense mass of texts required an unparalleled compartmentalization of knowledges. In such an environment of massified knowledge formation, a tangible criterion was needed to define which traditions of thought would be empowered to break from the past and thereby transmit the weight of history forward. Given its significance to the first phase of philosophical modernity, Germany was an important early site for thinking about such questions. Particularly noteworthy were the modernizing impulses of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, a thinker who formulated important institutional and historical ramifications of the new technological advance. Leibniz proposed that a governmental archive should be set up to create a line of continuity between the past and the present, and clearly embedded in his discourse is the seed of a distinct theory of history. If the inscription generated by print materially lays down a sequence of memory or a continuity of mind by allowing the present to build on past knowledge, this timeline in turn could potentially allow mankind to be defined as historical and by extension, as human. However, there was always the danger that too much printed matter would result in an unleashing of chaos and a return to barbarism, so that in the face of this risk, Leibniz had to call for a novel and cohesive ordering of knowledges. Thus, despite the overwhelming mass of books and printed matter with which mankind was faced, Leibniz disarticulated his thought from a fear of being unable to systematize so much knowledge to show instead that knowledge was in fact still fragmentary and incomplete. This proposition required that the gaps in an incomplete

¹⁰ My analysis of the sixteenth-century European situation of mechanical reproduction and its corollary conceit of temporal relations is closely reliant on Terry Cochran's book, The Twilight of the Literary.

knowledge system needed to be filled in by scholars who did not repeat the old but always produced new material. The potential for a totality implied in Leibniz's theorization invests the present not only with a specific responsibility to thrust history forward, but also emphasizes that each present should record a rupture with the past, that is, differentiate itself substantially from the past. Given the extraordinarily expansive circulation of the book, we can see how the linearity of the notion of progress crystallized into a universally accepted truth such that every historical moment was authorized not only as that which must raise itself to a higher level of human achievement, but also as that which must differentiate itself epistemologically from its own past legacy.

As the single most important manifestation of print technology, the book inserted itself as a link between men and the world they inhabited by recording and preserving the products of the spirit, which in turn survived its own demise by virtue of having firmly lodged itself in the material inscriptions engendered by print. As such, it was the book that was responsible not only for all knowledges and their continuity in time, but most importantly for the human capacity to record that each present progressively built on the past while also substantially differentiating itself from its own immediate legacy. As the guarantor of historical perpetuation, as well as of a fundamental epistemological distance between past and present, the book served to solidify the linearity of the notion of progress that we have already identified as an iconic signpost of modernity. The form of the book, not just as a principal manifestation of print technology, but also of its concomitant epistemology of temporal relations thus seems to be a somewhat anachronistic medium for Dubashi's writing (which after all seeks to liberate itself from precisely such a notion of temporality). However, it is in this context that we must take note of the fact that The Road to Ayodhya began not as a book, but as a series of essays or "columns" (as the author himself names them) that Dubashi wrote between 1989 and 1992 for the RSS

weekly, the Organiser, and somewhat less frequently for a daily newspaper called The Telegraph. The impulse to collect these essays in book form (much like the logic of periodization that Dubashi employs as an overarching rubric for his work) is therefore in itself the trace of an anachronistic intent, hard pressed to follow in the footsteps of its own perilous potential. Or perhaps, on the contrary, the impulse seeks to revolutionize conservation in a manner that while apparently maintaining the status-quo and thereby preserving the customary or habitual form of the book, does so only as a completely novel thing.

2.2 EPIC COLUMNS AND NEO-ESSAYS

Employing the term essay to understand Dubashi's work, immediately stakes out a familiar comfort zone for literary critics attempting to respond to emergent political formations. Yet, this term, perhaps precisely because of its reassuring familiarity, is inadequate and indeed obsolete when applied to the specific modalities of the kind of writing that Dubashi and others of his ilk practice. The word essay is etymologically associated with the Old French essai or the English assay and signals the action or process of trying, testing, and experimenting, perhaps best summed up in The Spectator, no. 476, where Joseph Addison foregrounds the radically unfinished or "rude" aspect of the art when he refers to "the Wildness of those Compositions which go by the Names of Essays." In keeping with Addison's pronouncement, the career of the essay in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—Sir Joshua Reynolds' Discourses refer to an "Artist in his first essay of imitating nature," Livingstone's Zambesi speaks of his "second essay at authorship" and Cowley's Preface to Odes of Pindar is an "Essay ...but to try how [Pindar's Poetry] will look in an English Habit"—emphasized a sense of profound uncertainty and

incompleteness, and in fact emerged as a manner of writing that unfolded with and in, the contingent flows of time. To use the language of the theatre, which I am wont to let go of, for reasons will become clear soon, the essay in this sense, would perhaps be something of a rehearsal, whose end product could only be hesitantly, tentatively, and cautiously projected. Clearly then, what we have said about Dubashi's work and its postulation of an attempt to eliminate from its universe, temporality as distance, difference, and contingency, is fundamentally incompatible with the essay as a material articulation of the eventuality of time. Thus, in order to differentiate Dubashi's practice here from the sense of the essay formulated above, I will categorize his writing as neo-essays, and also urge us to keep in mind that column, the word Dubashi himself uses, is in fact no less apt as a descriptor, for the work that The Road to Ayodhya comprises.

The essay approached its fullest realization between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries when, in order to encounter emerging worlds beyond the ken of mankind, the archetypal adventurous spirit swore to defy his fate on the treacherous waters of the deep seas. As the steam engine penetrated the hinterlands of pockets of civilization in the West and European buccaneers rode the high waves of imperialist expansion, the essay emerged as a contrapuntal expression of intelligence, overlapping, intersecting, and converging with a heterogeneous mass of allied realities. Rather than passively bearing witness to, or mimetically reflecting and recording the remote and exotic adventures of the travellers, the essay wandered along a myriad of paths beginning with Montaigne's Essais, which engendered the sense of the essay as a composition that lacked finish and regularity, to the Critical and Historical Essays (1843) of Thomas Babington Macaulay, perhaps *the* most renowned pedagogue of British imperialism in India. It is beyond the reach of this chapter to investigate when exactly the sense of the essay as an unfinished, tentative, irregular, and somewhat undigested piece of writing fell

out of use and by what complex processes of knowledge-formation, Montaigne's assayistic thought-experiments gave way to Macaulay's writings, which are clerical handmaidens for the established architectures of colonial governance. Nonetheless, I do think it fair to argue that the genre of writing that has in the twentieth century become familiar to us as the column (whether in newspapers, periodicals or on the World Wide Web) and for which we often bandy about the term essay, is precisely that style of expression that spells the end of, or, better still, preempts profoundly contingent and radically provisional assays into time. This is not however to say that the neo-essay is in any way a less significant genre of writing than the modern essai, for much like its forebear it is an articulation of intelligence that, in its own occasion, bears unmistakable and indeed discoverable traces of an emergent mode of imperialism.

When there are no more new worlds to explore, test, and try, when history has been all but declared dead by quasi-Hegelian intellectuals like Francis Fukuyama, and when the opening up of time as distance and discontinuity is itself preempted by a language environment that manically works to collapse all semantic indeterminacy in the unmediated transparency of instantaneous identifications, then all that remains to be achieved is the micromanagerial ordering of an always already knowable globe. As an ordering of this kind, the neo-essay is neither compelled to discursively restrict itself to the priestly pieties of national borders nor does it have to summon up the daring of a swashbuckling fortune-hunter in order to assay out towards remote and exotic locales. Given that it is the material articulation of a dangerous attempt to harness the very differentiability of time, this micropunctual distribution of expressive energies (since it owes no allegiance to molar institutions of national literature) already has the most discontinuous reaches of the globe at its proverbial beck and call and is comfortable, as it were, with the world as its home.

The neo-essay thus proliferates with variables that it fashionably culls from a global market of linguistic commodities: Nehru, Hitler, Stalin, Lenin, Lord Krishna, the Mahabharata, Ayodhya, and the Berlin Wall. In the absence of a foundational epistemic difference between these brands, all the neo-essay has to do to manage them according to the primary organizing principle of the column is to affectively affix one to another in fast-multiplying frequencies of instantaneous association.¹¹ As the name itself suggests, the architecture of the column is a sophisticated exercise in the management of space. Unlike reportage, or an arrested representation that merely reiterates events (and therefore in its own way controls the contingencies of the time of narration), the column is, strictly speaking, expected to be a holistic metacommentary on a particular political, historical, or social condition. Yet at the same time, the columnist has an absolute number of words that his column must not exceed. In association with his editor, therefore, the columnist must approach his metacommentary with an economy so absolute that there can be no room for a leisurely universe of propositional unfolding. It is imperative in a condition like this for each sign to disburden itself of its own semantic gravitation and become, instantaneously, the perfectly symmetrical repetition of another, such that there is no pause of meaning—no “gag” or “stutter”—in which the possibility of transparent

¹¹ Especially after the fall of the Soviet Union, neo-liberal narratives linking together Hitler, Stalin, and Lenin as tyrants of the same order and as emblems of an ‘evil’ that had finally been overcome by the forces of ‘good,’ became increasingly familiar. What is new in the Indian context however, is the attachment of Jawaharlal Nehru to this tyrannical triumvirate, and more specifically, the entry of a whole range of ethnically identifiable signs (such as Babur, Krishna, the Mahabharata, and Sri Ram) into the world market of linguistic commodities (Hitler, Stalin, Lenin).

communication might be interrupted or foiled.¹² The column, as displayed by Dubashi, forfeits the unreliability of referential possibilities by articulating the positing act as such as meaningful (which is to say that the meaning of the sign Nehru, for instance, resides solely in the act that posits its instantaneous coincidence with Babur). Thus we no longer have language, neither one in which the connection of a meaning to an act has no ground in the act itself nor one where meaning can be distinguished from what is being said.

Once the positing act has been tyrannically established as the very repository of meaning, it is no longer possible to read, for the ethical act of reading has become identified with the high moralism of pure communication—an insipid negotiation between two already defined and constituted subjects where both come to a consensual understanding on the common ground of a universal and transparent linguistic code. For the docile and terrorized recipient of such communication, there are no agonistic pauses, no imperceptible fissures, no voids of temporal difference from which language speaks and in which all possible purely communicative links are violently interrupted. And if these pauses, voids, and fissures were the imperceptible signs of the unreliability of referential orientations that for the first time opened up time and history, then in an environment from which such fault lines claim to have eliminated themselves, history can be historical only because it is immediately simultaneous, and transparently identifiable with itself and more specifically, only because it has annihilated the accidents and contingencies of time from its perfectly managed structure.

The autarchy of Dubashi's medium, the column or neo-essay as we have called it, lies therefore, in the fact that it generates a communicative environment that both thematically and

¹² Here I join Giorgio Agamben and Paul de Man in understanding their terms, "gag," and "stutter," to designate the being-in-language of human beings.

stylistically articulates history as a deliberately designed system of instantaneous simultaneities. This is also why for instance, Dubashi's chosen platform for expression harks back to what Sara Suleri has said of the story of journalism. History is perpetually new in the story of journalism and it is relentlessly impelled by surprise precisely because in this story history is simultaneous with itself. Ceremonially cleansed in this way of all possibilities of accident and contingency, such a history has the potential of summarily doing away with the very possibility of reading. Yet despite the fact that Dubashi presents us with what could be called pithy memos of a managerial intelligence that preempt the ethical strife that is language and thereby the impulse to read, his work does display an almost alluring epic fervour that, perhaps precisely because of its arrogant flaunting of impieties, has the power to hypnotically draw its own terrorized recipients. This epic pitch, however, has less to do with questions of genre than with the sheer ambition of the intent that attempts to eliminate time itself, along with its constitutive categories, from political visions of historicity. The term epic, as I have often used it, thus associates itself with The Road to Ayodhya not in its noun form, but solely in its adjectival aspect.

For Erich Auerbach, whose first chapter in Mimesis remains one of the most searching literary analyses of the paradigmatic Homeric epic, Homer's style is paratactic. This means that it represents its reality as an unbroken procession of externalized, homogeneously radiant phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place, brought together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground: thoughts and feelings expressed without the dark depths of perspective, events unfolding in a lingering style and with little room for suspense. The paratactic style, which technically designates a syntactic exercise in which words and phrases are added on rather than made subordinate to each other, may seem dangerously proximate to what I have described as Dubashi's presentation of an apparently infinite system of signs, each affectively affixed to the other in frequently multiplying instantaneities, yet there is at least one constitutive difference

between Auerbach's analysis of the Homeric style and Dubashi's tableau of postindependence Indian politics. Auerbach begins his investigation in medias res, immediately drawing our attention in the first chapter of his book to the tender moment in Book 19 when Odysseus has finally come home, but is still in the garb of a weary stranger, unknown to the members of his household. While bathing the stranger's feet, which Auerbach tells us is in all old stories, the first duty of hospitality towards a tired traveler, the epic hero's childhood nurse comes upon a scar and with an almost audible cry of joy, recognizes her master. Just as the old housekeeper falls upon the scar (that is, at the crucial moment of recognition), there is an interruption in the narrative, and the bard chooses to return to the origin of the wound, and leisurely tell readers of the extended context in which the young Odysseus had succumbed to a boar's tusk while away on a hunting expedition with his grandfather.

In Auerbach's analysis, the pivotal point is that even though the interruption of Homer's narrative entails a prolonged and elaborate excursus into the past of the hero's childhood, to read it as a technique for generating suspense at a moment when Odysseus's true identity is on the brink of being revealed would be to completely misunderstand Homer's style. For the mood of suspense to be successfully generated, the crisis whose resolution is pending cannot be completely put out of the readers mind; rather it must remain vibrant in the background, and according to Auerbach, since Homer's universe knows no background, it therefore knows no suspense. The verses that intervene in the critical foot-washing episode entirely fill Homer's stage. They put the crucial event of recognition out of the readers' mind, and thus for the moment form an exclusive and independent present, a distinct foreground, rather than a journey into the dim depths of the hero's past. In a different context, this creation of perspectival distance would have been precisely what sustained the crisis of the present and thereby generated suspense. For the first chapter of Mimesis, the absorbing aspect of Homer's style is

that on his stage every event is an immediate foreground and every event comes to complete and absolute illumination on a single plane of independent and exclusive presents. Yet what Auerbach does not emphasize is that even Homer, for whom all events are in the present, must call upon the recognition of the epic hero's childhood nurse (even though this is not recognition or memory as a subjectivist-perspectival act) to make the *passage* into a distant context and then allow readers an elaborate and leisurely scene in which this passage unfolds as an exclusive and independent present. In contrast, Dubashi's writing has no need for the ethical act of remembrance or recognition or even reading, for the Masjid at Ayodhya is a historical scar only because it immediately signals the Moghul emperor, Babur, who is in turn in a relationship of simultaneous identification with Nehruvianism and its allies. Thus, Babur (who could perhaps be understood as the corollary of the boar of Odysseus's childhood) does not need to come to light through an interruption in the narrative and an elaborate excursus that foregrounds an-other context. Because the act that posits the Moghul emperor, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the Masjid at Ayodhya as instantaneous signals for each other is in itself meaningful, and so we have a landscape always already cleansed of disruptions, whether initiated in a critical moment of recognition or through those imperceptible gaps that call for the ethical act of reading.

In a different context of epic narratives, Ranajit Guha points out that under the influence of a translation that followed the English conquest of India as an exercise in violence, the Sanskrit word itihasa, which was used to designate Indian epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, came to be identified with the English term history. Guha writes in History at the Limit of World-History that the implant had taken root despite, and perhaps in consonance with, the fact that Hegel continued to stubbornly hold forth on the unredeemable problem of historylessness in India. Of course the triumph over such a doomed infirmity was to do the colonial project proud irrespective of the banner under which it traded and warred. For with the

translation of history as itihasa India was decisively on her way to civilization, and thus launched towards a climax of the historicizing process that had begun in South Asia with the East India company's accession to Diwani not long after the Battle of Plassey in 1757. Yet as Guha shows, the term itihasa, and moreover, the apparent smoothness of its translation as history conceal a fundamental difference between Western paradigms of storytelling where the primacy of unmediated experience has long held supreme sway, and corollary Indian forms.¹³ "In the Sanskrit from which it is taken, [itihasa] combines two indeclinables, iti and ha with a verbal noun to produce a complex structure.... Iti joins the other avyaya or indeclinable ha in itihasa to radically transform something that 'has been' or 'was' (asit) into 'what has just been said about it'" (50-51). Here, a certain distancing between narrator and event rather than the immediacy of any personal experience makes up the story. According to Guha, it is in this sense that the Mahabharata (approx. 400 BC to AD 200) is most profoundly itihasa, for the narrative is rich with Benjaminian story tellers of the traveling journeymen kind, each stylized to play the role of reteller rather than eyewitness. This diagnosis, Guha argues, applies even to the so-called principal eyewitness of the Battle at Kurukshetra for listeners and readers have no direct access to what the royal herald Sanjaya (who is supposed to have seen it all), actually said as he described it blow by blow to the blind king Dhrtarastra. In fact the version of Sanjaya's report that we have in the Mahabharata is what has been handed down to us by a long line of raconteurs

¹³ In History at the Limit of World-History, Ranajit Guha performs a careful analysis of western paradigms of story-telling, beginning with Herodotus and Thucydides who according to Hegel belonged to that "class of historians who have themselves witnessed, experienced and lived through the deeds, events, and situations they describe," and tracing such a primacy of unmediated experience right up to the beginnings of the modern novel form.

from Vyasa to Ugrasrava, and even the very first narrator only distantly recounts it as told by his guru, therefore leaving no room at all for anything like an unmediated, direct experience.

In listing each of the principal narrators of the Mahabharata, Guha talks of Ugrasrava, Vaisampayana, and Sanjaya, each of whom, through conversation with their interlocutors, functions to emphasize exercises in retelling, and the aspect of storytelling that privileges a temporal and spatial distantiation between narrator and event. Not surprisingly, Guha does not include in his list of retellers the Lord Krishna himself for even though he too has an interlocutor in the great epic hero Arjuna, and he too tells his protégé a story, he is after all not one of the commonly agreed-upon raconteurs. Nonetheless, Krishna is significant to the Mahabharata and particularly to our purposes insofar as he is the one person in the narrative who has the sovereign ability to figurally collapse a carefully sustained distance between events and their narration, and between the unfolding of distinct and fundamentally unknowable occasions in the past, present, and future. In the face of the Great Battle, Arjuna, the most distinguished warrior in the Pandava army, sweepingly surveys his adversaries, and, paling at the prospect of such utter decimation, he expresses to Krishna, his charioteer and beloved friend, a firm resolve not to fight. The opposing forces comprise closely related kith and kin and many with whom the Pandavas have no quarrel—moreover, these also include highly esteemed gurus and elders, and Arjuna's scruples therefore rest on his imagination of the terrifying consequences that his decision to battle might have on the cosmic sustenance of dharma.¹⁴ To fight would be to force a

¹⁴ Dharma has often been cited as the most central and ubiquitous concept in the South Asian context, for it is overwhelmingly significant not only in the Brahmanical/Hindu tradition, but also in Buddhist and Jain philosophy. The category first appears in the early Vedic literature with reference to the way in which the Ārya maintains social and cosmic order through the performance of his Vedic rites. However, the semantics of

decisionist intervention in the multiplicitous and competing laws that rule Arjuna's being—as princely warrior, as peerless kinsman, and as respectful disciple—rather than to achieve a catastrophic balance between asymmetrically related versions of dharma (of the warrior, the clansman, and the apprentice), and thereby allow for a proliferating mass of sovereignties. In response to the epic hero's wavering resolve and his desire to achieve the semblance of equilibrium when confronted with heterodox strands of dharma, Krishna speaks with Arjuna (the Bhagavad Gita is their dialogue) until he is once again determined to enter battle. Subsequently, the Kurukshetra War is fought for eighteen days, leaving only a handful of warriors alive, and the Pandavas, though disadvantaged by numbers at the start, emerge victorious largely due to the strategic wisdom of their divine preceptor. It is clear from the narrative that one of the principal causes for the Pandava victory was Arjuna's resolve to fight the war, and in this, as we have seen, Krishna and the Bhagavadgita played an important part.¹⁵ More specifically, it is through

dharma soon extended themselves to include norms of correct social behaviour in both the ritual and the moral/social spheres. In the Dharmasūtras, which are part of the Vedic Supplements, one notion overlaps with another, and the authors pass imperceptibly from one to the other. After the Dharmasūtras, dharma came to be embodied in the Dharmaśāstras which despite continuing a similar engagement with the category, were composed in a different style. The concerns voiced in the Dharmaśāstras were followed by critical encounters with the notion of dharma in the epics, the Gītā, and in the work of thinkers responsible for the formative stages of nationalist discourse in the subcontinent. Since the root of the word, "dhr" means "that which sustains," Arjuna in having to encounter a threat to the sustenance of political order, expresses at the same time, his fear of a threat to dharma.

¹⁵ In Of Many Heroes: An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography, G.N. Devy argues that the formation of powerful sects around readings of literary-religious texts is a

the story of Creation that Krishna tells in the Gita, that He collapses what I have called the carefully sustained distance between events in different temporal registers, and thereby, spiritually and militantly rejuvenates his warrior-disciple Arjuna. Krishna bequeaths to his protégé a privileged access to trikaal darshan, (or the sovereign Being's divine vision of the entirety of the past, present and future in one instant), and in doing so convinces the epic hero that his own participation in the war and a Pandava victory after the destruction of almost all the mustered forces are events that will simply come to pass:

phenomenon strikingly significant to the Indian political context. Most important of such sectarian breakaways from dominant centers of power, were those constituted around analyses of the Bhagavadgita. For instance, the thirteenth century Marathi poet Jnaneswara, wrote an elaborate commentary on the Gita entitled, Jnaneswari, and critics have asserted that Jnaneswara was to Marathi literature what, his contemporary, Dante, was to modern Italian literature. At the time Jnaneswara wrote it, writing a philosophical commentary on a Brahminical scripture in a new language like Marathi, was an act of radical departure, and thus the Jnaneswari succeeded in founding an important tradition of vernacular literature. This was a momentous occasion in the battle against the cultural hegemony of Sanskrit and high-caste Hinduism waged by the medieval Bhakti poets all over India, for the discourse of Jnaneswara announced to the world the arrival of a new literary epoch in which Sanskrit along with all the Prakrit (generic term employed for the group of Middle Indic dialects that arose in counteraction to Sanskrit which literally means "refined," or "cultured") languages were to melt into one bhakta speech. More importantly, Janadeva's image for founding a literary canon is that of founding a city. In a later chapter in this dissertation, I will use this trope as a point of departure, to read Lok Manya Tilak's early twentieth-century discourse on the Bhagavad Gita as a constitutive moment in the founding of Hindutva as a conservative-sectarian breakaway from more dominant forms of postindependence Indian politics.

Drona, Bhishma, Jayed-ratha, Karna, and other heroic warriors
of this great war have already been slain by me:
tremble not, fight and slay them. Thou shalt conquer thine
enemies in battle (56, my emphasis).

Since these events the war and its consequences are already contained within the world, Arjuna is only an instrument who cannot help but slay his loved ones, just as by implication, he cannot help but briefly think that he must not do so.

In From Lineage to State, Romila Thapar argues that the war recorded in the Mahabharata directly and indirectly involved almost all the intermittently warring clans in the subcontinental landmass and finally succeeded, through a sovereign instance of violence, in heralding the beginnings of the monarchical state in the Middle Ganga Valley. The tragedy of the battle at Kurukshetra was thus not merely tied to the absolute death and destruction of human life that it brought, but perhaps more profoundly to the passing of a style of social aggregation and its concomitant political form. If this argument were to be used as a point of departure for understanding the epic grandeur of the Mahabharata, then the Lord Krishna may in fact be the single most important figural expression of such a transition. As the divine being who has supreme sway over past, present, and future, as well as the sovereign entity who can intervene in a catastrophically balanced landscape to decisively declare the exceptional circumstance in which the dharna of the warrior overrides all other laws, he is that complexity of forces in which we can recognize the beginnings of the state form.¹⁶ It is precisely in this sense—that is,

¹⁶ Krishna is the reincarnation of Vishnu, the Preserver of the Hindu trinity, born to rid the earth of tyranny, and his genealogical evolution is a long and complex one. In the modern Indian context, Krishna is commonly portrayed as a dark-complexioned, mischievous child, or as a youthful cowherd wearing a crown of peacock feathers

the sense in which the Mahabharata marks the passing of a political style and its concomitant epistemology of temporal relations—that the Krishna of the epic, and indeed, the epic as a whole

whose beauty entrances all who see him or hear the irresistible call of his flute. Two thousand years ago when Krishna first moved into the Hindu pantheon, the god was a more austere and perhaps even militant deity. In the Mahabharata for instance, he is a wise counselor and warrior-charioteer, and I would argue that it is this aspect of the god that has become increasingly significant to the contemporary context of Hindutva. Krishna's nature which was, as we have seen, somewhat different in the Mahabharata, began to undergo a transformation around A.D. 500 in the Harivamsa (the genealogy of Hari or Krishna) which stressed Krishna's early years as a willful child and as the youthful, divine lover of the gopis, or cowherd girls. The later Krishna texts, Vishnu Purana, Padma Purana, and Bhramavaivarta Purana, are fascinated by, and focus upon, these aspects of the god: Krishna's freedom and spontaneity as the eternal child, the youth-Krishna's surpassing beauty and the seductive power of his haunting flute, which breaks down human resistance to the appeal of the divine lover. The medieval cult primarily associated with Krishna, with its stress on bhakti or devotional activity, faithfully reflected this change in the nature of the god. Whereas the bhakti of the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita is staid and pietistic, its devotion channeled through a life of discipline and strict adherence to ethical and social norms, beginning in the medieval bhakti cults and down to the twentieth-century, bhakti is no longer a pale and austere affair but rather emphasizes intoxication and uninhibited response to the dark god, a release from the constraints and precepts of orthodox religion. The popularity of the Krishna cult has not only a psychological but also a social rationale—namely, its promise of salvation to the dispossessed classes. By rejecting the conventional Hindu axiom that a person's birth, social status and caste membership govern his chances of reaching moksha, the Krishna cult actively welcomes and even recruits the participation of oppressed classes and castes in its devotions and ceremonies, an utterly unorthodox state of affairs.

are significant for Dubashi's essays. Even though the Lord Krishna does not feature as frequently as Sri Rama, he is clearly sovereign, even in the universe laid out by The Road to Ayodhya, for as Dubashi says in the essay entitled, "A Temple in Every Corner," "There is no more beautiful sight in this world than a temple surrounded by cows and young calves, a sight that would have please Lord Krishna, and anything that pleases Him must please the whole world" (28). Yet this is not to say that Dubashi is merely returning in his columns to the landscape of the Mahabharata, or that he is enacting an obsequious repetition of the discourse of the Bhagavadgita. Rather, his work is clearly in intersection and conversation with earlier epic narratives (including the Homeric), but only by way of a simultaneous process of conservation and revolution. It is only in the domain of realpolitik that we can approach and begin to understand such an apparently paradoxical movement.

2.3 EPIC TOYOTISM

In titling his book The Road to Ayodhya, Dubashi is referring to what he calls a "long intellectual journey" that originated after the Bharatiya Janata Party's disastrous performance in the Indian general elections of 1984, and dramatically moved toward a climactic identification of the party's agenda of Hinduness with a vitally rejuvenated political system (ix).¹⁷ Dubashi

¹⁷ The Bharatiya Janata Party is surprisingly enough one of the more moderate of the Hindu Right wing units in India, and it was formed more than twenty years after independence out of the decrepit remains of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh. As far as the opposition was concerned, in the period immediately after independence, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, in contrast to most other Hindu nationalist outfits, assembled itself as a

reports that the BJP had clearly reached the nadir of its short career when two months after Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination in October 1984, the former political unit came out of parliamentary elections battle-weary, bruised, and humiliated by having only two members in the Lower House. As party members ran helter-skelter to amass their oppositional resources in the face of overwhelming defeat, Dubashi (who joined the ranks of the BJP in 1985) and other prominent members tried to formulate a response that would begin to correct the near-desperate situation by first rearticulating foundational party ground. The pundits on the committee decided that cogently arguing the principal character of the party, attempting to convincingly locate its place in the already pock-marked history of Indian politics, and finally, elaborating specific programs for a radically transformative historical-political agenda would help them to begin the work of reconstruction. The Bharatiya Janata Party had from its inception

liberal constitutional party that could provide a substantial challenge to the Congress. The Jan Sangh's alternative to Congress rule was centred primarily on overt hostility to Pakistan and to the multiplicity of regional languages vis-à-vis Hindi as a standardized national tongue, as well as on traces of an effort towards liberalization. In confining itself to a rather limited constituency of the North Indian petty bourgeoisie however, the Jan Sangh failed to authoritatively present itself as a pan-Indian formation capable of usurping the throne of the Congress; members had to wait until the formation of its successor, the Bharatiya Janata Party before they could taste power. The Bharatiya Janata Party was formed in 1980, and as recently as the 1984 elections, it endorsed a benign form of state capitalism in much the same way as did the Congress Party. However, by the time of the 1990 elections, the BJP quickly and completely changed its political discourse, such that 'Nehruvianism' simultaneously became the uniform label for the entire postindependence era, as well as a violent indictment of the developmental ethos of the Congress Party and its vulnerable politics of secular balance.

been rather gingerly treading the gaps between such vaguely formulated terms as cultural nationalism, Hindutva, Hindu dharma and Hinduness. Yet if indeed the party was to seek for the role of arch protagonist in the increasingly popular theatre of Hindu nationalism, and if in order to do so it had decided to hark back to the writings of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and deploy the term ‘Hindutva’ to describe such nationalism, then what exactly was to be the political tableau of Hindutva?¹⁸ How were the numerous heterogeneous forces of the proscenium of

¹⁸ Although the term Hindutva was first generated in nineteenth-century Bengal, and popularized later by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (Hindutva: Who is a Hindu) in the complex anticolonial climate of the 1920s, it is possible to argue that the phenomenon has realized itself in a fungible stylistics of governmentality only at the very end of the twentieth and turn of the twenty-first century. An important parliamentary yardstick for the strengthening of Hindutva politics in the subcontinent may be located in the fall of the United Front Coalition in 1998. Following this, fresh elections were held, and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) headed by A.B. Vajpayee returned triumphant on the crest of a sweeping mandate ensured by the spectacularly successful deployment of the issue of a Ram Temple at Ayodhya. Propped up by the banner of Hindutva (loosely translated as “cultural Hinduness” or “cultural nationalism”) qua Ayodhya, the BJP and its allies occupied the portals of power for five years until their rather dramatic defeat in the Indian parliamentary elections of May 2004, when the Congress Party emerged as the surprise victor and once again returned to the haloed sanctum of power. In the five years of a BJP dominated New Delhi, Hindutva as a slogan, came to the forefront not only of academic discourse, but also of a more popular journalistic debate – Romila Thapar designated “cultural Hinduness” as a statist project that brutally conjoins imaginary mythographies with the more sophisticated methods of history-writing; Sumit Sarkar, Tapan Basu et al called it an organized mass movement, pioneered by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, that sought to transform the social aggregations of post-independence India into militarized

politics to be strategically rearranged around a central prop so that an arena of struggle could emerge, in which the very political lexicon, as it were, would wholly metamorphose itself to magically raise Hindus from the ascetic impotency of their epoch-long stupor?

Dubashi writes that the BJP's National Executive identified two political lynchpins that would enable the outfit to design a trademark identity for itself: the first of these was the torrid question of an electoral alliance with the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, and the second concerned what in common parlance has come to be called, simply, "the Ayodhya Issue."¹⁹ The executive

outfits sustained by virile fantasies of a swashbuckling Hindu Empire; and as we have seen, Dileep Padgaonkar of The Times of India hailed it as the harbinger of India's "imminent second republic." Predictably, the Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies responded to these attacks with McCarthy-like blacklists, but more importantly, they were aided by an increasing mass of managerial intelligence, channeled through the professional and technocratic elite of the country, which was in discursive confrontation with critiques of Hindutva and began to gradually saturate almost all forms of the privatized media through writing, films, and television shows.

¹⁹ The "Ayodhya Issue" began with the claim that a modern Indian town, home to a sixteenth-century mosque, was also the scene of the nativity of Rama, the Hindu God. Even though no ancient accounts associate the birthplace of Ram with Ayodhya in modern India, according to a populist version of the Hindu faith, King Ram or Sri Ram, an Aryan prince, and the protagonist of the epic Ramayana, was born in antiquity, at a location coterminous with the territory of modern-day Ayodhya. In 1528-29, the Mughal governor, Mir Baqi constructed the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya to honor his emperor, Babur. But the first references to modern Ayodhya as the possible birthplace of Ram started only in the eighteenth century, and spectacularly culminated on December 22, 1949 with a statue of Ram miraculously materializing in the interiors of the mosque. Hindus believed this to be a divine intervention, and as a consequence, the Masjid was declared "disputed property" by the district magistrate and presumably

committee had already reached a near-complete understanding with Bal Thackeray, the notorious chieftain of the Shiv Sena, and the issue was scheduled to come up for ratification before the larger party in the Palanpur session of June 1989.²⁰ What remained to be taken on

closed to devotees of all faiths on December 29, 1949. Hindu priests, however, continued to worship Ram in the precincts of the Masjid even after the legal declaration of the property as “a disputed site,” and significantly enough, no action was taken against the offenders. Instead, on February 1, 1986, in the midst of increasingly heated suits and counter-suits that registered competing claims to the site of the Mosque, the district magistrate of Faizabad, K.M. Pandey, ordered that the barred gates of the site be thrown open to Hindu bhajan and puja, and further ordained that the State of Uttar Pradesh not obstruct the performance of these rituals in any manner. The five-hundred-year-old Masjid had after all, long ago fallen into disrepair and for several years before the appearance of the statue of Rama, not even been used as a house of worship. In 1989, Rajiv Gandhi’s centre-right Congress government allowed the foundation stone for a temple in the name of Ram to be laid at the site of the Babri Masjid, and as Dubashi tells us, this was also the time in which the rank and file of the Hindu Right became increasingly agitated in their claims for a Ram Temple to be actually built at the site of the mosque. A climactic few years after the BJP’s Ayodhya Resolution in 1989 and Party President, L.K. Advani’s rath yatra, the mosque was razed to the ground by fundamentalist cadres on December 06, 1992. The ravishing of the structure of the Babri Mosque led to blood-curdling riots across the country, and many critics and journalists at the time wrote, that not since partition, had India lost so much life and property to the violence of communal rioting.

²⁰ Extra-parliamentary organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS), – the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, predecessor to the BJP, was formed in 1951 as the parliamentary wing of the RSS – the Bajrang Dal, and the Shiv Sena, were particularly important to the BJP’s victory in the Indian general elections of 1998, and in particular to the spectacular flaring up of the Ayodhya issue.

therefore was the long history of the Ayodhya problem, which in its multiple ramifications was already becoming something of a hydra-headed monster. According to Dubashi's account, the BJP's rank and file had for quite a few years been increasingly agitated in its appeal for a Ram Temple to be built at the contested site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, and in 1989, it began to vociferously demand a firm stand one way or another on the issue. Backed into a corner by such agitations, the National Executive Committee of the party, after much heated debate, came to a momentous decision to draft what it called "the Ayodhya Resolution." The document was drawn up by party president L.K. Advani himself, and it clearly presented the BJP's political and moral support of the claim for a Ram Mandir at the location of the sixteenth-century mosque. Needless to say, the story that the Ayodhya Resolution narrates has in ensuing years become familiar in a variety of rather gruesome ways to scholars of Indian nationalism and politics. The primary claim of the document was that since the Babri Masjid had been built by a Mughal governor over the demolished remains of what Hindus believed to be an ancient temple marking Ram's birthplace, it was now time for the wronged community to appease itself and, if need be, violently take its fill of revenge. In other words, Hindus had the right not only to take down the Babri Masjid precisely because it was a symbol of Mughal domination in Hindusthan, but also to build a Ram Temple over the decrepit rubble of Babur's mosque so as to begin the work of rewriting the history of their land. This much is an oft-repeated rendition of the moral position of the BJP. Yet what is perhaps more enigmatic and intriguing about the Ayodhya Resolution, is that it presents the issue of the Ramjanmabhoomi Temple not only as a principal weapon of

Most of the cadres who actually participated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid were drawn from the rank and file of these outfits, as were those who comprised the masses at Advani's rath yatra.

Hinduness, but paradoxically, as the crucial intellectual axis for severing such Hinduness from its racial-religious associations and resurrecting it as indeed a “vibrant political system.”

Before beginning to draft the Ayodhya Resolution in June 1989, the BJP's National Executive Committee had insisted unanimously on one thing: the proposed temple in honour of Sri Ram was first and foremost a political issue, and it must be presented to the community at large as in fact the very cornerstone of Hinduized politics. However, at the same time that it strongly emphasized the exclusively political edge of the Ayodhya issue, the Resolution stubbornly proclaimed that the solution to the problem, and indeed the problem itself, lay outside the hands of law:

The BJP holds that the nature of this controversy is such that it just cannot be sorted out by a court of law. A court of law can settle issues of title, trespass, possession etc. but it cannot adjudicate as to whether Babur did actually invade Ayodhya, destroyed a temple, and built a mosque in its place. Even when a court does pronounce on such facts, it cannot suggest remedies to undo the vandalism of history. As far back as in 1885, a British judge Col. F.E.A. Chamier disposing off a civil appeal relating to the site, observed in a helpless vein:

“It is most unfortunate that a Masjid should have been built on land specially held sacred by the Hindus, but as that occurred 365 years ago, it is too late to remedy the grievance....”

(Dated 18th March, 1886, Civil Appeal No. 27 of 1885, District Court, Faizabad).

In this context, it should not be forgotten that the present turmoil itself stems from two court decisions, one of 1951 and the second of 1986 (xii-xiii).

The Resolution went on to specifically argue that not just was Ayodhya a condition outside law, but more dangerously, it was an event that had been brought to such an

exceptionally volatile status precisely because it had been referred time and again to the sanctified duty of preserving law. With litigations and counter litigations being bandied about for more than a century and dust laden files taking on a Dickensian mass and decrepitude, Hindus had finally begun to clamor for their temple outside the auspices of constitutional law. In fact, instead of being rendered blunt and insensate by the sheer slothfulness of court proceedings, the sharp political edge of Ayodhya had, according to the BJP, been engendered and further whetted precisely in the interstices of that sluggish and unproductive lumber toward a judgment, whose climax is continually deferred. The Hindu claim for a Ram mandir could in such circumstances be answered only in two possible ways: by negotiated settlement in favor of the temple, or by the violence of a law-making decision. Litigation, in the account of the BJP, was certainly not the answer.

In the discourse of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the political is that entity engendered precisely by the haphazard proliferation of multiple sovereignties, and that entity which, from amidst such a bewildering morass, exactingly demands the intervention of a decisionist Schmittian sovereign. Yet if Carl Schmitt's sovereign was one who could decisively stake out separate camps for existentially marked friends and foes, then Dubashi's (and therefore the BJP's) sovereign was one who could semiotically, as we have seen, create the conditions for the relentless application of a binary logic of friends and foes. What remained to be determined therefore was whether the same could be achieved on an existential register. The BJP's stylized presentation of the condition that engendered and honed the Ayodhya Issue was not very different from Romila Thapar's diagnosis of the political context of the subcontinental landmass prior to the Battle at Kurukshetra. While the larger part of the Ganga Valley was before the Great Mahabharata War in the hands of manifold warring clans and their always-shifting allegiances, the BJP had succeeded in construing Ayodhya as a "war front" precisely by

referring it back to an effect engendered by the precarious alliances of the Congress Party, or what has been retrospectively called the Nehruvian paradigm (32). In the period after independence, the Indian National Congress had constituted itself as a sovereign ensemble based on the blueprint of a mixed model of government. The Party had promised its people democratization, social and industrial technologization of the feudal-agrarian countryside, and a form of welfare and distributive justice based on protosocialist ideology. To achieve this, the Indian government also proposed an economic arrangement that would ensure state protection of the macro-economic aspects of infrastructure and agriculture and the regulated growth of a private sector licensed against international intrusion and buttressed by state monetary institutions. Yet the challenge for the Congress lay in the means it employed to balance all the struggling vernacular energies of the older social aggregations of the national landscape with the uniform political architecture of such a sovereign state. Thus the relatively homogeneous centre of political power that presumed to have realized itself in the mixed bureaucratic-economic design of a benevolent state capitalism gave itself the grave responsibility of maintaining at least the semblance of an equilibrium with the multiplicitous religious, linguistic, casteist, ethnic, and ideological units that defined the plural society of tradition. The structure of the Congress, or of Nehruvianism as the BJP would call it, thus always depended on a catastrophic balance between a somewhat stable modern centre and its asymmetrically related peripheries, on changeful coalitions between state monopoly and local bodies of governance with their varying patterns of operation, and on a hazardous balance between religioethnic groups, primarily that between the majority of Hindus and the powerful minority of Muslims. The discourse of the Ayodhya Resolution had managed to present this very tableau of the Congress Party not only as a political system that was in itself responsible for the volatility of the temple issue, but as a condition that, much like the Battle at Kurukshetra vociferously demanded a sovereign instance of decisionism.

But if Krishna had ushered in a new style of politics by intervening in the Great Battle to decide on a state of exception in which the dharma of the warrior was permitted to exert a monopoly over the claims of all other competing laws, then how was the Bharatiya Janata Party, in a different context, to realize such a foundational instance of violence?

