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UTOPIAN ART AND LITERATURE FROM MODERN INDIA

Nishchindipur: The Impossibility of a Village Utopia

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This article seeks to examine the persistence, in Indian and specifically Bengali literature of the twentieth century, of a contradiction: the myth of an ideal or utopian village set against actual experiences of suffering, inequality, and deprivation. It traces some elements of this contradiction to Thomas More's foundational text, *Utopia* (1516), and continues by examining the idealization of the self-sufficient and unchanging Indian village community in the social thought of the nineteenth-century British jurist Sir Henry Maine. Subsequently, the village becomes a focal concern for Indian nationalists, producing a strain of idealized 'pastoralism' as well as utopian dreams, countered by equally important critiques of rural obscurantism and decay. Both idealization and critique find their place in the literature and art of early twentieth century Bengal, but the category of the village Utopia proves impossible to sustain. The title of the article gestures towards this failure by citing the name (Nishchindipur, meaning 'place of contentment') of the village setting for Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's Bengali novel *Pather Panchali* (1928), made into an iconic film (1955) by the director Satyajit Ray. The film generated a curious conjunction of the epithets 'idyllic' and 'impoverished', and was criticized for its unsparing depiction of rural suffering.

Nishchindipur: The Impossibility of a Village Utopia

This article seeks to examine the persistence, in Indian and specifically Bengali literature of the twentieth century, of a contradiction: the myth of an ideal or utopian village set against actual experiences of suffering, inequality, and deprivation. It traces some elements of this contradiction to Thomas More's foundational text, *Utopia* (1516), and continues by examining the idealization of the self-sufficient and unchanging Indian village community in the social thought of the nineteenth century British jurist Sir Henry Maine. Subsequently, the village becomes a focal concern for Indian nationalists, producing a strain of idealized 'pastoralism' as well as utopian dreams, countered by equally important critiques of rural obscurantism and decay. Both idealization and critique find their place in the literature and art of early twentieth century Bengal, but the category of the village Utopia proves impossible to sustain.

Utopia

Let me begin with a provocation, theoretically contentious if textually justified: *Utopia is a city*. Or at least it is a *polis*: in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), the island of his imagination contains fifty-four city-states, each one exactly like another, so that to describe the capital, Amaurotum, which lies at the very center, is to describe all the rest. Between the cities there is agricultural land, but this is organized not so much on the model of the village as of the farming commune:

Everywhere in the rural districts they [the Utopians] have, at suitable distances from one another, farmhouses well equipped with agricultural implements. They are inhabited by citizens who come in succession to live there. No rural household numbers less than forty men and women ...

Twenty from each household return every year to the city, namely, those having completed two years in the country. As substitutes in their place, the same number are sent from the city. They are to be trained by those who have been there a year and who therefore are more expert in farming; they will themselves teach others in the following years. ...Though this system of changing farmers is the rule, [...] yet many men who take a natural pleasure in agricultural pursuits obtain leave to stay several years (More, 1979: II.115).

The duties of farmers are thus performed by citizens who take turns to live in the country in forty-member 'households' (each with two slaves), half their number being replaced every two years. This achieves the double purpose of making agriculture both the foremost concern of the state (*prima cura agricolationis*, says the marginal gloss in the original Latin text), and agricultural labor a shared civic responsibility, very much the dream of Stalin's Russia and Mao Zedong's China. These rural collectives are scarcely villages: their territorial limits are mapped only by the fact that each city has at least twelve miles of countryside around it. Suitably, but non-specifically located, every rural 'family' of forty members is required to 'cultivate the soil, to feed the animals, and to get wood and convey it to the city either by land or by water, whichever way is more convenient' (More, 1979: II.115). There is no village market, still less a village. Instead, in a work remarkable for its ideological treatment of space, More's attention is focused on the city, on city planning, on urban architecture, and on the garden as a form of urban commons, its care and upkeep shared by all residents. The French philosopher Louis Marin, in his careful structural analysis of More's *Utopia* – an interesting feat of close reading despite the sad fact that Marin is unaware of the difference between Calcutta and Calicut (1990: 43–44) – comments:

The city, as the sum of entirely identical quarters, closes itself off to the countryside that surrounds it by means of gateless city walls. But each quarter, as a part of the city, encloses a "countryside" internal to it by means of houses having permanently open doors (1990: 125; italicized in the original).