On September 25, 1990, not long after the drafting of the Ayodhya Resolution, BJP president Lal Krishna Advani undertook a month-long rath yatra (voyage of the chariot) across the nation, starting from Somnath, that iconic originary locale against which Mahmud of Ghazni led his raids, and culminating at Samastipur in Ayodhya.²¹ Writ unabashedly large on the agenda of the rath yatra was the construction of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple at the site of the Babri Masjid, and Advani defiantly and repeatedly challenged the law to arrest his project. Although the voyage was constituted in terms of what Advani and his protégés called “a healing touch,” its affective and ritualistic paraphernalia smacked of a blood-thirsty militancy (The Sunday Times, October 14, 1990). Collections of lethal shastras (divine weapons), vessels overflowing with symbolic blood, inflammatory speeches, and ceremonious renderings of the blood tilak (a ritualistic mark on the forehead that is the iconic signature of the warrior, and in an interesting conflation, of a devotee of the Hindu pantheon) grandiosely marked the opening of

²¹ The city of Somnath in western Gujarat was constituted as a major rallying point for the Ayodhya issue not only because the temple in that city is said to have been plundered by invaders, as many as seventeen times, but also because, the first president of independent India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad issued an ordinance for its reconstruction, and thereafter personally installed a jyotirling (symbol of the Lord Siva) in the new temple on May 11, 1951. The edifice was to remind devotees of the splendour of the original temple, but in claiming that the Indian government should do in Ayodhya as it had done in Somnath, the Hindu Right neglected to argue that Somnath was not home to a sixteenth century mosque.

the voyage which left a gory trail of rioting and wide-spread destruction in its wake. Despite its purported reliance on the largely peaceful devotional symbols of Lord Ram, the image of Advani setting forth on his chariot was dangerously proximate to the Mahabharata's Krishna entering the battlefield of Kurukshetra as Arjuna's charioteer, and at a time of crisis for the epic hero, even brandishing a glittering Sudarshan Chakra (a divine weapon belonging to the Lord) from atop his rath.²² We have already seen that the Lord Krishna, by virtue of his divine trikaal

²² In January 1987, the Indian state-run television began broadcasting a Hindu epic in serial form. Ramanand Sagar's Ramayana ran for almost two years to nationwide audiences, but most significantly, it was broadcast in violation of a decades-long Nehruvian taboo on the expression of religious partisanship by state institutions. With viewership ratings in excess of eighty percent, Ramanand Sagar's production achieved an iconic status: busy streets fell silent on Sunday mornings at nine, marketplaces echoed with their own stillness, and masses of devotees and viewers worshipped the television screen as a pantheon of gods graced private homes. Many theorists of television and critics of nationalism were later quick to point out that what resulted from the televised Ramayana was the largest political campaign since post-independence times. Led by Hindu nationalists, this campaign amassed itself around the symbol of Lord Ram, and in the opinion of many, irrevocably and quite violently scarred the already pock-marked aspect of Indian politics. A little more than a year later, the same television channel began the broadcast of B.R. Chopra's Mahabharata—the serialized show ran on Indian National network for close to two years, and achieved almost as important a status as its predecessor. Many of the images accompanying the credit sequence of Chopra's Mahabharata are of the godly, dark-skinned Krishna, but this is not the blatantly sexualized Krishna (of the Bhakti cult) who is worshipped as paramour to more than a hundred maidens, nor is it the frolicsome child-god who in millions of Hindu homes nation-wide exemplifies the ideal son. Rather, this is the Krishna of war, determinedly guiding the chariot of the

darshan, has the ability to subsume all three orders of time into his being, and in the course of the battle of Kurukshetra allows his warrior-disciple Arjuna a privileged vision, via his own transcendent being, of the entirety of past, present, and future. Thus Krishna's temporal sweep assimilates and controls all worldly eventfulness so that every occasion has always already been mythologically ordained, and reality has only to belatedly catch up with it. The image of Advani atop his chariot effected precisely such a divine sweep over temporal eventfulness, for in the wake of the Ayodhya Resolution and its support of a Ram Temple, the Babri Masjid had already been destroyed, just as Lord Krishna had already slain the warriors at Kurukshetra so that the chronometric time that Arjuna followed in actualizing his willfulness was only a disciplinary regimen meant for those who don the frock of lesser mortals.²³ Thus as a belated real struggled

Pandavas into the bloody battle field of Kurukshetra, while simultaneously heralding and engineering a Pandava victory. The credit sequence is thus developed as an explicit call to arms and in fact ends with the blowing of the conch shell, a ritualistic invocation to battle, in sonic harmony with appropriate slokas (ritual chants) from the Gita. It was precisely with this image of a battlefield in which Krishna makes a decisive intervention, that the rath yatra affected a synergy.

²³ The image of L.K. Advani at the fore of his chariot was consonant with India's soon-to-be inaugurated policies of economic liberalization, for the president of the Bharatiya Janata Party rode a 1990's Toyota bedecked with the ritualistic trappings of an epic chariot (including flowers and divine weapons). Advani was thus simultaneously a clairvoyant force capable of harnessing all differentiability and contingency to his grotesque will to enframe time, and a political campaigner backed by the inescapable force of global capital. In this context, it is important to note that just a few months after the completion of the rath yatra in 1991, the Indian state machinery cast aside its old protectionist model of Nehruvian Socialism and opened the floodgates of economic liberalization in the face of an enormous negative balance of payments. This meant that

earlier rulings like the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, and the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Commission, both instituted by the Janata Party in 1978, had to be dismantled. Multinationals like Coca-Cola and IBM, whose trade licenses had been terminated as a result of the Janata Party's legislation were encouraged to return along with newer competition. Concomitantly, Dr. Manmohan Singh's finance ministry inaugurated a fiscal process aimed towards making the rupee fully convertible, so that very soon Indian markets would be completely open to the flows of transnational capital. Jawaharlal Nehru's "temples of the future," the motto that summed up his government's emphasis on an economy founded on public sector investment in large-scale industry, had long been in disarray. With the liberalization drive spreading to consumer goods in 1997, any traces of the Nehruvian economy were decidedly abandoned. 1997 was also the year when India joined the Information Technology Agreement (ITA) of the World Trade Organization, paving the way for a phased reduction in import tariffs on IT products. The transformation of the Indian media space, and information technology more broadly had of course already begun earlier in the nineties. The first Indian-made satellite, INSAT-2 A was launched in 1992, the same year that saw the launch of the Star TV cable network, and the destruction of the Babri Masjid. The Star TV network not only challenged the monopoly of state-run television, but also inaugurated its own competition in the form of a large proliferation of commercial satellite channels. In an effort to clamp down on a mediatized space increasingly slipping away from its control, the lower house of Indian parliament attempted to pass a bill to regulate cable television in 1993. However, the bill suffered a setback when in 1995 Supreme Court legislation declared airwaves to be public property. Clearly, national interests were at this stage being forced to retreat in the face of the insurmountable domination of transnational capital. Hindu nationalist leaders however, arrayed themselves firmly on the side of economic liberalization, and declared in no uncertain terms that India could enter the information age only through an upsurge in nationalist and patriotic fervour. Bharatiya Janata Party leader Pramod

to catch up with preordained vision of the Ayodhya Resolution, in the year after Advani's rath yatra came to its gory end, the death throes of the Babri Masjid echoed through the subcontinent. It was December 6, 1992.

When such a trikaal darshan reigns supreme, the domain of reality is always belated, an epigone. In the wake of the Masjid's destruction, the ideologues of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and other such bulwarks of the project of Hindutva were only mildly taken aback in the face of a bewildered nation struggling to cope with thousands dead. Their sole response was that the occasion had clearly been preordained, and no human intervention could have stemmed the tide. In fact, in an Economic Times article published a month after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Advani himself expressed no regrets over the demolition, adding: "it was the hand of providence that willed the fall of the Babri Masjid" ("Providence"). The assemblage of forces conflated in this declaration is indeed epic in its scope—Time-Lord Krishna-L.K. Advani-Providence-Destiny-Fate—but nonetheless, a gaping wound had been very deliberately forced open by even so cohesive an image. In a press conference on April 18, 1993, the BJP leader summed up his party's views of the response to the demolition of the mosque:

the country reacted in two diametrically opposite ways, as virtually two different peoples. For a handful—those in government, in political parties, and in large sections of the English press, for instance—what happened was a "national shame", it was "madness," and it was "barbaric." For the rest of the county it was a liberation—a sweeping away of cobwebs. The depth of anger at the recent policies, surprised me, as I said; the depth

Mahajan, for instance, noted the inextricable nexus between "buying" and "voting," and from then on promised to shape the BJP into a "good product" under the auspices of the communication revolution.

of the chasm between these two nations—the microscopic minority and the people—did not (The Frontline, May 21, 1993)."

Coupled with the slogan “Babri Masjid todo, jo hum say takrayega sidha upar jayega” (“Destroy the Babri Mosque, those who attempt to stop us will meet their death”) raised by party cadres, Advani’s declaration clearly pointed toward two warring factions, two peoples, even two nations, and it is precisely at this juncture of events in the domain of realpolitik that we can return to one of the key questions of this section (The Sunday Times, October 14, 1990). If the image of Advani atop his rath approximated the image of the divine pictura of Krishna venturing forth into the battlefield, and if the violence in the wake of the Masjid’s destruction was given its affective paraphernalia, made to come close to the death and destruction at Kurukshetra, then what was to be the new style of politics that the BJP was going to usher in, and how would such a style be adequate to the rise of a new breed of Hindus?

The Bharatiya Janata Party’s deployment of the “Ayodhya Issue” to usher in Hinduness as a vibrant political system hinged on the fact that this was an assemblage of forces that could bring to the foreground, as did Advani’s declaration of “two nations,” Partition rather than Independence as the truly definitive moment of postcolonial Indian politics. Through a long history of litigations and counter litigations between representative platforms like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Sunni Waqf Board, according to the BJP the Ayodhya problem had only served to show how pseudosecular politicians in India were habituated to falling to their knees for the sake of the minority community’s vote, and how the Congress Party genuflected before the Muslim League Lobby in the country just as it had done in the early- and mid-twentieth century, in the face of a volatile demand for Pakistan. Thus, the forceful opening up of the “historical scar” of the Babri Masjid would bring to light the fact that “It is not the independence of India, but its division that constitutes for most Indians and certainly all Hindus the most

important event of this century” (67). Given the implications of this argument, political autonomy would have come to the subcontinent one way or another. According to Dubashi, India was not the only country to become independent after the war, and the British under Labour were more keen to hand over the country to whomever was prepared to take it than Gandhi and Nehru were to simply receive their silver platter.

Since then, the BJP and its allies argued, the wound of division had been routinely obfuscated and concealed from the popular view, and it was only an overtly Hinduized system of governance that could take note of this momentous historical occasion and thereby expose the idea that the euphoria of nation-formation under Nehru and his Congress System was also at the same time a powerless acknowledgment of the impossibility of nation-formation. If the Mahabharata's Krishna had figurally expressed the beginnings of a sedentary design of political form, and thereby signaled the passing of a style of social aggregation based on the fluidity of multiple nomadic clans, then at the helm of the Ayodhya Issue, L.K. Advani was to herald an overtly Hindu-normative politics that in violently forcing open the fact of partition would question the architecture of nation-formation under Nehru and, in the same stroke, gesture toward a conglomerate of Hindus, that always already embraced not just a piece of land but indeed the entirety of the created universe. In short, Dubashi's argument that “It is not the independence of India, but its division that constitutes for most Indians and certainly all Hindus the most important event of this century,” is not merely the oft-repeated Hindu nationalist diatribe against Nehruvian secularism as one version of the Gramscian national-popular. Rather it is a call to think postpartition India in imperial rather than national terms. Unlike the epic hero Arjuna who required the transcendence of the divine being to achieve a privileged access to trikaal darshan, modern-day Hindus whom Dubashi imagines as an effect of The Road of Ayodhya will be able to realize an imperial vision of the entirety of past, present, and future, by

virtue of the fact that they both are a political system, and constitute a part of it. This is not distinct from the sovereign vision of Krishna, who despite having taken mortal form, is “not bound by this vast work of creation. [He is] and watch[es] the drama of works” (44).

Where a worldly political system closely related to the homogenized architecture of the state form is called upon to generate the transcendent vision of a divine entity, and where the politics of state becomes identified through the creation of a particular kind of language environment with a supreme being who has absolute control over the contingencies of time, religion is no longer to be understood by virtue of its place in the historical movement of the World-Spirit. It is no longer a set of rituals and practices that principally defined a primitive condition of man, overtaken once and for all by the irreversible arrow of time. Rather, religion in this context designates a particular kind of communicative environment, a technology of transmission that frenziedly works to pre-empt the thickness of language, to conflate the multiple referential possibilities of what is meant with what is being said, to collapse the heterodox semantic orientations of a syntax of signs with the act that posits its meaning, and thereby, to foreclose the emergence of difference as the fluidity of time itself. In this sense, the resurgence of a multiplicity of religious discourses in the extended domain of world politics is not to be understood as evidence of the fact that what we are witnessing is a return of medieval tribalisms, even though there may indeed be interesting points of intersection between contemporary political visions and earlier forms of aggregation. Instead, the kind of religiopolitical discourse that contemporary theorists and critics are troubled by today is in truth, one and the same as the struggle of different interest groups (whether they be national or extranational) over a global technology—whether concerning the technology of cybernetics, of penetrating space, of biochemical transformation, or even of a universally transparent and communicative language— that attempts to harness and subdue to its violent yoke the very

differentiality of time and historicity. Hinduness as a political system under the BJP and its allies is just one of the more powerful of these interest groups, struggling, via technologicistic-managerial arrangements of language, for an imperial edge in a globalized landscape within which it has its own illusions of grandeur. We can easily recognize in this context the epic zeal of Dubashi's work—that is, the ambition of the intent that attempts to eliminate time itself from its tableau of historical-political visions—as it converges, intersects, and overlaps with the specific technology of the column to give us what we have called the neo-essay. This form of writing in turn has at its proverbial beck and call the entirety of the globe as its home. What we are yet to witness, however, is Dubashi's promise, harnessing the strength of such technology, to usher in a Hindu empire that will succeed (rather than oppose) the British, the Russians, and finally even the Americans.

3.0 A MATTER OF LIFE AND REBIRTH

Yada yada hi dharmasya
glanir bhavati Bharata
Abhyutthanam adharmasya
tadatmanam srijamyaham
Paritranaya sadhunam
vinasaya cha dushkritam
Dharma—samthapanarthaya
sambhavami yuge yuge

When righteousness is weak and faints and unrighteousness
exults in pride, then my Spirit arises on earth

For the salvation of those who are good, for the destruction
of evil in men, for the fulfillment of the kingdom of
righteousness, I come to this world in the ages that pass.

Bhagavad Gita

In ably capturing the majestic aural qualities of the original Sanskrit, Juan Mascaró’s English translation of what is perhaps the principal verse of the Bhagavad Gita opens with a tightly sealed reciprocal structure: “When righteousness is weak and faints and unrighteousness / exults in pride, then my Spirit arises on earth.” This structure almost too succinctly compresses a causal topography for the Lord’s coming into a brief span of two lines, before, in a quick volte-face, yielding to the gentle yet alluring surge of ritualistic reiteration.²⁴ The concluding lines of the verse, with their wanton repetition of successive prepositional forms—“for the salvation of those who are good, for the destruction / of evil in men, for the fulfillment of the kingdom of / righteousness”—successfully generate an incantatory mood, the deep, resonant, almost hypnotic measure gradually reaching its climax in a thunderous echo of divine proclamation. As the reincarnation of Vishnu, Preserver of the Vedic Trinity, the Spirit of Lord Krishna will walk the earth in the ages that pass, when in the worldly kingdom of man dharma is weak and falters, when adharma prevails as aggrandizing master of all it encounters, when good men must be saved and the kingdom of righteousness rid of a Tarquin’s ravishing strides. Openly announcing the repetitive occurrence of the theophany, Krishna’s declaration in the above verse marks an important point of intersection with Jay Dubashi’s The Road to Ayodhya. As we have seen, while issuing a call to protect the birth place of Rama, The Road to Ayodhya in fact realizes and consolidates this call through an invocation of the sovereign style of Krishna. Comparing these two avatars of Vishnu, Bimal Krishna Matilal, one of the most significant authorities on Hindu religious and philosophical culture, saucily proposes in a collection of essays entitled Ethics and Epics: Philosophy, Culture, Religion that while “Rama’s dharma was rigid; Krishna’s was

²⁴ The Penguin edition of The Bhagavad Gita (1962), translated by Juan Mascaró and with an introduction by Simon Brodbeck, has come to be treated as the standard English edition of the text, and I use it henceforth in each reference to the work.

flaccid” (47). On the basis of this postulate, he later goes on to argue that Indian political and cultural expressions are motored by the struggle of theophanies as manifest in the distinct avatars of Rama and Krishna. In the Ramayana, Rama’s inflexible regard for duty is evident when he restrains himself from attempting to regain his throne at Ayodhya and instead suffers fourteen years of exile, simply to honor an oath he had been made to take. In the Mahabharata, Krishna on the other hand is expedient, antinomian, and hypocritical, not only in the way he exhorts Arjuna to battle, but also in so far as he encourages the warriors under his purview to overstep the rules of engagement specifically laid out in the text. Yet, in spite of such a powerful theophanic antagonism, Jay Dubashi’s writing violently binds these two figural expressions together, much as it annihilates the difference between blessed binaries like tradition and modernity, self and other, and nation and empire. Concealing its debt to Krishna in a veneer of zeal for Rama, The Road to Ayodhya acts as a refracting surface for how Krishna’s above proclamation—rendered distinguished and sacrosanct by the priestly offering of a dense proximity of extended Sanskrit vowels—at once puts under erasure its own clairvoyant herald of more “destruction” to come, and, in the same stroke, belies the exceptionally volatile textual-historical conditions in which the avatar preached his discourse.

In the “Bhismaparvan” episode of the Mahabharata, the longer of the two Indian epics (the Ramayana being the other), two armies stand mustered, almost ready to close in battle, standards raised, men and beasts taut with anticipation.²⁵ History itself awaits this occasion with

²⁵ Divided into eighteen Parvans or episodes (which themselves are divided into several chapters), the Mahabharata is not only the longest epic known to world literature, but also in the context of Hindu religiosity it claims authority as the fifth Veda, an addition to the four original Vedas of the collection. A distinction is regularly made in the institution of Sanskrit religious literature between Sruti (“that which is

bated breath, for as Romila Thapar reminds us, not only did the Great War recorded in the Mahabharata involve an epic enormity of destruction on both the Pandava and Kaurava sides, but more importantly, in forcing almost all the seminomadic, intermittently conflicting clans of the Ganga Valley to seek shelter under the benevolent scepter of a single monarchical state, it signaled the blood-soaked passing of an older style of political aggregation. In a momentous occasion such as this, and just as the sacred conch shell is about to be sounded in a ceremonial invocation to war, Arjuna, the mighty marksman of the Pandavas, and Krishna, his princely charioteer, find themselves plummeting deeper and deeper into an elaborate philosophical tête-à-tête. The epic hero has decided to lay down arms in the face of a battle he fears will gravely disturb the sovereign equipoise of dharma, which given its root dhr (“that which sustains”) could be translated as the precarious balance of forces that, in a particular historical occasion, enables a specific style of social organization.

heard”) and Smriti (“that which is remembered”), the former considered more theoretically authoritative because it is understood to be revealed truth rather than mediated tradition. However, several scholars of this tradition have argued that the work designated as Smriti was in fact more popular and more often used as scripture than that designated Sruti. Strictly speaking, Sruti designates the Vedas, a vast collection of religious texts that reflect a multiplicity of theological positions present in the subcontinental context from about 1400-300 BC. Except for the latter portion of the Vedic corpus known as the Upanishads, the Vedic material came to receive more reverence than it did following. This meant that in order to be authoritative even Smriti had to claim that what it taught, if properly interpreted, was to be found in the Vedas. Thus, the Mahabharata too claimed a direct relationship with the Vedas, not merely insisting that what it spoke was a kernel of the Vedas, but going so far as to claim that it was itself the fifth Veda.

Given the textual landscape of the Mahabharata, Arjuna's worries are not unfair or even unfounded; the war of the Kurus does indeed signal an important transformation, causing the eldest Pandava, Yudhishtira, to find himself suzerain in its aftermath over what appears to be a completely different set of political conditions. In other words, what Romila Thapar retrospectively calls the shift from a fluid, lineage-based style of political aggregation to the more uniform design of the monarchical state is for Arjuna an abandoning of dharma at the altar of the sovereign decisionism of Krishna. Arjuna's revered elder, the grand patriarch of the Kuru clan, has already waxed eloquent on the limits of the rights of kings specifically in relation to the sovereignty of dharma in the "Santiparvan" episode of the Mahabharata. Given the authority of Bhishma's discourse, Arjuna's unease is not surprising. According to Bhishma, the ideal king is decisively subordinate to dharma, and must respect its many conflicting strands, catastrophically balancing one against the other in a precarious architecture of at least four asymmetrically related sources: good custom, memory and tradition, the reasoning of the virtuous, and the approval of conscience. Schooled in such a modality of thinking, Arjuna is responsible for drawing on these sources and thereby maintaining at least the semblance of a dharmic equilibrium, even in the face of the bellicose exception. In order to urge him to fratricidal battle, then, Krishna must do everything in his power to convince the Pandava hero that as a royal member of the varna of warriors, his only dharma is to follow his caste-calling and wage war without feeling attached to the fruits of his actions. The epic narrative is thus dramatically suspended at perhaps its most crisis-ridden moment. Poised on the brink of a decisive instance of violence, Krishna and Arjuna spend eighteen long cantos dialoguing in Anustubh meters, philosophically debating the shadowy mystery of human death, convincing themselves of the inexorable sacrifice of life at the shrine of a divine Trikaal Darshan, and generating thereby what has come to be revered as the Bhagavad Gita.

Krishna's task is to first and foremost ensure that the epic hero of the Mahabharata does not shy away from war and its torrid liaison with death; Arjuna must be steadfast enough to take up his mighty bow, a boon from Lord Shiva, the creator-destroyer of the Hindu Pantheon, and despite the fetid stench of quickly decomposing carcasses, he must continue to hold his own on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Without him as the mainstay of the Pandava forces, victory will be impossible. As Arjuna's charioteer, however, Krishna's responsibility is not in any way unique. Elsewhere in the Mahabharata, before other less significant battles, warriors have often wavered in the instant before swords are to clash, plagued by misgivings, doubts, and fears at the sheer scope of the destruction they are about to unleash. Ordinarily, most of them are easily refocused by charioteers scoffing at their cowardice, grandiosely recalling the exploits of earlier heroes and eloquently preaching the fruits of victory as well as the noble death and heavenly afterlife of those who fall in battle. Krishna, too, despite his more prominent lineage, attempts such familiar and somewhat wearied methods of reasoning, but the third Pandava is not swayed by a mere attack on his heroic spirit, or by the promise of a better life to come. The princely charioteer finds that he must be able to discourse on loftier themes. While two of the largest armies in the subcontinental landmass patiently await a formal call to conflict, the son of Devaki thus embarks on a sophisticated cosmology, carefully outlining the place of human action in the functioning of the earthly kingdom of man and specifically attending to the need for a martial spirit that will be inured to the bittersweet effects of its own encounter with death. With reference to the Pandava hero's particular fear of slaying venerable elders, peerless kinsmen, and august gurus, Krishna introduces the idea of dehin, the "one in the body" (such as a spirit or soul), which cannot be killed, and which, inextricably tied to the velvet yoke of karma, will return to inhabit another body soon after the death of the current one:

Because we all have been for all time: I, and thou, and

those kings of men. And we shall be for all time, we all
for ever and ever.

As the Spirit of our mortal body wanders on in childhood.
and youth and old age, the Spirit wanders on to a new
body: of this the sage has no doubts. . . .

Interwoven in his creation, the Spirit is beyond destruction.
No one can bring to an end the Spirit which is everlasting.
For beyond time he dwells in those bodies, though these
bodies have an end in their time; but he remains immeasur-
able, immortal. Therefore, great warrior, carry on thy fight.
If any man thinks he slays, and if another thinks he is slain
neither knows the ways of truth. The Eternal in man
cannot kill: the Eternal in man cannot die. . . .

As a man leaves an old garment and puts on one that is
new, the Spirit leaves his mortal body and then puts on
one that is new. (10-11)

In place of the inevitability of death with which profane time comes to an end and instead of the Semitic notion of everlasting life in heaven or hell, subsequent to judgment day, the Bhagavad Gita presents us with an extended sequence of lives, each a divinely ordained compact between a finite body and the immortal soul or atman. What is captivating about this articulation is not merely the fact that it poeticizes for Western audiences the cycle of birth and rebirth as that most curious of Oriental philosophies, but also that it deploys the otherwise burdensome profanity of such a cycle as in fact an elaborate conceit for unveiling “the Eternal in man.” The timeless aspect of Krishna’s own divine person is like the shepherd’s staff, herding

together and benevolently embracing into its fold the infinitude that the Lord has accorded not just to Arjuna (who is, after all, his favored protégé), but also to other, implicitly less privileged “kings of men”: “Because we all have been for all time: I, and thou, and / those kings of men. And we shall be for all time, we all / for ever and ever.” The absolute inclusion pictured in these lines is rhythmically emphasized in the assonant harmony spawned by the thick cluster of long vowel sounds that initiate the verse in so stately a manner—“Because we all have been for all time”—the plural first person pronoun ostentatiously attaching itself to the soft yet emphatic swell of an additional indefinite pronoun (“we all”), thereby beginning the process of homogenizing its own potential plurality. In other words, it is the rather redundant covenant between the plural “we” and its auxiliary indefinite “all” that both awards the verse the specifics of its meter and stresses that it is not just the Lord Krishna but indeed all the warriors of Kurukshetra, and even more generally all men, who are constant and have no end in time. Unsurprisingly, the deployment of the adjectival aspect of the same indefinite pronoun form (“. . . we all have been for all time”) saturates eternal time with precisely this unvarying eternal spirit, only to quickly reach an apparently impregnable pause and give way to a breathless procession of successive conjunctions—“Because we all have been for all time: I, and thou, and / those kings of men.” The marked use of polysyndeton, following hurriedly after the break of caesura, serves on the one hand to somewhat gratuitously elaborate the representative constituents of the congeneric “we,” and on the other to reestablish Krishna himself, along with his warrior-wards, as very much a part of the same privileged parliament of eternal souls. Thus, by the end of the very first lines of the verse itself, there is already little choice between the Spirit of the Lord and the interminable Spirit of man (specifically “kings of men”), for the latter has through a great deal of syntactic pomp been formally inducted into the divine folds of the former, becoming part of its glorious timelessness and sacredly sharing in its enduring substance. Much like Krishna

who “come[s] to this world in the ages that pass,” the Spirit of man returns time and time again to take mortal bodies, susceptible to worldly destruction, vulnerable in the face of an authentic historicity, yet all the while partaking of sacred time precisely by virtue of death as the infinitesimal crack through which the eternity of the soul momentarily reveals itself.²⁶

The notion of a burdensome cycle of birth and rebirth had already been through the travails of a myriad of zealously guarded hermeneutic circles. The discourse of the Bhagavad Gita on this issue, despite the fact that Arjuna seems largely unaware of such a sequence of adjoining lives, was thus not in any way unique to that text, or even by any stretch of the imagination unfamiliar to the earliest audiences of the Mahabharata. A philosophical milieu friendly to its dissemination notwithstanding, however, Krishna’s theorization of the karmic cycle of successive lives diverged in significant ways from its predecessors. The Mahabharata is said to have been composed between 400 BC and AD 400, and, constituting an inset of eighteen cantos at what I have called perhaps the most crisis-ridden moment in the narrative, the

²⁶ The only difference between the Spirit of Man and the Spirit of the Supreme Being, Krishna says, is that while both he and Arjuna have been born many times, Arjuna has forgotten his many lives and Krishna has not:

I have been born many times Arjuna, and many times hast
thou been born. But I remember my past lives, and thou
hast forgotten thine.

Thus not only is Krishna free of the plague of an imperfect memory of the past, he is also sovereign of all temporal eventfulness in the future, and this aspect of his divinity is again reiterated in his promulgation of the ages to come. Thus, Krishna does not say he will come to the world in the ages that pass, but rather announces that “[he] comes to the world in the ages that pass,” the arrogant abandonment of the futurity of tenses signaling that the Lord is outside time, that he is indeed the very principal of time.

Bhagavad Gita is generally thought to belong to the second century before the Christian era. This was also the period during which a Brahmanical ritual economy based on the authority of the Vedas was quickly plunging into marasmic disrepair, and especially around the political landscape of Kurukshetra where the war of the Bharatas is set, the persistent challenge posed by renunciant moksha- and nirvana-oriented groups (particularly the Buddhists, Jains, and Ajivikas) only served to first inaugurate and then hasten this ruinous process of decay.

In earlier, more volatile times, the great ritual sacrifices of Vedic Brahminism were not only flamboyant occasions for a coming together of several quasi-vagabond clans that often conflicted in search of fresh pasturelands, but they also functioned as the principal platform from which the victorious chieftain of the moment demanded a spectacle of tribute from his vanquished subjects. Despite the fact that the conquered tribes would prostrate themselves, amid rich fanfare, before the newly crowned sirdar, it was not as though the soaring flames of the sacrificial fire necessarily consolidated victory for any significant length of time. Indeed, no sooner had the blaze of the scintillating conflagration fallen into the bashful blush of dying cinders than the eruption of yet another skirmish would give birth to yet another conquering potentate. While the Brahmins responsible for once more initiating the coronation ritual sank quickly into decadence and grew corpulent and florid from the reckless purses of a long line of short-lived patrons, the Mahavira and the Buddha tirelessly traveled the countryside, questioning, through their own exemplary lives, the divine status of priestly ceremonies and preaching an ascetic abnegation of the ritual economy altogether. For the renunciant sects, deliverance from the oppressive chain of birth and rebirth could not be tied to the pompous performance of rituals, smug in their display of riches, yet nonetheless obsequious in the way they fed already ample Brahmins with sumptuous feasts fit for the entire pantheon of more than a thousand gods. Instead, salvation was to be earned through a difficult path of abstinence.

Unlike the Vedic fathers, then, anti-Brahminical sects articulated life as a potentially dangerous event, always hovering on the threshold of sensuous indulgence. Life was something to be overcome through the pursuit of nirvana, beginning first and foremost with the renunciation of priestly sacrifice, of the Kshatriya dharma of warfare, of the production and protection of offspring, and of the sustenance of existent social structures.

In its increasing hold on the imagination of the dispossessed, life, paradoxically coeval in this sense with the quest for a deliverance from life, threatened the very continuity of all social, political, and economic architectures of power, and the discourse of the Bhagavad Gita had to take into account not only the philosophical challenge of Buddhist and Jain thought but also its effects on changing modes of political and social aggregation. Dotted with glittering centers of trade, increasingly circuted by the gay abandon of flourishing bazaars and the fast-expanding hegemony of a courtly Sanskrit literature, the topography of the Ganga Valley was beginning to look very different from the one in which Vedic tradition had dominated. In the spangled radiance of such mushrooming havens of trade, the politico-economic function of great rituals as a dramatic tableau for tribute-gathering was quickly falling into abeyance, and given that Sanskrit literature now performed the cosmopolitan function of graciously tying together a rajah's brilliant coterie of savants, the sacrificial flames were no longer needed to function as discreet invitations to obeisance. Given such transformed conditions, Krishna is more than a sage in painting a jaded picture of the great rituals' more unsavory contemporary adherents, who despite having no vision speak many words, who despite following the letter of the Vedas cannot understand their profundity, and who warped with selfish desires cannot attain access to god. Yet since the Bhagavad Gita seeks to nonetheless preserve and safeguard at least a version of Vedic Brahminism over and against the tenets of the breakaway sects, the Lord Krishna

enacts what one must submit is something of a conceptual coup to both achieve this purpose and constitutively articulate what might be called the sovereign beginnings of a new world order.

In confrontation with the increasingly powerful appeal of renunciatory paths to nirvana, Krishna proposes a life of action that is nevertheless ascetic insofar as the ideal devotee is expected to perform all his worldly activities with what he calls the nonattached attitude of yoga. The theorization of such a manner of life is specifically concerned with attachment to the success or failure of worldly actions, and the yogi is said to act without imagining the consequences or fruits of his actions (whether these be sacrificial rituals or the waging of war, or even acts of thinking), pietistically offering all acts as a kind of oblation, bowed low, in an attitude of ceremonial consecration. The yogic method thus intersects in an intimate fashion with Brahminical ritualism on the one hand and with the philosophy of the Buddha and the Mahavira on the other. But it is also, as we shall soon see, linked in a delicate filigree of connections with the Lord's Krishna's very own notion of dehin, which alongside the boon of divine trikaal darshan he has already bequeathed his warrior-ward.

Dehin is a quality or substance—even though neither term really translates its complexity—fundamentally set apart from prakriti, the protean world of process and flux, the coming-to-be and passing-away of forces, energies, and events—the habitat of the individual human insofar as he is irrevocably fated to finitude. Given the auspices of Eternal dehin, the significant philosophical unit is no longer the doomed individual, whose life is transient and precarious, ridden with uncertainty, and subject to decay despite the best protective efforts. Instead, it is a sequential pattern of individual lives, united, in spite of their disparate serialization, by the enduring substance of dehin. In each life, the permanence of dehin silently witnesses all that transpires within range of the individual—his thoughts, his actions, his loves and his wars. But it is powerless to affect the dynamism of events one way or another, or even

augur ethical choices for the bumbling mortal who heroically struggles, despite a destined temporal end, to ensure his own survival as well that of his offspring. In short, while dehin may represent the permanence of a sequential design of lives, it is prakriti, with its immeasurable extension in time and space, her feral uncertainty before and beyond the individual human, that has supreme sway over the events of each life in the sequence. Yet, as we already know, even the sovereign governance of prakriti is tamed by the godly vision of Lord Krishna, who is able to harness the flux of all contingent eventfulness through his divine trikaal darshan in which one must recall, Arjuna has a special share.

For those not as blessed as the epic hero, however, the yogic method is pronounced to achieve much the same effects as the charioteer's gift of divine sight. In the state attained through the practice of yoga, the individual is able to directly contemplate dehin without the mediation of the Lord Krishna, and it is precisely such contemplation that will ensure that he sustain an attitude of nonattachment to his actions. To serenely ponder the notion of dehin is not only to understand that it is ontologically distinct from prakriti, but it is also to hold the view that all earthly actions, reactions, hopes, and ambitions are decidedly under the sway of a world of process, a world that has its own laws and inexorable forces that are not to be overcome by mere human intervention. The yogi, rendered disinterested by the ultimate ineffectiveness of his heroic deeds, thus not only seeks refuge in the interminable aspect of dehin. He also comforts himself with the thought that it is precisely the timelessness of dehin that ensures his rapturous identification with the Eternal Spirit of Vishnu, who much like himself comes to the world again and again in the ages that pass. One with dehin, and thereby potentially with Krishna, such a yogic man does not concern himself with the changeful world of process, but instead remains ascetically disengaged from its sensuous design and continues to perform all worldly actions as the ideal devotee sacrificing to prakriti. He knows only too well that even the vigorous

movements of untamed prakriti are ultimately subject to the will of the avatar, and therefore all sacrifice at her temple is also a sacrifice to Vishnu.

Given the yogic principle, life in the earthly kingdom of man comes to be a curiously different creature from that theorized either by Vedic Brahminism or by the renunciant groups organized around nirvana. For the anti-Brahminical sects, human life was a profane occasion always dedicated to overcoming itself through the abstinent pursuit of nirvana rather than through the momentary release of death. In contrast, for the ritual economy of the Brahmins, life was an event that in fact continually staved off all contingencies precisely by means of the opulent luxury of ceremonial sacrifices. Krishna's articulation of the method of yoga on the one hand retains the importance of sacrificial ritualism, but on the other, in what I have called a conceptual coup, it postulates not just the acts of an individual life but indeed the yogic life itself as the most sacred of all Hindu oblations. Even the earthly life of the Lord Krishna is constituted as a sacrosanct offering, rather than as a mere occasion that enables libation or even a godly exception. As the charioteer divinely declares, "In this body / I offer sacrifice, and my body is a sacrifice" (39). According to the wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita, then, life is not only that event that makes possible a devotee's performance of the great rituals; rather in its very performance of actions without thought of their fruit—its very depraved corporality—the yogic body is a rich libation, fit for the gods.

Acting in the world without thought of consequences permits the body to indulge in worldly deeds, but at the same time constitutes each of its deeds, as also the body itself, as a tormenting tenderness supplicant before the sovereign governance of prakriti (which is in turn harnessed by the divine sight of Krishna/Vishnu). In such a landscape, the final yogic act, the most devout sacrifice as it were, is to "slay" and "be slain" without thought of consequences, for not only are such extreme acts a devout reiteration of events already enfigured within the world

of process (which of course we know to be supplicant before Krishna's trikaal darshan), but also they confirm and ritually culminate the notion of the body as sacrifice. Life is thus sacred only insofar as even its most radical act—to slay and be slain—offers itself as a yogic sacrifice, one that knows no attachment to the success or failure of its own desires and one that thereby controls all contingent eventfulness, all indeterminate potentialities. Life's dialectic counterpart, death, thus becomes simultaneously a rapturous moment in which the flames of the great ritual reach their climactic zenith and the momentary fissure through which the eternity of dehin unconceals itself. No longer is life a fatigued burden to be borne until the final release of nirvana, no longer is it a mere vessel prostituting itself for the sake of performing sacrifices; it is now itself sacrifice, a sacred sculpting for the ultimate ritual of death. The corporeal body being itself forfeit, death is no longer a threat to life or even a momentary release from the burden of life only to be repeated endlessly before nirvana; death, or more specifically, the privilege of slaying and being slain, is an orgiastic rapture, a final offering, a blessed occasion that lovingly, even amorously, unveils, albeit for an instant, the eternity of timeless dehin.

3.1 PARLIAMENT OF SOULS

For Giorgio Agamben, who theorizes a different order of sacrality, the concept itself is indissociable from a notion of sovereignty. In recalling the person of homo sacer (sacred man), an obscure protagonist of ancient Roman law, he shows how the thespian deployment of this archaic figuration pressures and in fact compels modern codes of politics to yield their sepulchral mysteries. In the terms of Agamben's Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, sacred life is first and foremost that which can be killed yet not sacrificed—and thus it is doubly

excluded, as he intricately displays, from the sphere of the *ius humanum* as well as that of the *ius divinum*. Constituting itself as a vagabond excrescence infiltrating the profane with the religious and the religious with the profane, the violent but unsanctionable killing (which in the case of the sacred man anyone might commit) is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as the execution of a condemnation to death nor as sacrilege, and thus neither in the realm of human law nor in the domain of divine justice. Agamben writes:

The topological structure drawn by this double exception is that of a double exclusion and a double capture, which presents more than a mere analogy with the structure of the sovereign exception. . . . Just as the law, in the sovereign exception, applies to the exceptional case in no longer applying and in withdrawing from it, so homo sacer belongs to God in the form of unsacrificeability and is included in the community in the form of being able to be killed. (82)

Drawing on the work of Carl Schmitt, Agamben elaborates the notion that the production of the exception is the foundational act of sovereignty. In finding an analogy such as this one between the sovereign exception and the figure of sacred man, he is able to conclude that what is captured in the exceptional condition produced by the sovereign is in fact a human victim who may be killed without being sacrificed, or, in more contemporary terminology, without being a victim of homicide. The secular sanctity of life, which in a biopolitically governed landscape is contentedly, even smugly, invoked as the fundamental human right in confrontation with sovereign power, thus in its very beginnings emerges as both life's submission to a power over death and that very life's vulnerable exposure, in what the author calls "a relation of abandonment." In Agamben's diagram of sovereign power, the term life, which in its etymological infancy did not have juridical content but rather designated a way of living, thus acquired juridical meaning only insofar as it was articulated in Roman law as the

counterpart of a power threatening death. Lurking behind this rather dire prognosis is homo sacer's gesture toward Thomas Hobbes's later theorization of life in the state of nature, which is unconditionally exposed to a death threat, and which under the protection of the Leviathan comes to be euphemistically termed "political life"; in fact, life in this state remains that very same entity, always exposed to a threat, which now rests exclusively in the hands of the sovereign. Agamben's archaic protagonist thus becomes the starting point in a familiar genealogy, for drawing on the work of thinkers like Schmitt and Hobbes, and even referring in his theorizations to Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault, Agamben has unveiled homo sacer as that figure who reveals sovereignty as a coming-together not of consensual political will but of the violence of naked life, kept safe and protected only to the degree to which it submits to a power over life and death.

In the Bhagavad Gita however, Krishna inaugurates a somewhat distinct order of sovereignty, one in which the founding moment originates not with a naked life that may be killed without being sacrificed, but with a yogic sequence of sacrificial lives, in which each life is in fact called upon by the Lord himself to devoutly fashion itself for the final ritual of slaying and being slain. Here there is neither a state of nature where life acquires meaning precisely in so far as it is threatened by death, nor is there a protector pater who brutally monopolizes the unconditional threat of death (for after all, according to the law of prakriti, men must encounter death despite the best protective efforts), nor even is there a relation of abandonment where life is vulnerably exposed to a double exclusion. Instead this is a topology where each life is sanctified and indeed nurtured by the sovereign Being, where each life struggles not to ward off the threat of death, but to in fact unconditionally offer itself to the amorous arms of the god of the netherworld, for to slay and be slain is the yogi's most ceremonious ritual, his most consecrate, non-attached sacrifice. In such conditions of articulation, where life is lived

according to the yogic principle, and all deeds are performed with complete disregard for their consequences, the sovereign is he who can revoke a non-attached sequence of lives from its cosmological diagram, and install it as the very foundation of political power, and this in fact is precisely what, in the midst of battle, the avatar is able to enforce. Thus, despite being distinct in its elaborations from that conceptualization of sacrality where life comes into being as a counterpart to death, Krishna's too is a notion of the sacred that is inextricable from its accompanying notion of sovereignty.

Indeed, once Kurukshetra has come to its gory end and the eldest Pandava is firmly established on the throne, he is clearly sovereign in a new world order, previously torn by the ravages of war but now sheltered under the peaceful auspices of his terrifying scepter. Yet what is only thinly disguised by this placid landscape of peace is precisely the originary violence of the yogic method, the foundational moment of sovereignty in which life is articulated as a sequential pattern, disinterested in the consequences of the wars it wages, and indeed in love with death. It carves and chisels itself for the final submission to the lover's ardent arms—in truth, to the arms of the Supreme Being. What the newly crowned prince after the Great War must therefore remember is that even though the peace of his kingship has put under erasure this foundational act of violence, the sustenance of the monarchical state depends on whether even after Krishna's intervention, that is, after the avatar has come and gone, the suzerain retains the authority to evoke a yogic sequence of lives as the very ontos of political power.

Drawing a veil over its own violent institution of sovereignty, the Bhagavad Gita plucks audiences from the verge of what is the most decisive moment in the larger epic narrative and plunges them headlong into a lumbering philosophical debate about the meaning of human death, its place in the grand scheme of the cosmos, and the omnipotent sway of the Supreme Being over even the flux of prakriti. Much like Odysseus's foot-bathing episode, which leads,

through the recognition of his nurse Euryclea, to an extended excursus into a completely different milieu involving the epic hero, the errant deviation of the Bhagavad Gita does not constitute what in the essentially detective design of the modern impulse to novelization would appear as a prime occasion for suspense. In other words, even though it is poised at a critical moment before the clash, the dialogue does not restively urge a return to the significance of the occasion that spawned it; nor does it, so to speak, allow a blood-spattered battlefield to palimpsestically linger in its lines. Instead, much like the excrescent boar hunt of Odysseus's childhood, it stands on its own, impassively removed from the turmoil of its own potential for carnage, its aspect turned away like that of the pensive philosopher, detachedly contemplating the infinite mystery of the stars.

This is also the reason for which it has been fairly easy, over the centuries, to wrench the Bhagavad Gita preemptorily out of its context, to lure it away from its historically specific beginnings, and to monumentalize and enshrine it as little more than the most devout of Brahminical scriptures far out of reach of the sovereign domain of Yudhishtira's princely heirs. In so far as the Sanskrit word itihasa, which was used to designate Indian epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, came to be identified with the English term history, this shift is a paradoxical one. I have already demonstrated that according to Ranajit Guha the translation of itihasa as history ensured that India was on its way to civilization qua the historicizing process. But if this was so, then the fact that emerging critical traditions increasingly removed the Bhagavad Gita from its historical conditions of production could only be yet another twist in the sordid tale of struggling sovereignties. Cleansed of the impure miasma of questions of political power and presented instead as the transcendent word of God, the Bhagavad Gita came to emblemize a mind-boggling diversity of Hindu paths to salvation, indeed to the fatal neglect of the idea that what Krishna's words achieve is in fact a radical articulation of historical

sovereignty. As I have already shown, this was a sovereign principle in many ways distinct from one that emerged in the West, and as I will now show, it was one that also quietly continued to evolve and morph itself, not only in some of the ensuing literature surrounding Krishna's life, but also in the course of the Mahabharata itself.