All houses in the city stand around a central square; their fronts open onto the street, their backs into a communal garden producing fruits, vegetables, and flowers. As Marin points out, this structure is replicated in the division of the city as a whole into four identical quarters, with a 'market of all kinds of commodities' in the middle of every quarter, where the produce of all the households is stored and distributed (1990: 129). However, these markets within the city are explicitly segregated from the 'designated places' *outside* the city walls where beasts are slaughtered, and all their

'gore and offal' washed away (by slaves), so that nothing 'filthy or unclean' may enter the city, exposing it to contagion or pestilence (More, 1979: II.139). Like hospitals, that are also placed outside the city walls, such external, abjected sites confirm, as Marin says, that '*exteriority connotes refuse, rot, and sickness*' (1990: 135; italics in original). Marin comments that the city is a 'highly concentrated countryside; the country, a city expanded' (1990: 119). In actual fact, however, the countryside is only allowed into the city in the non-contaminating and amenable form of the garden, which Jacopo Bonfadio, following Cicero, was later to describe as a 'third nature' (for 'second nature', see Cicero, *De natura deorum* II.60, 151–52; for 'third nature', see Bonfadio, 1978: 96).

But no reader of More's *Utopia*, especially of its first book, can be unaffected by its references to rural unrest, poverty, and depopulation caused by the pillage and exploitation of the countryside in contemporary England. Raphael Hythloday's account of a conversation at the table of Cardinal Morton turns on the evils of forced enclosure, the breakdown of the manorial economy, the terrorization of husbandmen by former soldiers now turned vagrants and thieves, and the immediate necessity of restoring both tillage and cloth-working (More, 1979: I.65–71). These are concerns that, as we know, remained urgent through the course of the sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth, when they were powerful factors in the making of the English Revolution – at least for its subaltern actors. But in *Utopia* itself, the archaic, threatened, disruptive village is not just excluded – like butchers and sick people, who might spread disease and are placed outside the city walls – it is completely elided from view and replaced by an alternative form of rural communitarianism. More's Utopianism is structurally bound up with a vision of the ideal city, inspired more by Plato's *Republic* than by St Augustine's *De civitate dei*. His is not an accidental choice of urban over rural, since for the idea of rural felicity there were already literary genres in existence, with their attendant ideologies: pastoral, idyll, golden age, *locus amoenus*, the myth of paradise. The village falls somewhere *between* these spaces of rural *otium*, as traditionally conceived, and the *negotium* of the city.

Idealizing the village

I have chosen to begin with this historical and textual excursus, which may appear far distant from my paper's principal concern – the represented village in Indian modernity – in order to place that concern within the conceptual paradox created by the use of the word 'Utopian'. The idealization of the village and of the village economy is a process that unfolds over several centuries, one that has already attracted attention in the context of Utopian ideas: for example, in Anupama Mohan's fine study, *Utopia and the Village in South Asian Literatures*, where she discusses what she calls 'rural heterotopias' (2012: 3). Yet it is worth remembering that the originary structure of Utopia explicitly excludes the village and regards it with distrust and suspicion. How then should we regard the call of the village and its centrality to the nationalist imagination, as well as to literature and art in early twentieth century social and cultural life in India? Not only is the village the locus of a powerful critique of colonial modernity, a space enshrining nationalist hope and imagined community, but it is bound up with the many anxieties and contradictions of the emergent nation, so that its representation looks back, we might suggest, to a 'Utopian' paradox.

The most influential theorization of the village as the site of ideal community was by the British jurist Henry Sumner Maine in the context of India in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1847, at the age of 27, Maine was appointed Regius Professor of Civil Law at the University of Cambridge, and he went on, after having been called to the Bar, to become one of the Readers to the Inns of Court. In this latter capacity he delivered lectures that became the foundation of his influential but controversial work *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society, and Its Relation to Modern Ideas* (1861). In it, Maine traces an historical progression from (largely unwritten) customary law, as found in ancient societies, through the era of written Codes, to contract, or civil law, characteristic of a modern legal system. He further distinguishes between what he calls 'stationary and progressive societies', describing 'Brahminical India' as stuck at 'a stage at which the rule of law is not yet

discriminated from a rule of religion' (Maine, 1861: 23), while 'the movement of the progressive societies has hitherto been a movement *from Status to Contract*' (Maine, 1861: 170, emphasis in original). It appears that Maine had already made a study of Hindu law, since he refers to the 'code of Menu', recording 'the opinion of the best contemporary orientalists' that this code did not 'represent a set of rules ever actually administered in Hindostan' (Maine, 1861: 17–18). But it was in the context of the law of property that he wrote enthusiastically of the 'immense antiquity' of the village community of India, describing it as 'at once an organized patriarchal society and an assemblage of co-proprietors', where 'the personal relations to each other of the men who compose it are indistinguishably confounded with their proprietary rights' (Maine, 1861: 261). Perhaps inevitably, Maine was invited in 1861 to become Legal Member of the Governor General of India's Council in Calcutta, an invitation that he accepted in 1862.