In the Anu Gita, another section of the Mahabharata where the Lord Krishna recapitulates his earlier discourse, only this time in a postbellum era, the articulation of the sovereign principle and, more specifically, of the place of the avatar in the newly instituted monarchical state become somewhat more ambiguous. The Anu Gita sets itself in an opulently languid milieu, with Krishna and his warrior-disciple dallying leisurely amid the imperial trappings of what is described as a certain portion of the palace that resembled heaven, content and fulfilled in the sole supremacy of the Pandavas after their momentous victory on the bleeding battlefield of Kurukshetra. Krishna, however, is soon to leave the celebratory air of Hastinapura for his own palace at Dvarka, and given his impending departure Arjuna is downcast, his flush of victory threatened by pangs of despair. Transported by anguish at the sheer scope of the destruction that his mighty marksmanship caused in the famous fratricidal battle, the epic hero is thus confronted with a return of the same agonistic dilemma that he suffered on the eve of the Great War. Would not a clash in which righteous warriors were forced to bear the sword against their own kith and kin, eminent elders, august gurus and venerable teachers, gravely disturb a cosmic balance of dharma? Would it not bring into catachretic conflict the multiple strands of dharma that rule a warrior's being as disciple, as kinsman, as head of the clan? Crippled by the very thought of defying the sovereign equipoise of dharma, Arjuna had decided to lay down arms, and it was only the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita that had enabled him, on the uncertain eve of Kurukshetra, to martially rejuvenate himself and once again sound the Pandava conch shell in a ceremonial call to battle.

The situation laid out by the Anu Gita is however distinct from that in which its better-known counterpart unfolded; Arjuna claims that in the lull after the war, his mind has fallen into degeneracy because Krishna's words have fled him. Since his peerless kinsman is determined to depart, his own inveterate anxieties would be put to rest only if the prince of Dvarka were to recapitulate for him the wisdom of the Gita, and thereby foray yet another time into the shadowy mystery of human death. In response to Arjuna's confession, Krishna chides the epic hero for having forgotten what he was schooled in earlier, but at the same time obdurately asserts that it will not be possible for him to re-present the Gita to his protégé. After all, that discourse was adequate for and occasioned by an exceptional condition of war, and cannot therefore be mimetically reproduced in profoundly changed circumstances. Moreover, Krishna admits, somewhat unpredictably, that when he spoke on the battlefield of the Kurus he had surpassed even himself, for in that critical situation he was inspired and in a state of exaltation, accompanied by the powers of the supreme Brahmana. Bereft of his sovereign abilities, which displaced from his person now find a home in the promulgations of the text itself, Krishna will no longer be able to recapture the words of the Gita, and indeed all he can do in an attempt to assuage his disciple's fears is assume the aspect of a storyteller, relate ancient parables upon the subject, and hope that Arjuna has both the interpretive skills and the deductive arsenal to be enabled by them in much the same way as he was invigorated by the Gita itself.

At the heart of the Anu Gita are thus three fables: one recounts a dialogue between the Siddha and his disciple, another presents Arjuna with a conversation between Brahmana and his spouse, and yet another tells the story of a master and his apprentice. As Arvind Sharma points out in his book, The Hindu Gita: Ancient and Classical Interpretations of the Bhagavadgita (1986), the most striking interpretive feature of the recapitulation in the Anu Gita consists not of what it emphasizes but instead of what it neglects to recapitulate. The parables are clearly

directed towards spawning a mood of contemplative serenity in the listener rather than swaying him with military verve as was the case in a condition of war. The verses of this later text, sated with invocations to the golden path of knowledge and to the attainment of salvation through jnana (knowledge) rather than bhakti (devotion), are thus unabashedly blasé insofar as the devotional aspects of the Bhagavad Gita are concerned, indifferent to any glorification of Krishna as He who was born to rid the earth of evil and apathetic in the face of the divine form of the theophany.

In only selectively recalling the teachings of the Lords Lay, the Anu Gita, according to Sharma, inaugurates a tradition of interpreting the Bhagavad Gita as a Gnostic rather than a devotional text, and indeed does so from within the epic narrative itself instead of in the more rigid disciplinary form of literary criticism. Thus, while Sharma's rather clever analysis of the Mahabharata as a postmodern fragmentation capable of commenting on its own discontinuities is adequate to, and synchronous with, the model that Krishna himself articulates in using a series of episodic parables to comment on the larger message of the Gita, what is ignored by his analysis is the ever-so-slight displacement of sovereign power that the Anu Gita records in relation to its earlier counterpart. Indeed, in place of attending to these rather intriguing results of his own reading, Sharma goes to great lengths to propose that his book avoids parroting a weary historical account that locates Sankara (whose Bhasya appeared in approximately the ninth century) as the first in a long line of interpreters who read the Bhagavad Gita as a pamphlet explicating knowledge rather than devotion as the rightful means to salvation, and claims instead to establish a "pre-Sankaran point . . . as the Anugita must have been some few centuries old at the time of Sankaracarya" (3). In merely pushing back the beginnings of an important hermeneutic tradition and declaring thereby to have made a dent in the traditional design of Gita

criticism, Sharma thus tightens the noose around the circle, masking even further the place of sovereign power in the emergent monarchical state.

Once he has successfully argued the notion that it was in fact the Anu Gita that began an important practice of scholarship, previously believed to have originated with the work of Sankara, Sharma turns his attention to the Gitamahatmyas, a set of verses that appear regularly in the Puranas and dedicate themselves to extolling the virtues of the Gita as a religious text, a devotional song that gathers in its short span the essence of Vedic precepts, and therefore the very acme of the Hindu tradition.²⁷ In commenting upon and thereby reinscribing the deity of the Mahabharata, the Puranas emphasize Krishna's early years as a willful child, his frolicsome mischief that only half-seriously troubles his foster-mother, Yashodhara, and the divine yet blatantly sexualized romancing that he generously bestows upon more than a hundred blushing cowherd damsels. In particular, the Vishnu Purana, the Padma Purana, and the Bhagavata Purana focus upon these aspects of the god: Krishna's cavorting spontaneity as the eternal child, the youth-Krishna's unsurpassed beauty as a dark god in a crown of peacock feathers, and the seductive power of his haunting flute, which quite brazenly flirted with the limits of human resistance in the face of a divine lover. Unlike the Anu Gita, therefore, the Puranas translate the prince of Dvarka into an object of worship, a personal deity, who from the staidly militant warrior of the Mahabharata has now become an exemplary instantiation of the ideal son, the eternal child, the unparalleled kinsman, and even the incomparable paramour.

Of course, Arvind Sharma's analysis of Purana literature along these lines allows him a point of departure to contend that parallel to the line of exegesis launched by the discourse of the

²⁷ The Puranas (AD 200-1200), with their stories of the gods, became more well-known than Vedic literature, and like the Mahabharata, were claimed to be the fifth Veda, or an official commentary on the Vedas that spoke the word of inspired sages.

Anu Gita, the Puranas, with their glorificatory verses in praise of Krishna, could be understood not just as biographical paeans to the reincarnation of Vishnu but indeed as the origin for an opposing exegetical tradition, one that claims a devotional (rather than Gnostic) status for the Gita. Thus is established the rather neat though familiar binary between the Lord's Lay as a discourse that both emphasizes the worldly pursuit of action and knowledge and recommends ascetic renunciation and single-minded devotion to the divine person of Krishna as the most righteous path to salvation, the one strand of interpretation originating in Sharma's account with the Anu Gita, and the other with the Puranas.

Such a dialectically divided structure apart however, what is interesting about the Puranas is the way in which, while recognizably departing from what Sharma calls the "jnana-oriented" recapitulation of the Anu Gita, they intersect in one constitutive instance with the very occasion for the earlier text. If in the Anu Gita Krishna had claimed that it would not be possible for him to recount the wisdom of the battlefield because the words he had spoken amidst the clamor of swords were divinely inspired and products of a moment of union with the Supreme Brahmana, then in the Puranas, Krishna distances himself from the Gita in a similar way. By the time of the latter text, the Gita is no longer sacred because it was recited by the Lord, but instead sacralizes by its mere recitation. The son of Devaki, pleased with its incantation, describes the words of the Gita as the supreme abode, the most excellent station, the highest guru, and the seat of intense, inexhaustible knowledge. Thus, while in the Mahabharata, Krishna was the guru, and Arjuna his disciple, in the Puranas (and implicitly, in the Anugita as well), it is the words of the Gita itself that are elevated to the status of guru. And indeed, whereas in the midst of battle Krishna is said to support the weight of the world by virtue of his very divine demeanor, in the Varaha Purana Vishnu is able to sustain the world only because he relies on the inexhaustible knowledge of the Gita. The Preserver does not say, "where I am there is the Gita," but rather

must submit to proclaim, “where the reading, recitation, hearing, and reflection on the Gita is to be found, O earth! I, to be sure, reside there for good” (Sharma 15).

The Lord Krishna, who in the Gita is sovereign by virtue of his trikaal darshan as well as by virtue of the fact that he can revoke a yogic sequence of sacrificial lives as the very foundation of political power, is transformed into a completely different being in the Anugita and the Puranas. By this time, the sovereign principle has been wrenched away from the figure of the Lord and instituted in the depersonalized form of the text, such that the words of the Gita are constituted as a legacy for the monarch to look to, even after the avatar has come and gone. In other words, Krishna’s impulse to dissociate himself from his own words on the battlefield serves to disengage sovereign authority from the person of Vishnu and incarnate it decidedly in the formal aspect of the text. The Gita is henceforth to function as the supreme law book of Hindu monarchy, something Yudhistira’s heirs can turn to when called upon to govern over exceptionally volatile conditions. Yet clearly, the habitual approach to the Anu Gita and the Puranas, as also to the Gita itself (and Sharma’s book is only one exemplary instantiation of such an unfortunate critical temper), has systematically obscured precisely this dynamic mobility of the sovereign principle from its beginnings in the monarchical state of the Ganga Valley to its vigorous resurgence in the high colonial climate of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the battle against British Raj.

In the early twentieth century, one of Yudhishtira’s most illustrious children, a man named Bal Gangadhar Tilak, directly confronted the mighty governance of the British Crown with the declaration that in the absence of the Lord Krishna, sovereignty was to reside in the “reading, recitation, hearing, and reflection on the Gita,” rather than in the supreme sway of the Indian penal code. In the 15 June 1897 issue of Keshari, a Marathi weekly, he wrote with a great deal of nationalist élan:

Shrimat Krishna preached in the Gita that we have the right to kill even our own guru and our kinsmen. No blame attaches to any person if he is doing deeds without being actuated by a desire to reap the fruit of his deeds . . . get out of the Penal Code, enter into the lofty atmosphere of the Shrimat Bhagavad Gita and then consider the actions of great men. (Minor 58)

Scholars of the Gita have pointed out that the later colonial period was one in which the text most energetically thrust itself into the foreground of both popular religious upheavals and elite scholarly adventures. But one must note with some trepidation that what continued to be almost completely overlooked was the fact that even in dialogue with the governing machinery of British rule, the Gita was still understood purely in terms of religiosity rather than in terms that could hazard to provide an alternative to European notions of sovereignty.²⁸ Even Tilak's 1915 Gita Rahasya ("The Esoteric Import of the Gita"), which categorically situated questions of sovereign power at the very heart of the text, was considered indistinguishable from more

²⁸ It is intriguing to note that the Bhagavad Gita, which seems to have almost a naturalized popularity in the modern Hindu context, was perhaps not very well-known before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Beyond the commentaries and essays of the intellectual elite, there is little nonliterary evidence to support the view that the Krishna of the Bhagavad Gita was a personal deity of great significance. The earliest illustrated manuscripts of the Gita are from the eighteenth century, and earlier artistic representations are rare. While the Krishna of the very popular Bhagavata Purana and scenes from the rest of the Mahabharata are found regularly, only two illustrations of the Krishna of the Gita are known: one from the fourteenth century, at a temple in Pushpagiri in Andhra Pradesh, and another from a frieze on the late-twelfth-century Halebid temple.

decidedly theological interventions that frenziedly delved into Krishna's words to extract from them an essential Hinduism for the newly emerging nation.

This is not however to say that Tilak's work completely shunned such programmatic attempts at cultural-nationalist mobilization, but what is perhaps more intriguing about his writing is that in moving the masses to an abandonment of the Penal Code and a return, in its place, to the doctrine of the Bhagavad Gita, the Gita Rahasya specifically marks its titular forebear as a book of law imminently suited to governing the mundane matters of the young republic. Yet, not surprisingly, the stage for the neglect of this aspect of Tilak's analysis had already been set almost a century ago with Charles Wilkins's translation of the Bhagavad Gita in 1784, a contribution to and of high Indology, for which the first governor-general of British India, Warren Hastings himself, wrote the introduction. Hastings wrote of Wilkins, "Though he started with a political motive he soon acquired admiration for the classics of India like the Bhagavadgita, which, he declared, 'would live when the British dominion in India has long ceased to exist and when the sources which it once yielded of wealth and power are lost to remembrance'" (Minor 169). Clearly, both Wilkins and his bureaucrat-superior seemed to submit, through their comments about the text's transcendence of wealth and power, to an already fatigued criticism of Hindu religiosity.

Hinduism had already suffered the travails of being labeled as otherworldly, fatalistic, passive, and lacking in concern for a workable social ethics. And even though in the earlier period of the Company Bahadur such conclusions occasioned a pretext for relegating natives to an inferior status, given the philosophical position of many Indologists it was precisely this transcendent aspect of Hindu religiosity that translated into its greatest antimodernist strength. Strength or weakness notwithstanding, locked in an exquisite web of conflicting strands of interpretation and racing ahead and slumping back in unreliable syncopation, a rising number of

nationalist thinkers took it upon themselves to respond to what they had constituted as this blistering torrent of criticism. Turning in their quest to the sagacity of the Gita, such intellectuals found that the Lord Krishna of the Mahabharata could be the most effective face of their cause, for by exhorting Arjuna to war-like action (while still prescribing a yogic method of nonattachment), he had cleansed his discourse of a doomed belief in otherworldliness that sat rather ill with the principal banners of the colonial enterprise. By couching their response in the paradigm already instituted by Indology, the nationalist ideologues who took up this call were themselves in the clutches of a powerful system of thinking, one that had already set the terms of a debate that was henceforth to inflect, if not shape, most individual utterances on the subject.

Caught in such a delicate web of unholy critical alliances, it is not surprising that Tilak's work on the Gita, despite its implicit suitability for the profane matters of governmentality, was constituted as one argument among others for reading the Gita as a text that could once and for all salvage Hinduism from the oppressive yoke of primitive fatalism and restore it to its proud place among the great religious systems of the world. And of course, Tilak's work manifested a gross disdain for the idea that what the Gita Rahasya in fact approximates is not only a theorization of Hindu religiosity as a modern mode of thinking, but also a translation and reappropriation of the sovereign principle as it had emerged and metamorphosed in the middle Ganga Valley. In fact, always demurely masking itself in the veil of metaphysical truths and their cosmological span, and wandering through the meandering routes of Indology and Orientalist knowledge formations, the figuration of the sovereign principle had, with the advent of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and his protégés, reached a new turn in its already mottled career—traveling from the divine person of Krishna through the Anu Gita and the Puranas to the formal aspect of the text itself, and finally beginning to house itself quite comfortably in the interstices

of an emerging nation-state, with its competing feudal patriarchies, its bureaucrat-pundits, and finally, its Rex, Lex, and Principium.

3.2 YUDHISHTHIRA'S CHILDREN

Born in Maharashtra in 1856, Tilak was a devout and scholarly Brahmin steeped in the scriptural tradition of Hindu India. At the same time, he was an ardent nationalist politician whose intellectual energies vacillated wildly between his own construction of pan-Hinduism as a religion with the ability to cross regional boundaries and his parochial and chauvinistic Maharashtrian Brahminism. One of the main concerns of Tilak's times was the reform and modernization of Hindu custom by the intervention of the statutes of British Law. Tilak argued that while he would not resist reform per se, he believed it should arise out of the dharma of Hindu practice and therefore in accordance with the proposals of an educated Hindu community rather than in submission to the Queen's Men.²⁹ In the pages of periodicals like the Mahratta and

²⁹ Given that Bal Gangadhar Tilak had firmly allied himself with Hindu orthodoxy, his attitude towards Indian Muslims became a source of debate that continues to fester today, particularly insofar as his work has become extremely influential to the founding figurations of contemporary notions of Hindutva. In 1893, for instance, Tilak revived a Peshwa family festival honoring the birth anniversary of the elephant-headed god Ganesha, leading to a ten-day-long public carnival of music, singing, and parades alongside the image of Ganesha – a decidedly Hindu ceremony for a decidedly Hindu society. The festival continues to be celebrated with great fanfare even today, especially in Mumbai. Three years later, in 1896, Tilak supported a celebration in honor of Shivaji, the great Marathi leader who had used deception to defeat an occupying Muslim army

the Kesari, both of which he had come to own by 1890, Tilak time and again declared that the beginnings of the problem lay in the fact that instead of patronizing Brahmin priests and scholarly pandits, the standard bearers of British Raj had left this learned class to dwindle, creating in its place a new elite reared on the sacred texts of Western civilization.³⁰ Not surprisingly, Tilak's position on the one hand gained him the undying support of the Hindu orthodoxy, threatened as it was by a myriad of reform proposals as well as by the flagging narrative of Brahmin domination, and on the other ensured that he would become one of the leading members of the nationalist or extremist group of the Indian National Congress, a pioneering body that later came to be identified as the only viable platform for heterodox expressions of nationalist struggle.

The Congress had started out as an assembly of men who, as the earliest legatees of the English education system, were firm believers in Western ideals of freedom, equality, and

in 1659. In his remarks at the inaugural event, Tilak announced that the object was not to encourage an imitation of Shivaji's deeds against Muslim India, but to develop in the populace a feeling for the spirit and courage that had motivated him. Nonetheless, it would take no great stretch of the imagination to move from honoring a hero to emulating his actions, a sensitive point that was not lost on the British and that also caused the Muslim community a great deal of concern.

³⁰ Much like Tilak in the early twentieth century, the contemporary adherents of Hindutva argue, through the organs of both vernacular and English-language periodicals, dailies, and web-portals, that liberal and left-wing scholars of Indian nationalism, reared on the significant politico-literary achievements of Western civilization, have so overwhelmed powerful, metropolitan discursive environments that they leave little space for a Hindu-normative tradition of scriptural understandings of economics and politics.

justice. Their political philosophy had been informed by European ideas, and their reform programs were decisively located in the constitutional machinery of British rule. While such “moderates,” as they came to be called, tended to preserve a rather sharp distinction between their religious and political views, towards the end of the nineteenth century, men such as Tilak, whose religious nationalism was combined with increasingly fervent political aspirations, began to rise to prominence. Such men rejected concepts of political activity and governance based on foreign ideals and philosophy, for in their mandate what India needed was her own native system of government, based on her own politico-literary traditions, which ironically enough were increasingly being shaped, as we have seen, by the translations and commentaries of foreign Indologists. In the midst of such a tortuous field of critical convergences, resistant, to say the least, to strict binaries like East/West, foreign/national, and native/English, Tilak argued that for a feasible process of self-realization, India needed to be in control of all the constitutive elements of the nation; judicial, financial, industrial, and political. The aim of the extremist wing of Congress thus became not cooperation with British rule and relative autonomy within it, but rather noncooperation and the achievement of political autonomy based on a purified notion of Brahmin Hinduness. The sharp division between these two sides of the Indian National Congress softened somewhat in the latter half of the nineteenth century, especially with the articulations of a figure like Jawaharlal Nehru, who agitated for complete political autonomy, or Home Rule, while paradoxically following in the footsteps of Western paradigms of political aggregation. It was thus under his stewardship that while the world slept, modern India famously awoke at the stroke of midnight on 14 August 1947 as a sovereign democratic republic, independent of British Raj.³¹

³¹ Shortly before independence became a reality, Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India’s

If in contrast to earlier statesmen like Tilak and others of his ilk, Nehru had, in a stroke of genius, successfully instituted a Western diagram of industrialization as the temple of India's future, this was not to say that the political field had been entirely cleansed of significant and powerful challenges to the new prime minister's notions of progress and modernity.³² In fact, even the "father of the nation" Mahatma Gandhi himself, or "Bapu," as he had come to be lovingly called, had on several occasions not only criticized Nehru's ideas of civilization, progress, and social production as masquerading modalities of domination; he also claimed that the central problem of Western economies lay in their much-coveted principles of exchange and industrialization, which Nehru had come to mistakenly embrace. Yet despite the fact that the Mahatma had in this way directly challenged what was by now an authoritative Nehruvian vision, it was impossible for even a powerful leader of Congress like Nehru to deny Bapu's iron grip over nationalist struggle in the subcontinent of the early twentieth century.

In the face of Gandhi's overwhelming affective reach over what Nehru called "the peasant mind," for instance, the latter was rendered without analysis, and apparently bereft of

first prime minister, famously addressed the Constituent Assembly in New Delhi: "At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom" (New Delhi, India, 19 August 1947).

³² Soon after 1947, at a time when the Congress Government was in the process of floating its five-year plan emphasizing the macroeconomics of large-scale industry, Nehru designated dams and steel plants as "the temples of India's future." As the motto that summed up his government's emphasis on an economy founded on public sector investment in a massive sweep of fast-paced industrialization, Nehru's statement figurally selected those projects that would redress the harsh quotidian realities of the majority of the population, and in so doing gradually constitute a national polity homogenized by an assurance of progressive welfare for all.

any machinery of comprehension whatsoever. For all that Nehru would hazard to say about the Mahatma was that he was idiosyncratic, spoke a quaint religious idiom and dealt in sage metaphysical postulates that somehow came together to form a winning concatenation, part of the magic of an incomprehensible political genius: his spell-binding powers, his irrational capacities, his baffling knack, his unfathomable instinct.³³ Despite the fact that there does not seem to be in such a rush of bewildered statements any attempt to plumb the theoretical depths of Gandhi's political thinking (to the contrary, the affect of childlike wonder seems to deliberately foreclose any engagement of this kind), it is clear that the Mahatma's alternative to Nehru's understanding of the sovereign national state, his exposure of the limits of the Nehruvian vision as it were, was not without precedent. In fact, Gandhi's articulation of an undivided concept of popular sovereignty and collective moral will against the systems of representative government, parliamentary democracy, and their corollary shifting allegiances, while being distinct from Tilak's more statist-militant theorizations, was nonetheless, like the latter's, self-professedly based on his reading, understanding, and persistent thinking of Krishna's words on the great battlefield.³⁴

³³ My analysis of Nehru's relationship with Mahatma Gandhi is largely indebted to Partha Chatterjee's book, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse (1993). Here, Chatterjee diagrams a three-fold movement of nationalist thought beginning with the work of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, moving through what he calls a "moment of departure" in the thinking of Gandhi, and finally coming to a "moment of arrival" in the stewardship of Nehru.

³⁴ Gandhi's ideal of a stateless society relied on the position that the national state could formally use its legislative powers to abdicate a presumed responsibility of promoting development, and thereby clear the ground for popular nonstate agencies to take up the work of revitalizing the economy. Clearly this position was distinct from Tilak's,

For Tilak, the Bhagavad Gita was first and foremost a text that called for disinterested action rather than quietism or ascetic renunciation. Given that in response to European critiques of a fatalistic Hindu religiosity, he argued this view of the central esoteric teaching of the Gita, Tilak differed from earlier mainstream thinkers of Vedantist philosophy to which he professed a genealogical relationship.³⁵ Most of the major strands of Vedantist thinking had so far argued that according to the Lord's Lay, the hermit-like acquisition of knowledge was the only means to liberation. Despite the obvious novelty of his intervention in the field, Tilak made no claim to an original articulation, merely declaring to have restored to its rightful place the timeless doctrine of the religion of action. Given the by-now familiar quagmire of a strictly two-fold model of approaching the Gita—on the one hand as a text that emphasizes the worldly pursuit of action and knowledge as the single means to moksha, and on the other, as one that recommends ascetic renunciation and single-minded devotion to the divine person of Krishna as the most righteous path to salvation—Tilak's Gita Rahasya very easily sunk into the critical viscosity of conflicting interpretive sides. Yet what was foreclosed by the deathly sterility of such a relentlessly binarized approach was the notion that, much like the Lord Krishna himself, Tilak theorized

but once again what I am stressing in introducing Gandhi into the same field of signification as Tilak is his debt to a notion of sovereignty as articulated in the Bhagavad Gita.

³⁵ The "pure Vedanta philosophy" to which Tilak relates his work is none other than the Advaita Vedanta School associated with the eighth- to ninth-century philosopher Sankara. For the Advaitins, the philosophy of the Gita was nondualistic, and while Tilak agreed with this aspect of Sankara's thought, confirming and elaborating his notions of the Brahman, the theory of creation, the nature of the human being, and the doctrine of bondage, he dissociated himself from Sankara's Gitabhasya insofar as the means to salvation was concerned.

action in such a way that it emerged as the primary tenet for the institution of a sovereign principle, culled with great care from the priestly pieties of high Brahminism. Reverting to the etymological root of that most enchanting of terms, dharma, Tilak was to write in a Jan. 1906 edition of the Mahratta: “The word dharma means a tie and comes from the root Dhri, ‘to bear or hold,’ [and] what is there to hold together, but to connect the soul with God and man with man”. In Tilak’s analysis, therefore, dharma becomes just another word for precisely that bond that connects one life in the karmic cycle to another, identifies the Spirit of man (or the Eternity of dehin) with the Spirit of Vishnu, and in a convoluted circularity returns to articulate life itself as a sacrifice to precisely such divine identification.

Using this assertion as a point of departure, the author of the Gita Rahasya goes on to argue that no human being, no matter how enlightened, can escape the imperative of action, and indeed this is precisely what the Lord Krishna shows us when he assumes mortal incarnation. In his worldly life, the Lord not only exhorts Arjuna to his caste-duty as a warrior, but also shows that acting without thought of the action’s success or failure is an obligation even of the avatar’s life in the earthly kingdom of man. In the Mahabharata, Krishna navigates Arjuna’s chariot through the momentous battlefield of the Kurus, and given that he has come to the desecrate world as a member of the warrior caste, here he too must perform warlike actions, strategizing and deploying his best tactical arsenal to ensure a victory for his own side. In Krishna’s discourse, the avatar’s life thus emerges as an exemplary one, and in his reading of the Gita, Tilak particularly alights on this notion to argue therefrom that when such a model life offers itself to death—when, according to the precepts of the book of the Lord, it carves itself for the final ritual of slaying or being slain—that death too is an ideal to be devoutly replicated or at least earnestly approximated. If Krishna had revoked a yogic sequence of sacrificial lives as the very source of sovereign power in the emergent monarchy of the Ganga Valley, and if he had

suggested that it was the form of his words that constituted the primary abode for sovereignty, then as the supreme book of law for Hindus and in place of the Penal Code, the Bhagavad Gita would function, even after the avatar had come and gone, as a formalization of that very sovereign authority. The autonomous government of India would thus look to the Gita as a phenomenal expression of the Supreme Brahman, and one that could ceremonially, and indeed not unjustly, call upon men to offer their lives in service of the nation.³⁶ Such a national state founded on the Bhagavadgita would, according to Tilak, never be at a loss for “life in reserve,” for in the terms of Krishna’s discourse, every man was constituted not by a single life but by an extended sequence of lives, each clamouring to offer itself to the sacrificial flames of a Hindu national state.³⁷

Even though the Mahatma never wrote an extended treatise on the Lord’s Lay, and even though much of what has been gleaned from his work would constitute little more than fragmentary comments on the Gita, his thinking was infused with a rhetorically charged interpretation of Krishna’s words, and given the terms of its dissemination, has persistently been

³⁶ According to the Advaita Vedanta System of Philosophy with which Tilak claimed a genealogical relationship, all phenomenal entities, including the national state of which one is citizen, are worldly manifestations of the Supreme Brahmana. On 10 July 1906, in the pages of the Kesari, Tilak publicly proclaimed his debt to such a manner of thinking: “. . . it is a special divine plan that we must achieve success at some time. God and our nation are not separate; on the contrary, our nation is one of God’s forms.”

³⁷ In addition to Robert Minor’s Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavad Gita (1986), my understanding of Tilak’s work is indebted to Stanley A. Wolpert’s Tilak and Gokhale: Revolution and Reform in the Making of Modern India (1962), which to date, and to the best of my knowledge, remains the most authoritative reading of Tilak’s relationship with his contemporaries.

understood in contradistinction to Tilak's Gita Rahasya. This is in part because of what I have described as an unfortunate interpretive environment, one that must closet emergent readings in either this or that category, guarding them quite jealously from penetrating, contaminating, or infecting each other. Nonetheless, there was a difference between Gandhi's Gita and Tilak's diagnosis. For Gandhi, the Gita was an ahistorical allegory dealing with eternal verities, taking up historical personages and events, transforming them into angels or devils, and thereby presenting audiences with the universal and timeless duel between good and evil, spirit and matter, the divine and the demoniac:

Now the Bhagavadgita is not a historical work, it is a great religious book, summing up teaching of all religions. The poet has seized the occasion of the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas on the field of Kurukshetra for drawing attention to the war going on in our bodies between the forces of Good (Pandavas) and the forces of Evil (Kauravas) and has shown that the latter would be destroyed and there should be no remissness in carrying on the battle against the forces of Evil, mistaking them through ignorance for forces of Good. (Minor 98)

In fact, a few years after the above declaration, Bapu went so far as to say that the Mahabharata was a great antiwar epic because it described the utter futility of a pyrrhic victory in which both victors and vanquished lost all. Constituting the central episode in such a decidedly antiwar narrative, he continued, the Gita was undoubtedly a principal treatise on nonviolence. While such an interpretation permitted the now ahistorical Gita to mutate into a version of Gandhi's own philosophy, it was also precisely this stance that cleansed the Mahatma's interpretation of the more bellicose aspects of Tilak's reading.

Yet one must remember that like his earlier contemporary, Gandhi did not sever the theology of the Gita from his more mundane understanding of philosophies of political aggregation, but instead deployed it as the very cornerstone of his many articulations around these issues. The Mahatma, for instance, never tired of repeating that the essence of the Gita was expressed in the last twenty verses of the second canto where Krishna describes the sthitaprajna, the man who has achieved perfect control over his inner self as an exemplary product of the yogic method. For Gandhi, such a man was then to become the constituent element of his ideal village, which as the principal unit of politics had to be prepared, even disciplined, to perish in the attempt to defend itself against any onslaught from without. Parallel to this diagram of polity in which the village is the centre of the vortex, Gandhi, in his multiple writings on swaraj or autonomy, theorized life itself as an oceanic circle whose focal point was the yogic man, the sthitaprajna always ready to slay and be slain for the village, while still conceding that the only majesty belonged not to him as an individual but to the oceanic circle itself. Bapu's formulation of an oceanic circle of lives ready to submit itself to the cause of the village, and as such, courting death precisely as an occasion for identification with Eternal dehin, resonates unmistakably with Krishna's revocation of an extended cycle of sacrificial lives as the very foundation of sovereign power. For Gandhi, India could achieve swaraj (autonomy) only through the way people lived their lives, and since the exemplary life was one that understood that doing one's duty without any consideration for what rights one will accrue (or in yogic terms, without consideration for the fruits of one's actions), this life would also be the foundation of popular sovereignty in the new dispensation, a life that knew "neither birth nor death." Such a life, the very ontos of Gandhi's message—his own life, so to speak—was both a

preparation for the great ritual and itself the great ritual, to be repeated again and again timelessly through a karmic cycle of successive sacrifices.³⁸

Stylistically orchestrated in the terms of the great Vedic sacrifice itself, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's magnum opus, The Indian War of Independence, 1857, (1909) had already deployed the karmic sequence of life and rebirth as a way of thinking closely allied with the battle against the sovereign power of the Crown, and what was perhaps its most powerful cultural-pedagogical tool: English historiography. Divided into four parts, each recalling in its naming the preparatory steps toward the ceremonial ritual, Savarkar's book conflicts in its very organizational principles with the objectivist structures of contemporary European history writing. The rhetorically charged chapter headings, "Adding Fuel to the Fire," "Light up the Sacrificial Fire," "The Conflagration," and "The Culminating Offering," gradually build on one another in a rising surge of ceremonial incantation. Indeed, even the people who inhabit this sacred world are syntactically cast in the same ritual grammar as the categories that classify them; they are not distinct individuals with their own inimitable personas but rather iterations of each other, soul to blessed soul affined, one rehearsing the life of the other, one giving birth to the other and one bleeding into the other, to constitute a timeless sequence of interminable life

³⁸ In an interview with Denton J. Brooks, the Far Eastern correspondent of the Chicago Defender (appearing in the Defender on 10 June 1945 and in the Hindu on 15 June 1945), the Mahatma was asked whether he would care to send a special message to the Negro people of America. In response, Gandhi famously said: "My life is its own message. If it is not, then nothing I can now write will fulfill the purpose." Entitled "My Life is Message," in the section called "Gandhi on Himself and His Mission," this famous proclamation is quoted in Raghavan Iyer's very useful collection, The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi (2000). It indeed crystallizes the notion that for Bapu, living an exemplary life like the avatar's was the only way to Swaraj.

cycles. For instance, Nana Sahib and Lakshmi Bai, the hero and heroine of Savarkar's story and thus the imperial bearers of the ritual tradition, are said to be the very incarnations of the Revolutionary Spirit ("At the place of honour sat the proud and noble form of Nana Sahib, the very incarnation of the Revolutionary Spirit. . . . There also sat the lightening Queen of Jhansi"), their unconquerable souls having taken root from the blood of Shivaji, the great Maratha warrior who lived centuries before them ("They are two witnesses, sword in hand to prove that the blood of Hindusthan that gave birth to Shivaji is not yet dead"), and their sacrificial lives, when costumed for libation in the culminating offering, giving rise in turn to thousands of heroes ("Out of my blood will rise thousands of heroes!" These last words of the noble martyr, could not be falsified, were not falsified").

In a portentous enunciation that quite peremptorily does away with the finality of death and therefore with the irrevocable passing of events or the irretrievable movement of time, Savarkar seems to suggest that history is not about absolute successes and failures but rather about repetitions, reiterations, and endless rehearsals, founded in extended cycles of lives, overseen by the Eternity of dehin and identifiable with the Supreme Brahmana precisely insofar as bowed low, in an attitude of consecration, they forfeit themselves at His temple. The princely warriors of The Indian War of Independence, 1857 are thus not historical personages violently immobilized in the death frieze of an absolute past but recurring lives that rise from the ashes of archaic heroes, and they rehearse anew timeless conflicts—the war of the Kurus, the struggle against the Mughals, and the Battle of Plassey against the British—such that "the sacred fuel of their lives in the sacrificial fire is [in its turn] a thousand times more life-giving than the log of wood burning in the funeral pyre" (388). Defying death and embracing thereby the avatar's task of walking the earth whenever dharma is weak and falters, when adharma prevails as aggrandizing master of all it encounters, when good men must be saved, and the kingdom of

righteousness rid of a Tarquin's ravishing strides, these insurrectionists are, according to Savarkar, men and women who "[w]ielding the sword dripping with their own hot blood, in that great rehearsal, walked boldly on the stage of fire and danced in joy even on the very breast of Death" (544). These are revolutionaries who fight for death alone, who court death as their duty rather than live life as a right, and, pledging the seed of their martyrdom to the honorable blood of successive generations, ensure that their spirits return incarnate to feed the continuing ritual.

The stylization of Savarkar's characters is in many ways similar to the manner in which Jay Dubashi liberates the protagonists of The Road to Ayodhya from the clutches of an absolute past, and of course both texts are founded in epistemology of life and rebirth rather than one of life and death. It is not surprising therefore that the ideologues of Hindutva in its contemporary manifestation call upon Veer Savarkar as the founding father of their enterprise. Yet clearly, while Dubashi's aspiration is toward an imperial Hindudom, Savarkar's is toward Hinduness as a national formation. In other words, while Savarkar combats imperial domination by taking note of the impossibility of translating certain indigenous forms of cognition into European concepts, a present-day commentator like Dubashi generates India as an imperial nation precisely by collapsing the very possibility of such untranslatable distinctions. Bubbling with felicity, The Indian War of Independence, 1857 proleptically imposes a nationalist battle for autonomy on a subcontinental terrain that was yet to be articulated as 'nation'. Beginning in its very first pages with a provocative call for aggression, Savarkar rallies against all those forms of historiography which composed from the point of view of the Queen's Men, could not help but designate "the brilliance of a War of Independence" as merely 'the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 (xxiii).' In the author's introduction to the work, Savarkar claims to have garnered all his resources for research before setting out to confront the might of the imperial historians, for as he tells his readers, "even the slightest references and the most minute details in [his] book can

be as much substantiated by authoritative works as the important events and the main currents of the history (xxiv).” Having loudly asserted his intention to write an unprejudiced history, a somewhat awkward problem still remained for Savarkar, for according to him, no European author had been able to objectively study the 1857 sepoy insurrection (and no Indian author had so far even undertaken this difficult historical task), and consequently precisely those “authoritative works” that he had had the opportunity to consult were only partial and blemished representations of the brilliance of the sepoy uprising.

Being the first Indian to approach this problem, Savarkar thus takes it upon himself to correct this ungainly condition and in doing so, firmly situates the figure of the writer-historian in the same ritualistic reiterative line as the revolutionaries themselves. For instance, in the chapter entitled, “Adding Fuel to the Fire,” our author sets out to deftly dispel the notion that the First War of Independence was inspired by a mere rumour about Hindu and Musalman sepoys being, against the grain of their religiosity, forced to bite into cartridges greased with the fat of cows and pigs. Yet, faced with the silence of Indian writers, and the blindness of English historians on this issue, Savarkar in order to meet his objective, must forcibly launch his own persona as historian into the immediate fray of the sepoys’ battle.

Rise, then O Hindusthan, rise! Even as Shri Ram Das exhorted, “Die for Dharma; While dying, kill all your enemies and win back Swarajya; while killing kill well.” Murmuring such sentiments to himself, every sepoy in Indian began to sharpen his sword for the fight for Swadharma and Swarajya. (66)

In affecting a temporal coincidence between the past of which and the present in which he is writing the author of The Indian War of Independence, 1857 is no longer a historian in the objectivist sense of the term, no longer is his language at a secure distance from the events which it records, and no more is he concerned with endorsing every detail in the work, even one

as apparently inaudible as the soft ‘murmurs’ of the sepoys, by the heavy artillery of an authoritative canon. Instead, Savarkar is now both historian and actor of his own language, a figure who is recurring and reiterative – one with the martyrs of the 1757 Battle of Plassey (who in fact return as the revolutionaries of the 1857 uprising), privy to the softest murmurs of the sepoys in the insurrectionary uprisings a hundred years from then, and later again, no stranger to the early and mid-twentieth century struggles for autonomy from British rule. Much like the insurrectionists themselves, Savarkar, the historian is a reincarnation of the Revolutionary Spirit; he takes root from the blood of earlier heroes, and defying the irrevocability of a past, returns to the earthly kingdom of man to rehearse anew the events of yore.

Especially in a Hegelian and post-Hegelian context, history has always had an intimate relation with death—with the absolute finality and the sepulchral arrest of vital lives. In such a historicist architectonics, any vitality and its potential for anarchic dynamism had to be apprehended and violently captured in an immobile mask of death before it could even be submitted to the learned gaze of the disinterested historian—removed, in splendid isolation, from the baffling mire of emerging events. However, unlike the great English histories of the colonial period, which of course were inflected and shaped by this familiar Hegelian model, The Indian War of Independence, 1857 is content to wander adrift in an oceanic circle of continually recurring lives, and in keeping with this foundational difference between the two styles of writing, Savarkar’s book fittingly enough ends with a ghazal rather than an invocation to the Muse of Historiography. An ancient Persian verse form more often than not erotic in nature, the ghazal uses a stubbornly recurring rhyme scheme and usually evolves in couplets, even though the couplets often do not display a sustained narrative, thematic, or linear progression. Most critics of the ghazal form have argued that each couplet ought to be allowed to stand as a single object, twisted and perfected to its own individual end, and Savarkar’s The Indian War of

Independence, 1857 deploys precisely the above stylistics of this form to confront and indeed attack what English scholars constituted as the historical “failure” of the Sepoy insurrection. According to Savarkar, when faced with the sepoys’ crushing defeat, the Emperor Bahadur Shah is said to have turned to the poetic resources of the ghazal in order to sustain his belief in the potential of any event to generate multiple instances of thought and imaginative action; in his opinion, touched by such a style of expression, the Sepoy insurrection was not so much a “failed mutiny” as it was an iterative rehearsal for the day on which Indian swords would ring at the very gates of the Queen’s palace:

Ghazionmen bû rahegi jabtalak iman ki

Tabto London-tak chalegi têt Hindusthan-ki

As long as there remains the least trace of love of faith in the hearts of our heroes, so long the sword of Hindusthan shall be sharp, and one day shall flash even at the gates of London. (545)

With its obdurate refusal to yield to thematic narrativization and its scornful disdain for any attempt at latitudinal progression, the ghazal form rhythmically parallels a host of Savarkar’s characters who, in expressing particular occasions in an endless sequence of lives, are no longer inimitable historical personalities who come to be and pass away as the matchless and irretrievable effects of time. Rather, they become iterative instances in the continuing performance of the great Vedic ritual. These men and women amorously offer themselves to the welcoming arms of death and in so doing allow their sacrificial blood to take root, giving rise thereby to more libations for the ritual and enfiguring in their very corporeal bodies the ghazal’s recurring erotics of measure. Needless to say, even Savarkar, the writer, is part of this ceremonial design, for he is by no means the scholarly bystander; he in fact bodily infiltrates

events themselves centuries apart, offering his desecrate corporeality to the ritual fire and hoping that his sacrifice will yield “a yet coherent history of 1857 . . . in the nearest future from an Indian pen” (xxiv). Given the paradigm he has inaugurated, however, this “yet coherent” creature will not and cannot be a history, for if it is born of the sacrificial offering of The Indian War of Independence, 1857, then it will undoubtedly be a reiteration of its karmic forebear’s worldly mode of being. This will be history as ritualistic reiteration; this will be history where death does not spell the apprehension of life; this will be history as a series of mutable rehearsals, an elaborate charade in which every life and every event appropriates and restages another that came before it. As such, autonomous India will have a style of expression that is capable of taking on the imperial might of British Raj itself, for in an ironic reversal of the herald of sovereign power in England, the publisher’s note to Savarkar’s work ends with a call to a different form of sovereignty: “The Original Marathi book is dead!—Long live the book!”³⁹

³⁹ The publisher’s note reaches a dramatic culmination after it presents “The Story of This History,” or what one might translate as “the story of the material dissemination of The Indian War of Independence, 1857.” The book was originally written in Marathi in 1908, when Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was about twenty-four. Select chapters were often reproduced in English as Savarkar would deliver them at open weekly meetings of the Free India Society in London. The manuscript made its way to India despite the strict vigilance of authorities in the face of “seditious” material, but the leading presses in Maharashtra could not take the risk of printing the work. Finally, a member of the Abhinava Bharat Secret Society undertook its publication, but before the process began, the manuscript again had to be smuggled out of India to escape the hands of the Indian police. After many more such escapades, an English translation of The Indian War of Independence, 1857 was finally printed in Holland and sent back to India in special covers replicating the covers of such novels as The Pickwick Papers and Don Quixote.

3.3 POWER OVER LIFE AND REBIRTH

Veer Savarkar's thinking occupies an important place in the midst of the veritable scribblomania that since the Nineties has emerged with the discourse domain inaugurated by Hindutva, and in particular it was Savarkar's 1923 pamphlet Hindutva: Who is a Hindu? (rather than The Indian War of Independence, 1857) which decades after its first publication, was resurrected as the very manifesto of 'cultural Hinduness'.⁴⁰ Largely based on readings of this founding document, or at

Immediately after the British attempt to crush the Abhinava Bharat Society in 1910, Lala Hardyal Chattopadhyaya organized the American branch of the Society. To make known this body of revolutionaries, he started his newspaper the Gadar (Rebellion), which was henceforth to become an important mode of communication especially for Sikhs settled in America. The portals of the Gadar were also used to publish the second English edition of Savarkar's book, and the Gadar also published Hindu, Urdu, and Punjabi language translations of sections of the same work.

⁴⁰ Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was trained in the legal profession and rose to be president of the Hindu Mahasabha between 1937 and 1942-43. His disagreement with Mahatma Gandhi's theorization of non-violence is particularly important in the context of his argument that only an armed rebellion on the part of Indians could liberate the country from the British yoke, and amongst other things, it was this aspect of his thinking that placed him in the same line as Bal Gangadhar Tilak. After the assassination of Gandhiji, Savarkar, along with others was charged by Nehru's government with a part in the conspiracy. He was later acquitted, but the reputation of the Mahasabha suffered, and more importantly, Savarkar's work came to be considered in absolute contradistinction to Gandhi's, so much so that, since Tilak had been understood as the Mahatma's most powerful antagonist, Savarkar would now be positioned as the latter's immediate heir, and Nehru and Bapu would be their adversaries on the other side. (This is not to say that the work of Savarkar and Tilak

least on understandings of its most committed discursive avatars, Hindutva in its turn of the millennium incarnation has come to the forefront not only of academic scholarship, but also of a more popular journalistic debate. Most famously led by Romila Thapar, such a specifically nineties brand of Hindutva has been variously heralded by liberal and left-wing scholars of Indian nationalism as a discourse that in invoking a purely decorative antiquarian history, in fact puts under erasure any notion of historicity and a statist project that brutally conjoins imaginary mythographies with the more sophisticated methods of history-writing. More interestingly, contemporary Hindutva has been uncovered in the work of such scholars as an organized mass movement that pioneered by the belief in neo-Brahminical, neo-Aryan myths seeks to transform the social aggregations of post-independence India into militarized outfits sustained by virile fantasies of a swashbuckling Hindu Empire.⁴¹ Most of the complaints from scholars of Indian

had not been shaped and inflected by many of the same interpretive traditions – both men were Maharashtrian Brahmins, both were decidedly influenced by Hindu orthodoxy, and both organized their thinking around the heroism-martyrdom of the great Marathi leader Shivaji, in the face of invading Mughal armies). Given that a very clear diagram of allegiances had been set up, it was thus no longer possible to understand the critical continuities between Gandhi on one hand and Tilak-Savarkar on the other, even though such an understanding would be significant to accessing not only the opposition to mainstream strands of nationalist thinking as emblemized in the Nehruvian cabinet, but also the travails of a notion of sovereignty as it wandered from Krishna's words on the battlefield, through the work of Tilak, Gandhi, and finally, Savarkar.

⁴¹ These claims have most reputedly been made by the doyen of subaltern historiography, Sumit Sarkar in his 2002 book, Beyond Nationalist Frames: Postmodernism, Hindu Fundamentalism, History, and by Sumit Sarkar, Tapan Basu and Tanika Sarkar in their 1993 book, Khaki Shorts, Saffron Flags: A Critique of the

nationalism have thus, somewhat understandably, been directed against the mode of historicizing deployed by the banner of Hindutva, its irreverential misuse and mistranslation of consecrated scholarly terminology and its terrifying tendency to imagine primitivist mythographies, while always ignoring the scientific methods of modern historiography.

These analyses of course are more than significant, and indeed they remain a powerful platform for attack against the dangerous rise of Hindutva. Yet what the almost lyrical indignation against the lack of historicity in right-wing Hinduism fails to take into account is that it is a strange, and not-so-familiar creature that is being produced in the interstices of history text books, journalistic essays, political pamphlets, homilic accounts of neo-liberal economic policies, pithy memos of a millennial managerial intelligence, and astoundingly urbane illustrations of cyber demagoguery. That is to say the heterodox styles that come together under the rubric of contemporary Hindutva are not merely mythical throwbacks and they are most certainly not on a continuum with the early Herderesque affiliations of Hindu nationalism. As we have seen, founded on a karmic cycle of life and rebirth, rather than on the linearity of life and death, Hindu monarchy at the time of the great war of Kurukshetra emerged in contrapuntal association with a notion of power based not on the protection of life, or the monopoly over the death threat, but on the ability to call upon men to sacrifice their lives. The monarch was he who had the capacity to revoke an entire sequence of such sacrificial lives, as the very ontos of political sovereignty. In such a landscape of the power over life and rebirth, death is not a conceptual category of the same register as it is in the hands of the Leviathan, the master and the

Hindu Right, published soon after the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 06, 1992, and the consequent eruption of widespread rioting in almost all parts of the country.

slave are in fact not engaged in a fight to death. Persons and events do not come to an irrevocable end and therefore cannot be captured, as time's victims, in an immobile monument perfectly suited to the learned gaze of the historian in search of veritas.

In the work of a symptomatic early Hindu nationalist like Veer Savarkar, the distinct and untranslatable energy of indigenous scriptural and political traditions such as the karmic cycle of life and rebirth was specifically called upon to challenge the power of empire. Thus, The Indian War of Independence, 1857 was pitted against 'English Historiography', just as Tilak's Gita was pitted against the Indian Penal Code. However, while paying lip-service to the conceptualizations of men like Tilak and Savarkar, expressions of contemporary metropolitan Hindutva such as The Road to Ayodhya collapse the intellectual force of the comparatist epistemologies that those ideologues inhabited. Invoking the globally dominant forces of economism, technologization, and militarization on the same plane as the holy cows of Hindu tradition, Hindutva in its new shape demonstrates how the agon of imperial unevenness that had called into being the contentious grammar of a nationalist project of autonomy is now only a belated archaism. Yet, in so far as the work of Savarkar in particular is concerned, it is somewhat intriguing that while a text like Hindutva: Who is a Hindu has become the object of all scholarly forays in this area, a quaint creature like The Indian War of Independence, 1857 remains confined to a deathly silence, bereft of the attention of modern historians. As I will show however, the former has received more than its share of attention for in fact all the wrong reasons. The text is noteworthy, not because it introduced the term 'Hindutva' into a popular nationalist mythography, but rather because it marks an occasion of transition in which Savarkar's thinking moves closer to the form of contemporary Hindutva than it had ever before been. But Savarkar still clearly belongs to an earlier episteme, and he remains, as we shall see, caught in a political form that is unable to break free of its own historical conditions.

The story goes that although the term Hindutva was generated in nineteenth-century Bengal, it was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the erstwhile president of the Hindu Mahasabha, who popularized it from behind prison walls in a pamphlet-type publication entitled Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu? After a member of the Free Indian Society killed an official in the India Office in London, Savarkar, who had long been associated with the Society, was arrested and transported to the Andamans for life imprisonment, reaching the Island Penitentiary in 1910. Folksy narratives about Savarkar's inscription of the pamphlet on the walls of the Andaman Prison cell to which he was confined abound, and they are only made more idyllic by tales of the work's transmission through commitment to memory and subsequent regurgitation by like-minded inmates released earlier than Savarkar himself. However, the discursive conditions that the pamphlet inhabited were not so much pastoral-idyllic as they were marked by violent and tumultuous struggle. The Indian subcontinent at the turn of the twentieth century saw dynamic lines of force intersecting, encompassing, and converging upon each other in the heat of the pre-independence struggle, but most importantly for Savarkar's later work, in the aftermath of the formation of the Muslim League.

Unlike the earlier book, The Indian War of Independence, 1857, Savarkar's 1923 pamphlet was published at a time when the Hindu Mahasabha was still struggling to formulate a conceptual response to the government's 1909 Minto-Morley reforms, which awarded separate electorates to candidates amassed under the banner of the Muslim League. Its anxieties regarding the achievements of the League had only been further fanned by the Lucknow Pact of 1916, which served to consolidate the content of the 1909 reforms in a League-Congress

agreement.⁴² Central to the worries of the Hindu Mahasabha (and therefore to Savarkar who was already an active member of this body), and first propounded in the subcontinent by Sir Syed Ahmad in the late nineteenth century, was the two-nation theory hailing suchcha Musalmans (true Muslims) as distinct peoples with a unique way of life and originary cultural values. By the second decade of the twentieth century this theory had garnered support due to increasing discomfort about the minority status of Muslims in India. It was thereby already beginning to stake a powerful claim on the discourse of the Muslim League, which had been foundationally articulated as a guarantor of the minority community's claims upon the infinite resources of the state. In confrontation with increasingly strident cries for the protection of minority Muslim rights and simultaneously, a separate Muslim Homeland, the Indian National Congress, as the pioneering member of the heterogeneous cast struggling against the Crown, chose to constitute its own brand of nationalist struggle and reform by catastrophically balancing a series of

⁴² The Muslim League was founded in 1906 as the All India Muslim League by Aga Khan III. An early leader in the League, Muhammad Iqbal was one of the first to propose the creation of a separate Muslim India in 1930. By 1940, under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the League for the first time formally demanded the establishment of a Muslim state in the form of Pakistan. In the elections of 1946, the League won almost all of the Muslim vote; the following year saw the division of the Indian subcontinent and the League became the major political party of newly formed Pakistan. In the early part of the century, the Khilafat Movement (the expression of South Asian Muslims' solidarity with the decrepit remains of the Ottoman Empire) added to Savarkar's and the Hindu Mahasabha's worries, because Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi linked Swaraj (political autonomy) to the Khilafat Struggle in an attempt to effect Hindu-Muslim unity. The ensuing movement is regarded in many circles as the first countrywide popular uprising against the British Crown.

precarious alliances (including that with the League) in its imaginary-idealist postulation of a free Akhand Bharat (Undivided India).

From the point of view of the Hindu Mahasabha, Savarkar's formulation was urgent, not only in the wake of the contemporary cry espousing Hindus and Muslims as separate nations, but also in confrontation with what it had identified as a fragile politics of secular balance advocated by the Congress. In order to intervene in the conflict and successfully counter the conflicting forces unleashed by both of its powerful adversaries, the immediate task for the Hindu Mahasabha was to identify the Hindu in terms of an originary way of life, a distinct cultural orientation. This would establish the claim to a homeland, impregnable in the face of the enemy. Given the continually evolving, heterogeneous mass of Hindu religious practices, which were exceedingly difficult to pin down and represent once and for all, this was going to be no easy task. However, the strength of Savarkar's pamphlet lay in the fact that his writing went to great lengths to extricate the concept of Hindutva from what he presented as the narrow shackles of theological speculations and to posit it instead as an entirely modern, rationalist, and historicist idea of nation formation. The conceptual coup of the tract was enacted in Savarkar's insistence that the notion of Hindutva was to be equated with history itself, while Hinduism was only a secondary derivative of the former, and like all other "isms" had its roots in spiritual or religious dogma.

This postulation meant that not only had the pamphlet in one fell swoop disengaged the doctrine of Hindutva from the evil perpetuated by all "isms," including Mohammedanism, while still retaining the possibility of legitimizing religious practices as constitutive of a distinct way of life, but more significantly, that it had at least formally opened up the discourse domain to an overwhelming nationalist commitment to history, from Bankim to Nehru. The formal emphasis on history and the postulation of Hindutva as a historicist modality of nation-formation enabled

Savarkar to immediately propel his doctrine onto a stage where it could not only openly encounter the theorization of separate nationhood forwarded by the disciples of Sir Syed Ahmad, but it could also cause substantial discomfort to the Congress's drive for an Akhand Bharat vulnerably balanced between competing claims to national history. Indeed, according to Savarkar's pamphlet, Hindutva was on the one hand evocative of an originary practice of living that demanded a modern nation to itself, and on the other so powerful a historical formation that it would shatter the cacophonous claims of conflicting histories and thereby foreclose any attempt to weaken its fort by what it suggested was an obsequious appeasement of "minorities."

The historical-political notion of Hinduness that we see in Savarkar's foundational text is, however, not unparalleled in Indian nationalist thought. In fact, many late-nineteenth-century thinkers and historiographers, including Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (one of the most critically charged nationalist thinkers in the subcontinent), had already written of a Hinduness that did not need to be defined by religious criteria. Taking as his point of departure the principal question of the subcontinent's long stretch of abject servility in the face of foreign invasions, Bankim had argued with strictly postenlightenment scientific thought that in order to confront this problem, a people must be able to reclaim its own history as a rationalist receptacle of objective truth and thereby as a story of power. If the self-recognition of a people comprised the knowledge of its own history, and if history reflected the positivistic representation of the objective and changing world of being, then according to Bankim, one could indeed say that a nation existed in its history, and the primary task for nationalist mobilization was therefore none other than history-writing. So far, Bankim's theorization is more or less straightforward, and much like any other metanarrative seeks to deploy itself in relation to universally familiar conditions that may be synthetically resolved through the intervention of the historical-scientific spirit. A problem is however generated insofar as the historicist method of Bankim's postulation is always an

epigone, and thus unable to accommodate in its imperial sway the struggle for power being enacted in its own occasion, or its own moment. In other words, Bankim's thinking, while indebted to the positivist-utilitarian corpus of the postenlightenment and still concerned with the modalities by which power is articulated in the flux of the "now," is inherently unable to account for that very orchestration of power and knowledge that continually nurtures its own methods of study. This crease in his theorization reveals itself when, in confining the memory of the Indian struggle for power entirely to a pre-British past, and in only narrating for his readers stories of conflicts between the Hindu jāti and its Muslim Badshahs, Bankim almost imperceptibly shifts his diagram of signification and representation to identify national history specifically with a Hindu-Muslim struggle for power.⁴³

Despite their formally similar concerns and the fact that both authors ultimately emphasize the Hindu-Muslim struggle for supremacy, Savarkar's bandying with history is not inscribed by the same positivist schema that characterized the work of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. And it is at this juncture that that one can see a somewhat macabre relation developing between Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu? and The Indian War of Independence, 1857: the latter is relegated, against its very karmic-cyclic mode of being, to the irrevocable annals of a deep and hoary past, and the former is exorcised as the still-born nucleus of a powerful historic necromancy. In the later text, Savarkar grandiosely invokes the all-important trope of history in order to legitimize the doctrine of Hindutva, and at the same time suggests that the ontos of the

⁴³ My discussion of Bankim's work is indebted to Partha Chatterjee's 1993 book, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse, but while Chatterjee draws a dynastic line of nationalist thinking extending from Bankim to Nehru, my attempt here is to understand how the work of members of the Hindu Mahasabha both intersected with and diverged from that of their predecessor.

word Hindu lies beyond the clutches of not just historiography, but even mythology. If Bankim believed that the epic and mythic Sanskrit texts must be shorn of their falsehoods in order to render them historical receptacles of a rationalist truth and thereby of power, then Savarkar's notion of history and its relation to power is ensured not so much by the dyadic reciprocity of truth as by what the author expresses as potentially unificatory energies (whether rationally "true" or based on religious faith) capable of spawning reserved forces for the coffers of a sovereign state. For both Savarkar and Bankim, one of the insurmountable problems in representing an alternate historiography to that of the colonial state was that Hindus were notorious for their negligence in the writing of history. Therefore, latter-day historians had to rely for their version of truth on the accounts of chroniclers accompanying the victorious Muslim armies.

As far as Bankim was concerned, the absence of a Hindu history could be partially corrected by positing Hindu mythology, stripped of the irrational untruths it had accrued over centuries of inscription and reinscription, as indeed the earliest form of historiography. In Savarkar's narrative, in contrast, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata (to take the most significant examples) were not merely histories of Hindu Rajas and their epic victories, which if absolved of their fairy-tale elements might conclusively prove that the Hindu, just like the English Sahib, had a profound understanding of European paradigms of sovereign power and its enlightened historical foundations. Instead, the epics, and ostensibly even their conflicting versions (which were precisely what Bankim objected to) were, for Savarkar, especially in the context of competing claims to nationhood, primarily an infinite vessel brimming over with common heroes, kings, kingdoms, laws, disasters, and triumphs. He felt that this cast, precisely as a dynamic and infinitely assimilative body of representations, had the capacity to reach out to the teeming millions of Hindusthan and elicit some recognition from each and every one. In the

absence of a Prophet or a Book, these institutions could not only be cast as the aggregations of godheads that constitute a “Holyland,” but also could serve to topographically plot the territorial expanse of an emergent nation-state. Savakar’s pamphlet attempted to identify a national polity grounded in the doctrine of Hindutva, asserting that even though a Hindu was almost impossible to define in terms of a homogenized body of religious practice, the part of the Indian populace that recognized the commonality of the epic and mythic institutions of Sanskrit texts, and simultaneously realized in them the typical signatures of a Holyland and the territorial markers of the Fatherland, could be designated as Hindu. Once Savarkar had emphatically identified this population over and against a heterogeneous mass of competing peoples, he postulated it as indeed the foundational cast of the sovereign state of Hindusthan, and in a quick conceptual volte-face, one which constituted what he somewhat infamously nominated as the State’s “reserved forces.”

The phrase “reserved forces” is central to Veer Savarkar’s discussion of the Hindu citizen. Even though this articulation has been largely ignored by scholars of Indian nationalism, it is precisely what severs his work from its commonly accepted attachment to Romantic theories of nation-formation and its easy designation as a “pre-modern” and mythic iconography of politico-cultural self-determination well on its way to being colonized by other fast-modernizing, contemporary discourses of nationalism. This is to say that even though Savarkar’s work may be glibly understood in terms of its Herderesque affiliations, as a theorization that constructs the people as a homogenous entity that gives expression to a unified national spirit, it is actually quite distinct from continental-Romantic formulations precisely in that it understands citizens as an expression of national spirit only insofar as they can be instrumentalized as a mass

of life to feed the reserved forces of the national state.⁴⁴ If one were to recall in this context Krishna's words on the battlefield of the Bharatas, then of course such a mass of life would be no stranger to the constitution of sovereign power in the subcontinental Ganga Valley. In fact, in keeping with the articulations of the Gita, which had at least once before been hailed as successor to the Indian penal code, this sacrificial mass of life would be continually expanding, returning time and again to inhabit the earth, and every time preparing itself for the culminating offering to the ceremonial coffers of the new republic.

Yet such a republic would also be distinct from the one expounded by members of the Congress (in particular emblemized by the towering figure of Jawaharlal Nehru), who in dialogue with a British model of governance were frenziedly preparing to launch sovereignty as a happy coming together of consensual political will, paternalistic protection, and a universal democratic citizenry's inalienable right to life. In place of such a well-disguised common weal, Savarkar's national-state, distended with the blood of its own dutiful citizens and their karmic cycle of lives, constitutes itself in an analogy, interestingly enough, not with Britain and her subjects but with America and its Anglo-Saxon constituents:

. . . the life of a nation is the life of that portion of its citizens whose interests and history and aspirations are most closely bound up with the land and who thus provide the real foundation . . . the structure of their national state. . . . [The] American State, in the last resort must stand or fall with the fortunes of its Anglo-Saxon constituents. So with the

⁴⁴ Such a notion came dramatically to the forefront of the political tableau in the case of the Babri Masjid Issue, when a Hindu people were construed as the privileged legatees of the site of a Ram Temple at Ayodhya while at the same time being called upon, in the course of violent rioting, to lay down their very lives and splinter a catastrophically balanced secular population precisely in order to actualize this so-called privilege.

Hindus, they being the people whose past, present, and future are most closely bound with the soil of Hindusthan as Pitribhu [Fatherland], as Punyabhu [Holyland], they constitute the foundation, the bedrock, the reserved forces of the Indian State (140).⁴⁵

At a time when almost all versions of nationalist thought in the subcontinent were busily performing Home Rule as that entity that could in one way or another carefully balance diverse segments of the population, Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu? emphasized that the life of a sovereign state could only be construed in the life of a portion of its citizenry. Even if this theorization was not in itself essentially unknown, difficult to grasp was Savarkar's notion that even this

⁴⁵ In this context, it is intriguing to note that whereas Savarkar identified the rightful Hindu population of autonomous India with the privileged Anglo-Saxon constituents of America, Gandhi, in his interview with Denton Brooks, and in response to the request for a special message to the Negro people of America, pointed to a recent statement he had made at the beginning of the San Francisco conference. There, he had indicated that India's freedom was to be closely identified with the welfare of all other underprivileged peoples: "The freedom of India will demonstrate to all exploited races of the earth that their freedom is very near and that in no case will they be exploited." In fact, this was to become rather a standard distinction between the Hindu right on the one hand and the Gandhian-Nehruvian strands of thought on the other. Despite their differences on some issues, and their rather complicated relationship, the Mahatma and Nehru agreed on the identification of India's independence with the freedom of oppressed peoples globally (in this context, Nehru's nonalignment policies and his participation at the Bandung Conference in 1955 are just as important as Gandhi's highly affective proclamations), while Savarkar and other members of the Hindu Mahasabha imagined an empathy between Hindu India and Anglo-Saxon America. Indeed, this strand was to resurface several decades later in the thinking, as we have seen, of figures like Swapan Dasgupta and Jay Dubashi, who enfigure the Hindu state as a more powerful version of North America's Israel.

apparently privileged “portion” was to be understood not in a familiar language of the rights and freedoms of those who don the universal frock of citizen vis-à-vis a homogenous state, but in terms of forces that the state could deploy to meet its needs in exceptional situations. Given that the need of the moment, in light of competing demands from both the Muslim League and the Congress, demanded that these reserved forces be expanded to the fullest capacity possible, Savarkar’s invocation to the Mahabharata and the Ramayana was indeed a significant one; in their infinitely divergent and heterogeneous forms, these texts did in fact reach out to potentially each and every inhabitant of Hindusthan. And if they were also amenable to being constituted as both the divine godheads and the historical markers of the territory of the fatherland, then they could quite easily be enfigured as installations of sovereignty with the right, like that expressed in the Gita, to call for their devotees’ sacrificial lives.

It may be true that unlike in The Indian War of Independence, 1857, the Savarkar of Hindutva: Who is a Hindu seems to have moved quite far away from a direct engagement with Krishna’s words on the battlefield, but it is also true that by the time of the later pamphlet, Savarkar has quite decidedly abandoned his rather intriguing attack on English historiography, and transferred his energies, via the work of the Hindu Mahasabha, to the crystallization of an inimitable Indian state-form. Thus, what in The Indian War of Independence, 1857 was a potentially radical notion of historicity that knew not the finality of death, and was content to find itself adrift in a series of repetitions and in the flux of events and personas that stubbornly refused to pass, became in Hindutva: Who is a Hindu an occasion for the emergence of a distinct sovereign authority. Tied to the institutional auspices of the Hindu Mahasabha, and bound thereby, to the inauguration of a decidedly Hindu state, this was a sovereign form that founded itself in the conflict with an emergent Pakistan and with the Young Indian Republic as envisioned by a specifically Nehruvian Congress. Yet in spite of this foundational distinction,

and indeed, in much the same manner as the Nehruvian system itself, Savarkar's work remained bound to historical conditions that in order to generate political autonomy, must oppose nation to empire. It is precisely such an epistemology and the historical specificity he inhabited that foreclosed the president of the Hindu Mahasabha from writing nation into empire as Jay Dubashi does in The Road to Ayodhya. The brief moment in the above extract when Savarkar imagines an arresting closeness between Hindusthan and the American grammar of nation (rather than the liberal form espoused by the English Whigs) is perhaps the sole instance in which Hindutva: Who is a Hindu is dangerously proximate to what Dubashi promises many decades later. The instance however remains largely unexplored, just as Savarkar's conceptualization of sovereignty remains distinct from that of contemporary Hindutva.

Hegel vigorously held forth on the historylessness of the Indian subcontinent, and Marx designated the mode of production in the same region as irremediably outdated. What both of these colossal figures in fact hailed as a corollary to the impulse to imagine time was a distinct imagination of sovereign power, one that had been actualized in the monarchical state of the middle Ganga Valley, and that many centuries later had reared its archaic head in confrontation with the relentless penetration of Western modes of governance. Erupting in what appeared to be familiar approaches to the Gita and its critical progeny, and in political attacks on the Indian National Congress and the way it caved to the demands of the Muslim League, on Nehru and his breed, and finally, even on Mahatma Gandhi himself, such an imagination was purported to have finally been subdued when, in the aftermath of the Mahatma's assassination in 1948, Savarkar and other members of the Hindu Mahasabha were charged with a part in the conspiracy and the reputation of the body reached its nadir. Clamping down on such primitivist elements meant that India had come out of a green barbarism, that she had triumphed over the doomed infirmity of historylessness, that she was decidedly on her way to modern civilization, and that the

Nehruvian dream was everywhere and omnipotent. Then, in 1962, came war with China, and the dream began to crumble. Given that the ill-equipped Indian forces were routed in battle, Nehru was immediately attacked by the right wing of Congress for his nonalignment policies. And even though the Congress won the general elections after the war, the rise of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (the predecessor of the BJP) as a liberal constitutional party, unlike the many extraparliamentary units of Hindu nationalist outfits, signaled a formidable merging of the forces of industrial proliberalization and Hindu communalism, in collective opposition to Nehru. The struggle thus reemerged, gorily carrying itself into the next half-century, bringing with it an imagination of sovereign power and time, translated, re-appropriated, and re-staged from its beginnings in Krishna's words on the momentous battlefield of Kurukshetra.

4.0 THE PLAY OF LIVING CREATION

What to us is jivalila, the play of living creation, is known across the western seas as the struggle of life....

The problem is, we are much too embarrassed with the word lila nowadays. Life as mere play! What would the race of swaggerers, busy shaking up the three worlds with their bluster and brawling, say if they heard such a word?

I must confess that I feel no shame on this count. My English mentor might shoot the surest dart at this point and say, "My dear fellow, you are Oriental after all." But that won't kill me.

The word lila, play, tells the whole story; call it "struggle," and you chop off head and tail. Where does it start and where does it lead? What madness have we unleashed on a sudden, crazed by the holy narcotic offered to us by our drugged deity! Why may I ask you, this pointless struggle?

"For life."

"What's the point of being alive?"

"You are dead else."

"So what if I die?"

"You don't want to die."

"Why don't I?"

"You don't because you don't, that's why."

Rabindranath Tagore, "The Poet's Defence" (1915)

Thwarted once and for all in his attempts to penetrate the opaque irrationality of the Oriental mind, Tagore's imaginary rival, the "English mentor," is easy to visualize in the repartee of this extract, throwing up his hands in despair, pursing his lips and turning away in a huff, and finally reduced to a tetchy and almost infantile churlishness, stomping away in a great sulking tantrum. No matter how hotly the mentor argues his point, he finds the labyrinthine mind of the native unshakeable on one foundational issue. He will not, under any circumstances pledge his allegiance to the primal idea of a "struggle of life," and claims instead to found and express himself through what in comparison appears to be the utterly frivolous notion of jivalila, or "the play of living creation." Despite the fact that both writers plunge headlong into the sordid struggle of life and death, interrupting and disfiguring it through the ennobling rhythm of life and rebirth or the blithe nonchalance of a play of life, Tagore's cavalier style in this extract is something of a foil to Veer Savarkar's earnest fervor in the history of 1857. Indeed, as we shall see, it is precisely through this fanciful style that the Poet performs battle against his English mentor's wooden insistence on the tyrannical determinism of life and death, nimbly putting in its place a much more animated play of life which will then generate the world as a poem. In other words, for Tagore, the Poet's capricious manner has the ability to call into being a world distinct from, and counter to, the imperial order of his English mentor.

Yet Tagore's Poet is not one to completely absolve himself of what we might call non-native affiliations. Rather his apparently whimsical fancy puts into play the delicate mobilities of traditional scriptural mythographies and new vernacular mongrelizations, one cleaving from the other, but still touching the annals of otherness in continental thinking. In short, his thinking is so intricate, so light, so delightfully airy precisely because Tagore disengages his imagination from torpid binaries like tradition and modernity, east and west, and sacred and profane. Dangerously proximate though such a fancy may seem to the imperial ambition of The Road to

Ayodhya, Tagore's effort is, as we shall see, to imagine the human as a radically secular function of the contingent time of literary rhythm. He does not, like Dubashi, conceive of a numbed time that generates the human as the function of a grinding field of samenesses, whether that of empire or nation. Indeed, this is why I call upon Tagore to take on the likes of both Jay Dubashi and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, for his is one of the finest examples of how secularism may be understood as a linguistic event, and one which conceptualizes the human as an effect of the buoyant caprice of a literariness that does not aspire to any religious, pragmatic, historical, or transcendental truth.

Despite Tagore's willingness to play with modes of thinking that may be other to his native associations, he begins "The Poet's Defence" with a determined division between the struggle of life and the play of living creation. Yet, as his essai adventures into different worlds, there is a way in which even this division is reversed such that the play of living creation brushes against and caresses associations other to its native ground. But more of that later; first, in the above extract, so dissimilar is "the struggle of life" from "the play of living creation" that when Tagore writes, "What to us is jivalila...is *known* across the western seas as the struggle of life," he takes special care to emphasize—by resisting an immediate and therefore tortuous rendering of one notion into the other—that these are not complementary ideas which could be easily subject to a massified philology of translation. Rather, they are the lexis of distinct minds that may well be inherently, and hopelessly foreign to one another. To the mind of Tagore's English adversary then, jivalila can only be yet another quaint curiosity of the east, just as "the struggle

of life” despite its newfound rhetorical hold on the “Oriental,” is, finally, only a form of temporary madness artificially induced in him by the holy narcotic of his drugged deity.⁴⁶

This is not to say however, that *jivalila* on the one hand, and “the struggle of life” on the other are estranged from each other by way of rhetoric alone. In fact, not only are these two articulations the expressions of distinct minds, with their own varied ways of knowing, articulating, and thinking the human condition—beginning first and foremost with an understanding of mortality and its place in the making of man—but they in turn have rippling effects, resulting in heterogeneous syntaxes of being and discrete patterns of aggregation. As the

⁴⁶ When Tagore writes of “the holy narcotic offered to us by our drugged deity,” he is referring to Siva, the destroyer of the Hindu pantheon, the wayward ascetic given to taking narcotics and hobnobbing with demons and spirits on ghastly cremation grounds and waste spaces. As compared to Siva, and more broadly, the Trinity, Tagore in this essay, appears to value more highly the oneness of the Brahman of the Upanishads, who has almost always been less popular than Visnu, Krisna, or Siva. Even Brahma, the manifestation of Brahman as creator in the trinity of creator, preserver, and destroyer (Brahma, Visnu, and Siva, respectively) and therefore not to be confused with Him, does not live in the daily devotions of Hindus in the same way as do the two other gods. Yet later in “The Poet’s Defence,” Tagore favorably refers to an act of the wayward Siva that in fact saved the world from destruction. When the gods and demons, in one of their struggles over who would rule the world, churned the world’s waters, they in the process generated a deadly poison. Siva is said to have saved both sides by drinking this poison and storing it in his throat, which thereafter turned blue (hence, one of Siva’s many names is nilkantha, or “the one with the blue throat”). Tagore’s point in bringing up this mythological tale about Siva has to do with his argument – which is at this point still tied to Upanishadic doctrine – that pain, and even the pain of a powerful god like nilkantha, will ultimately merge with the joy of Brahman, and that is why it is in fact suffered.

brief exchange with Tagore's fancied interlocutor reveals, the notion of the "struggle of life" for instance, slips with sovereign ease into a language environment in which such struggle can only, and indeed exclusively, be construed as the struggle of life against death, as if life must know no other conflicts and as if all aggregations of life must consequently be understood solely in terms of their ability to foil a power threatening death. In contrast, the idea of *jivalila*, insofar as it is poised against its rival counterpart, seems to leave little or no room for the notion of death, even though Tagore's poetic objection is directed not so much against a theorization of death qua death but rather against a principal semantics of struggle, and therefrom against an originary struggle between life and death.

Bearing witness to the centrality of the notion of *jivalila* for his work, the editors of Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Writings on Literature and Language, are particularly careful to annotate the expression in an introductory section entitled "Some Basic Terms and Concepts, and Their Renderings." Lila, the term the poet is ostensibly attempting to resurrect from the hoary annals of its own past, and the term which so effortlessly begins his essay, may well be literally translated as "play," but as Sisir Kumar Das and Sukanta Chaudhuri argue, it is in fact seldom used to refer to actual play or sport. *Lila* "sometimes refers to playful or sportive behaviour in humans," they write, "but classically, it alludes to the 'sport' of providence, some deity, or more cosmologically, the order of the worlds, in a free, often irrational and inscrutable exercise of its forces" (xii). Nonetheless, in deploying such a term against his mock-foe, sunken irredeemably, according to Tagore, in the primacy of an originary struggle between life and death, the poet is in fact not indulging in an erudite Shakespearean gesture that imagines flies to wanton boys as mortals to gods who kill for their sport. That is to say, *lila* is not for Tagore, the irrational and inscrutable sport of a potent providence, tickled beyond measure by the casting of its own chance-ridden die and by the random mix of fortunate and unfortunate lots that are

occasioned by it. Rather, the term is balanced precariously between what Tagore presents as his debt to a Sanskrit scriptural tradition based on the Upanishadic doctrine of anandam (joy) and what may be called the poet's own more literary rendition of the possibilities of thinking life as mere play. And indeed it is precisely at this vulnerable juncture where the thought of the Scriptures becomes almost inadvertently, the thought of Tagore the poet that the understanding of life as "play" or "sport" takes on a resonance distinct in its modalities from both the Sanskrit genealogy which Tagore himself begins with, as well as the unmistakable Renaissance-Shakespearean note struck by his editors.

Drawing on his rather ambiguous relation with archaic scriptural texts, Tagore, early on in "The Poet's Defence," pronounces a line from the Taittiriya Upanishad as the very axis of his thinking: "everything is born of joy, everything lives in it, everything moves towards it" (275). He thereby proposes a wholeness of anandam that, like a primal chasm, has the ability to monstrously devour and therefore conceptually annihilate any notions of discord or friction, be they even of the magnitude and finality of death itself (275).⁴⁷ The Upanishads—which through

⁴⁷ The ambiguity of Tagore's relationship with the Sanskrit scriptural tradition should become clearer as the explorations of the chapter unfold. Indeed, the entire oeuvre of Tagore's work is riddled with ambiguity for his career was a long one: he started writing at a very young age and continued writing, painting, teaching and composing until the ripe age of eighty. In the course of his many productive years, he moved rather restively between various distinct phases. His work is thus endlessly plastic, shifting from elaborations on high Hinduism to a radical reversal of Hindu thinking through the monotheism of the Brahmo Samaj, and from almost grass-roots-level nationalist politics to the literary articulations of "The Poet's Defence." Indeed he profoundly revised many of his most renowned plays, poems, and songs to become entirely different entities. My references to Tagore's work are thus not limited to "The

precisely this notion of anandam shape what Tagore presents as a rather absorbing relationship between life and death—were spiritual treatises of widely varying lengths, the earliest composed between 800 and 400 B.C. and some dated even as late as the fifteenth century A.D. The very first of the Upanishads were thus certainly pre-Buddhistic (written before the Buddha’s challenge to the scriptural authority of Vedic Brahminism), while a few of them came into being after the rise of the Buddha, and around the same time as certain sections of the Mahabharata, particularly those that in discoursing on sovereignty, themselves offer a significant inflection on questions of the relation between life and death. For instance, one of the most well-known of the Upanishads, the Isa Upanishad, was not far in age from the Bhagavad Gita of the second century BC, which according to a note later added to the end of each chapter (beginning with the words, “Here in the Upanishad of the glorious Bhagavad Gita”) could itself be considered an Upanishad.⁴⁸ Much like the Gita, the Upanishads claim to revisit and revise the thinking of the

Poet’s Defence” or even to a particular phase of his work, but move rather freely within the scope of Selected Writings on Literature and Language between points of contact in his early and later work.

⁴⁸ Juan Mascaró writes that the Sanskrit word Upanishad, Upa-ni-shad comes from the verb sad, “to sit,” with upa, related to Latin s-ub, “under,” and ni, found in the English forms be-neath and nether. The composite word would thus translate as “bowing low” or “sitting at the feet of the master” for the purpose of instruction. In theory, then, an Upanishad could be written even today, as long as it drew its life from a master text or what could be identified as the one source of all religions. It is in fact in this sense that the Bhagavad Gita is an Upanishad, for Krishna’s sermon on the battlefield of Kurukshetra draws its primary principles from the one source in the Vedas and interpreting them to meet the needs of its own occasion calls into being what may be considered a new Vedantic order.

Vedas, and in doing so intervened in an earlier conceptualization of sovereign power. As a body of work collectively called Vedanta, or the rightful telos of Vedic thinking, these texts addressed themselves to a fast changing political and economic landscape, and consequently to new modes of social aggregation not very different from those heralded in the aftermath of the great Battle of Kurukshetra.⁴⁹

Yet, soon after positing precisely the wholeness of an Upanishadic notion of anandam as the basis of “the poet’s defence”—“everything is born of joy, everything lives in it, everything moves towards it”—the Poet of “The Poet’s Defence” is once again confronted by persistent questions from his imaginary rival. Despite having been exasperated in his earlier attempts at debate, the mentor continues to linger, as if in a different aspect, like an interlocutor prostrate at the feet of his Socratic master. In response to this interlocutor’s question of whether there is any affliction, sin, or strife in a universe embraced by the sheer benevolence of anandam, Tagore joins the many sages of the many Upanishads in rhetorically asking, “who would have exerted body or life—that is, who would have brooked the slightest suffering or strife—if the skies were not filled with joy?” (276). The notion of joy (anandam) as expressed in the Upanishads, and in particular in the Taittiriya Upanishad, is of course to be understood not so much in its individual-existential proportions, but more as a condition of knowing bound to a specific nature of union with Brahman and thereby, figuratively, with the blitheness of His abode in Upanishadic skies.

Indeed, since according to the Upanishads, everything—including conflict, struggle, suffering and strife—ultimately moves from immanence toward transcendence in an ascension

⁴⁹ I more fully elaborate the transformations ushered in by the great battle of Kurukshetra in the second chapter of the dissertation, “A Matter of Life and Rebirth.”

of evolution toward the Spirit of the universe, everything moves precisely toward anandam or the supreme joy of identification with Brahman. It is in this sense that the Upanishads articulate an implicit notion of man, for even though the Brahman of Upanishadic doctrine exhausts all the potentialities of creation with at least an aspect of himself, man is clearly different from the other possibilities of the created universe. While at the end of evolution, everything will move towards Brahman in a great surge of anandam, man is the one manner of being who has the ability in this life itself to cleanse himself of his profane outer layers, achieve a “consciousness of joy” and thereby, become one with Brahman. The pure, unadulterated joy of even the pain of death in this sense becomes therefore only an occasion for thinking the cosmic migration that is spawned of it, for death may end life in its earthly aspect, but it can never destroy the possibility of an ultimate union with the Supreme Being. In these circumstances, to understand death as merely the polarity against which life struggles, and that which it attempts at all costs to ward off, is to understand only an infinitesimal fraction of the totality. In Tagore’s own words, it is to “chop off head and tail” of a more expansive story. Instead, in a cosmogony such as the one the Upanishads propose, even the fiefdom of death is subject to the larger truth of anandam, mortality being merely a temporary and necessary terminal for Atman before it moves towards a final, culminating identification with Spirit and returns home, as it were, to the happy skies of the poet’s Upanishad.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ One of the central philosophical theses of the Upanishads was the identification of Brahman with Atman, and while this doctrine distinguishes the Upanishads from the Vedas, it was later to become a moot point of difference between the tenets of the Buddha and Upanishadic doctrine. As he revised and revisited the thinking of the Upanishads, the Buddha rejected the fundamental metaphysics of Atman, while still

4.1 LINES OF FLIGHT

When Tagore writes of anandam as expressed in the Upanishads it is as if we have not strayed too far from the Totality of the epic Vedas, even if by the time of the later texts, Totality is only something that Upanishadic skies aspire toward without ever fully approximating. In the earlier Vedic dispensation, man had wondrously humbled himself before the elements, for the very meaning of his life was expressed in the scintillating flames of fire, the crystal transparency of water, the stolidity of nurturing earth, and the powerful gusting of angry winds. Such an immanent luminosity of meaning was ruled over by beings that on the one hand could annihilate all with their roaring thunder and incendiary lightning and on the other chose in their infinite benevolence not to wreak destruction on their beloved, though cowering children. Yet these gods and fathers of men, the guardians, as it were, of the comprehensive accord of meaning, were soon to be driven away by a rather well-defined series of events. The unprecedented rise of a priestly class of Brahmins, their zealous guarding of the scriptural authority of Vedic texts, the insatiable insistence of priests on the performance of the great ritual in all its extravagance and the mushrooming of glittering centers of trade increasingly fattened by the spangled radiance of flourishing bazaars, had rendered man too degenerate for his gods; he was summarily abandoned to wallow in his own corrupt condition.

The corpulent splendor of the later Vedic period however soon gave way to the doctrine of the Upanishads, which patiently set about monotheistically reordering an older landscape of unreliable pluralities. The Upanishads implicitly announced that the multiple gods of fire, water, earth and wind had fled this fallen world and taken refuge in Brahman, or the Supreme Being,

adhering to other major components of Upanishadic thought: rebirth, karma, and moksa, or nirvana.

who now hid Himself in the blithe skies of an Upanishadic cosmogony. The Upanishadic skies continued to be blithe despite the flight of the gods, precisely because they expected, by investing the new age with their own scriptural authority, to correct the depraved morality of man, and restore to the world its lost concord. The loss of innocence and the feeling of being the hopelessly belated legatees of the world-process were thus temporary conditions that could be put right if only men were to understand that what the Upanishads had to say was Vedanta, or the rightful telos of Vedic thinking. In short, the Upanishads were responsible for rectifying the wrong turn taken by later Vedism, without tampering, in the very slightest with what they themselves interpreted as its inner truth. Even though the gods had fled a wanton world and sought shelter in Brahman, the Supreme Being was after all both transcendent and immanent, both outside man and inside him, and all that man needed to do was overcome his lower self and thereby attain a level of consciousness in which it would be possible for him to once again be one with his god. While recording and thus admitting to the gaping chasm between Brahman and his earthly heirs, the Upanishads offered to heal this irredeemably wounded landscape by ordering it through their own doctrinaire regularities.

This story of the journey from a Vedic to an Upanishadic cosmogony is isomorphic in many ways with the philosophical account of modernity in the western world—of the flight of the gods and their clairvoyances from the happy skies of an epic universe and the birth of Man and his institutions in a novel historical landscape. In different versions, this tale has been told again and again by a long line of thinkers from Hegel to Lukacs, from Holderlin to Heidegger, and from Vico to Auerbach. Its distinct resonances notwithstanding, the contours of the story remain much the same. The epic world (now lost) was one in which severe, yet paternalistic gods, hovered benevolently over interstellar spaces, and crashing thunder and flickering slicks of lightning constituted the terrifying, though recognizable omens of divinities who precisely

through this system of signs revealed the transcendental fate of epic man. In other words, this was a happy age in which the soul of man rested within itself, at home, even while it went forth to heroically adventure in the world, its every impulse wedded to a pre-destined form fated for it from the remotest distances of eternity. Each action of epic man thus became arched with meaning in precisely such a destined roundedness, its actions temporarily estranging itself from its essence, only to again find the placid comfort of a centre, draw a curvature of sense around it, and thereby, return the soul to itself. This circular fullness of meaning upon which life in the happy ages founded itself was what Lukacs for instance called the totality of being; a totality complete and impermeable because nothing was excluded from it, nothing pointed at another reality outside it, and everything was unvaried despite being contained by an infinite variety of forms.

For such a soul, meaning—that is, precisely the complete and perfectly circular totality of being—was ever present, immanent, and luminous, and all that was necessary was the correct recognition of signs heralded by the supreme beings of blithe skies, and the patient anticipation, as it were, of revelation and grace. In other words, this was a soul that did not yet know any abyss within itself, for it still had no outside, no exterior, no profound and dark otherness, capable of making it a stranger to itself. Innocent of the chasm that would rudely wrench it away from itself, this was a soul for which familiar binaries like self and world, inside and outside, and spirit and things still kept time with each other in the graying light of an era that was to soon make way for a secular cosmology bereft of its gods. With the flight of the gods, the circularity of meaning and being that was the very vitality of epic heroes was ruptured and broken and everywhere was a dissonance—between being and destiny, adventure and accomplishment, and the home and the world. The disenchanting birth of modern European man had announced itself in no uncertain terms. Marking the beginnings of a historical journey which could no longer be

recognized in revelatory happenings designed by, and communicated through the whimsical caprice of dreaded deities, the new man had to read himself as well as the journey before him by means of the cognitive functions of the modern human subject. Yet, in his inherited landscape of transcendental homelessness, the dazzle of lost epic skies was still seductive. It made these new men forget the hopeless cracks in their universe, and rendered almost irresistible the dream for new unities that would atone for the god-forsaken condition of man and serving as an ironic link, bind the irredeemable sin of the world to its forever unattainable, though promised redemption.

Indeed so urgent was the yearning for a unifying whole that even the primary cognitive task of meaning-making, which was first opened up precisely in the interstices of the new man's estrangement from his world, had to become merely the means whereby an errant soul wandered in search of the lost totality. Given this demand on its functionality, Reading as the very vehicle for the process of making meaning, or the very ability of the fallen soul to inhabit the gap between itself and its own essence, could not remain entirely distinct from the epic unveiling of a decipherable system of divine clairvoyances. Instead, it had to answer to a call of loss—the loss of life's extensive identity and of an immanent plenitude of sense—and continue to construct new harmonies that would take the place of the totality of the Greeks, thereby bridging that unbridgeable gulf between the home and the world. The epic hero had thus become Man or the much extolled European anthropos, but despite this apparent transformation, he yearned nonetheless to return home to his gods. Thus was inaugurated what we might call the secular-Christian figure of the human who reconciles his sense of loss and belatedness by replacing the circularity of being and the gods in the epic ages, with the rounded contours of a modern world historical whole. Unlike the epic totality which was consolidated precisely because the soul of man had not yet become an object unto itself, this modern aspiration toward a historical totality was to come about through a conscious psychobiography of the individual Self. As a continually

unfolding drama of human consciousness, this was a narrative in which the soul in the happy ages of the epic was understood as structurally coeval with the childhood of man and thus had to grow out of its naiveté to a fallen maturity. It was this fallen yet mature soul that was then to become both the prime protagonist as well as what Nietzsche would call the emblematic epigone—the grey haired men—of a developmental process of world history

The journey of the Self toward this world historical unicity is thus coeval with the angst ridden journey of European man, his horror and dismay at finding that paternal gods do not hover over his earthly aspect, his sequential ordering of memory in terms of his own degraded fall from a glorious past, and his notion therefrom of chronometric time and its corollary in progressivist notions of the totality of civilizational movement. Yet, having returned the conscious soul to itself through these various cognitive functions and the transcendence of the world-historical process, and having thereby constructed an impossible new unity that will atone for, and redeem fallen man, anthropos is no longer in the most significant sense of the term, secular. Rather, it has merely replaced the paternity of its classical gods with the sovereignty of the transcendent human without letting be, in any sense, the gaping wound that was suffered in the wake of their absence. Such a modern self therefore, has no notion of what it means to inhabit the yawning chasm left by the gods, for in replacing the gods with Man, and destiny with world history, it has called into being the epic of a different age. In short, despite having founded itself on a notion of secular historicity, this was a self that yearned to close precisely that gap—between the soul and its deeds, between cognition and action, and between the gods and men—which was to first engender a phenomenal realization of time. Not knowing the pure nothingness of a void in which god is definitively dead, this novel soul could not know the finitude of its own mortal condition, the gap between life and its redemption, and the authentic historicity

whereby man understands himself not in terms of eternity and totality, but indeed as a quintessentially worldly and thus, temporal creature.

According to Surendranath Dasgupta, the eminent historian of Indian Philosophy, even in the Indian context, the Upanishads had catapulted the idea of the self to the center of the intellectual and spiritual universe thereby usurping the place so long occupied by an external creator. This Upanishadic notion of self was no doubt distinct from that which emerged in the West, for as Dasgupta demonstrates, the self of the Upanishads emerged through a direct perception of truth rather than through extended philosophical deliberation, or the psychobiographic analysis of mind. Yet, the very idea that a human self had taken the place of the supreme being was enough for many commentators to see similarities between the journey towards an Upanishadic cosmogony and the beginnings of a godless world in the West. Dasgupta's reading as well as other significant interpretive attempts thus situated Upanishadic doctrine quite firmly in an archetypal narrative of consciousness/perception, the Vedas being equated with the childhood of man and the Upanishads beginning a journey whereby man moves from childhood to maturity and hence from objective perception to immediacy of truthful insight. Yet, Tagore's particular articulation of the thinking of the Taittiriya Upanishad and its relation with other essayistic expressions of his imagination, presents a more ambiguous picture, somewhat foreign to these analyses.⁵¹

⁵¹ In History at the Limit of World-History, for instance, Ranajit Guha writes that as a confirmed Vedantist himself, Tagore would have had no trouble with the idea that all is comprehended in Brahman. Indeed, he had often followed this line of thought both in his work as a poet, novelist, and essayist, as well as in his enunciations as a preacher for a sect of Hindu reformists known as the Brahmo. Yet, Guha also points out that Tagore often "uses an upanishadic text entirely in his own way unfettered by textbook

On the one hand, Tagore's account of the Upanishads and their call for a joyous union with Brahman may seem close to the covenant between the conscious human and a world historical Totality, or between the immediately insightful self and its god. On the other however, "The Poet's Defence," through precisely its distinctive reading of Upanishadic doctrine, stays away, quite decidedly, both from the clutches of a Hegelian psychobiography of consciousness as well as from an idealism that aspired to directly perceive truth.⁵² Indeed, as Tagore's own thinking dithers between these two aspects of the essay's movement, what comes into being is the idea of *jivalila*, that very notion which we had identified as the lynchpin of the poet's defence, and that very notion which through its various nuanced deployments, will serve to

Vedantism" (85), and I would argue that this is one of those instances in which he interrupts the emergence of Upanishadic doctrine through the force of his own literary-poetic thinking.

⁵² The Upanishads were particularly important to Tagore as the mainstay of the Brahmo Samaj, a society of men, largely limited to Bengal, who sought what Tagore called "a revival in our country of a religion based on the utterance of Indian sages in the Upanishads." Founded in 1828 by Raja Rammohun Roy (1773-1833), widely regarded as the father of modern India and formally inaugurated in Calcutta by Tagore's father, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore (1817-1905), the Samaj traced its genealogy to the reform programs of the Raja, who had steeped himself in principles of liberalism and democracy. Besides its monotheism and rejection of image worship, the Brahmo Samaj also rejected the caste system, untouchability, and the segregation of men and women. It advocated the right of widows to remarry and that of women, educated and of age, to choose their own partners. Tagore himself being a part of the folds of the Samaj, his reliance on Upanishadic doctrine is not surprising. Yet, as I have attempted to show, the force of Tagore's literary thinking often slips away from the clutches of doctrinaire philosophies and wanders off into avenues of thought that are entirely its won.

distinguish Tagore's Upanishadic story from the story of the journeying soul of a transcendental human subject. In short, it is the

Now, in keeping with the Sankhya and Nyaya strands of classical Indian philosophy Tagore would have been familiar with the notion that the universe conforms to the grammatical structure of the sacred language of the Vedas, rather than to a mathematical measure of space and time. Sanskrit, not having any punctuation marks, is thus akhanda (indivisible) and ultimately refers to the single monistic reality, Sabda Brahman, or Brahman as utterance.⁵³ Since the ritual chant Om embodies this cosmic presence of meaning, all profane syntaxes (as infinitely varied versions of the same structure of Om) could be understood as mere repetitions, or attempts to mimetically re-present the divine presence of Brahman as man. In fact, man himself is constituted by his speech insofar as such speech is in the final analysis, an aspect of the Sabda Brahman. Consciousness, that exalted existential core of secular man, has therefore no primacy here as the essential protagonist of world history, for it can exist in all creatures only after it is preceded by speech. And it is speech, as the earthly textualization of Brahman in time, that prompts the constitution of the human as an attribute of the divine. Since immaculate speech which exists within the speaker because his higher self is said to be one with the Supreme Being, it is the attainment of faultless speech, rather than a civilizational consciousness, that is coeval with the attainment of Brahman. And since he who knows the secret of a perfect syntax, is

⁵³ The word akhanda (indivisible) resurfaced in the struggle against the Crown, when faced with the partition of British India into India and Pakistan, many nationalist thinkers, including Mahatma Gandhi and most in the Hindu Mahasabha called for an akhand or indivisible Bharat, thus infusing their articulation with a scriptural-poetic energy.

joined through its deployment, with the immortal Brahman, it is only such perfection of syntax that can ensure the pure joy that is Upanishadic anandam.⁵⁴

In “The Poet’s Defence,” however, in keeping with the thought of the Taittiriya Upanishad, the archetypal Om, that primal utterance that makes the Supreme Being as text, is supplemented by the name, sacchidananda, a compound comprising the three attributes of Brahman – sat (truth), chit (knowledge), and ananda (joy). These, when uttered together as an indivisible composite, are said to encapsulate the totality of the Supreme Being, and therefore like Om, sacchidananda is a materialization of the single monistic reality to which all mundane speech ultimately refers. Yet, in their infinitely varied earthly stylizations, their manifestations, as Tagore puts it, “in the laboratory of human knowledge” (276), the heirs of sacchidananda can only pretend to approximate its divine perfection. And since each of their patterns, permutations, and combinations, no matter how unique, after all trace an archetypal curve toward utterance as the Supreme Being, what the Upanishads emphasize is the perennial search, through speech, for union with the monistic whole of the Sabda Brahman. Thus for Tagore, if there is any journey at all, it is not the journey of the Self, struggling against pure nothingness to achieve a union with being, but rather the journey of sacchidananda, that primal and primary utterance that

⁵⁴ This analysis refers back to the work of Bhartrhari, who in the post-Panini period of Sanskrit poetics influenced both literary critics such as the ninth century philosopher-critic Anandavardhana and the eighth to ninth century philosopher Sankara. Sankara’s Advaita-Vedanta School of philosophy was based on a non-dualistic interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita, and became in the nineteenth century a significant influence on nationalist politicians such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who argued that all phenomenal entities including the national state of which one is a citizen are worldly manifestations of the Supreme Brahmana.

encapsulates all meaning and that in order to be one with the Supreme Being, must perennially battle the infinite profanities of the worldly text.

As such, however, the apparently distinctive path toward sacchidananda is not very different from the road traversed by the conscious self of the world historical process. The latter, after all, struggles against death not only on the existential plane as an end to life, but against death as a nodal occasion for understanding a transformed worldview, death as a nomination for the noncoincidence between cognition and action and word and deed—in other words, death as the end of the essence, and an epistemological confrontation of the nothingness between mortality and redemption. In the same way, the profane legatees of sacchidananda yearn to close the fissures between themselves and their ultimate reference to Brahman as utterance, and thereby battle a way of knowing death that would tamper with their own sense of the wholeness of being. Thus the speech that predates consciousness and the speech that might have had the ability to intervene in the totalizing predilections of a transcendental human subject, becomes in the Upanishads just another name for consciousness, with its own version of the total and its own means of aspiring toward it.

The Upanishadic notion of anandam that Tagore declares as the very axis of his thinking comes precisely from the complex form sacchidananda and is a whole only because it is also an attribute of Brahman. Because anandam or ananda (as Tagore puts it) is an attribute of the Sabda Brahman, it is therefore an utterance that if approximated in correct syntactic terms could ensure identification with Atman and thereby with Brahman. Given the terms of “The Poet’s Defence,” the notion of lila appears implicitly tied to precisely such an Upanishadic doctrine of anandam (or ananda), for Tagore proposes that if “the struggle of life” tells only a part of the story of the world, then jivalila is a more complete notion with the ability to provide an unambiguous beginning and end, or better still a syntax of being for a tale, that would otherwise be endlessly

suspended in medias res. Much like anandam then, jivalila begins to look like the conceptual kernel for a metaphysics that in proposing its own totality, can subsume any unsettling notions that would otherwise have disturbed its endlessly synthetic scope. Yet Tagore does something to both these terms—anandam and jivalila—that cuts them off from their scriptural-epic roots and ensures that they become resonant, not so much with their familiar doctrinal genealogies but more as vernacular energies pitted against received terminological forms.

In this vein, what Tagore first and foremost does with the notion of anandam is to de-Sanskritize it, or to translate it into the vernacular as ananda. The same goes for jivalila; the term is simply spliced in half and vernacularized into plain lila, a word with in fact a far more charged and indeed sexualized connotation than its more imposing forebear.⁵⁵ The new mongrel form, what Tagore calls “the play of living creation,” is then brought into a close and indeed,

⁵⁵ Ever since the Bhakti movement of the middle ages, Lila and in fact Rasa Lila rasa here indicating the kind of relationship that the devotee shares with his Lord has been associated with the playful frolic, or the mosaic of uninhibited song and dance between Lord Krishna and his gopis (cowherd girls). Yet while drawing a connection between the medieval cult of Krishna, and Tagore’s thinking of lila, we must remember that the Krishna of the medieval Bhakti Movement was the Krishna of the Puranas, rather than the Krishna of the Mahabharata—the divine lover of unsurpassed beauty, the God who could break down human resistance through the seductive power of his indolent flute, and the willful deity who cavorted with more than a thousand young gopis. On the one hand, lila referred to the mosaic of music and dance which expresses an almost sexualized relationship between Krishna and his devotees, and on the other, it refers to the frolicsome pranks of the Krishna who is also worshipped as the ideal child. Tagore’s thinking of jivalila as well as his elaboration of rasa, are of course influenced by these features of the Bhakti Movement, just as his push towards mongrel forms in language, is also affected by the vernacular revolutions of medieval Bhakti.

dangerous proximity with certain other terms native to the author's own, more literary thinking.⁵⁶ Early on in "The Poet's Defence," for instance, Tagore tells us that the entirety of his work has been criticized in the past for trafficking too frequently and far too intimately with the sheer flippancy of aberrant ideas like lila (play) ananda (joy), khela (also translated as "play"), and chhuti (merry leisure) – and here already, *lila* and *ananda* have not only been bastardized: they have also been thrown into the milieu of a different syntactic potentiality—to the neglect of more significant and practicable concepts such as violence, struggle, work, death, pain, suffering, etcetera. Indeed, the man referred to as "the Oriental," the man of infinite siestas and ancient and venerable torpor, is no doubt a man loath to be moved from his classic languor by the notion of a fierce fight to death or of the race for survival, no matter how forceful or inspiring such ideas may seem to be. Yet the poet's anonymous critic seems to suggest that surprisingly enough, while full of lazy disdain for any expression of struggle whatsoever, such a man is piqued, and quickens with excitement in the airy lightness of terms like lila, ananda, khela, and chhuti, all semantic variations on what the poet would perhaps have called the spring of frolicsome sport.

⁵⁶ The term *jivalila* is in itself interesting, and while Swapan Chakravorty's translation in effect transliterates the original, thus preserving its radical edge, when Dipesh Chakraborty writes of "Kabir Kaiphayat" in Provincializing Europe, he translates *jivalila* into "jiban leela," rather peremptorily replacing "jiva" with "jiban." Indeed, this is done without so much as an explanatory footnote on Chakraborty's part. Now, whereas "jiban" is commonly translated as a "lifetime," or "the duration of a life," "jiva" has the far broader sense of "any organism with life." It thus seems to me that Tagore in using the term "jivalila" rather than "jiban leela" as Dipesh Chakraborty suggests, is in fact indicating that his attack is against an uncritical and naturalized assumption of anthropomorphic modes of thinking as the norm.

This combination of terms is intriguing. Of the group, khela and chhuti are both familiar and everyday constructions of a modern and indeed, contemporary Bengali lexicon which Tagore had played a significant part in birthing, after the significant syntactical revolutions already initiated by colossi like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar. Ananda is of course a contaminated form of the Upanishadic notion, anandam that Tagore has already elaborated, and lila, part of the compound jivalila, is as we have seen, tied to precisely the larger sense of ananda. As compared to ananda and lila, then, khela (play) and chhuti (leisure) seem bereft of the same remarkable genealogy, for they are both used largely in relation to the romping rhythms of the world of the child—to indicate an irresistibly infectious sense of merriment, a prolonged and lingering sense of spirited gaiety, and what we might call a mood of entirely unburdened buoyancy. Thus, infused with an air of gamboling playfulness, khela and chhuti, would appear in syntactical orchestrations, quite far removed from those in which notions like jivalila and anandam should find a place, the latter being commonly attached to more weighty philosophical considerations. Yet, when Tagore launches a two-fold attack—first, by vernacularizing the two terms and then by plunging these improper forms into the company of such a flippant lexicon (khela and chhuti), he manages to in fact wrench them away from their more lumbering relationship with archaic scriptural texts and give them an entirely distinct twist.⁵⁷

This twist, as it were, is dependent not so much on the lexical correctness of language, but on what Tagore, in another essay, “Banglabhasha-Parichay” (1938), (“Introduction to the Bengali Language,” calls the poet’s ability to shun the exact denotation of words, and the

⁵⁷ The vernacularization of Sanskrit terms has a lot to do also with specific critical-historical events in the times during which Tagore lived. These should become clearer as the chapter continues to unfold.

anxiety of expression following the complete erasure of the familiar meaning of a word.⁵⁸ Lila, ananda, khela, and chhuti, despite being essentially foreign to one another, are thus quite deliberately made to appear together in Tagore's prose, and as they skirt in and around one another, stepping out of time with sacrosanct notions of correctness, they infect, contaminate, and transgress each other's boundaries, indeed to the point of a complete eradication of familiar lexicon. Once the primacy of meaning has bent under the sheer pressure of Tagore's poetic thinking, the infectious energies of lila, ananda, khela, and cchuti become not so much a sign of levity, but rather, a challenge to the Upanishadic doctrine of Brahman as utterance, and as such, an expression and material dramatization of what the poet has called "the play of living creation." Indeed, Tagore's notion of jivalila is brought into being precisely by the airy lightness of such sporting semantics, which in turn has been made possible only because anandam (and by extension, jivalila) was rudely split from its ties to sacchidananda and made to inhabit a veritable non-place between the Sabda Brahman and its fallen textualizations.

4.2 A DEATHLY RHYTHM

The anxiety of expression following the annihilation of meaning is coeval in Tagore's work with precisely the menacing abyss between Sabda Brahman and its earthly heirs, between Brahman and man, and between what Lukacs would call the home and the world. And since it is clear from the sheer plasticity of his thinking, that Tagore values precisely such an anxiety of

⁵⁸ My reference is to the text of the essay "Banglabhasa-Parichay" collected in Rabindra Racanabali, Janmasatabarsik Sanskaran, Vol. 14 (Essays, Bengali). Calcutta, Paschim Banga Sarkar, 1961.

expression over and above the mere signaling or descriptive power of words, what concerns him is not the totality that is Brahman, nor even the monistic cosmos of meaning that merges with the Supreme Being, but rather, the emptiness of the breach between the Sabda Brahman and its human legacy, the place of nothingness in which an infinite variety of syntactical patterns penetrate and sully one another. This is also the nonplace, Tagore intimates, where literature—which the poet describes as that which has to be recognized simply because it has come into being rather than because it aspires to a transcendent religious, pragmatic, or conceptual truth—can take shape as “creation” rather than “construction” (a distinction that Tagore recurrently made), as that which “lives under time’s rule and yet does not cooperate with it,” and therefore, as the materialization of a language that is rent by its own contingent indeterminacies (“Literature,” 262).⁵⁹

There is in literature the idea of creation, not of construction. The task of construction requires one, at each moment to self-consciously exercise the authority of the self over inert materials; it is not so with creation. Rather during creation those inert materials

⁵⁹ The phrase does “live under time’s rule and yet not cooperate with it” is drawn from Tagore’s 1924 essay entitled “Literature,” and my translation in this case relies on Swapan Chakravorty’s translation of the essay in Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Writings on Language and Literature. Tagore drew the phrase under question from the noncooperation movement of 1920-1921, and much like Akhand Bharat (undivided India) had been invested with a scriptural energy, he invested this phrase with the literary-poetic energy of his writing. The block quote that follows however is from an earlier essay, “Sahitya” (“Literature”). As the notes to the essay in Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Writings on Language and Literature point out, this earlier document was written in 1889 “in a manuscript family album or memory book (Paribarik Smritilipi Pustak) now in the Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.”

seem endowed with consciousness by some novel principle, so that they fashion themselves by their own force (“Literature” 49).

Tagore’s understanding of literature as creation rather than construction, and his insistence therefrom on authoritative forces other than those of a sovereign man, offer us the possibility of articulating a secular cosmology from which not only have the gods withdrawn, but in which what is of primary concern is precisely the gash caused by their line of flight. The genesis of such a truly secular cosmology is marked by the absence of a transcendental human subject who will self-consciously exercise the authority of self over inert matter, the disposing of the quest— through an unabashedly improper rhythmic combine of *lila*, *ananda*, *khela*, and *chhuti*—for a final identification with Brahman, and the quiet letting be of a godless textuality where radical secularism resonates with the originary finitude of Tagorean language. The godforsaken text of the world thus no longer craves the transcendence of the whole, but rather cavorts and comes into being precisely in the noncoincidence, the fracture, and the irretrievable break between words and things, between subject and object, and between profane articulations and the ritual chant *sacchidananda*.

This enduring gap—rather than a specific mechanics of metre and verse—is what Tagore imagines as rhythm. The Tagorean notion of rhythm parallels not only the authentic temporality of the void left by the Vedic gods of fire, water, earth, and wind, but also the void that has not yet been filled by the sovereign human, and the void in which time thickens into something other than a numbered or quantitative measure of space. Such a notion of rhythm as a lag and a thickness of time, rather than a metric keeping of time is that which enables what the poet calls the “play of living creation,” and that which engenders what Tagore in yet another essay entitled, “*Apurba Ramayana*” (“A Novel Ramayana”), calls the world as a poem. In this 1895 essay, Tagore writes that “If universal creation is viewed as a poem, then its principal rasa is the rasa of

death” (91).⁶⁰ Leaving aside the problem of death in this articulation to consider Tagore’s designation of universal creation as a poem, we would first have to reiterate the fact that for Tagore, the poet extends inconsistencies and imparts the look of the unfamiliar to a familiar word. In so doing, he extends the denotative boundaries of language indefinitely, so that his creations make possible signals of thought which transgress their own limited lexical boundaries. And if it is precisely such a transgression of referentiality that the poet values above all else, then it is also Tagore’s rather specific notion of rhythm that assists and makes possible the merry play of such infectious syntactic energies.

In Tagore’s elaboration, rhythm which commonly designates a kind of restraint, a certain attraction to laws of measure, and a mathematical division of time, comes to emphasize precisely the opposite: the lack of a binding signification, of the disengagement from laws, forms, and proprietary rights, and finally, the complete annihilation of any desire for historical unification. The idea of universal creation as a rhythmic poem therefore, has nothing whatsoever to do with an image of totality that constructs the worldly text as self-consuming artifact in which the paraphrase of the poem and the poem itself are one. Rather, Tagore’s world is a poem only because it expresses the createdness of the universe as *jivalila* in precisely that pulsing asymmetry between a poem and its meaning, between words and deeds, cognition and action, and the soul and its essence, what Walter Benjamin strikingly referred to as a grotesque death mask which expresses but cannot bridge the gap between mortality and redemption. It is really only here, that is, only in the music of the void that it is possible to think of the materiality, the finitude, the authentic temporality of creation, and to encounter secularism—one of Tagore’s

⁶⁰ My translation in this case relies on Tista Bagchi’s translation in Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Writings on Language and Literature.

significant concerns—in terms of a poetic language wrenched away from the total and put into play in the profanity of innumerable fissures and rents.⁶¹

Yet, amid this plethora of living creation, this endless play, this continual rhythmic interface, where if at all is the place for death, and why, for Tagore, is the principal rasa of the poem of the world death? Moreover, how does the question of death bring us back to Tagore's concerns in "Kabir Kaiphayat" where the poet's objections are directed not so much against death qua death, but rather against the primal and originary struggle between life and death? On the one hand, given the above analysis, it appears that much like ananda, lila, khela and chhuti which splintered from their umbilical relation to Brahman sport with each other in the

⁶¹ Politically, secularism was one of Tagore's major concerns, as it was indeed for many statesman-litterateurs of his time. What is noteworthy about Rabindranath's thinking on secularism, and what I believe sets his work apart from that of other nineteenth- and twentieth-century public intellectuals, is the fact that Tagore explores the secular through literary language and its rhythms. In Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief (1989), Gauri Viswanathan complains that ever since modernity invented religious fundamentalism as its necessary antithesis, the principal difficulty with contemporary cultural studies has been that it has no adequate vocabulary or language with which to discuss religious belief. Viswanathan also draws on Rustom Bharucha's work, The Question of Faith to strengthen her argument. Bharucha makes the point that there are no languages in the social sciences to deal with their internal contradictions. Yet, Vishwanathan's own second book shies away from encountering secularism in the present age precisely as a problem of language. Indeed, to talk about religiosity in a secular age of postmodern skepticism is to talk not only about language, but also to discuss thinkers such as Tagore who offer us the opportunity to think the secular through language, and more specifically, through a radically finite notion of literary rhythm.

noncoincidence between themselves and sacchidananda, life and death too engage in a rhythmic play. This interaction is much like the banter Tagore and his interlocutor started out with, always tampering with each other's well-defined semantic borders, often stepping out of time with one another but never struggling against each other on an existential plane. On the other hand however, the notion of death has a more weighty import for Tagore's thinking, one that he elaborates not so much in "The Poet's Defence," but more so in "A Novel Ramayana" and "Sahityatattwa" ("The Philosophy of Literature").

In "A Novel Ramayana," Tagore draws on the Atharva Veda, (and it is interesting that he goes back to Vedic texts to do this rather than progressively moving forward from the Upanishads) to declare that the universe itself is to be understood as a poem. More significantly, if this is so, then the principal rasa of the universe is the rasa of death. Yet death, Tagore writes in "The Philosophy of Literature," signifies the pain of nothingness, and it is precisely here that one can record an almost synonymous relationship between what Tagore imagines as rhythm and what he calls death.⁶² As the notion of death converges with, and indeed becomes that very same musical void signified by rhythm, it also becomes for Tagore the very occasion that enables man to think the world as a poem. As such, death is the lesion left by the flight of the

⁶² Even though Swapan Chakravorty translates sunyata in "Sahityatattwa" ("The Philosophy of Literature") as "emptiness," I prefer the term "nothingness," because in relation to death as an epistemological confrontation of the gap between mortality and redemption, "nothingness" seems to me a more charged term than emptiness. Also, "emptiness," I believe has shades of subjective existentialism, which Tagore's attention to linguistic verve and resourcefulness at the expense of realistic representation, attempts, I would argue, at all costs to avoid. My reference is to the text of "Sahityatattwa" in Rabindra Racanabali, Janmasatabarsik Sanskaran, Vol. 14 (Essays, Bengali). Calcutta, Paschim Banga Sarkar, 1961.

gods: it is that which hollows out the space in which the createdness of the poem and the material universe can banter and sport with one another, it is, in other words, that which allows the void to exist as void, and that which thereby enables rhythm to take on the specific nuance that Tagore wishes to give it. Death is therefore the nonplace in which lila and ananda come into being, and it is also the abyss in which, freed from their bonds with sacchidananda, these terms become cadenced units of sound that are out of sync with khela and chhuti, but nonetheless mobilize each other's vernacular energies to create the world as poem. Such an earthly poem can be called into being not because life struggles against death, but rather because liberated from its gods, life incarnates itself as a "play of living creation," or as the contingent rhythm of literary-poetic language precisely in the music of emptiness hollowed out by death.

Titillated beyond measure in a language environment flush with his own favorite expressions—lila, ananda, khela, and chhuti—the Oriental, as Tagore after his English mentor cuttingly refers to himself, the species of murky kinships and excessive appetites, stubbornly convinces itself that language is truly free to engage in an endlessly merry caprice. Such a cosmogony of joy and play creates the universe and its heterogeneous worlds only in the nothingness gouged out by an epistemological confrontation of death. Here death and its accompanying stillness constitute an indispensable partner to the quickness of joyful rhythm, for as Tagore explicitly says in "A Novel Ramayana," if it were not for the stirring endowed the world by death, life would inhabit an enduring mausoleum, everlasting, stark, enclosed, and sentenced to eternal immobility. Thought of in this way, mortality, according to the poet, lightens the heavy yoke of existence for death is no longer a slow, choking, bludgeoning way to bring life, face down in the wayside dust, but instead a pulsing vessel for the music of sportive play, a measure of the very freedom of living creation, and indeed, the principal cadence in a cosmos of khela, chhuti, lila and ananda. If in such a Tagorean orchestration of life and death,

death is not merely that against which the sanctity of life must battle, it is also not, as in the Upanishadic notion of anandam, only a temporary terminal before the joy of the final union with Brahman. Rather, death here has no particular destination and promises no resolute telos—it is therefore the sheer happiness of a myriad beginnings that have no destiny, the joy of “that cataclysmic sphere where there is neither burden nor compulsion,” and as such, the principal rasa of the world as poem (“The Philosophy of Literature” 297).

4.3 TRIAL BY FIRE

Tagore’s call for understanding universal creation as a poem, and his gesture toward the Atharva Veda in order to do so resonates somewhat heretically with the concluding lines of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar’s 1909 magnum opus, The Indian War of Independence, 1857. Stylistically orchestrated, as we have already seen, in terms of the great Vedic sacrifice itself, Savarkar’s “History of 1857,” as the work is also called, is peopled by men and women who, compelled by an extended sequence of lives ritualistically reiterate the timeless conflicts of the past. Their insurrection in 1857 is thus on the one hand a re-staging of the great battles of the age—the Battle of Kurukshetra, the struggle against the Mughals and the Battle of Plassey—but on the other, a rehearsal for the day on which Indian swords will ring at the gates of the British court itself (“As long as there remains the least trace of love of faith in the hearts of our heroes, so long/ the sword of Hindusthan shall be sharp, and one day shall flash even at the gates of/London”). Because their lives are merely temporary terminals in a karmic cycle of life and rebirth, Savarkar’s protagonists willingly give themselves up to death, and as fuel to the sacrificial fire they promise to return as the very incarnation of the Revolutionary Spirit and

therefore as mere iterations of one other. This is why, when such deathless heroes are faced with a crushing defeat, their insurrectionary spirit remains unbroken. Indeed, it is only further fortified, for when news comes Bahadur Shah of their defeat at the hands of the British, the poet-emperor vows to keep his soldiers alive on the strength of a ghazal promising the return of their spirit of revolution. With its iterative erotics of measure, this ancient Persian verse form not only parallels the relentless return of the heroes of 1857 to the flames of the great Vedic ritual, but also rhythmically pledges that the very same nationalist insurrectionists will one day carry their revolt right up to the shores of London. Like the repetition inherent in a karmic cycle of life and rebirth and not very different from the ritualistic re-staging of the great Vedic sacrifice itself, the events and peoples of Savarkar's "History of 1857" persistently incarnate a renewal of the same Revolutionary Spirit. Each past battle in the chain and the already preordained realization of independence are therefore easily identifiable with the other, just as the protagonists of the sepoy unrest are merely points in a sequence—both re-playing and rehearsing the lives of their forebears and heirs.⁶³

If for Tagore, the notion of universal creation as a poem is in confrontation with the Englishman's idea of a foundational struggle between life and death, then for Savarkar, the ghazal form with its obdurate refusal to yield to the absolute passage of time and its utter disdain for any attempt at latitudinal progression, is a primary weapon against what he implicitly diagnoses as the linear-progressivist muse of English historiography. Yet, while claiming to challenge the oppressive systematization of British historians, Savarkar's rhythmic ritualism aspires in its own way to the condition of a system and is therefore distinct, in a constitutive way

⁶³ I more elaborately detail the distinct nuances of Savarkar's "History of 1857" as well as its relations with his later pamphlet Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu? in the second chapter of the dissertation, "A Matter of Life and Rebirth."

from the airy flippancy of Tagore's more literary rendition of the world as poem. Given the iterative orchestration of the history of 1857, the Revolutionary Spirit is bound to rise from the blood and ashes of archaic heroes, and Savarkar monstrosly claims its contingent futurity in declaring without a doubt that as long as men and women sacrifice their lives for the sake of the ritual of revolution, new heroes will rise to embody the eternity of insurrectionary verve. Flatulent with the deathless blood of their karmic fathers, these protagonists will never become the absolute victims of time, and will therefore unquestioningly court destruction over and over, returning thereby to feed the continuing ritual. Despite Savarkar's almost demagogic fervour, however, such a powerfully imaginative project could compete in an increasingly secular milieu of nationalist politics only if it were to be ordered by a sovereign authority who, disengaging the karmic cycle of lives from its refuge in a divine diagram, would institute it as the very foundation of a new earthly kingdom. In 1909, such a sovereign figuration was still fairly undefined for Savarkar, and what we have in The Indian War of Independence, 1857 is at best a mass of undifferentiated feelings, sometimes called "the Revolutionary Spirit," sometimes called "the battle against Englishmen and their incorrigible writing of history" and sometimes called "Dharma." By the time of Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu? (1923), however, this knotty tangle of inchoate forces had congealed into an occasion for the emergence of a more distinct sovereign authority, tied to the institutional auspices of the Hindu Mahasabha, the inauguration of a decidedly Hindu nation-state, in conflict with an emergent Pakistan, and the Young Republic as envisioned by a professedly Nehruvian Congress.

Unlike Savarkar's invocation of the echoing quality of the ghazal, Tagore's notion of rhythm never aspires to the condition of a system. Not surprisingly, when the latter thinks universal creation in terms of a poem, he does so not because he imagines that a diagram for the world would be mirrored in the internal system of the poem, nor even because, as in the case of

the “History of 1857,” the specific measure of a particular refrain will aid his expression of a grand architecture for the nation. Rather, the notion of worldly creation in Tagore’s oeuvre, his idea of “createdness,” as he calls it, is content, literally, to wander adrift without a destiny in the secular abyss between the Sabda Brahman and its earthly heirs, or to put it differently, in the poetic lag between Brahman and man. Thus, if for Savarkar, the harping rhythm of the ghazal signaled the ritualistic recursivity of karmic lives and thereby the transparent coincidence between a variety of historical events and personas, then for Tagore, rhythm signaled precisely the noncoincidence between words and things, cognition and action, and the soul and its essence. As we have seen, this notion of asymmetry—which is synonymous, for Tagore, with a notion of death—calls into being what the poet presents as a play of living creation rather than the struggle of life against death. The tempo of the interlude in which jivalila thus frolics, although in many ways resonant with Savarkar’s karmic play of life and rebirth, is not tied to the cause-and-effect pattern of karma. It is also not the foundation for a distinct notion of history, such as Dubashi’s, that having abolished the notion of time as an irreversible arrow replaces it with a different ritualization of time. Instead, bereft of a either a historical or a karmic kismet, the poem of the world as Tagore demonstrates, is surfeit with the causelessness and ineffability of rasa.

Like the archaic English term humour, rasa literally means “fluid” or “juice” and in classical Sanskrit poetics signified the mood, vein, or spirit that a work of art was expected to induce. Tagore, while staying decidedly away from the rather complex genealogy of the term, simply uses rasa to signify the “affective experience” aroused by a work of art (The Philosophy of Literature), but more interestingly, he writes, in a 1924 essay entitled, “Literature,” that “joy assuming a form is rasa.” We know that for Tagore, “joy,” to say the very least, has been rudely severed from the comfort of any kind of formalism. If we can talk of joy at all, then, it is the

pure joy of a nihilistic blank, of the deathly emptiness between the Sabda Brahman and its innumerable profane progeny. If “joy at all assumes a form” in Tagore’s thinking, that is, if rasa comes into being in the literariness of the worldly poem, then it does so only to crumble into the nothingness of rhythm and therefore render createdness surfeit with a fateless elusion. This is also why Tagore writes that if universal creation were to be imagined as a poem, then its principal rasa would be the rasa of death, for the joy of the void is in Tagore’s work, the pulse of the emptiness that is death (“The pain of death is emptiness,” he writes in “The Philosophy of Literature.”). In such a condition, life does not become meaningful because it courts death and forfeits itself at the altar of transcendent Brahman only to return again to feed the sacrificial ritual, nor does it acquire valence merely as the binarized counterpart of a power threatening death. Rather, here living creation is meaningless—and with no sense of its own historic design, it plays, sports, and comes into being, precisely in the secular void constituted by death as rasa, or by death as the causeless ineffability between Brahman and man.

In 1873, when Tagore was only twelve, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), almost unanimously held to be one of the most critically charged thinkers of Indian nationalism, dismissed Sanskrit poetics in general and the theory of rasa in particular with unconcealed contempt. Bankim’s argument was that the Sanskrit tradition of literary production was too restricted and mechanical to deal with the infinite nuances that constitute literature. Paradoxically, this colossus of nineteenth-century criticism instead presented Bengali society with what we might call a sociological theory of literature which he felt would redress the inadequacies of rasa as an organizing principle for poetics. A keen student of Auguste Comte, Bankimchandra was familiar with the positivists’ idea of literature. The influence of this group was evident in many of his writings, but perhaps most clearly so in his analysis of an erotic Sanskrit poem by the name Gitagovinda. Much in the same way as the evangelicals and

utilitarians in British India had tied the error and deception in native society to the moral degeneracy of Oriental literature, Bankim related the erotics of the Gitagovinda to the timeless indolence of his strongly defeatist contemporary society. Referring to the highly deterministic methodology of Henry Buckle, and influenced not inconsequentially by the utilitarian-positivist bent of John Stuart Mill (whom he almost revered), Bankim wrapped up his theorizations with the argument that there was a direct relationship of coincidence between literature and external conditions, such as physical features and climate, as well as between political and religious movements.

A youthful man during the time in which Bankim was at the peak of his intellectual production, Tagore was in many ways expected to inherit Bankim's mantle, and he in fact started his own work at a time when the sociological theory was already fairly well-known and the stalwart *littérateur* of Bengal had unquestionably pledged himself to European critical thought. Although traces of older Sanskrit poetics continued to linger, these were more formal and terminological rather than conceptual in nature, and almost no texts were discussed under the larger framework of fifteenth and sixteenth century critical schools. Indeed, the fact that by the mid-nineteenth century Bengali criticism in general seemed largely under the sway of an imperial influence and that the powerful alamkara tradition of Sanskrit literary culture had almost entirely died out, intersected of course—as Gauri Vishwanathan has rigorously shown—with the changing educational policy of the colonists and with the continually shifting power equation between English Parliament and the increased influx of missionaries into British India.

Vishwanathan's first book, Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India (1989) sets out to demonstrate that the discipline of English blossomed at a time of high imperialist expansion when the riotous men of the Company Bahadur were slowly giving way to the more evenhanded stewards of English Parliament. Yet what came to be the standard colonial

curriculum in English had as much to do with the situation in India—that is, with the need to administratively control a mass of inexplicably volatile native subjects—as it did with certain more congealed politico-historical conditions in England, the constraints of church-state relations, being principal amongst them. Insofar as the genealogy of English studies emerged largely as a result of such complex geopolitical translations, Vishwanathan’s study puts its finger rather squarely on two basic points. The first and more dramatic of these is that English literature appeared in the colonies long before it was institutionalized in the home country. Second, Vishwanathan argues that the later institutionalization of English in the home country was the result of that country’s well-established structure of Christian values, which unlike the colonial situation had no use for English literary texts as a medium of secular instruction.

In the heyday of the East India Company—particularly in the period after the Charter Act of 1813 which not only enjoined Britain to be responsible for the education of its native subjects, but also relaxed controls on missionary activity in the colony—the British Indian curriculum in English was primarily devoted to language studies. Steeped in European classical humanism, and despite utilitarian pressures toward change, British administrators continued to heroically hold forth on the classical approach to the study of language as an end in itself, and indeed this model was not without its own distinct political advantages. Translated into administrative terms, classical humanism ensured that the integrity of native learning would be protected, for if language and literature were ends in themselves, then both Oriental and Western learning could claim the status of true knowledge without necessarily being subject to normative criteria of value. However, by the 1820s the growing number of missionaries who had gained access to India after the Charter Act began to clamor restlessly against the atmosphere of secular tolerance in which English studies were being conducted. The classical curricula thus began to disintegrate under combined demands from apparently opposed fronts, but matters only came to a head when

the criticism of corrupt poetic languages and their inevitable deviation from truth when read without a context or purpose, brought the evangelicals and the utilitarians to a common platform.

Even though British missionaries of the nineteenth century may have believed that the secular study of literature would lead to moral degeneracy, this was by no means to say that they also believed literature would naturally tend to corrupt individuals and blur their moral sense. Given that direct religious instruction was forbidden by the law of British India, literary study would have to take the place of an institution that the missionaries would have preferred to have available. Therefore, the issue was not so much whether literature had the power to inculcate virtue, but rather whether the methods of study allocated for it were sufficiently moral. The Protestant Reformation had already provided a historical blueprint that imputed a normative value to English literary texts and Protestants of course especially cherished literacy and, hesitantly, literature, as the means by which man might enter into the hallowed presence of the word of God. Yet the characterization of English literature as the intellectual production of fallible humans, rather than the immediate word of God, implied a different process of reading, one that called upon reason rather than a blind, unquestioning faith. The interpretation of error-ridden worldly texts would no doubt give rise to a multiplicity of responses and since in such an unreliably plural situation the receiving mind would have to weigh the distinct value of each heterogeneous possibility, a rational judgment could reach its truth only if it diplomatically squared the equally powerful positions of both the utilitarians and the early evangelicals. As a medium of modern knowledge, literature was the expression of the composite culture of an age and a reflection of social coherence (Vishwanathan points out that the 1848 inaugural lecture of A.J. Scott at University College, London is said to be the earliest instance of a formal academic plea for such a study method), and it was in this specific avatar that literary texts were going to have to serve the missionaries in place of a more immediately religious medium of instruction.

In such a milieu then, English literature was to become the vessel in which empirically verifiable truth and religious faith converged as one. The structural parallels established between Christianity and English literature thus made way for a new pulpit; here, preachers could declare that as the very repository of the book of God, England had produced a literature that was especially virtuous, because it was blessed by a religion to which Western man owed his material and moral progress. The continuity between the English nation and the Christian God thus expanded to include an equation between the English nation and the new forms of knowledge produced by historical development and material progress. Literature in the context of British India, was the urtext not only of Englishness, but also of historicity itself, and thereby of notions of truth, knowledge, and reason only ever-so-slightly displaced from their sacred plane.

In 1844, Lord Hardinge, governor-general from 1844 to 1848 made a resolution assuring public office preference for Indians who had distinguished themselves in European literature, thus bringing the utilitarian-evangelical combine to its complete fruition. On the one hand, Hardinge's act gave literary study a material motive that ensured that the subject population would frantically aim at their own intellectual and moral improvement: on the other, in claiming literature as the repository of a larger design of moral and religious values, the resolution argued that it was these values that provided the most suitable and well-disciplined basis of a public servant's education. Thus, if Orientalism had grown out of Warren Hastings' concern that English administrators and merchants in India were not sufficiently responsive to native traditions and languages, then the present utilitarian-evangelical model of English literary instruction was still fairly safe even from his point of view. The literature of England may indeed have usurped the place of Oriental texts, yet since this implied intellectual and moral improvement from both the utilitarian and evangelical perspectives, the takeover simultaneously

proved that British government was virtuous and just. Moreover, given its pedagogical imperative of nurturing a historically minded man, the nineteenth-century incarnation of English literature also made a larger claim to place the Indian reader in a position where he could excavate his true identity from the decay to which it had become subjected through immoral native texts. Far from violently displacing the reader from his own culture and background, English literature taught less as a branch of rhetoric than of history promised to return him to an essential unity with himself and reinsert him into the course of development of civilized man, thus rendering him a participant not only in the life of his fellow humans but also in the grand movement of world history.

In May/June 1915, only two months after the first version of Tagore's play, Phalguni had appeared in the pages of the avant-garde monthly Sabuj Patra, "The Poet's Defence" was published by the same periodical in response to Tagore's critic, Radhakamal Mukhopadhyay, an eminent social scientist and professor at Lucknow University. Mukhopadhyay's primary attack on Tagore was based on the latter's alleged lack of realism and on the fact that the poet was too far removed from the problems of ordinary people to have any effect on the cumulative life of the nation or the development of his fellow citizens. Without directly addressing the issue of realism or the poet's role in the life of the common man, Tagore's response in "The Poet's Defence" struck, in a roundabout manner, at the very heart of the problem. With no desire for a unifying historical kismet, Tagore's notion of the world as a poem could be attached neither to an overarching diagram of cultural-national value nor to a grand architecture of moral religiosity. More significant perhaps, Tagore's notion of literary createdness had no room whatsoever for an image of sovereign authority—be it God, Law, Truth, Knowledge or, the political map of the nation-State—which in providing comprehensive myths for the people, actually deprived each individual and every event of their own rhythmic freedom.

There is thus no godhead in Tagore's thinking like the Krishna of the Bhagavad Gita, there is no dharma in his work like that which is Savarkar's Hindu nation, and finally, there is no authority in the poet's articulations like the masterful human subject, who having killed his gods promises to return to them as the transcendental protagonist of a world-historical whole. Indeed, in a rather contrary move, Tagore gestures toward human consciousness as a mere participant in what he has elaborated as the joyful sport of living creation, or what is for him, at the same time, the originary contingency that is rhythmic language. Much in the way that such a language is rent in the gap between the Sabda Brahman and its earthly manifestations, man too—that is both Tagore's fellow natives and the transcendental human of history—is both constituted and torn apart in precisely the same break between mortality and redemption, which, having emancipated itself from transcendent truth, allows createdness to come into being, surfeit with the fortuitous play of *rasa*.

If in 1915 Tagore had thus quietly intervened in what Hegel called the irredeemable problem of historylessness in India, then six years before "The Poet's Defence," Savarkar's attack too was pitched against a climax of the historicizing process that had begun in South Asia not long after the Company Bahadur's accession to Diwani in 1757. Between 1909 and 1923 however, Savarkar frenziedly went about tying his attack to the political architecture of an emergent sovereign state that the Hindu Mahasabha believed could challenge and perhaps even overthrow the secular liberalism of the Indian National Congress (INC). The INC was fast moving toward a position in which nationalism, firmly secured within the domain of state ideology, would seek its legitimizing principle in a conception of quasi-socialist development. Indeed, according to the Nehruvian Congress, the principal task before independent India would be to establish a sovereign national state, which would stand above the particular interests of all competing groups and classes in society, and in accordance with the best social-scientific

procedures would plan and direct the process by which India was to catch up with the linearity of world-history. Given Savarkar's Indian War of Independence, 1857 however, history was not constituted by the irreversible arrow of time, which pregnant with the futurity of a civilizational trajectory, could promise to decisively launch a teleological project of development spearheaded by the transcendental human protagonist. Rather, history was about repetitions, reiterations, and endless rehearsals, founded in an extended cycle of life and rebirth and identifiable with the Supreme Brahmana precisely insofar as bowed low, in a prostrate attitude of consecration, it forfeited itself at his temple. In the place of the Nehruvian State that hoped to offer its citizen-subjects the fruits of civilization—freedom and emancipation from a condition of the pre-modern and therefore rights to the well-distributed resources of a benevolent modern state—the state of Hindutva would articulate itself through the duties it accrued from its mass of “reserved forces,” or the karmic cycle of lives and rebirths, which the strictly national sovereign could call upon to sacrifice itself in the course of battle.

Instead of the sacred contract between literature and history, which ever since the alliance between the evangelicals and utilitarians in India had come to be, like Rex and Brahmin, the two poles of the modern, civilized state, Savarkar's stately medium was to be articulated in the unificatory power of myth. Particularly in an utilitarian-evangelical climate, myths were the most hotly contested domain of classical Indian poetics, for not only had Hegel and Mill already written about the blurring of a historical and mythical consciousness in Indian writing, but even Bankim Chandra Chatterjee had advocated that myths be shorn of their falsehoods in order to make them coeval with a rational process of truth and history. One of the problems was that myth, unlike literature, could not be very easily attached to a chart of latitudinal historical progress and thereby to an exclusive linearity of time. Their inflexible recursivity was also the single enduring omen of their contested truth value. Yet, if myth was read in nineteenth-century

British India exclusively and derogatorily as narrations of events in primordial, atemporal moments, which constituted sacred time and differed from the rational civility of modern calendrical time, then for Savarkar what was imaginatively powerful about such mythographies was precisely their cosmological-sacred scope. Not surprisingly, in calling upon myths to do for him what literature and history were to do for a Nehruvian vision, Savarkar in fact repeatedly awards value to precisely the “irrational untruth” of mythographies. For it was only because of their infinitely conflicting versions, their ties to an unreliable orality, and their unabashedly cyclical returns that these forms had the ability to elicit some recognition from each one of the teeming millions of Hindusthan. Moreover, through their cadenced ties with the notion of a karmic cycle of life and rebirth, the recursive pattern of myths could be affixed to the institution of a Hindu state, in which calendrical time existed alongside the sovereign time of the trikaal (a composite vision of past, present, and future, like that of Krishna in the Mahabharata) only to regulate the mundane life of those who don the universal frock of citizen. In other words, these privileged men, much like Arjuna of the Mahabharata or the perfect yogis of the Bhagavad Gita, would follow a disciplinary regimen of chronometric time only to willingly actualize the cosmological-mythic vision of the sovereign, and thereby offer themselves as a mass of “reserved forces” for the sovereign coffers of Hindutva (Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?, 140)⁶⁴. As we have seen before however, despite the cosmological ambition of Savarkar’s sovereign, both the “History of 1857,” and Hindutva:Who is a Hindu remain tied to decidedly national

⁶⁴ In Time as a Metaphor of History, Romila Thapar points out that even during the Puranic age (approximately AD 200-1200), a sequence of generations (which is for all practical purposes, an exercise in linear time), coexisted with an overall cosmological time frame.

parameters, while contemporary Hindutva is imperial rather than national in its conceptualization of militarization, economism, and technologism.

4.4 SNAKES AND LADDERS

A collection of neo-essays first appearing in India Today between 1977 and 1984, Jay Dubashi's Snakes and Ladders: The Development Game was written at a time when the heady days of the Young Indian Republic had almost decisively come to a close and the not-so-young architecture of governance was beginning to show indelible signs of political and economic turmoil. Dubashi's book begins at the moment following the declaration of emergency by the Indira Gandhi government in 1975 when the incumbent prime minister was defeated in the parliamentary elections of 1977, and the opposition Janata Party emerged victor over the illustrious Indian National Congress. On 2 January 1978, Indira Gandhi and her followers seceded from the INC and formed a new opposition party, popularly called Congress (I), the "I" signifying Indira. Over the next year, this new party attracted enough members of the legislature to become dominant as the official opposition, and in 1981 the national election commission declared it the "real" Indian National Congress (the "I" designation was dropped in 1996.) Meanwhile, Mrs. Gandhi regained a parliamentary seat in November 1979, and in the following year she was again elected prime minister. In 1981, to stem the financial crisis in which she found the country, Gandhi took India's first ever International Monetary Fund loan of a whopping \$5 billion. But before a democratic citizenry could vote on the political effects of this rather significant step, the prime minister was brutally assassinated by her own security guards in October 1984.

Written in such a troubled milieu, Dubashi's essays take up not just the issue of swiftly changing and therefore unstable governments, but also the question of India's overwhelming international debt situation and the politics of Indira Gandhi's exchange with Bretton Woods-type organizations. One of his points of departure therefore is that despite the changing face of parliament—not only had the Indian National Congress splintered, but also it had actually given way, for a few years at least, to the revolutionary Janata Party—things were no different than in the early days of independence. India's promised trust with destiny seemed still a long distance away. The economic policies of successive governments continued to derive from an outmoded and infirm socialism, which as the sacrosanct legacy of Nehruvian politics could not, under any circumstances, be overthrown. The principal argument in Snakes and Ladders is therefore rather simple: the trouble with the Indian economy is its unwillingness to throw off the shackles of a state-protected market. Culminating in the complaint that “the doctrine of modernization [as] an incarnation of the theory of progress has given rise to a growing faith in centralized institutions,” it offers a somewhat predictable solution: “the only solid foundation for genuine democracy is diffusion of economic power, including state power” (16).

According to Dubashi, the difficulty with the centralized institutions of socialism is that blindly and mindlessly taken up with the attempt to justly distribute inadequate state resources, they are unable to think of ways to enable and ensure the productive generation of those very same resources. To Dubashi's mind, this condition is a rather surprising, for ensuring that resources are generated is not even a difficult proposition—all government has to do is leave the market largely to its own devices, and productivity will take care of itself, for as the author of Snakes and Ladders writes:

Capital, like knowledge is not a finite quantity and keeps on growing. It is wrong to look upon it as a limited resource, so limited that it has to be carefully doled out by the spoonful by some babus in the Planning Commission or elsewhere. (48)

Such a diagnosis, despite the note of righteous élan in Dubashi's writing, is tiresomely familiar, and in fact quite unabashedly derivative. Yet, the fatigued design of a free market and its miraculous effects, is in Snakes and Ladders complemented by an endlessly intriguing illustrative conceit that promises not only to multiply the effects of the design itself, but also to show how Dubashi's essays rather dangerously appropriate both Tagore's concept of radical contingency, and the work of Savarkar, Dubashi's more immediate intellectual forebear.

As the title suggests, Dubashi's book is brought together by the elaborate conceit of Snakes and Ladders, a board game banally familiar to every man and woman in the subcontinent, from child to octogenarian. Unlike satranj (chess) the symbolic and much-lauded game of the courts, played (often as an expression of war-time strategizing) between badshahs and their nawabs, and rajahs and the commanders of their armed forces, Snakes and Ladders is undoubtedly the game for plebeians. The game uses no regulated codes of war no battle lines, no rears, no fronts, no strategies and no tactical maneuvers, and perhaps most importantly, no restriction on the number of competitors. The board consists of a series of squares numbered from one to a hundred, and while some of these spaces feature the ends of ladders, others feature the forked tongues of venomous vipers. Each player must cast the chance-ridden die and move the number of spaces it indicates to a particular square: the winner is she who is able to reach the finish in the shortest amount of time. If a player is wounded by a poisonous snake, she topples down to a lower position, and if she is lucky enough to hit a ladder, she has the opportunity to immediately rise to a higher rank on the board. Yet the player who has once risen to the upper echelons may very easily be ousted from her superior standing, and similarly, someone who has

suffered a fatal brush with death can once again be a part of the game if only she were to come across a golden ladder of opportunity. The cast of the die is not dictated by a well-defined system of movements, and indeed it is precisely because the resultant maze of ups and downs on the board does not constitute a particular pattern that Dubashi is able to deploy Snakes and Ladders as a conceit for the game that is free-market development, unburdened by the restrictive policies of state, and therefore merry, playful and flush with the gay abandon of sheer productivity.

Snakes and ladders thus provides an ontological principle of development that can in one fell swoop dismiss the burden of the relentless critique of neoliberal economic policies, which Dubashi argues will only come into being once an antiquated socialist economy is willing to throw off the fetters of its mind and imaginatively start afresh. Yet, the primary critique of proliberalization forces in India (which had started coming into their own ever since India was defeated by China in 1962) involves what Dubashi calls the interminable burden of a song that stubbornly refuses to pass. This “song”—the rich grow richer and the poor, poorer—not only prevents policy makers from coming to terms with the existent realities of economic growth, but also, is so rigidly ossified in the minds of Nehruvian economists that it forecloses their creative re-imagining of the relative distance between rich and poor:

The hard economic fact is that there are poor people and rich people in all countries, and no matter what the governments do and do not—and also no matter how rich or poor the countries are in overall GNP terms, when the rich become richer, the poor do not become poorer but maintain more or less the same relative distance from the rich. (236)

For some inexplicable reason, Dubashi argues, political kingpins in India believe that while private companies are morally degenerate monsters, ready to exploit their workers and the nation

at large every chance they get, the government is a benevolent benefactor, and therefore will be just in controlling the widening gaps between rich and poor.

In contrast, Dubashi's book very patiently shows that forces of privatization have nothing at all to do with growing income disparities, for just as players in the game of Snakes and Ladders reach distinct positions on the board through no apparent fault of their own, inequality, according to our author, cannot be blamed on the particular pattern of human aggregation. Indeed, no matter how frantically one searches, there can be no one cause for unequal incomes except the natural, heterogeneous constitution of individual humans, and as a metaphorical map for precisely this basic understanding, the board of Snakes and Ladders will help us to rethink the essentially misunderstood notion of inequity:

The rich do get richer but it is not the same rich, nor is it the same poor who get poorer.

Even the very poor can and do get rich and the very rich often vanish into limbo. And

what is true of companies is also true of life in general. (162)

As a radically democratic distribution of completely unhindered energies, Snakes and Ladders thus incarnates a new world picture, one in which despite governmental protection and all manner of care, some organizations are gulped down whole by insatiable pythons and "there are apparently no convincing reasons why one company—or a group of companies—has done well and another blotted its copy book" (161). Similarly, Dubashi contends "there are no hard and fast rules in development. Countries go up and countries go down, leaving economists and others wondering why a particular country is surging forward and another barely limping along" (198). Given the fanciful interventions enabled by the power of his ingenious conceit, Dubashi proposes that once it finds its fullest expression, the dynamic ontos of Snakes and Ladders will take over from a restrictive economic landscape of yore, and infusing this earlier terrain with its own brand of causeless ineffability set it free from the lifeless matter of Nehruvian socialism.

And when the economic landscape of the nation is finally set loose from its postindependence roots, the author promises that the sheer dynamism of his innocuous game will spawn a creative principal of managerial intelligence with the power to immediately release the world into numberless productive units.

To think of Dubashi's work in terms of ancient Indian philosophy is no wild flourish of the imagination, for the game of Snakes and Ladders was historically derived from karmic philosophies of life and rebirth. Considered through this lens, Dubashi's common-sensical appropriation of Tagore on the one hand and Savarkar on the other becomes rather more clear. The author of Snakes and Ladders has already proposed that one of the problems with Nehruvian politics was its dogmatic belief in modernization as an incarnation of the linear-developmental theory of progress. Understandably, then, Snakes and Ladders with its supreme disdain for any notion of deterministic linearity, has the capacity to overhaul the misdirected economics of the postindependence national state: instead of being harnessed to an irreversible arrow of state-led welfare, the fiscal landscape is constituted by the romping antics of a quintessentially free, open-market createdness. And if such a notion of creation is tied to a cyclical philosophy of life and rebirth, then this is so not because the free economic life sacrificially courts death only to rejuvenate and rebuild itself, but rather because just like inequality is banished from his design, death has in fact no place in Dubashi's a karmic version of Snakes and Ladders. Even the final release from the cycle of life and death is here awarded no valence whatsoever, for in Dubashi's game, the object is not to emancipate oneself from the board; it is not to find moksa from the burden of an interminable cycle of life and rebirth, but rather to enjoy the unrestricted expanse of economic life, free even from the sovereign fiefdom of death. Like Savarkar's history, then, Dubashi's Snakes and Ladders is replete with a deathless cycle of lives or, to put it differently, with an infinite supply of players. But unlike in The Indian War of Independence, these are lives

that have been released from their ties to a sovereign order of a fated repetition, reiteration, and ritualism. Instead the lives on Snakes and Ladders are constituted by the contingent indeterminacy of Tagore's rasa, with rasa being replaced by income disparities, as causeless and as ineffable as the worldly poem itself. As strands of thinking from Savarkar and Tagore thus flit in and out of Dubashi's prose, appropriating each other, falling into time with each other, and culminating in a final flush of happy hybridity, we have instead of "The Poet's Defence" a defence forwarded on behalf of the creative principal of managerial intelligence; and instead of the ritualized body of the martyr who gives herself willingly to the amorous arms of death, the figure of the manager of business who cannibalistically feeds on life fattened with its own freedom.

For the author of Snakes and Ladders, this manager of business is someone who can bring a new world into being because he is also someone who can creatively rethink what Dubashi calls the "versus complex" of the Indian economy. Indeed, when confronted with "large versus small industry, public versus private sector, urban versus rural, equality versus growth, and finally, almost as a natural corollary, government versus people" (146), this is a man, who in his endlessly assimilative manner, ensures that all binaries are given the freedom to run amok with the carefree playfulness of a children's game. Thus, no longer does the Indian economy have to be hopelessly torn between contraries, for nourished as a principal of constitutive intelligence, Dubashi's business manager liberates the world into an abandon of sheer productivity, in which "villages and cities, multinationals and self-reliance, atomic energy and cow dung, and industry and agriculture" can merrily gambol with each other without transgressing the territorial markers of narrowly defined boundaries (3). Once he has unchained the oppressive parallelisms of an old socialist landscape, such a creative manager is someone who can turn his attention to the larger problems at the root of such dualistic thinking.

If it was the fear of increasing poverty and widespread inequality that had caused successive governments to think in terms of contraries—city or country, atomic energy or cow dung, industry or agriculture, etc—then Dubashi’s professional creator is someone who, even in the face of apparently insurmountable problems such as poverty and inequality, can merely shrug his shoulders and say that they should be left to their own devices. In fact, given the fortuity engendered in the conceit of Snakes and Ladders, even poverty and inequality can no longer be tied down to a deterministic pattern of cause and effect, and so they threaten to dissipate into a nothingness reminiscent of Tagore’s own elaboration of a quintessentially playful lila. Following this vein of inspired reordering, Dubashi assures his readers that once the immovable white elephant that is Nehruvian socialism has been cleansed from the landscape of Indian economic policy, there will be indeed no earthly reason for poverty. And even if there still is, the man who starves will know that his condition is caused not because of rich men, but because of the causeless nature of differences inherent to the human condition:

The disparity of fortune between the rich and the poor has reached its height, so that the city seems to be in a dangerous condition, and no other means for freeing it from disturbances seem possible except perhaps despotic power.

This sounds like Robert McNamara in one of his addresses to the board of governors of the World Bank, but it is not. It is Plutarch writing about the Athens of 594 B.C....There is no earthly reason for any human being to starve but there is also no earthly reason why the man who starves should blame the rich man for his condition. (93-94)

Many of Dubashi’s neo-essays in Snakes and Ladders in fact begin precisely in this manner—with the pedantic tone of a father softly chiding his young son, and a mood of entirely blithe lightheartedness that both echoes the child-like game of lila, ananda, khela, and cchuti, and anticipates the carefree dynamism that is Snakes and Ladders. Yet, if Tagore’s imagination

of frolicsome sport renders a radically fatherless condition, Dubashi's syntax always bears traces of at least the specter of a swaggering pater. With some flourish, this shadowy father now asks his child rhetorical questions whose answer is inherent in the question itself: "Does a country always stay a less developed country or should it finally, like children be asked to leave home?" (229). Now, as in the above extract, he tells his offspring that when he believes something by force of habit alone, he may in fact be believing wrongly. Once the befuddled child is convinced that what seems to be is actually not so, he is thrown into a further morass of confusion. Not only is Plutarch not Robert McNamara, not only is Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev not Indira Gandhi (in the essay "Moon and Sixpence"), and not only is the Indian government not a scary bloated giant that will never go away (in the essay "A Bloated Giant"), but even problems that the young mind believes to be at the very basis of a developing economy, are for all practical purposes, nonproblems. Men as far apart as Plutarch and Robert McNamara may have debated endlessly about poverty and the rancor resulting from widening disparities of income, and indeed such problems may be existent realities, but if one were to take seriously the board of Snakes and Ladders as an imaginative conceit for economic life, then one would know that the free market is not to be blamed for a heightening in the hard, indeed timeless facts of economic growth. And even though we may not be accustomed to thinking so, life released from the restrictive fetters of developmentalist socialism would lead us inevitably to the following truth: "There is no earthly reason why a human being should starve, but there is also no earthly reason why the man who starves should blame the rich man for his condition." Snakes and Ladders thus promises to emancipate economic life from the immobile morass of cause-effect patterns of thinking and in so doing, offers itself as the millennial portent of a manner of living in which starvation and inequality are as ridden with chance as the die cast by the plebeian players of the game. Apparently like Tagore's notion of createdness itself, then, the basic problems of a

developing economy literally wander adrift in Dubashi's prose, with no need to be addressed or questioned, finally crumbling into the gamboling ethos of a banal gameboard that has unchained them from the fetters of needless planning, state-led development, and quasi-socialist notions of welfare.

Despite such a merry vision, however, the style of Dubashi's articulation about starvation and inequality is chained to a rather taut parallelism, sustained by the perfect balance of rhythm that reciprocal arrangements of evenly measured clauses cannot but bring in their wake (there is no earthly reason why.../but there is also no earthly reason why...) In fact, the essays that make up Dubashi's book are full to the brim with such pithy, almost homily-like arrangements, which in heralding a new style of economics and of life are all the more noticeable because of their conspicuous juxtaposition with lyrical, even plaintive descriptions of the old Nehruvian order:

The word Government today suggests a nebulous entity slowly gone to seed. A government office is a long murky tunnel reeking like a public urinal. And Government Servants are small, shabby clerks huddled among fraying file covers while serving life sentences in Dickensian dungeons. (27)

In contrast to the almost mournful nostalgia associated with "big government," we have what might be called the terse memos of a millennial intelligence, which, with their carefully measured staccato rhythms are the harbingers of a new dispensation on the verge of usurping the decrepit Nehruvian throne:

Democracy as we popularly know it cannot coexist with planning; alternatively, planning cannot be done in a democratic set-up.

Actually there is no such thing as "scarce resources." Resources need dynamic effort, and additional development creates additional resources. Any undue control on resources inhibits development and lack of development results in lack of resources. (128-129)

The quick, timely beats of firmly condensed reciprocal structures lend Dubashi's prose a foppish cocksureness of measure that gives the sense that the new dispensation will veritably swagger through what an older order may have perceived as the insurmountable problems of development and scarce resources. At the same time, the terse, indeed stiffly restricted homilic style of the new regime sits rather uneasily with what Dubashi has insisted is the causeless ineffability and sheer sense of liberation afforded by Snakes and Ladders as a conceit for economic life. As such then, Dubashi's rhythm threatens, through the very tightness of its grip, as well as in its stylistic reliance on a swaggering father, to coincide with precisely that syntax of being that Snakes and Ladders had set out to jettison.

Now, the final object for players of Snakes and Ladders is to meander their way through the maze of ups and downs, to be the first one to reach the finish line, and thereby to get off the board. Also, if the game is indeed tied to karmic philosophies of life and rebirth, then the final object in this dispensation too is to find nirvana from the interminable cycle of lives, and thereby, to become one with the Supreme Being who is both outside and inside the board of lives. Yet, as I have mentioned before, in Dubashi's displaced structure there is in fact no outside to the game of Snakes and Ladders: the final object, therefore does not involve reaching the finish line and with the flourish of the winner, realizing an "other" to the banality of the board. Rather, given that the economics ordained by the game is coeval, as Dubashi stresses on several occasions, with the free and democratic expanse of human life itself—"In economics as in life, there are no easy answers" (98), or again, "What is true of companies, is true of life in general"—the object for the players is to enjoy the right to a free life, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs, and beyond all the oppressiveness of Nehruvian-protectionism, to the right to discover all that one is and all that one can be. If the poet in Tagore's work is he who participates in the untimely play of jivalila, and if as such he was the rent consciousness that

inhabited death, or the rhythmic lag between the Sabda Brahman and its blemished heirs, then in Dubashi's scheme of things, the manager is he who inhabits life itself. Unlike chess which was restricted to the courtly order of Rex and Brahmin, the board of Snakes and Ladders horizontally expands itself to cover the whole range of human society, and all are invited onto a board from which there can be no escape. Thus, having set about to liberate economic policy from state-led welfare, Snakes and Ladders brings about a convergence between economics and life, and democratizing itself so far as to ensure that no form of life is left by the wayside itself becomes a fetter for which any notion of an outside would be undemocratic.

The unbearable and indeed agonizing claustrophobia of the total spread of a life coeval with the board of Snakes and Ladders ensures that Dubashi's is a syntax of being in which there can be no questions or problems for all manner on inequality or unevenness has evaporated into the causeless ineffability of nothingness. He creates a style of living in which there are no lags or fissures, for all have been filled to the brim by the indisputable goodness of a free life. In other words, if rhythm for Tagore signaled the lag between mortality and redemption, and the deathly void that was an indispensable partner to the quickness of joyful play, then rhythm for Dubashi indicates something rather different. Both the measured tautness of the grammar that ushers in a changed pattern of thinking and the closely secured rhythm of a game that overwhelms all manner of living in fact signal precisely the closing of the Tagorean lag, for Dubashi's game fills all potentials for the epistemological confrontation of death and its attendant notion of emptiness with a plenitude of life itself. Such a flush of plenitude is so overwhelming because given the karmic resonance of the board of Snakes and Ladders the life that the game ushers in cannot be finite or temporal.

The sequence of lives in Dubashi's version of the sport may not be attached—because of its quintessential commitment to human life and freedom—to the strictly national parameters of

Savarkar's cycle of life and rebirth. No longer must the men and women of the karmic cycle heroically court their right to sacrificial death, and no longer must they forfeit themselves at the altar of Supreme Brahman (or the Hindu state as in Savarkar's Who is a Hindu?), for liberated from the power of the sovereign, the players in Dubashi's game enjoy a fundamental and inalienable right to life. One with the increasingly global spread of free humanity, the board of Snakes and Ladders does not any longer have to concern itself with designating particular corners of the world for civilization, or with choosing particular groups of humans who, given certain privileges, could be inserted into the course of historical development. Instead, overcome by its imperial expanse, masses of life that would otherwise have remained at the margins of society are now invited to join Snakes and Ladders as rightful players, and it is the availability of these masses of life, the promise of an endless cycle of lives, as it were, that allows Dubashi to write: "In an open society as on stage, everyone must act freely, for the show must go on" (188).

From this point forward, it is not difficult to conceive of Dubashi's anticipation of a truly modern democracy, and therefrom of the biopolitics of a society of hedonistic surfeit and mass consumerism. Once all aspects of the mass of human life have, through a total horizontal spread of Snakes and Ladders, been economically ordained, we are ready to inaugurate a rather familiar design in which man's natural life itself comes to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of micro-power. Here, even apparently neutral domains of life will be taken into the care of the economic order (which is also the political order), power will penetrate the very bodies of subjects through the care of biological life and sexuality, and the distinctions between right and left will get so thoroughly confused as to become irretrievably lost. Yet the already dangerous contiguity between modern democracy and totalitarian states that biopower inaugurates through its politicization of every aspect of man's life is complemented in Dubashi's Snakes and Ladders by a further, and even more explicitly stated convergence. In a gesture that

parallels the ban on death by the fundamental right to life in the game, Dubashi relegates history (as well inequality and unevenness) to the status of a “limbo” that can have no place on the board of Snakes and Ladders. Yet, it is of course not surprising that Dubashi’s vibrant and animated game cannot, even if it wants to, accommodate a notion of history that is fettered to the linear passage of time, for such a version of history is also intimately associated with the corollary notion of an absolute past and thereby with the petrifying arrest of life’s vitality. Thus, like the emptiness of death, the limbo of history is in one fell swoop pushed out of Snakes and Ladders, to an outside, which if it exists at all, is as we know undemocratic and therefore unworthy of consideration. Instead of history, then, Dubashi’s book posits what the author calls “time-capsules,” which follow upon one another like bytes of information. As immobilized as those reaches of the world still tied to the fetters of the sovereign, these capsules merely await their inevitable induction into the dynamic folds of a democratic development game (20). The fundamental right to life in Snakes and Ladders: The Development Game and its attendant banishment of the notion of death converge with Dubashi’s pronouncement of the end of inequality which is also the end of history. Therefrom, these become one with the imperial attempt to control the emergence of difference as the very fluidity of time itself, an attempt that we saw come to life in the epic columns and neo-essays of Dubashi’s 1992 compilation, The Road to Ayodhya.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ In the first chapter of the dissertation, “Epic Columns and Neo-essays,” I show how Dubashi’s prose orchestrates a unique historical world-view. Rather than proposing a narrative that unfolds in and with time, Dubashi’s is a system of language in which each sign is merely the perfectly symmetrical repetition of another without any temporally inflected relationships between a sign and its semantic gravitation. I argue that The Road to Ayodhya thus threatens to remove time itself, along with its

constitutive categories of past, present, and future, from a principal role in historical-political visions. In this context, the religiosity of Dubashi's discourse is less a throwback to a premodern and mythic nationalist verve than a highly sophisticated technology of language (the neo-essay is the expressive form that this syntax takes) hoping to control the emergence of epistemological difference as the very fluidity of time itself.

5.0 A BATTLE OF THE BOOKS

There is a fundamental commonality in democratic expression, and that link is forged by the big picture. This is what connects the Gujjar to the Jat and the middle classes to the Adivasis. Yesterday they voted for the BJP and tomorrow they may well opt for the Congress.

For those who vote as Indians, no party is untouchable; it is the ghettoized analyst who believes in exclusion. India may be an infuriatingly complex society but it is also governed by amazingly simple norms of right and wrong. We can call it anti-incumbency, a function of horribly exaggerated expectations or just a simple vote for change. In the end it amounts to the same thing – that Indians vote on moral lines. The successful spin doctor or politician is one who can comprehend that notion of dharna.

“The Notion of Dharma” (2003)

Swapan Dasgupta’s column “The Notion of Dharma” appeared rather unobtrusively in an important online news portal only a few months before the dramatic Indian parliamentary elections of May 2004 in which a coalition led by the Congress emerged surprise victor over the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and its somewhat infamous doctrine of Hindutva. Fervidly publicized for months before the event as the only political formation capable of providing the country with stable government, and of marching a shining new India— which of course we

know as a conceptual function of the road to Ayodhya— into the twenty-first century, the BJP and its allies were nonetheless definitively ousted from the haloed portals of New Delhi.⁶⁶ The event of course made screaming headlines—both national and international—and while Mumbai’s Stock Market hiccupped its way through an anxious few days, the stewardship of state oscillated perilously between Congress Party bigwigs like the highly regarded economist Dr. Manmohan Singh and the enigmatic Italian widow, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi.⁶⁷ Meanwhile global

⁶⁶ An important component of the election campaign waged by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party in the run-up to 2004 was the “India Shining” advertising promotion. The campaign hailed the success of the Indian economy, highlighting high levels of foreign investment particularly in the country’s burgeoning IT and service sectors. Apart from making a bid for the votes of those social layers of the population that had benefited the most from economic restructuring, the promotion was also a pitch for big business, pointing to the current high growth levels and the booming stock exchange and pledging that the program of open market reform would continue unabated. From the opposition, the response to this campaign seemed largely confused. On the one hand, the Congress under Sonia Gandhi claimed that it was in fact preceding Congress regimes that had first inaugurated economic reform of this nature - particularly the regime of P.V. Narasimha Rao whose finance minister Manmohan Singh announced the opening of the Indian market in 1991. On the other hand, the Communist parties and their various factions protested that the BJP had spent an estimated 20 million US dollars to have its advertising promotion aired on all television channels in the major Indian languages. Yet, clearly even whopping spending spree was not enough, for, according to most analyses, the electorate ultimately voted for change based on the widening social chasm between rich and poor in India.

⁶⁷ Sonia Gandhi, the fifty-seven-year-old widow of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi looked all set to become India’s next prime minister following her Congress Party’s

trade pundits clamored to know whether economic reforms and India's fairly youthful open market policies would continue under the new regime, and the American foreign office threatened, yet again, to reconsider India's alternately dipping and bobbing status as the privileged, if subaltern military power central to U.S. interests in Asia.

As the debonair diplomats of 10 Janpath Road weighed their not so varied options, technocratic middle-classes across the country writhed pitifully before the imminent verdict of multi-national corporations and their mysterious investment patterns, and a shell-shocked Hindutva brigade ran helter-skelter to amass its oppositional resources in the face of overwhelming defeat. Not to be left out of the fray, left-liberal thinkers the world over were flush

surprise general election success in May, 2004. Distancing herself from politics after her husband's assassination in 1991, Mrs. Gandhi was initially seen as a reluctant and almost reclusive politician. However, she officially took charge of the Congress party in 1998 and was elected to parliament in the last elections of 2004. After the results of May 2004, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi in a shock decision announced that she did not intend to become India's next Prime Minister and that her party's chosen candidate for the post was Dr. Manmohan Singh. Widely regarded as the architect who inaugurated India's economic reforms and open market policies in 1991, Dr. Manmohan Singh was at the time finance minister in the cabinet of Congress Party Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao. In the anxious days in May when the decision was being made as to who would lead the country, the money markets gave their verdict with share prices rising at the very first rumors that Dr. Manmohan Singh was to be Prime Minister, but the corridors of political power still remain abuzz with doubts about Dr. Singh's ability and experience as a political strategist. The general consensus seems to be that the Prime Minister is a statesman-like figure and the cleanest politician in India and that as such he is a mere façade for the political capital of the Gandhi family, and its latest torch bearer, Sonia Gandhi.

with victory. Intoxicatedly celebrating the strength of Indian democracy, and waxing lyrical about its rush of blood against Hindu fundamentalism, they clairvoyantly divined that this was only the beginning of a series of global insurgencies against religious conservatism more broadly. Yet, such zealously divided blocs notwithstanding, in the heated months of campaigning leading up to the elections, as indeed in the wake of the shock defeat itself, Swapan Dasgupta, a new age public intellectual, who had been perhaps one of the most passionate media ideologues for the BJP and its allies, stayed determinedly away from endorsing the incumbent party. Instead, this strictly Anglophone, urban-metropolitan raconteur—who started his career as a contributor to the distinguished corpus of subaltern historiography—chose with an almost chilling quietude to strategize what he called ‘the silken bond of Indian democracy’.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Once a contributor to the distinguished corpus of subaltern historiography, Swapan Dasgupta is now a Delhi-based journalist who had propped himself up as the rather obsequious media-mascot for the coalition of Saffron powers, when between 1999-2004 they reigned supreme in parliamentary as well as extra-parliamentary politics. Urged on by the proliferation of privatized media spaces in the newly globalized Indian context, Dasgupta’s writing saturates almost all important English dailies and periodicals in the subcontinent, as well as a significant network of cyber spaces on the World Wide Web. He variously refers to himself as a “special columnist,” a “journalist,” a “political columnist” and has recently been roped in to teach journalism at several mushrooming institutes all over the country, and parades as something of a new-age public intellectual—in the same illustrious genealogy as the early twentieth century nationalists—who prophecies on almost every matter, and thereby has the ability to mobilize a new ‘public.’

In particular Dasgupta's December 2003 essay, "The Notion of Dharma" was indicative of this mood. Without directly addressing the issue of particular outcomes and probabilities, the essay plunges headlong into an investigation of what Dasgupta diagnoses as the "inglorious history of election reporting in India" ("The Notion of Dharma" <http://in.rediff.com/news/2003/dec/08swadas.htm>). Locating the origin of this disparaging story at a juncture in those dark ages when "opinion and exit polls had not yet become growth industries and sources of disinformation," Dasgupta cuttingly remarks that this was a charming old-world milieu when only hapless journalists monopolized the privilege of getting electoral forecasts horribly wrong ("The Notion of Dharma"). From this point of departure, "The Notion of Dharma" launches into a latitudinal elaboration of its tale, pointing out that the first in a long continuum of failed media professionals was that most quaint and archaic breed of scrupulous journalists who no matter what they thought, felt compelled by the integrity of their training to offer readers an objective and detached account of the Indian political situation. Racked as it is by an almost dizzying variety of local imponderables—micro-level caste-equations, the dynamics of block level factionalism within parties, and changeful and asymmetrical coalitions between the 'modern centre' and its many satellite bodies of governance—the disinterested presentation of Indian geopolitics produced a type of correspondence that read according to Dasgupta, like "meandering exercises in prevarication" ("The Notion of Dharma"). Not surprisingly, these uninspiring texts proved too bland for the palates of spectacle hungry masses on the brink of discovering the dustier, noisier, hedonism of a fully liberalized media space, and thus the outmoded crop of yesteryear's reporters gave way to a new school of popular correspondents.

With steady cameras on their shoulders and techno-scientific savvy at their beck and call, these dapper men and women trailed passionate politicians into the very hearts of their campaigns, and having abandoned neutrality at the altar of a feverish ardor, produced eminently readable, indeed, riveting copies of the heat and dust of campaigning. Dasgupta quickly goes on to show that even the scribes responsible for this fashionably edgy style, were largely unsuccessful. Indeed, they were only a little less analytically incompetent than an emerging group of competing “pop sociologists” who also lost their way because of too much radical political sentiment and a mulish belief in the naiveté of categories like “grassroots secularism” (“The Notion of Dharma”). Dasgupta’s tale of shame thus hurtles forward, monstrosly mawing down an entire history of election reporting in democratic India, arising like a fire that burns all before it” (Bhagavad Gita, 9). In fact Dasgupta’s history of failure is only gloriously validated when almost in a flash, as is often the case with third world economies that are suddenly swept up by the mercurial speeds of a novel free market, there came a media moment in which even the enormously voguish pop-scribes were, en masse, no longer trendy. Backed by India’s emerging prominence in the giddy highs of the global information revolution, it was now for opinion pollsters and techno-journalists to take centre-stage and reign as the supreme avatars of the new era of information-overload. As empty of political vision as any of their forbears however, these novel soothsayers too continue to fail in their mission, for succumbing to what Dasgupta calls the “celebration of the fragment,” and thereby to a veritable deluge of “pseudo-intellectual inanities,” they merely bring up the anticipated end of a quickly unfolding narrative of ignominy (“The Notion of Dharma”).

The large part of “The Notion of Dharma” is thus taken up by a consistently ironic description—this of course no gentle touch of light and graceful irony, but rather a plodding,

monotonous, and relentlessly acerbic manner of prose—of all methods of journalistic prognostication and descriptive analyses. In adopting such a manner, Swapan Dasgupta hopes to call into being, or to constitutively evoke what in Sara Suleri’s phrase, and particularly in relation to Jay Dubashi’s work, we had called the story of journalism. In that sense, his is indeed the origin of the new story of Hindutva. Yet, Dasgupta sets about his task by first demonstrating a need to sanitize the ground of all the messy business of history that came before his own corrective tale. His history of failure is thus unlike Dubashi’s tableau in The Road to Ayodhya which carefully culling events, personages, and ideas from amidst the clutter of the past, designs a system of simultaneities which the author deems history. According to Suleri, the story of journalism, as we know, necessarily occurs in the absence of precedent, and therefore in this story, impelled relentlessly by the syntax of surprise, history is always of the here and now. In fact, what we see of historical precedent in The Road to Ayodhya is not only rendered syntactically simultaneous with itself, but coincident also with the novelty of the first-hand present. In such a dispensation where the past is coeval with the present which it has become, there is no urgency to clear the ground, for the anarchy of the past was inherent only in its ontological and epistemological distance from present formations. In making this dangerously keen observation Swapan Dasgupta, unlike Jay Dubashi, fails. At the very level of style, acrimony replaces surprise, because the author of “The Notion of Dharma” pledges to syllogistically distinguish his own notion from those that came before, and in the very act of maintaining a syntactic before and after, he admits the possibility of distance and difference. Indeed, it is precisely in the stuttering pauses between this shameful before and the novel, but nonetheless original and dharmic after that Reading, as I hope to show, can take flight.

The primary trouble with all the apparently distinct intelligences that Dasgupta chooses to jettison is brought home and concentrated in his attack on a method based on “the celebration of the fragment”. Called into being by fatuitous cogitations, what he calls the celebration of the fragment is troubling for Dasgupta not only because it is causally related to each of the representative trends responsible for this shame-filled *histoire*, but more specifically, because it is a practice of political thinking from which the category of the average voter has disappeared. Beset by that accursed “celebration of the fragment” the safely rounded contours of the average voter and his manifest will to unite have been replaced with a postmodern patchwork of disaggregated communities, each fractured from the other to such a great degree that none can relate to the “larger picture” that binds them (“The Notion of Dharma”). Yet, according to “The Notion of Dharma”, there is indeed a larger picture, and the still youthful tale of political auguries in India has been a disgraceful one, precisely because caught in the viscous quagmire of descriptive analyses, of proto-intellectual drivel, and indeed, of historicity itself – all of which have only been sharpened by the postmodernist disavowal of autumnal, though still august metanarratives – it has been unable to grasp the cosmic contours of its own more meaningful scope.

Swapan Dasgupta calls this ‘larger picture’ the silken bond of Indian democracy, and in “The Notion of Dharma”, he offers his vision of such a seamless union by concluding his essay with the quite brazen declaration that

There is a fundamental commonality in democratic expression and that link is forged by the big picture. This is what connects the Gujjar to the Jat and the middle classes to the Adivasis. Yesterday they voted for the BJP and tomorrow they may well opt for the Congress. (“The Notion of Dharma”)

The singular monument of a people's expressivity is for Dasgupta much in the nature of a manifest will that is perceptible well before the specifics of a contract, the diagram of rights and duties, or even the representation-based design of a normalized, democratic polity. As we have observed before, coming at the time it does, four months before a fretfully contested election, "The Notion of Dharma" is significant, apart from everything else, because it stays rather pointedly away from the fracas of the battle and resisting the temptation to portend the success of one party over another – "Yesterday they voted for the BJP and tomorrow they may well opt for the Congress" – chooses in fact to contemplate an apriori concept of the political, a haven of harnessed energies, telescoped into, and by, the constitutive oneness of national expressivity ("The Notion of Dharma"). In other words, Dasgupta prophesies that what is at stake in May 2004 is neither this or that factionalism, nor even this or that ideological chic, but precisely the mobilization of a larger picture, an essential, immovable, unshakably united spirit of democracy. Once Dasgupta has invoked this "larger picture," it is retrospectively presumed as the very plinth of governance, for our author's image of democratic expression as a continuous commonality of spirit, is in a grotesque twist, both the spawn of, and the embryo for, his parallel attempt to administer and managerially govern all manner of implosive dissociations, which as Lyotard once put it, "are the basic principle of the task of intelligence" (3). In place of such a seething discordance of unresolved irregularities, "The Notion of Dharma" offers a Leviathan-like project of associative collusion whereby the enduring force of the One that is said to primally move democratic expression in India, becomes, almost inadvertently, the same steadfast union that Dasgupta calls upon to govern discrete heterodoxies of recording and remarking political phenomena. Democratic expression thus emerges not only as just another name for the sacrosanct parameters of consensual nationalism, but also as a mode of governance that

articulates and sustains itself through precisely that notion of consensus, for which any attempt at critical analysis—even if it were only lightly touched by just the shadowy specter of an inquiring mind—is a hideous condition of exception.

In so far as it designates divisive modes of thinking and remarking political events as the exception to democratic consensus “The Notion of Dharma” writes itself into a fairly familiar and indeed globally resonant political discourse, and one that has become increasingly powerful at least ever since the devastation of September 11, 2001. The echoes are indeed so striking as to be almost eerie. In the course of the heated activity of crisis management after the attacks on the World Trade Center, a report was produced by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, for instance, entitled, “Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It”. This conservative academic council which was in fact founded by U.S. second lady, Lynne Cheney – whose own therapeutic response to 9/11 took the form of a sustained effort to reinvigorate American Studies and pedagogically instill traditional American values by canonical interventions in the field – claimed primarily that university professors and officials were “the weak link in America’s response to September 11 (“Defending Civilization,” <http://www.goacta.org/publications/Reports/defciv.pdf>).” The problem outlined in the document emphasized the fact that in the name of giving context to September 11 and consequently sharing information about other cultures, university faculty, unlike professionals in other fields, had not followed the American President “in calling evil by its rightful name” (“Defending Civilization”). According to the report, “many faculty demurred. Some refused to make judgments.” Thus the “nation’s intellectuals” were designated “short on patriotism” because in their reluctance to defend its civilization “they [gave] comfort to its adversaries” (“Defending Civilization”). Evidently however, there is a more profound challenge concealed in the rhetoric

of “Defending Civilization”. The first problem is that in not following the call of the president and its parroted echo with professionals in other fields, intellectuals constitute an exception to the schemata of consensual democracy. Secondly, armed with their tools for critically thinking language itself as a diffuse design of socio-political power, and with their intellectual commitments to other languages and other histories, they refused to clearly name and judge evil, thus interrupting the agenda of soliciting consensus. In an effort to emphatically affirm the threat inherent in fracturing the process of a consensual response to 9/11, “Defending Civilizations” statistically enumerates 117 campus incidents around the country as empirical “evidence” of anti-Americanism, almost artfully therefore orchestrating a convergence between such unpatriotic bents of mind and the tendency of university faculty to debate in the name of democracy, rather than unify. If intellectuals in North American universities were thus named the perfidious flaw in the silken bonds of a consensual democracy, then in the Indian context, “The Notion of Dharma” designates journalistic and proto-scholarly investigation as the disruptive exception to a similar universalization of national consensus. In other words, much like the report produced by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, Dasgupta’s essay engenders a smooth, svelte continuity between the exception to democratic norms and an implicit category of anti-Indian-ness, such that to be undemocratic in Dasgupta’s sense is to be branded anti-Indian, just as to engender debate in the classical democratic sense is to in fact be anti-American.

This is why even as he engages in a rather familiar and increasingly visible reordering of dissociative intelligences Dasgupta never loses sight of the particularity of the Indian situation. The immediate problem for “The Notion of Dharma” is the intricate filigree of multiplicitous religious, linguistic, casteist, ethnic, and ideological units – which in many ways defined and founded the specificity of the immediate post-independence Indian context – and the potentially

difficult relation of these with what “The Notion of Dharma” offers as the homogenizing urge of democratic expression. In the face of such a treacherous terrain, perplexed as it is by numerous and competing coalitions, Dasgupta faults a slough of false histories and feeble literatures which he argues have over the years only served to thwart and choke the wholesome texture of democratic politics in India. In their stead, Dasgupta simply proposes that India may be an unyieldingly complex social fabric, it may wrenched this way and that by so many local fidelities, and so many struggling sultanisms, but “it is also governed by amazingly simple norms of right and wrong” (The Notion of Dharma”). For “The Notion of Dharma”, these simple norms of right and wrong are expressed in the fact that no matter what their political affinities, “Indians vote on moral lines,” and in the terms of the essay, such a convergence is possible only because as a national people, Indians are made synthetically uniform by a hereditary concurrence with the sombre sameness of dharma:

In the end it amounts to the same thing – that Indians vote on moral lines. The successful spin doctor or politician is one who can comprehend that notion of dharma (“The Notion of Dharma”).

Presented in this manner as the principal and indeed sole spur for the political choices of Indians as a national people, Dasgupta’s essay thus unveils dharma qua morality as the One monotheistic principle that authorizes social-political aggregations in the Indian context, and permits thereby, the imagination of a cohesive national whole, purged and bled of its own demons, its own degenerate descent into a heady celebration of the disaggregated fragment.

As such of course, dharma, which is now contracted with ‘morality,’ constitutes what Dasgupta calls the larger picture, which is in turn coincident with the placid smoothness of Indian democracy, such that the three categories—morality-dharma-democracy—are locked in a

blessed syntactic trinity, each point in the triad being transparently and instantaneously concurrent with the other. On the one hand then, Dasgupta's essay strips each of its gods—dharma, morality, and democracy—of all potential heretical fragmentation and ceremoniously renders every one, separately, as a self-sustaining principle of piety. On the other however, and at the same time, the essay always presents its divinities as part of one grammar, as an irreversibly welded godhead, and as the synonymous triumvirate of a foundational political legitimacy. At the very apex of the Indian polity, the violently forged unicity of dharma is thus indistinguishable, in Dasgupta's view, from democratic expression as a “fundamental commonality” rather than a pagan proliferation of discontinuities, just as the even tenor of such democracy is then equated with a monotheism of moral fervor, which in turn completes the circle of identities through a returning synergy with dharma. This paradoxical move both toward and away from each other is an important one. For it is only because the three points in the sacred trio are at once mutually exclusive, as well as a deified whole, that democracy and morality can through the intervention of the singular force of dharma, be awarded a specifically Indian ontology. Thus, despite spreading its inalienable tentacles to embrace a transnational morality of common democratic expression, “The Notion of Dharma” never loses sight of a clearly identifiable Indian-ness, which unambiguous as it is, points rather sharply to a its own counterpart in a clearly binarized anti-Indianness. It is on the strength of this clearly identifiable authenticity, allied as it is with the global power of moral democracy, that Dasgupta feels qualified to forward a political vision with the power to negotiate even the apparently insurmountable divisiveness of that most quaint of Indian beliefs in the caste-system.

In other words, despite the challenge that casteist friction continues in a myriad of distinct ways, to plague the modern secular fibers of a democratic Indian state, Dasgupta

proclaims, with an almost epiphanic élan, that consolidated by its merger with the faultless balance of a dharmic morality, the schismless tie of democratic expression has the power to banish from its moral kingdom even the most ossified caste differences between the Jat and the Gujjar, let alone the less irremediable problem of class divides between the adivasis and the middle classes. However, lest he be charged with obfuscating a defining trait of authentic Indianness, Dasgupta does not fail to paradoxically gesture toward a residual notion of finely stratified and hierarchical caste units; only, he does so rather craftily, remarking quietly that “For those who vote as Indians, no party is untouchable; it is the ghettoized analyst that believes in exclusion” (“The Notion of Dharma”).

The notion of untouchability of course slides almost furtively into this turn of phrase, and affixes itself not as one would expect, to an intricately calibrated division of endogamous and occupationally specialized human populations but rather to relations between the ‘Indian voter’ and this or that political party. Yet, since in Dasgupta’s essay, “for those who vote as Indians no party is untouchable,” the category itself is transformed from a marker of authentic Indianness into a principal token of anti-Indianness. That is, untouchability becomes, in a paradoxical neo-Brahminical distortion, the mindless invention of the analyst, for whom exclusionary modes of thinking are in themselves a faith – “For those who vote as Indians no party is untouchable; it is the ghettoized analyst that believes in exclusion”. The ghettoized analyst becomes in this way, the ur unpatriotic representative, for in a macabre anti-Indian rendering of the old caste custom, he is exiled from the warp and woof of the larger picture. Borrowed from the innermost quarters of urban squalor, ghettoization therefore crystallizes in “The Notion of Dharma”, into a modern incarnation of what for Dasgupta is an obsolete notion of caste division. For after all it is indeed the ghettoized analyst who anachronistically preserves a memory of casta, by designating this or

that party untouchable to the voter, while being completely oblivious of the idea that for those who are bound by a democratic, dharmic, and moral identification of national sameness, there are no codes of untouchability.⁶⁹

5.1 A WINGÉD DHARMA

“The Notion of Dharma” is no doubt a telling title for an essay that sets out to re-imagine the very foundations of the Indian polity, for dharma has historically been at the forefront of perhaps the most transformative occasions in the subcontinental context. From the dharmayuddh of the Mahabharata with its resonances of ‘just war’ to Mahatma Gandhi’s call, in the face of a grotesque expression of religio-ethnic fundamentalisms, for the practice of sarva dharmasambhava or equal respect for all dharmas.⁷⁰ Despite the fact that a primary unifying impulse underlies both Gandhi’s call and Dasgupta’s vision of a fundamental commonality of democratic expression, “The Notion of Dharma” is perhaps more remarkably proximate with that

⁶⁹ The term ‘caste’ was first used by Portuguese travelers who came to India in the Sixteenth Century. The word comes from Spanish and Portuguese casta, meaning ‘race,’ ‘breed,’ or ‘lineage,’ and I retain this word here to allow for these lost senses to be resurrected in a neo-Brahminical climate that is particularly interested in consolidating ‘lineages’ of thought which have the ability to oust and pietistically make untouchable other strands of expression.

⁷⁰ Mahatma Gandhi’s call for sarva dharmasambhava, or equal respect and tolerance for all religions was borrowed from a Vedantic idea which in turn came from I.164.46 of the Rg Veda: Ekam sad; vipra bahudha vadanti (while Truth is one, the wise describe it in different ways)

momentous prior occasion on the battlefield of Kurukshetra when two of the most volatile armies in the subcontinental landmass are on the brink of a war that promises to transform the political topography of the Ganga Valley. This is the occasion when, Krishna, announcing himself as the divine being who simultaneously heralds and engineers the battle of Kurukshetra as indeed dharma yuddh, divinely declares that as the avatar of Vishnu, he will walk the earth in the ages that pass, when in the worldly kingdom of man dharma is weak and falters, and adharmā prevails as sovereign master of all it encounters:

Yada yada hi dharmasya
glānir bhavati Bharata
Abhyutthanam adharmasya
tadatmanam srijamyaham
Paritrānaya sadhunam
vīnasaya cha dushkritam
Dharma—samthapanarthaya
sambhavami yuge yuge

When dharma is weak and faints and adharmā
exults in pride, then my Spirit arises on earth
For the salvation of those who are good, for the destruction
of evil in men, for the fulfillment of the kingdom of
dharma, I come to this world in the ages that pass. (Bhagavad Gita, 23).

On the one hand, Krishna's promise to fulfill the ideal kingdom of dharma was to prefigure eighteen days of battle in which the violent dharma of the warrior would do a frenzied

dance of death amidst the severally gathered clans of the competing Kaurava and Pandava armies. On the other, the avatar's divine proclamation heralds even more destruction to come, its rousing rhythmic pitch – at once seductive and elevating – hypnotically ordaining the struggle between dharma and a-dharma as the very bedrock for multiple and continuing waves of messianic reversal. Yet Krishna's sacred enunciation is not merely the harbinger of war, be it in the immediate future of the battle of the Kurus, or in the promise of many messiahs to come. Indeed, it is in itself a battle, a reality – whose traces are borne by the very shape of Krishna's words – in conflict with the contestatory reality offered by the Lord's own warrior-protégé Arjuna. The epic hero's interlocution, his resolve to lay down arms in the face of fratricidal battle against his kinsmen, his gurus and his friends, does not merely represent, but is in fact an earlier reality of patterns of human aggregation and polity. As such it is unceasingly resistant, difficult, and crisscrossed by labyrinthine textual histories and tortuously tangled authorities. Thus even the avatar's words – which do not merely augur war, but are in themselves in battle with Arjuna's words – must violently agitate against these, and indeed successfully topple them before it is to arrive at a decisive departure, one that will then herald the carefree beginnings of a new world order.

Against the backdrop of an epic Kurukshetra, as the armies of the warring Bharata clan ready to close in on each other, cymbals clamoring, war drums rumbling, men and beasts strained to the thick surge of a ritualistic invocation to war, Arjuna, the mighty marksman of the Pandavas, is beset as we know, by a host of dharmic misgivings. Already, in the “Santiparvan” episode of the Mahabharata, Arjuna's revered elder, the grand patriarch of the Kuru clan, had waxed eloquent on the limits of the rights of kings specifically in relation to the sovereignty of dharma, and given the authoritative tenor of Bhisma's discourse, Arjuna's unease is not

surprising. According to Bhisma, the ideal raja is decisively subordinate to the kingdom of dharma, he must protect the dharma of the clan and the dharma of the country, the dharma of the weak and helpless and the dharma of women, the dharma of the castes, and the dharma of ascetics, and finally, the dharma of the old, and of that of the teachers, so as to uphold the poise of the world, according to the Atharva Veda. Indeed, in so far as dharma has priority over any mundane force, the earthly regent must be able to call into being a regnum by providing conditions for the practice of dharma, without himself voraciously devouring the legislative function as a whole. Moreover, according to Bhisma, the wise prince must always respect all expressions of dharmic multiplicity and his estate must be a space in which one strand of dharma catastrophically balances against the other in a precarious architecture of at least four asymmetrically related sources: good custom or customary practice, memory and tradition, the reasoning of the virtuous, and the approval of conscience. In different versions, this quartet of sources weaved in and out of a bewildering range of law books, training manuals, treatises on statecraft, and practical guide books on the art of warfare, and Bhisma's discourse on the role of the Prince vis-à-vis a protean intricacy of multifarious dharmic obligations is undoubtedly in conversation with contemporary texts composed in and around the dates accorded to the Mahabharata (400 B.C. to 400 A.D.) just as it is with the Vedic literature itself. For instance, Kautilya's Arthashastra – a manual of statecraft which appeared in c.250 B.C. – does not seem to diverge very sharply from the words of the deathless patriarch of the Kurus, at least in so far as it proclaims that “the ultimate source of all law is dharma” and that the King is responsible for preserving dharma through the maintenance of order and stability, rather than for himself making law (Arthashastra, 378-379). Similarly, the Laws of Manu or the Manavadharmasastra, that favorite child of the British which appeared a few centuries after the Arthashastra follows along a

like vein, somewhat grandiosely pronouncing customary practice as the highest dharma (acarah paramo dharmah), and thereby calling into relief Kautilya's dictum that even in the territories acquired by conquest, the victorious prince must respect the regional dharmas of his vanquished subjects.⁷¹ After Manu came Dharmasastras attributed to Yajnavalkya, Vishnu, Narada, Brhaspati and Katyayana, all of which, with only slight variations proposed that the King should likewise leave the 'custom' of regions, groups, and families untouched, allowing them to remain

⁷¹ Kautilya became counselor and adviser to King Chandragupta (c.321 - c.297) of the Mauryan Empire of Northern India, and the Arthashastra is awarded these same approximate dates. Kautilya's treatise came to be Chandragupta's guide and legend has it that as a principal aspect of Mauryan statecraft, it was instrumental in helping Chandragupta to overthrow the powerful Nanda dynasty at Pataliputra, Magadha. Lost for centuries, the book was discovered in 1905. Compared by many to Machiavelli and by others to Aristotle and Plato, Kautilya is alternately condemned for his principles of ruthlessness and trickery in government and praised for his sound political wisdom. Almost all authorities however agree that the Mauryan Empire under Chandragupta and later under Asoka (c.265 - c.238) was a model of efficient governance. The Manavadharmasastra was compiled quite late in c.200 CE. but still within the dates ascribed to the Mahabharata 400 B.C - 400 A.D. The book is ascribed to Manu, said to be the father of the human race, the first man. Manu's writings prescribe a particular ideal of society conforming to detailed social and ritualistic laws, which most commentators have read as a justification of Brahminical supremacy. Given that the text was translated by William Jones in 1794 and henceforth adopted as a tool for administering the 'law' to essentially 'unknowable' natives, the textual domination of 'The Laws of Manu' conceals the fact that it was just one set of laws amongst others which have both complemented and contradicted Manu.

the fragmentary, punctual, and discrete emanations of nomadically moving populations, rather than petrifying them into the uniform grammar of a consistently unfolding tale.⁷²

For Manu, Kautilya, and Bhisma, amongst others, customary practice clearly served to limit the power of the king, but given that ‘good custom’ could be monopolized almost entirely by those who knew the Vedic texts, it was in danger of becoming a hideous behemoth in the hands of Brahminical theologians who were after all the sole masters of the primal books. To check the power of the scriptural tradition and to split the poles of political sovereignty along two alternate, but complementary lines – raj and Brahman, rex and flamen, romulus and numa – books of law and statecraft were pressured to imagine a lost Veda. The fathomless mysteries of this endlessly enigmatic hymn were henceforth developed as a hermeneutic strategy for theoretically deriving all dharma from the Vedas (in other words, Vedic texts were retrospectively inferred from Custom), while in practice providing for a multiplicity of other sources. Yet apart from the fact that customary practice bore the scars of vagrant clans and their potentates who continually moved in search of another conquest, customs were also subject to the effect of time, and given the pressures of contemporaneity, some customs even passed almost completely into oblivion. Thus, alongside the appeal to the bottomless depths of the lost Veda, a bevy of commentators and digest writers, that is, men of reasoning and of good conscience, relentlessly worked towards providing contemporary and always changeful interpretive frameworks for the venerable old law books. Even while the basic texts remained the same then,

⁷² While the Dharmasastras are largely addressed to individuals, the Arthasastra is addressed primarily to the prince as a guide for the art of government, but both texts on dharma addressed to individuals and texts on artha that were meant for the purposes of princely training infringed quite freely on each others’ territories.

dharma was empowered to cope with flux, with durational antinomies, with quickly transforming geo-political situations, with the predatory movements of kings and their armies on the one hand, and the erratic, excrescent wanderings of migratory filiations on the other. In other words, scriptural dharma acquired its juridical function by its agreement with customary rule and customary rule by its agreement with good conscience and reasoning, so that what came into being as a result of such a dense, thickly layered field was an incredibly restless and adulterous set of righteous practices. Skirting in and around one another and still transgressing and contaminating each others limits, these interpretations of what was right may no doubt have been locked in sudden bursts of antagonistic conflict, but it was the royal function of the prince to sustain them in a catastrophic balance of dharmic concord. Schooled in such a modality of thinking, Arjuna is responsible for drawing not only on the discourse of Bhisma, the Manavadharmasastra, the Arthasastra, and the other Dharmasastras, but more importantly, for endorsing the basic interpretive impulse that shaped these books, and therefore, with maintaining at least the semblance of equilibrium, even in the face of the bellicose exception. The peerless Pandava marksman is thus smitten by terror at the prospect of disturbing the sovereign poise of that which sustains the world as he knows it, and in the Bhagavad Gita, he offers Krishna a terrible vision of a world collapsing, at each link in its constitutive chain, into utter disorder, complete chaos:

The destruction of a family destroys its rituals of righteous-
-ness, and when the righteous rituals are no more, unright-
-eousness overcomes the whole family.

When unrighteous disorder prevails, the women sin and
are impure; and when women are not pure, Krishna, there

is disorder of castes, social confusion.

....

Those evil deeds of the destroyers of a family, which cause this social disorder, destroy the righteousness of birth and the ancestral rituals of righteousness. (Bhagavad Gita, 7)

Arjuna's apocalyptic vision in these verses and his implicit gesture towards what an ideal regnum ought to be, smacks rather compellingly of Bhishma's earlier musings. Yet, as it happens, to become the glorious hero that he is, Krishna's warrior-ward must liberate his mind from these dreadful forebodings of a tumultuous convulsion in the universe, and he must understand that the kinsmen, gurus, companions and friends that he has been called upon to slaughter, have already succumbed to the instantaneity of godly vision. In a word, he must abjure his particular notion of dharma at the altar of the sovereign decisionism of his divine charioteer. Pressured in this way to relinquish his princely training and the wisdom bequeathed him by his teachers, Arjuna thus forfeits an entire hermeneutic science at the temple of Krishna's divine ordinance, proclaiming as it does Kurukshetra the exceptional condition in which the dharma of warrior supercedes all other conflicting strands. It is in this sense that the avatar's impulse to fetter the inconstant laws that rule his protégé's being – as regent of a people, as kinsman, as disciple – into a “fundamental commonality” of warrior-like expression, is a battle against Arjuna's dharma, the textual histories that have constituted him as the model warrior-hero and the authorities that allow him to inhere as such (“The Notion of Dharma”). Yet in the new dispensation, Arjuna will be able to princely only if Krishna is victorious, that is, if he succeeds in convincing the hero of the Pandavas to brush aside and dispose with precisely those tangled interpolative practices which had so far legitimated his way of being. In other words, the epic hero must cast off at least

a few centuries of political and philosophical commentary, a voluminous corpus of scholarly work, a whole set of interpretive acts, which accompanied the ‘older style of politics,’ and which with the upheaval of the great war was fated to pass into the groundless haze of oblivion. The tragedy of Kurukshetra is thus not only as Romila Thapar tells us the tragedy of the passing of an earlier political design, and the shift from a fluid lineage-based style of aggregation to the uniform design of the monarchical state. It is also the tragedy of the passing of a canon of commentary, a modality of organizing the asynchronous pressures of polity, and a science of hermeneutics that adapted itself to the nimble nomadism of multiple quasi-vagabond clans, fretfully moving in search of new lands, now prostrating themselves before the dharma of one region, now the other, often penetrating new topographies with their own dharmic innovations.

One of the most important of these dharmic innovations, if you will, had come about with the teachings of the Buddha (563 – 483 B.C.E) who tirelessly traveled the countryside questioning the divine status of Vedic literature, and preaching an ascetic abnegation of the ritual economy of Brahminical Vedism altogether. By the time of the Bhagavad Gita which is believed to belong to about the second century before the Christian era, the Brahminical ritual economy based on the authority of the Vedas was quickly plunging into marasmic disrepair, and especially around the political landscape of Kurukshetra where the war of the Bharatas is set, the increasing challenge posed by renunciant moksha and nirvana-oriented groups (particularly the Buddhists, Jains, and Ajivikas) only served to first inaugurate, and then hasten this ruinous process of decay. The heterodox renouncers no doubt marked a radical departure from the life-affirming values of Vedic Brahminism – which of course was no silken whole, and in fact had its own continuing history of skeptical detractors – but the dharma of Buddhist philosophies, nonetheless shared many of the same concerns as the dharma of ‘Brahminical literature.’ J.N. Mohanty points out in

Classical Indian Philosophy that in some of the earliest Buddhist philosophies, a padartha (Substance) was called dharma, yet in the thinking of most individual philosophers of this time, such dharma was a point-instance, rather than an abiding and undeviating substantiality.⁷³ Believing as they did that all entities are momentary, the early Buddhists were involved in rather lively debates about whether past, present, and future had a different ontological status and if so, how much change, or permanence would be compatible with the nonsubstantiality and transience of a dharma. In other words, men like Ghosaka, Buddhadeva, and Vasumitra were troubled by the question of whether at all they could speak of one single dharma or whether dharmas were

⁷³ This analysis of dharma in early Buddhist philosophies is however one of many ways of understanding dharma in Buddhism. For instance, for practicing Buddhists, dharma also refers to the teachings of the Buddha, and is sometimes called Buddha-dharma. Yet, dharma is in this sense the universal law, and to call it Buddha-dharma would suggest that there are other kinds of dharma. But this is not so, for according to this view, there is only dharma; the term Buddha-dharma merely refers to the fact that the universal law was discovered by the Buddha, not created by him. The status of dharma is regarded differently by discrete lines of Buddhist thinkers. Some regard it as an ultimate and transcendent truth which is absolutely beyond worldly matters, others who regard the Buddha as simply an enlightened human being see the dharma as constituting the 84,000 different teachings (the Kanjur) that the Buddha gave to various types of peoples based on their needs. Still others see dharma as an all-inclusive category which embraces not just the sayings of the Buddha but even later traditions of interpretation and explication that the various schools of Buddhism developed to elaborate the Buddha's teachings. The dharma is generally agreed to be one of the three jewels of Buddhism – the Buddha or the perfection and enlightenment of the mind, the dharma (teachings or methods) and the Sangha or a council of awakened beings who provide guidance and support. The theorization of dharma that I refer to here is

irredeemably tainted by the changefulness of time. Was the same woman wife, sister, and daughter, or did the substance of ‘woman-ness,’ transform itself in its discrete, radically protean states? The concern of the early Buddhists with continually mutating dharmas, and their inexhaustible generation of geometrically progressing asymmetrical relations – the same substance could be in its past, present, or future states, but also it could develop progressing attributes, for instance in relation to other substances in different states – thus in many ways strengthened, rather than weakened the legislative language of the Sastras and the epics. Of course, the Vedic literature itself had been compelled, as we have seen, to imagine a changeful and wavering dharma, and at least in this case, it was not necessarily in fundamental conflict with the otherwise heterodox impulses of emerging Buddhist philosophies. In such a difficult and indeed resistant landscape, branded as it was by faithless and erratic strands of dharma, Krishna intervenes to extinguish the very grounds for pluralized irregularities, claiming the caprice of time in the sheer span of a cosmological vision that embraces the entirety of past, present and future in one instant, and yoking multifarious dharmic obligations into a monologue of the one dharma of the warrior.

It is in this sense that Dasgupta’s monotheistic reordering of dharma into a trope that expresses “a fundamental commonality of expression” and his attempt to arrest the heterodox humors of disaggregated communities into one moral fervor is critically contiguous with Lord Krishna’s invocation to the divine trikaal darshan (“The Notion of Dharma”). Calling upon a prophetic vision that saturates the contingency of governance – and therefore the very need for interpretation – with the supreme sway of godly seeing, Arjuna’s charioteer had asserted his sovereign will precisely by brusquely brushing aside the wanton dishabille of myriad interpretive practices, which despite their variable, essentially changeful nature, had come to constitute a

complete and self-sustaining exegetical ethics. Similarly, in Swapan Dasgupta's hands, not only is dharma stripped of all potential multiplicity—becoming thereby a safely placid synonym for the already achieved union of democracy and morality—but also it is simultaneously released from the unbearable burden, the baffling surfeit, of its own textual dynamism. Indeed, despite the fact that dharma for Dasgupta retains, indeed, proudly parades its cosmological-mythic scope, the essay uses extremely sophisticated means to ensure that while being the very ontos of all historical-political manifestations, the notion of dharma is uncontaminated by the slough of its own heterogeneous beginnings, its own stories of unrequited struggles and unresolved affinities, its own agonistic processes of growth and evolvment, its own army of metaphors and metonyms whose shape bears a snarled and many-pronged reality. Instead the notion of dharma is given gossamer wings as it rises high above the mystifying knottedness of material inscriptions, comfortably making the world its home and happily inhabiting the same syntactic continuum as globally recognizable tokens like democracy and morality. Rendered airy, light, and buoyant, the apparently emancipatory notions of dharma, democracy, and morality thus become paradoxically locked in one stifling lexical embrace from which there can be no escape. What happens as a result is that instead of being engaged—as it was for instance, in the hands of the nationalist revolutionaries against the British Crown—in a relentless battle with an entire machinery of political practices imported from the West, dharma at once moves outward in a benignly globalizing movement, and inward, in an arrogant national exclusivity.⁷⁴ Emerging as an earlier

⁷⁴ In the face of the nationalist struggle against the British Crown, a long line of iconic literary-political thinkers took up the slogan of dharma, making it resonate in discrete ways with their own interpretations of Krishna's words on the great battlefield of Kurukshetra. Indeed, men as far apart as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Vinayak

Damodar Savarkar on the one hand, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi on the other, identified the Krishna of the Gita as the most effective face of the nationalist cause, and dharma – with its attendant notions of authority and legitimation – came to be culled, at least for the nationalist revolutionaries, largely in conversation with the discourse of this text. Yet, this was not to say that the category was not even during the nationalist struggle, embattled, besieged, pockmarked and mottled by a myriad conflicting interpretive mobilizations. If Bankim in his Dharmatattva had offered readers a Socratic dialogue between a guru and his disciple in which dharma now emerged as ‘culture,’ now as the constant substance of all religions, and now as the very bedrock of humanistic thinking, then Tilak had argued that even if the avatar of Vishnu had already come and gone, Krishna’s elaboration of the dharma of the warrior constituted a book of law powerful enough to replace the Indian Penal Code itself. In a similarly divergent vein, if for Savarkar in The Indian war of Independence, 1857, dharma vis-à-vis the philosophy of rebirth, was the sovereign principle that could call into being a national citizenry defined and founded, not by ‘the rights of man,’ but by its inalienable and relentlessly recursive potential for martyrdom, then for Gandhi, dharma signaled a way of being in the world, an ethics of acts, and an exemplary practice of worldliness whereby the life of man became his message. Their distinct critical perspectives notwithstanding, for the pioneers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century struggle against British Raj, dharma with the traces it bore of multiple realities was a useful alternative to the many sovereign banners under which the English sahibs traded and warred. In confrontation with the supreme sweep of English history, English education, English Law, and English religion, dharma threatened to birth a discourse in its own right, bringing with it a gamut of institutions, a voluminous scholarly corpus, a systematic vocabulary, a powerful set of images and doctrines, a reason as it were to battle and to vanquish, and even an entire political architecture, fit to compete with the supremacy of western rule. Peddled as a category that arched like a colossus over a range of texts extending from the Vedas to the Dharmasastras and the

name for ‘democracy,’ and therefore as an originary monument or primal chasm, this archetypal Hindu category hideously wolfs down all possible emergent formations in the realm of politics, while at the same time candidly erasing both itself and its allied forces of any bonds with the sacrilege of a worldly past.

As Dasgupta exhausts the course of his writing with a vitriolic disavowal of the inglorious history of all forms of intellectual output whether they be produced by hapless scholars struggling to theorize the political, or more well-accommodated statistical pundits engaging in their own version of pseudo-prophetic endeavours, he ritually prepares the ground for dharma to reveal itself as a pristine entity, purified and sanitized of its own enunciative potential. In fact, given the terms of his essay, we know even before we reach the conclusion – which is in fact the only occasion in which dharma is actually mentioned – that to think dharma historically, indeed to think any political category historically, would be equivalent to preventing the apprehension of actual political realities. Yet despite being so pietistically cleansed of the

Dharmasutras, from the epics to the Puranas, and from the annals of Sanskrit poetics to the Arthashastra, dharma was to prove conclusively once and for all, that even the doggedly reposeful Oriental had a dense textuality, a long and varied tradition of governance, a complex array of intellectual ideas, a regularized system of administration, and a history of sovereign power that long pre-dated that of the King’s Men. In that sense, it was to be the Frankenstein of Orientalist knowledges, the love-child that turned monster and knowing itself as irrevocably ‘other,’ refused to remain inert. Threatening to conjure a world entirely its own, such a notion of dharma was to mobilize armies, it was to call into being affections, overthrow the penal code, breed an entire line of pundits, invoke institutions, and above all, signal a distinct change of guard, and render the Orient once again invincible, impenetrable, even fatal, to the dazzling brilliance of the gods of light.

contaminating conditions of its material existence, when the notion of dharma does appear in Dasgupta's syntax, it appears unpredictably, like a false note in the midst of the most smoothly orchestrated symphony of signs – “In the end it amounts to the same thing – that Indians vote on moral lines. The successful spin doctor or politician is one who can comprehend that notion of dharma (emphasis mine)”. The instant at which the trope of dharma strikes is a discordant moment of surprise, for despite Dasgupta's most patient efforts, the adjectival inflection – that notion of dharma – cannot help but introduce into the act of reading, layers of palimpsestically lingering realities and thereby the numerous heterogeneous exegeses that dharma brings in its wake.⁷⁵ In other words, Dasgupta's writing makes it difficult to escape its own irrevocable gesture towards the fact that the realm of the political must come to terms with that notion of

⁷⁵ By the time Dasgupta is writing, the colonial combat over dharma is already an inescapable part of his usage, and indeed, “The Notion of Dharma” cannot but help to be part of this illustrious genealogy. Not surprisingly, it parades itself in much the same way as the dharma of the early nationalists, that is to say, as a slogan heralding a clean epistemic break from oppressive conditions, an emancipatory rupture with the past of shameful histories, and an invigorating air of new beginnings, liberated in Copernican shifts from the unbearable burden of precedence. Yet the essay is also distinct, in significant ways, from the work of Dasgupta's forebears, at least in so far as it stays away very decidedly from precisely that rich, if bewildering textual tradition that had made dharma significant to men like Bankim, Tagore, Gandhi, and Tilak. That is to say, if the early thinkers of nationalism made the most of the multiplicitous resonances of dharma and thus foregrounded and consistently privileged the dense textualities with which the category had come to be, then Dasgupta engages in a contrary task, sweeping away in his zeal to promote a monologue of dharma, an entire baffling history of remarking and recording political phenomena.

dharma, but only in opposition to an implicit heterogeneity of this notion, or perhaps, some other. Once the warring writerly inscriptions of dharma have seeped into Dasgupta's work, it is as if the essay takes a completely different turn, one that is startlingly enough, ignorant of its own beginnings. No longer is Dasgupta struggling to mark a new point of departure released from the impossible complexity of history, no longer is the objective to peremptorily jettison intellectual inanities in favour of actual political realities, and no longer does our author, with a Nietzschean flourish, pretend to inaugurate a novel modality of thinking that can kill the past in the hope of resurrecting life. Indeed, "The Notion of Dharma" almost fatefully ends with an invocation to precisely that intellectual history which it had arrogantly abandoned and it is in an almost hushed expression, a faintly whispered aside that we read Dasgupta saying: "History does not just happen. It has to be made to happen" ("The Notion of Dharma").

The two short staccato sentences bring up the conclusion of the essay, and not surprisingly they constitute a paragraph on their own, which, like a low incestuous murmur whispers that history is a profoundly worldly process of making, still unresolved, still being made, still open to the presences of the emergent, the insurgent, the unrequited, the unexplored. Yet this somewhat surprising volte face is not completely unexpected. For we must recall that after the great war of the Bharatas came to its sordid end, even Krishna, the divine avatar of Vishnu, the godly charioteer who pronounced the coming of multiple and continuing waves of messianic reversal, had almost bashfully distanced himself from his own words in the Bhagavad Gita. The transformation had crystallized in the Anugita, a later section of the Mahabharata set in an opulently languid milieu, with Krishna and his warrior-disciple leisurely dallying amidst the imperial trappings of what is described as a certain portion of the palace that resembled heaven. Content and fulfilled in the sole supremacy of the Pandavas after their momentous victory on the

bleeding battlefield of Kurukshetra. Krishna is soon to leave the celebratory air of Hastinapura for his own palace at Dvarka, and given his impending departure, Arjuna is downcast, the flush of victory threatened by pangs of despair. Apprehending the return of the same agonistic dilemma that had crippled him in the field of battle, Arjuna asks Krishna on the eve of his departure to recount for him the reassuring words of the Gita. But this time it is the avatar himself, rather than the dithering epic hero, who is struck by a crippling inability. When he spoke on the battlefield of the Kurus he had surpassed even himself, for in that critical situation he was inspired and in a state of exaltation, accompanied by the powers of the supreme Brahman. Bereft of his sovereign abilities, which, displaced from his person, now find a home in the promulgations of the text itself, Krishna will no longer be able to recapture the words of the Gita, and indeed, all he can do in an attempt to assuage his disciple's fears, is assume the aspect of a story-teller, relate ancient parables upon the subject, and hope that Arjuna has the deductive arsenal to be enabled by them in much the same way as he was invigorated by the Gita itself. In a word, all Krishna can do is perform the work of interpretation, thereby bequeathing the Gita a flawed earthliness subject to the contaminations, involvements, and interests of a profoundly irreverent, worldly existence. The avatar thus self-admittedly engages precisely in that task of explication and interpolative elaboration which his own words in the Bhagavad Gita had set out to erase, as it cut away in one fell swoop of blessed vision, lines of thinking as powerful as those in the Arthashastra, the Dharmasastras, the Mahabharata, and even the Vedas themselves.⁷⁶ In

⁷⁶ The Gita has of course been repeatedly categorized as a high-Brahminical text, which in the face of the increasing power of Buddhist and Jain heterodoxies, sought to consolidate and preserve the knowledge of the Vedas, the Mahabharata, the Upanishads rendering them the stronghold of a resurrected Brahminical monopoly. Yet,

doing so, the upholder of dharma thus once again prepares the ground for change, announcing his own divine portents subject to multiple readings, and thereby throwing open the floodgates of interpretive history itself. If in this manner the Anugita transforms the divine discourse of the avatar himself into a godless textuality which will set in motion those very practices of exegesis it had destined by its vision to die, then it is little wonder that even so smugly complacent a piece as “The Notion of Dharma” morphs ever so quietly into something that no longer knows itself.

5.2 GOD’S WANTON DISHABILLE

If in the Anu Gita, Krishna had claimed that it would not be possible for him to recount the wisdom of the battlefield because the words he had spoken amidst the clamor of swords were the divine product of a moment in which he was one with the Supreme Brahman, then in the Puranas too—which came after the Mahabharata, between 200 and 1200 A.D.—Krishna distances himself from the Gita in a similar way. By this time, as we know, the sovereign principle has been wrenched away from the person of the Lord and instituted in the formal aspect of the text.

despite this rather well-documented argument, I propose that Krishna in pronouncing the Gita to Arjuna was in fact asking his warrior-ward to do away with multiple strands of Vedic textuality, rather than consolidate them. Indeed, given his messianic fervor, the Lord must in order to fulfill the old law, close the door on it. This is in fact I believe what led one of the earliest commentators on the Gita – Sankaracharya of the 8th century – to uphold the Gita as a monistic ‘book,’ one that would stand on its own, apart from the Mahabharata, and indeed transform the very discursive terrain that had brought it into being.

Yet even the Lord's Lay has come to be, by Krishna's own admission, a markedly secular thing subject to the fallibility of the human mind, its provisional, disputable, and arguable combinations of sense and signification, and its antagonistic occasions for reading and re-reading that encrust language with a variety and even contradictoriness of meanings. Meanwhile, alongside the Bhagavad Gita, the figure of Krishna too was undergoing its own catalyses, weaving in and out of a series of stories that sought to flesh out the god's early years as a willful child and his youthful ardor as the divine lover of the gopis or cowherd girls. This most desecrate of declensions may have begun in later sections of the Mahabharata itself but it crystallized most decidedly in the Puranic myths where Krishna appeared in the aspect of an utterly unrestrained child or as a sultry and virile cowherd wearing a crown of peacock feathers, a godly figure whose beauty entranced all who saw him or heard the irresistible call of his flute.

It was in fact this particular divine demeanor that for centuries continued to be the more popular one, for the Bhagavad Gita – in which Krishna is a staid and militaristic figure rather than the cavorting deity of the Puranas – was perhaps not very well known before the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Beyond the commentaries and essays of the intellectual elite, there is little non-literary evidence to suggest that the god of the Gita was a personal deity of great significance, for artistic representations of his figure are rare. The earliest graphic manuscripts of the text appear as late as the eighteenth century and only two archaic illustrations have been found, the first, from a fourteenth century temple in Andhra Pradesh and the second from a frieze in a twelfth-century Halebid Temple. Until the later colonial period when the Gita most energetically thrust itself to the foreground of both popular religio-nationalist upheavals as well as elite scholarly adventures, and the austere divinity of Kurukshetra came to be enshrined as the quintessential figuration for the submission of the adharma of the colonizer before the dharma of

the colonized, the Puranic Lord reigned supreme. Clearly, the frolicsome, uninhibited child-lover of the Puranas had toppled the sovereign decisionist of the Bhagavad Gita, sweeping aside that earlier persona much in the same way as the discourse of the Gita itself had usurped the place of an older style of political intelligence. In short, the Lord Krishna himself had been textualized, and indeed foundationally revised into an impiously temporal figuration, subject to numerous unresolved readings, one ousting the other, one seizing the other's place of privilege, one making way for the other, yet all, in some way or another telling the story of dharma, the story of rhapsodically infirm syntaxes of being, the tale of ways of inhering in, and inhabiting, always contingent language environments.

As such, the story of dharma was especially significant to the Bhagavata Purana, perhaps one of the most significant of the Puranic texts that found its way into a remarkable number of manuscript copies, which according to Graham Schweig's recent book, Dance of Divine Love (2005) may be found in the oldest regional libraries even today. The popularity of the Bhagavata Purana – attested not only by the sheer number of manuscript copies, but also, according to Schweig, by the unanimity and correctness of these copies, as compared to the rather carelessly interpolated manuscripts of other extant Puranas – hinges on its tenth and longest book which contains the Rāsa -Pancadhyayi, or “The Five Chapters on the Rāsa Līlā.” These chapters, comprising something like a dramatic poem in five acts, culminate in the Lord Krishna's erotically playful dance of love with his female devotees, or what is called the Rāsa Līlā.⁷⁷ The

⁷⁷ In his book Dance of Divine Love (2005), Graham Schweig uses *rasa* with a small 'r' to distinguish this term from *Rāsa*. The first as we know literally means “fluid” or “juice” and in classical Sanskrit poetics ever since Bhrata refers to the mood, vein, or spirit that a work of art is expected to induce. This signification of course continues even into

word Rāsa here refers to sophisticated dance form of ancient India in which a circle of women with interlocking arms is formed, each woman having a male partner who places his arm around her neck. It is thus distinct from rasa in classical Sanskrit poetics, which like the English term ‘humor,’ literally meaning fluid or juice, refers to the aesthetic sap, if you will, that a work of art is expected to induce.⁷⁸ The Rāsa Līlā of Lord Krishna, in which god leads an almost licentious

modern times, with Tagore for instance, who simply uses rasa to mean the “affective experience” aroused by a work of art. Rāsa, with a capital ‘R’ on the other hand, refers to a special ancient sophisticated dance form of India in which a circle of women with interlocking arms is formed, each woman having a male partner who places his arm around her neck. The dance involves singing as well, and when Schweig writes of the Rāsa Līlā, he is specifically referring to the play (līlā) of the dance (Rāsa) or as he more broadly translates it, “Dance of Divine Love.” In other words, the Rāsa Līlā is the name for the specific episode within the tenth book of the Bhagavata Purana (versions of which are also found in the Harivamsa and Visnu Purana), which tells the story of how Krishna lures the cowherd maidens away from their homes and into the forest. The relationship between the small ‘r’ rasa or “taste” and the intimate experience or relationship with god however started very early, as I have pointed out in the Taittiriya Upanishad (which of course was the text that Tagore referred to in “The Poet’s Defence”) and as late as the fourteenth century, Visvanatha refers to rasa as the sum of all intimate experiences with the supreme.

⁷⁸ Bharata Muni’s Natyasastra (400 B.C. – 200 A.D.), said to have been inspired by the god Brahma himself is the principal work of dramatic theory in the Sanskrit drama of classical India. It is a set of precepts on the performance of dance, music, and theater. Bharata describes ten types of drama ranging from one-act plays to performances of ten acts. In addition, he lays down principles for stage design, makeup, costume, dance (various movements and gestures), a theory of aesthetics based on rasas (emotional

orchestration of rapturous dancers, has of course become the paradigmatic token for at least one very powerful line of Krishna devotees, and according to Norvin Hein who writes the forward to Schweig's book, it has been central to shaping the course of Hindu religiosity. Counterpoising themselves to the monism of Sankaracharya's powerful Advaita school of thought, the worshippers of Krishna as Bhagavan or personal deity inaugurated a counter-culture to Advaita monism by calling into being their own communities of devotion (Bhakti) through the hearing, telling and rehearsing of the story of Krishna's dancing of the Rāsa.⁷⁹ Yet, what remains largely

responses to the performance) and bhavas (the imitations of emotions that actors perform), acting, directing, and music, each in individual chapters. The Nāṭyaśāstra was used through the fifteen hundred years of Sanskrit literary thought as the bedrock of literary theory. Whether it was Abhinavagupta, Mammata, or Viśwanath, discussing poetry and literature during the subsequent centuries, they inevitably turned to Bharata's formulation as the high point of Indian aesthetics. The intervening centuries however, altered the conception of rasa, as did they the philosophic context in which it was originally couched.

⁷⁹ Sankaracharya, also known as Adi Sankara lived in approximately the 8th century and was the most famous philosopher of the Advaita Vedanta School of thought. His non-dualistic thinking profoundly influenced the growth of Hinduism and it was in his hands that the Vedas and the Upanishads garnered a new life that checked the popularity of Buddhism and Jainism. His commentary on the Gita which is extant is said to have been the analysis which in fact transformed the text into a 'book,' with an existence independent of the Mahabharata, and perhaps more importantly with a reading of Krishna as the One supreme being. Indeed, Adi Sankara's commentary was extremely vital for the nationalists of the late nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century, who adopted the Bhagavad Gita and Krishna as the most valuable face of the struggle against British rule.

unaddressed by the incontinence of this dance of love, this theatre of the ardently corporal relation between a godly paramour and his beloved devotee, which even today draws millions of pilgrims to the holy city, Mathura, is on the one hand, the shifty, almost treacherous notion of dharma that comes into being with the text, and on the other, the deathly narrative that in fact frames the Rāsa -Pancadhyayi. Made up of a total of 355 chapters, the Bhagavata Purana consists in turn of sacred tales, philosophical discourse, and epic poetry, all responding to the essential question of what one is to do to prepare for death, and the five chapters on Rāsa no matter how distant they might seem from such a discourse, are irretrievably framed by it. The tale that the Bhagavata tells of itself unfolds thus. The sage Vyasa, whose name means compiler is despairing and unfulfilled even after composing poems of such grand stature such as the Vedas and the Mahabharata, and in his misery, he turns to his teacher, the great sage Narada. Narada responds to his disciple's dissatisfaction by telling him that even though he has already paid homage to the ultimate purpose of human life in the sacred Vedas and the Mahabharata, he remains discontented because he is yet to sing a paean to the glory of Krishna, the avatar who will come to the world in the ages that pass, whenever dharma is weak and falters, and when adharma reigns as arrogant master of all it encounters. Vyasa's Bhagavata Purana, with its tales of Krishna's boyhood and youth, responds to Narada's call for a eulogy to the god and is thus thought to crown the bard's achievement by fulfilling the law of the scriptures with a full theology of Vishnu.

In the classic pattern of the Sanskrit itihasa—a word used to designate Indian epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, but which the violence of an English translation renders as

history—Vyasa tells a tale mediated by several layers of raconteurs.⁸⁰ Writing himself into the narrative as a traveling storyteller of the Benjaminian variety rather than an immediate eyewitness, Vyasa begins by relating what the sage Suta said to a group of ascetics gathered at the Naimisa forest. Suta in turn relates the vision of the narrator of the Bhagavata myths, a wise man named Suka, who is, in a curious twist of the narrative, also the son of that primal poet Vyasa. Suka's vision is of a king named Pariksit who is cursed to die by a small boy, and the parables of the Bhagavata Purana all address the question of how Pariksit is to best prepare for his accursed death. Like the rest of the Bhagavata, the Rāsa Pancadhyayi, or Krishna's divine carousing of erotic love is thus also shaped by precisely this cadaverous question. In fact, though the poem presents itself as anything but a pensively removed, deeply philosophical meditation on mortality, it is set, rather artfully, in a sacred realm of enchantment named Vraja. Yet this paradise-like topography is not completely disinterested in the dissolute mortality of mere worldlings, for it is also imprinted on the decidedly earthly Vraja, which shares its name, and is coterminous with Vraja Mandala, a rural part of northern India, not very far from modern Delhi. Couched thus in a shadowy sepulcher of indiscernibility between the *ius humanum* and the *ius divinum*, the story begins on an autumnal night when Vraja is heavy with the fecundity of fruit and bloom. As the full moon casts shafts of arrogant white light that peremptorily divide the inky darkness of the impenetrable forest, Krishna, the earthly cowherd, touched by the enchanted air of his surroundings, is compelled to play his divine flute.

⁸⁰ I have elaborated Ranajit Guha's theorization of itihasa – from his 2002 book History at the Limit of World-History – in more detailed terms in the first chapter of this dissertation.

Floating faintly down the valley, the delicious notes of sacred music catch the bustling cowherd maidens unawares, and they almost irresistibly stop short, even amidst the flurry of activity that will bring their day to its wearied close. So alluring is god's refrain that the damsels swell with passion, and their ardor reaching its flushed zenith, these unfortunate women almost inveterately abandon husbands and children, leaving cakes on the hearth, calves untended to, and the milk to boil over. The gopis follow the trail of the notes to reach Krishna and once they are united with their godly gallant, they erotically make merry with him on the moonlit banks of the Yamuna, the dramatic verve of the poem sustained by the profligate god's sportive aspect, now frolicking with the maidens, now disappearing from their sight, and now coaxing them again with the power of his tormenting flute. As their cavorting reaches its fullness the maidens suddenly find that Krishna has fled with a particularly special one of them, but setting off in search of the truant lovers, they find that even god's blessed favorite does not remain so for long, for she too is recklessly abandoned, and left to wretchedly wallow in the miserable throes of separation. As darkness engulfs the world of the gopis, sundered thus from their beloved, the maidens give up their search, singing sweet songs of hope and despair, hopelessly asking of the earth, the rippling vines, the deer, and the bees, whether they might have seen Krishna pass, aching for his return, yearning to hear his bewitching music. Just as their longing becomes an almost unbearable burden, god however reappears and the story culminates in the commencement of the Rāsa dance. The gopis link their arms together and the traitorous avatar by divine arrangement, dances with every cowherd maiden at once, while all the time each thinks that she alone is dancing with him. This uxurious saturnalia having come to its close, Krishna and the gopis wash away their fatigue in the cool waters of the Yamuna, where the lord, Suka

tells us, is as “a roused elephant along/with his female elephant companions,/breaking down any boundaries in his way” and finding a refuge in rasa (Dance of Divine Love, 71).

Krishna’s knavish manner of being – his willful game of hide and seek with the passionate gopis, his choice of one of them as his special mate, and subsequent rather summary abandonment of her—indeed his very allure in the Rāsa Pancadhyayi or five chapters on Rāsa is quite explicitly, and indeed principally sustained in a jousting quibble with the notion of dharma. When the impetuous god’s beloved cowherd maidens—breasts heaving with excitement, hair streaming, clothes in utter disarray—leave their homes to follow the seductive music of his wanton flute, the poet tells us that they are clearly abandoning their dharmic duties, their single-minded fidelity by their husbands and children, and their promised genuflection before the flames of a hundred obscure hearths. Even Krishna, resplendent in his peacock feathers, and already dallying intoxicatedly in the cool night, recognizes with a start that the women have violated their limited boundaries. Struck by their transgressive spirit, the errant paramour himself tries to frighten his beloved gopis into what would be considered righteous practice. But even as he does so, the shape of his words is paradoxical, twisted and arched in a dandy playfulness, fatally intoxicating the simple cowherd girls, and luring them to stay in the forest, rather than return to a safe dharmic abode. Like an overly polite host, Krishna begins by asking after their well-being and that of their relations and their community at Vraja. His welcome is however at once detachedly courteous, and tantalizingly lithe, such that god appears to offer himself less as the guardian of righteousness than as a luscious instrument of the damsels’ pleasure:

Welcome, most fortunate ladies!

What can I do to please you?

Is all going well in Vraja?

Please explain the purpose of your arrival. (Dance of Divine Love, 30)

Before the “most fortunate ladies” have even had time to respond to his many inquiries however, Krishna immediately goes on to say:

Night has a frightening appearance

Inhabiting this place are

fearsome creatures

Please return to Vraja –

Women should not remain here

O ones with beautiful waists. (Dance of Divine Love, 30)

Commentators have pointed out that the Sanskrit syntax of the above verse—and especially the many ways in which negatives cling almost amorously to words, could potentially produce an opposite meaning, suggesting in fact that the gopis should remain with Krishna in the forest:

Night is without a frightening appearance (aghora-rupa)

inhabiting this place are

creatures that are not fearsome (aghora-sattva)

Please do not return to Vraja (pratiyata vrajam na) –

women should remain here (iha stheyam)

O ones with beautiful waists. (Dance of Divine Love, 30)

In the first interpretation of the avatar’s words—which suggests that the gopis should shy away from the hideous terror of darkness, the first four words of the opening line—Night has a frightening appearance—appear in the original Sanskrit as “rajanay esa ghora rupa (Dance of Divine Love, 212).” However, since Sanskrit characters follow the rules of euphonic

combination, the endings of words are sonically merged with the beginnings of adjacent words to form what is known as a sandhi, such that the line in question actually reads as rajanayesaghorarupa. Trothlessly attaching itself to a succeeding adjective, the demonstrative pronoun esa ('this') pairs with ghora to spawn esaghora, and as the two distinct units of meaning cleave so ardently, almost as to choke one another's exclusive semantic force, one renders itself forfeit to the meaning of the other, and curves into the other to call into being an almost imperceptible ambiguity. In other words, given this rogue mating, esa could on the one hand be the positive form of ghora ('frightening')—that is, esa and ghora could combine to literally render 'this frightening night.' On the other, and indeed in a completely contradictory sense, esaghora could be the *negative* form ('non-frightening') since esa would drop its negative prefix a- when equivocally coupling with the negative adjective, aghora to literally translate as, 'this non-frightening night.' The beguiling pliancy of this syntax—which in fact instantiates and rhythmically parallels the very acts of the godly Krishna, his very being, if you will—is also not one solitary example, for voluptuous unions of this nature yet again come to the fore when the word ghora/aghora is used for a second time. On this occasion, ghora violates the preceding rupa to breed rupaghora-sattva ('frightening beings' or 'non-frightening beings'), rupa replacing esa as the form that lasciviously embraces ghora, and therefore sacrifices steadfast meaning at the temple of god's reckless love.

That Krishna bandies with the monistic whole of the divine language of the Vedas itself— Sanskrit being akhand or indivisible does not for instance, have punctuation marks—is not limited to whether the inky blackness of the night should or should not be terrifying to the gopis, or for instance whether night is infiltrated by 'frightening' or 'non-frightening' creatures. The wavering decision about what constitutes righteous practice—which in fact both impels and

is itself sustained by the intricate ambiguity of the ‘frightening’ or ‘non-frightening’ aspect of the dark—finally becomes the occasion for a foundational intervention on Krishna’s part. Much in the same way as he had spoken with Arjuna, the avatar directly addresses what for his beloved cowherd maidens should be their highest dharmic obligation (parodharma):

For every woman the highest dharma (parodharma)

is to serve her husband without falsity

Be agreeable toward his family members

and nourish the children. (Dance of Divine Love, 32)

When on the portentous battlefield of the Mahabharata, the glorious hero sweepingly surveys his adversaries and paling at the prospect of such utter decimation, expresses a firm resolve not to fight, the Lord tells Arjuna that his highest dharmic obligation as a kshatriya warrior is to look death in the face, and raise his mighty bow, a boon from the creator-destroyer, the great god Siva himself. Likewise, confronted by the dithering dharma of the love-struck gopis—who have after all defiled every and each of the duties Krishna outlines as virtuous—the best of all paramours manifestly articulates what for every woman should be the most righteous conduct. Yet, even in an unmistakably decisive moment such as this, Krishna totters on the brink of whimsicality, tempting the breathlessly heaving gopis to construe what they will from the semantic quirks of his verse. After all given the discrepant meanings of parodharma, god could in fact mean either one thing or indeed its complete contrary:

For the dharma of all *other* women (parodharma)

is to serve false husbands. (Dance of Divine Love, 32)

The perilous balance of the sovereign deity’s duplicitous verse—which is in fact what finally tempts these ‘fortunate’ women to stay in the forest rather than return to their blameless

fidelities—is preserved by two possible, but entirely distinct meanings for the Sanskrit term parodharmah. In other words, parodharmah could be understood on the one hand as “the highest duty” and on the other, in an utterly contradictory sense, as the duty of another or someone else’s duty. In the first instance, the prefix para- used with dharma indicates a sense of degree, that is, the “higher or as a superlative, the highest”; in the second instance however, the prefix may be interpreted in its sense of relationality that is as other, strange, or different (Dance of Divine Love, 213).” If parodharma were to be understood as the duty of another, then indeed, Krishna could be construed as saying whereas the pledge of other women is to serve false husbands, the dharmic tith of the cowherd maidens is to serve Krishna who is by implication their only true husband. The irreconcilable breach between para as ‘other’ and ‘para’ as an indication of ‘the highest degree’ thus becomes the very slippage that detains Krishna’s beloved cowherd girls from decisively confirming what in fact their highest dharma is, and therefore from returning to their individual mates, who unaware of their wives’ apostasy, peacefully sleep at home. As parodharmah and parodharmah contentiously agitate against each other, what comes into being is precisely a gaping void of indeterminacy, a pulsing asymmetry between one semantic gravitation and another, and an enduring lag in which time thickens into something other than the numbered space that would otherwise have measured a gopi’s wearisome work-a-day. Indeed, it is in this lacuna itself—that is in the time opened up by the unensurability, the radical contingency of the meaning of dharma—that the false women cavort with Krishna, thereby bringing into being the theatre of Rāsa Līlā. Again it is in the gulf exposed by this very indeterminacy that time is engendered as the inability of meaning to coincide with itself, and of course it is precisely such a time—that is, time as a medium of discontinuity and discrepancy—which has the power to

spawn a novel relation between god and his dharmic devotees, a new manner of divination as interpretive ethics, a rhetorically innovative syntax of being.

In response to Krishna's vexed pronouncement on what for the gopis should be their highest dharma, the women seem to take him up on his paltering discrepancies, choosing thereby to construe his words as they will:

O dear one, as you
who knows dharma
have stated,
The proper duty for women
is to be loyal to husbands
children and close friends
Let this dharma of ours be for you,
O Lord, since you are
the true object of such teachings. (Dance of Divine Love, 34)

The gopis' response is of course tinged ever so slightly with irony, an irony that is ironical precisely because it remembers the authentically temporal predicament of non-coincidence between parodharmah and parodharmah. Yet this remembering is irresistibly accompanied by a forgetting, for even as they ironically follow Krishna's equivocations with dharma, the cowherd maidens almost at once fall back on a defensive strategy that allows them to collapse dharma into the figure of the Lord who is "the true object of such teachings". In other words, even these "most fortunate of ladies" for all their understanding of irony as an authentically temporal predicament of non-coincidence between truth and its origin, cannot avoid pronouncing their own "truth" and proposing thereby that they act on behalf of at least something true (Dance of

Divine Love, 30). Shying away from the negative knowledge of the vast gulf between their highest dharma and the dharma of other women, Krishna's beloved gopis come close to sealing the chasm of emptiness that threatens their virtue, positing instead at least some version of a stable truth. The dramatic poetry of the Rasa Pancadhyayi, the time that the impassioned women spend with the avatar, and indeed their very "rippings of bliss" vis-à-vis god, will however only be possible if the breach between dharma and its origin, remains irremediable, if so to speak, it is consistently held apart (Dance of Divine Love, 43). The poet of the Bhagavata Purana thus quickly reminds us that despite the gopis' reassuring assertion that Krishna is the true object of dharma, the time that they spend with their Lord is made possible only because god's power of inducing forgetfulness has cast its web over their husband cowherds at Vraja. In short, because there is a yawning, sustained fissure between parodharma and parodharma, between the gopis' dharma by their homes and hearths, and their dharma by the Lord:

The husband cowherds of Vraja

felt no jealousy whatsoever

toward Krishna.

Deluded by his power of Maya (forgetfulness)

each husband thought his wife

had remained all the while by his side. (Dance of Divine Love, 76)

5.3 THE DANCER AND THE DANCE

The large part of the Rāsa-Pancadhyayi is however made up, not of verses that celebrate the coming together of Krishna and his beloved cowherd girls, but of stanzas that tell of the despair

of their separation. When at a particularly heightened moment in the drama, the gopis find that god has taken flight they are distrustful even of the complicity of the earth, the vines, the deer, and the bees. Could it be that the grass of the earth is resplendent, “elated/from the touch of Kesava’s fleeing feet,” could it be that vines are arched “with bodily ripples of bliss,” only because they have been stroked by his recalcitrant fingernails (Dance of Divine Love, 42-43)? Could it be that the deer’s widened eyes and the blind madness of the bees are the result of having clandestinely laid eyes upon the run-away god? Thwarted in their search for the fugitive god, and with the malignant silence of the creatures of the forest as their sole companion, the gopis fill the wretched emptiness of their time by telling the story of Krishna’s life, by enacting incidents from his boyhood and by performing episodes from his infancy, thus hoping to fulfill their throbbing desire through rhythmic representations of Krishna’s being. In a word, the “fortunate ladies” rehearse the Lord’s lila, or his divine drama with the hope of approximating his hallowed presence (Dance of Divine Love, 30). Yet, as the unrequited lovers begin to essay the most consecrated moments of Krishna’s growth from infancy to boyhood, the verses of the Rāsa- Pancadhyayi undergo a strange mutation, becoming something other than a mere recital or staging of god’s earthly days. Indeed, as the gopis sing, dance, and rapturously tell of their Lord’s mortal time, the drama of the poem literally and very materially dissolves precisely those dharmic duties that the women had defiled when they fled their homes, into their staging of the blessed occasions of an avatar’s life. For instance, if in their lure for Krishna’s music, the gopis had abandoned children suckling from their full, heavy breasts, then in reiterating the acts of the Lord’s childhood amongst earthly beings, “One of them mimicked Putana/while another imitated Krishna/who drank from her breast”. If they had deserted dumb beasts, suddenly ceasing their milking, to almost hypnotically follow the guile of the divine flute, then in the līlā, “Some

performed like Krishna and Rama/others acted like their cowherd friends...One of them called for the cows/who had wandered off/just as Krishna would,” thereby recalling duties they would have acted out had they remained tied to a trenchantly fixed notion of dharma. Finally, if the gopis had been torn away even from the romping and gamboling rhythms of their older children, then in performing the frolicking antics of god’s boyhood—“Yet another acted like a crying infant;/with her foot she kicked one/who pretended to be a cart”—they disjunctively anticipate precisely that safe dharmic abode which in their violent rapture they had relinquished (Dance of Divine Love, 44-45). Thus, through a joyous and almost utterly intoxicated tableau of song and dance, the devotees not only perform a theatre of Krishna’s life, but more importantly, they practice an asynchronous approximation of their own righteous duties, through what we might call an allegory of dharma, a manner of signification which troubles the stability, and indeed the very being of what it had set out to represent.⁸¹

The gopis’ staging of the divine līlā is allegorical because in iterating the significant incidents of god’s life, the “fortunate women” who had joined Krishna on the banks of the Yamuna, may no doubt be referring back to actual incidents in the boyhood of god, but their staging never absolutely coincides with these. Instead, what is so intriguing about the lila is that the damsels’ elaboration of episodes from Krishna’s youth become inextricably embroiled in the strands of their own lives, contrapuntally resonating with the banal practices of righteousness—their blameless fidelity by husbands and children, their promised genuflection before a hundred

⁸¹ In reading allegory and later irony in this way I follow Walter Benjamin’s understanding of allegory in The Origin of the German Tragic Drama, which was a key text for Paul de Man’s theorization of allegory and irony (which I am also indebted to), particularly in “The Rhetoric of Temporality.”

obscure hearths and their tending of cows and calves—which in seeking god, they had peremptorily cast aside. Designating primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, or signifying precisely the non-being of what it represents, the gopis’ enactment of Krishna Līlā renounces the nostalgia and desire to coincide with its referential source in the actual incidents of god’s life, and instead establishes its ruinous language in the void of a temporal discontinuity. In such a temporal disjunction or temporality as disjunctive difference—that is the discrepancy between the staged incidents and their actual referents—the power of memory does not reside in its capacity to resurrect a situation or a feeling. Rather, memory in such a temporal condition constitutes those acts of minds bound to their own present and pregnant with the future of their own elaboration. In other words, the gopis’ telling of god’s story does not rely on an accurate remembering of their godly paramour’s boyhood. Instead it is irrevocably attached to an asymmetrical approximation of duties which constitute the gopis’ own every-day lives, and therefore becomes an echo of their own present concern with dharma. The issue of dharma is of course at the forefront of the gopis’ present concerns for Krishna has just roguishly equivocated with his beloved cowherd girls, telling them on the one hand that their highest dharma is to their husbands, and on the other proposing that only the avatar should be the unimpeachable object of their dharma. Not to be left behind in the verbal quibble, the “fortunate women” had responded ironically to god’s equivocation—irony and allegory being linked in their common discovery of a truly temporal predicament of non-coincidence—announcing that since Krishna himself was the highest object of dharmic teachings, there should be no question at all about what constitutes righteous practice (Dance of Divine Love, 30). Yet, amidst this witty jousting, the teller of the Bhagavata tales is careful to remind us that even though the gopis seem to have reassured themselves of the virtue of their decision, there is still an enduring void between on the one hand,

their dharma as mothers and wives, and on the other, their righteous practice as disciples of the Lord who is after all the “true object” of dharma. Indeed, it is in this very void that dharma is allegorized, for having signaled god as the truth of dharmic teachings the cowherd maidens can be most faithfully dharmic if once Krishna has fled them, they anticipate his divine presence by enacting occurrences from their Lord’s earthly life as an infant and a boy. When the representation of divine līlā begins almost furtively to entangle itself with the profane lives of the cowherd maidens themselves however, faithful dharma is no longer constituted by the absolute identity between the image of god and his phenomenal substance. Instead, dharmic practice comes into being as an allegorical process in precisely that abyss between a set of sign (those that replicate god’s human life) and their referents (the actual incidents of Krishna’s boyhood) which are always fated to a pure, and unreliable anteriority.

Marking an absence or a blank of memory rather than its reconstitution, the devotees’ allegorical staging is the condition for the expression of dharma as a profoundly temporal practice, or indeed, it is the discovery of time as the painful, asynchronous rhythm of incommensurability. Instantiated as the figural representation of an interweaved structure of tropes, rather than the recuperation of the undivided origin, or the replete self (as in the case of Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, for instance) dharma is no longer a truthfully mimetic reflection of the singular being called Krishna. Emerging quite unabashedly in the chasm carved out by allegory, as a series of poetic conceits which can never achieve the absolute identity with itself that exists in the natural object, and as such, susceptible to the continual contaminations of adjacent figures and tropes, dharma is in the Rāsa Pancadhyayi constitutive of the fluidity of time itself. Given that the gopis’ performance of līlā renders such a treacherous notion of dharma, it is surprising that even as they stage events from god’s life, heretically echoing them in the profane

strands of their own worldly practices, god himself reappears and bodily inserts himself into the narrative of his own divine drama, his own līlā. The gopis' allegory of dharma which had begun as a presentation of divine līlā thus re-enters the story of god's life, becoming irresistibly entwined with it, such that the two can no longer be told apart. The hinge whereby dharma and līlā are weaved together is of course the slippage between rasa as the aesthetic experience aroused by a work of art, and rasa as the ecstatic experience of bliss engendered in the relation between god and his devotees, which from the very beginning haunts the footsteps of classical Sanskrit poetics. After all the gopis' performance of Krishna Līlā, which inadvertently becomes an allegory of dharma, only to later again re-enter the story of a divine Līlā, culminates in the dancing of the Rāsa Līlā, an art form that on the one hand hopes arouse an affective response, and on the other is an orchestration of the ius humanum and the ius divinum into a highly erotic relation. Yet, what exactly is the force of the term rasa which is able to collapse the godly līlā with the earthly dharma, muddying and allegorically ruining both in the process, rendering one indistinguishable from the other, and in a sense constituting the saturnalian void in which these illicit partners flirtatiously sport with one another. In so far as the Bhagavata Purana is concerned however, the force of rasa is not only consolidated in the shifty terrain between the "affective experience aroused by a work of art," and the rapturous relation of love between god and his devotees which was after all already an enduring trait of Sanskrit poetics (Tagore, Rabindranath: Selected Writings on Language and Literature. 301) Rather, rasa in this Puranic text is compounded by a notion that belies the cakes and ale, as it were, of the dancing, singing, and merry-making of the final revelry, a question that so quietly frames the narrative that it is almost in danger of being lost. In short, rasa in the Rāsa Pancadhyayi is allied with death, and indeed it is this alliance that on the one hand makes possible the object d'art called the Rāsa Līlā, and on

the other constitutes the answer to the primal question that binds the story together: what is the best way to prepare for death?

Now the Rāsa Līlā is enacted in a circle known as mandala, and as such, it is also known as rasa mandala. The word Mandala means “circle” or “round” and comes from the verb root, mand which means to adorn or to decorate. Various mandala configurations and designs were incorporated in ancient sacrificial rites during the Vedic period largely because these patterns were supposed to have reflected the arrangement of the cosmic spheres. Yet as Krishna and the gopis engage in the song and dance rhythms of the Rāsa Līlā, they purportedly parallel not only a Vedic notion of the music of the spheres, or even the cosmic scope of creativity according to the Vedic literature, but rather a very specific principle of creation. This principle comes into being in the allegorical/ironical void in which the worldly dharma and the godly līlā can frolic with each other in a piqued excitement of sexual intimacy that resonates quite sharply with what Tagore would have called ‘the play of living creation,’ an entirely unburdened, and buoyant spirit of gaiety in which death is not merely that against which the sanctity of life must battle, but rather the indispensable partner to life’s spring of frolicsome sport. Just as in “The Poet’s Defence,” lila, ananda, khela, and cchuti had flirtatiously infiltrated and bastardized one another, here too man’s dharma and god’s līlā leave their mutually exclusive domains to mongrelize each other, instantiating a quickening of matter that will call life itself into being:

With their feet

stepping to the dance;

with gestures of their hands

loving smiles and sporting eyebrows;

With waists bending

and the rhythmic movements
of garments covering their breasts;
with earrings
swinging on their cheeks;

....

They appeared

Like lustrous flashes
of radiant lightening
engulfed by a ring of dark clouds. (Dance of Divine Love, 67)

Yet, in the same way as lila, ananda, khela, and cchuti had knavishly trafficked with each other, precisely in the nothingness gouged out by death, flooding the emptiness with their voluptuous abundance, the Bhagavata Purana as indeed the Rāsa Pancadhyayi is framed by a narrative of death, rather than a celebratory tale of life. The parables of this Puranic text all respond to the question of how one is best to prepare for death, and as such they are addressed by Suka to King Parikshit when he is cursed to die by a young boy. Thus, the Rāsa Līlā—the quickening erotics of a rhythmic intimacy that we see in the above extract as also the allegory of dharma which is an unavoidable part of it—materializes and evolves precisely in the hideous blank that constitutes the inevitable answer to the question of how best to prepare for death. In a word, the blissful celebration of life in the poem is called into being, founded, as it were, by the question of death; as such, it makes replete and gluts the chasm of nothingness that is death. This is why as they rhythmically move to the song of the Rāsa Līlā, the gopis and Krishna are described as flashes of radiant lightening that dazzlingly illuminate the inky blackness carved out by portentous ring of deathly dark clouds.

The question of death—as well as its relation to *rasa*—and the way in which it penetrates a dramatic poem that exults in the very bliss of life is the axis at which Tagore’s work intersects in a most intriguing manner with the story of the Bhagavata Purana and in particular with the drama of the Rāsa-Pancadhyayi. For Tagore, one may recollect, “If universal creation is viewed as a poem then its principal *rasa* is the *rasa* of death,” with *rasa* in this case, gesturing toward a very specific sense of death (Tagore, Rabindranath: Selected Writings on Language and Literature, 91). In a post-Vedic world from which the gods had taken flight, *rasa* for Tagore indicated the gap between death and redemption, the rhythmic jubilation of a worldly matter liberated from its sovereigns, the pulsing asymmetry in which *jivalila* or the ‘play of living creation’ came into being precisely because it recognized death as the void left by the gods, and therefore as the indispensable partner of a *līlā* free of pietistic lordship. In Tagore’s thinking, this gap developed once the happy ages of the Vedas had been overtaken by the world of the Upanishads in which Brahman was the One power who could monotheistically reorder the universe into an absolute union with himself. Yet, the Brahman of Tagore’s Upanishads is neither a creator-god who is completely and absolutely identifiable with his own created universe, nor is the Tagorean story a pantheistic cosmogony in which the Supreme Being is everywhere immanent. Instead the poet’s Upanishadic translation is one in which Brahman has only an interested relationship with creation, that is to say, he is disjunctively proximate to it, without actually ever being concurrently one with it. Such an Upanishadic world is in the poet’s view blissful and joyous and replete with *ananda*, precisely because given the dynamics of this interested relation, cracks and fissures develop between Brahman and his earthly heirs, between the Sabda Brahman and his profane progeny, between the Supreme *ananda* and the vernacularized *ananda*, and between a divine *līlā* on the one hand, and the romping, jaunty, even

airy babel of the child's world of khela and cchuti on the other. In short, for Tagore, it is in these cracks and fissures that language comes into being, as a voluptuous, lascivious entity, overflowing the bounds of the Supreme Being and incarnating the play of living creation precisely in the pulsing nothingness gouged out by death, not as an existential end to life, but death as death as a nodal occasion for understanding a transformed world-view. That is to say death as a nomination for the non-coincidence between cognition and action, and word and deed, death as the end of the essence, and an epistemological confrontation of the empty chasm between mortality and redemption. Thus if universal creation were to be imagined as a poem, then its principal rasa would be the rasa of death, for the joy of the void in which living creation comes into being as a playful sport is in Tagore's work, the emptiness of death in which time thickens into a foundational and constitutive poetry of createdness.

This enduring emptiness—rather than a specific mechanics of metre and verse—is what Tagore imagines as rhythm. The Tagorean notion of rhythm parallels not only the authentic temporality of the void left by the Vedic gods of fire, water, earth, and wind, but also the void which has not yet been filled by the sovereign human, and the void in which time swells into something other than a numbered measure of space. In Tagore's elaboration, rhythm which commonly designates a kind of restraint, a certain attraction to laws of measure, and a keeping of time, comes to emphasize precisely the opposite—the lack of a binding signification, of the disengagement from laws, forms, and proprietary rights, the awakening from a hazy, deferential stupor, and finally, the complete annihilation of any desire for historical unification. The idea of universal creation as a rhythmic poem therefore, has nothing whatsoever to do with an image of Totality that constructs the worldly text as self-consuming artifact in which the paraphrase of the poem and the poem itself are one. Rather, Tagore's world is a poem only because it expresses the

createdness of the universe as *jivalila* in precisely those throbbing cracks between a poem and its meaning, between words and deeds, cognition and action, and the soul and its essence, what Walter Benjamin strikingly referred to as a grotesque death mask which expresses but cannot bridge the gap between mortality and redemption. Such a notion of rhythm as a hesitancy and a lag of time converges and becomes one in Tagore's work with the *rasa* of death. Allied with *rasa* on the one hand and a lilting, rhythmic joy on the other, death and its apparent stillness constitute an indispensable, if paradoxical partner to the quickness of *jivalila*, for as Tagore explicitly says in "A Novel Ramayana", if it were not for the stirring endowed the world by death, life would inhabit an enduring mausoleum, everlasting, stark, enclosed, and sentenced to eternal immobility. Thought in this way, mortality, according to the poet, lightens the heavy yoke of existence for death is no longer a slow, choking, bludgeoning way to bring life, face down, in the wayside dust, but instead, a heaving vessel for the music of sportive play, a measure of the very freedom of living creation, and indeed, the principal cadence in a cosmos of *khela*, *chhuti*, *lila* and *ananda*.

Much like Tagore's *jivalila*, the *Rāsa Līlā* comes into being in a void between *parodharma* and *parodharma*, in the breach between the *gopis'* *dharma* toward their husbands and their *dharma* toward Krishna, and finally, in the cracks between the actual incidents of god's life and the *gopis'* representation of them in a theatre of erotic love. In other words, just as *jivalila* comes into being in a lingering lull of time marked by the *rasa* of death, so too the *Rāsa Līlā* comes into being in the nothingness gouged out by dark clouds as the portends of death, and as a response to the question of how one is best to prepare for death. Indeed, if there is any difference at all in these two cosmogonies, they seem to settle on Tagore's rather obdurate use of *rasa*, very specifically in the sense of the "affective experience" aroused by poetic language, and the Rāsa

Pancadhyayi's dissolute dithering between rasa as aesthetic pleasure and rasa as the divine loving relation ((Tagore, Rabindranath: Selected Writings on Language and Literature. 301). Intricately crossed by multiple textualities in which god is rasa, or the sum of all rasas, or the object of rasa, or even in some cases, the most accomplished dilettante of rasa, the Rāsa Līlā culminates when god actually merges into the poetry and narration of those autumn nights, which in turn find their refuge in rasa:

Thus he allowed himself to be
subdued by these nights
made so brilliant
by the rays of the moon –
He was perfectly
fulfilled in all desires
and pure within himself

While with that group of maidens
so passionately attached to him
sexual enjoyment was of no issue
Inspiring the narrations
and poetry of autumn
all those moonlight nights
found their refuge in rasa. (Dance of Divine Love, 73)

In Sanskrit poetics (kavya) and Indian dramaturgy (natya), rasa (which is not to be confused with the dance Rāsa) refers to the pervasive mood or emotion experienced by the audience as aesthetic delight. More specifically, as we have already seen, the word rasa has the

sense of essence or taste. It can also mean the sap of plant, the juice of fruit, or more broadly, the best or finest or prime part of anything, or the vital essence of a thing. The Caitanya Vaishnavas – a group of Krishna devotees who were part of the many strands of the Bhakti Movement of the middle ages for whom the primary book of god was the Bhagavata Purana – apply the sense of the prevailing feeling, religious sentiment, or even disposition of the heart or mind to the term *rasa*.⁸² Their general connotative meaning is the directly experienced intimate relationship with the divinity. Yet the theological use of the word can be found very early, about two thousand years before the Caitanya school, in a phrase from the Taittiriya Upanishad which remarks,

⁸² The theistic Vaishnava tradition arose in the eastern province of Bengal and is referred to Caitanya Vaishnavism because it was initiated and inspired the charismatic figure known as Krishna Caitanya (1486 – 1533 C.E.) This ecstatic mystic and devotional revivalist along with his close disciples, established a theological school of thought and religious practice centered upon devotion, or *bhakti*, to the supreme Lord Krishna, and it was through them that the tradition spread throughout regions of Bengal, Orissa, and the northern areas of India. Scholars have observed that one of the most significant contributions of Caitanya Vaishnavism was its examination of the nature of religious emotion. Caitanya developed his devotional movement through direct instruction to key disciples. One of these disciples was Rupa Gosvamin (16thc). Under the direct guidance of Caitanya, Rupa articulated and formulated a theology of *bhakti-rasa*, or the soul's relationship with the divinity in devotional love within the realm of *lilā* or divine play. In his important work, *Bhakti Rasamrta Sindhu*, or "The Ocean of Eternal *Rasa* in Devotional Love, the Gosvamin further elaborated the understanding of *rasa* as the pervasive emotion of relationships found solely within devotional love. G.N. Devy's complaint however is that Rupa Gosvamin's was a system-building effort which was bound to announce the beginning of the end of Bhakti as a series of local, insurgent, practices of style, with no necessary impulse to unite into an architecture of thought.

“Truly the Lord is rasa” (raso vai sah). Thus, even though it was not uncommon to find an identification between religious and aesthetic experience in both Sanskrit poetics and the Vedic literature, it was in the Bhagavata Purana that the pleasure of the text became indistinguishable from the highly eroticized personal relation between a theistic god and his devotees, and that dharma came to be equated with this utterly uninhibited encounter between distinct textualities, for we must remember that by the time of the Bhagavata Purana, Krishna himself has been textualized. (Dance of Divine Love, 99).⁸³

Just as Krishna and the gopis meet in the yawning chasm of the breach between parodharma and parodharma, just as the cowherd girls and their beloved Lord caper in the cracks of a “frightening” or “non-frightening night” so too the dancers as rasika (that is, the connoisseurs of rasa) and the dance (that is, the text) meet in the pause of meaning, in the indeterminacy of lexis where dharma will come into being as allegory. This is the authentic temporality of non-coincidence where every possible communication is interrupted, and reading – the relation between the rasika and rasa, between the dancer and the dance, between reader and text – is spawned not as a subjective identification where predestined consciousnesses meet on the common ground of a transparent language, but rather as an uncontrollable process of mortification which pervades all allegorical expressivity along with those who use it. In the

⁸³ Poetry in Sanskrit originated as the hand-maiden of religion. The Ramayana and Mahabharata, for instance were ascribed to poet-sages, and were valued highly as pleasing re-presentations of the ethical codes laid down in law-books. Similarly, Bharata Muni’s Natyasastra (400 B.C. – 200 A.D.), the principal work of dramatic theory in the Sanskrit drama of classical India, was said to have been inspired by the god Brahma himself, just as Visvanatha argued that religion and art were discrete facets of the same experience.

Bhagavata Purana such an understanding of reading, or better still, such an encounter with a whole body of expressive potentialities, is called dharma, a practice that not only inhabits the framing question of the Bhagavata tales – how one may best prepare for death as – but indeed instantiates the temporality of allegory as a syntax of being.

Starting from approximately the fourteenth century, the dharma of the Bhagavata Purana – which of course has received only scant critical attention especially as compared to the dharma of the Gita—was to spawn what G.N. Devy calls “style communities” which were founded on the mosaic of songs and dances celebrating the Lord Krishna’s almost sexualized relationship with his fallen devotees (Of Many Heroes’: An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography, 166-167). The compositions of these communities, which have been commonly clubbed under the rubric of the Bhakti Movement, brought with them a wealth of literature and scholarship in the vernacular languages, thus challenging not only the hegemony of the courtly Sanskrit, but also agitating against the sovereign tenets of Brahminical Hinduism. Wantonly overflowing its own limited boundaries, refusing to be tied in any way to a monolithic edifice of power, and preferring instead to come into being in the interstices of myriad contaminated and contaminating strands of righteous practice such as those of the gopis in the Rāsa Pancadhyayi, the dharma of the Bhakti cults was instantiated as the very condition for inhabiting multiple worldly textualities. In the archaic Puranic text, Krishna and his beloved had engendered dharma as an epistemological encounter with rasa as the very condition of textual historicity, as the nothingness of death, as a new rhythmic lag between god and his devotee, between the dancer and the dance, and between reader and text. Likewise, the dharmic practices of the Bhakts were the conditions for a changing language environment which would effect an adjacency between heterodox styles of language and of gesture (in the songs, dances, and literature of these

insurgent cults) and the material ways of living of fallen and dispossessed devotees (within the cults themselves). Thus, unlike Swapan Dasgupta's "The Notion of Dharma" which invokes a monotonous community of average voters whose hereditary rectitude piously cleanses itself of multitudinous histories and motley textual realities, the dharma of the Bhagavata Purana and of the Bhakti Movement was a playfully rhythmic practice that invoked an aggregation of rasikas or 'readers,' indeed communities, for whom dharma was the very condition of rasa, as of textuality.

For the story of my dissertation, to have an apparently contrary conceptualization like Swapan Dasgupta's notion of Dharma inhabit an adjacency with the dharma of the Bhagavata Purana is to make an effort to aggregate what G.N. Devy calls 'style communities', and to perform in a different time and place what Rabindranath Tagore had called jivalila. The wayward style communities of the Bhakti Movement could after all come into being only in the breach between the law and its origins, when the treacherous dharma of the Rasa Pancadhyayi trafficked blasphemously with the militarized dharma of the Bhagavad Gita. Similarly, the delightfully nimble syntax of Tagore's jivalila only manifests itself in an isomorphic relation with the almost churlish earnestness of the Englishman's belief in a struggle between life and death, just as it dangerously approximates, but then cleaves from Veer Savarkar's fervent appeal for a Hindu sovereignty founded in life and rebirth. The contemporary Indian situation may be trapped in the apparently unyielding grip of a development game as innocently playful as snakes and ladders, and this may indeed be a conceit that with a great deal of ease can flexibly orchestrate positions as distinct as Savarkar's and Tagore's into one sustained celebration of neo-liberal tenets of the market. But as Amitav Ghosh demonstrates in the encounter between the Imam and the Indian, if we are suspect of the constancy of postcolonial brotherhoods and the truthful confessions of pertinent populations, then we ought also to be skeptical of neo-imperial complicities and pitiless

collusions, toiling to allow them from congealing into hardened customs, yet knowing that these are the very actualities that partition the fellowship of postcolonial selves even before it comes into being. Thus neither Swapan Dasgupta's notion of dharma, nor the impure and licentious dharma of the Bhagavata Purana may be blunted into authoritative concepts, but instead they may deftly skirt around and into one another, calling into being through their jaunty rhythm the contingent time of secular history.

In the vacuum left by the gradual erasure of national liberation movements that were spawned by what we might call the Third World Idea, a clash it seems to me is imminent between diagnoses that want to redefine postcolonialism in relation to its anticolonial beginnings, that hope to arrive at a final understanding of globalization qua neo-imperialism, that aim to displace a globalized world through the more powerful notion of planetariness, or that are still doing battle to spawn a dim and shadowy politics of the global south. Yet in the hurly-burly of such a conflict, that is, in the midst of a tensile terrain of unstable and changeful languages and forms, one giving way to another in a spate of sudden transformations and abrupt extinctions, are literary critics and theorists perhaps asking the wrong questions? Bound as they have become to curricular practices and to the institution of literature, to representative identifications and to professional evaluations, men and women who not so long ago had pledged their faith to the successful implosions of post-structural theory, are now scrambling to buttress their standing against the failure of that same movement. As older textures of language and syntax cave in and submit to new syntaxes of being, sometimes palimpsestically underlying them, and at other times metamorphosing beyond recognition, the urgent questions in this occasion of transition ought not to be as David Damrosch puts it, "What is World Literature", or as Wai Chee Dimcock attempts to ask, how do we think a literature for the planet, or even as

Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman pose the problem—is it possible to think of a literature of globalization? Rather, it seems to me that the questions should instead be how does the circulation of languages, forms, images, and gestures call into being a notion of planetariness, in what specific ways do expressive styles converge upon one another to constitutively evoke the patterns of globalization, and what are the modes of enunciation that facilitate and sustain a discourse of globalization? Similarly, the task is not to define secularism vis-à-vis Hindutva in India, and therefore lament the crisis of the former, as a group of intellectuals have done in the recently edited anthology The Crisis of Secularism in India. The task is rather, to question how communities of style come together at different periods to express distinct notions of secularism (or for that matter, distinct notions of politics and history) in the subcontinent. In what myriad ways is the scriptural tradition both conserved and revolutionized to enable and animate such communities of style and how, straining against the emergence of such style communities, has Hindutva written itself into a religiosity of time and discourse and thereby a new landscape of politics no longer divided by what used to be considered the radical edge of historical binaries like tradition and modernity, east and west, self and other, and national and imperial?

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