Maine remained in India for seven years. He advised the government on issues ranging from land settlement to civil marriage, and served as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calcutta, but it was after his return to England in 1869, and his taking up the chair of historical and comparative jurisprudence at the University of Oxford, that he began to draw upon his Indian experience to continue his exposition of the evolution of law and its relation to tradition. In the succeeding years he published *Village-Communities in the East and West* (1871), *Early History of Institutions* (1875), and *Early Law and Custom* (1883). *Village-Communities*, a literary reworking of six lectures originally delivered at Oxford, contains extended reflections on the nature of Indian village communities, which, Maine tells us, 'have been submitted to Mr. George Campbell, now Lieut.-Governor of Bengal' and confirmed from his more extensive 'experience and observation' (1871: vi). The fourth lecture in the book is devoted to the Indian village community, regarded by Maine as 'a living, not a dead institution', and which he discusses in terms already set by British colonial administrators (1871: 12, 101–28). He is critical of Lord Cornwallis's Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, a piece of legislation through which the East India Company sought to transform tax-collectors in Bengal into a 'landed-proprietary' on the British model (Maine, 1871: 104–06). In

attempting to locate 'the true proprietary unit of India', Maine draws, as Louis Dumont points out, not only on George Campbell's *Modern India* (1852) (see also Campbell, 1881) but upon a range of colonial administrators and their reports, from the *Fifth Report* of 1812 (See Firminger, 1917–18, I: 431 sq.), Thomas Munro and Mountstuart Elphinstone to Charles Metcalfe (Dumont 1966: 75–6, 67–8). Dumont comments that:

One is struck by the fact that all those texts have a family air, as if they all were variants of the same text, or had been engendered by the same mind. No doubt there is an objective element in the descriptions, but their factual basis will clearly not account for their stereotyped character, the very particular uniform language in which they are couched. For the observer of things Indian, there is something idyllic and utopian about them (1966: 68).

The word 'utopian' is telling. It was Metcalfe who famously observed that 'the Village Communities are little Republics, having nearly everything that they want within themselves and almost independent of any foreign relations' (1830: 328). From the early nineteenth century onwards, the view of the colonial government had been that the Indian village was a largely self-contained entity, with internal systems of governance, shared and customary practices of agriculture and land use, and with its own providers of various services. Maine enumerates 'several families of hereditary traders; the Blacksmith, the Harness-maker, the Shoemaker ... [T]he Brahmin ... for the performance of ceremonies, and even the Dancing-Girl for attendance at festivities' as well as the 'Village-Accountant', all of which he persists in describing as trades rather than castes (1871: 125). Intent on the notion of community, Maine observes that the attempt (by the British colonial administrators Thomas Munro and Mark Wilks, whom he does not mention) to create a 'peasant-proprietary' by introducing the *ryotwari* system of revenue collection in the Madras Presidency was also mistaken (1871: 105–06). For Maine the true proprietary unit, the village community as a whole, gains its cohesion from the 'brotherhood' and self-sufficiency that bind it together, though he is also conscious of the forces of modernization, hastened by colonial rule, that are fragmenting and destroying the traditional village:

For the separate, unchangeable, and irremovable family lot in the cultivated area, if it be a step forwards in the history of property, is also the point at which the Indian village community is breaking to pieces... The brotherhood of the larger group may still cohere, but the brethren of some one family are always wishing to have their shares separately (1871: 112–13).

Further, Dumont notes (1966: 79) that Maine shows some awareness of other threats to the simple notion of communally shared proprietorship: in particular, that:

When the village communities were allowed to be in some sense the proprietors of the land which they tilled, they proved on careful inspection not to be simple groups, but highly composite bodies, composed of several sections with conflicting and occasionally with irreconcilable claims (Maine 1871: 157).

Nevertheless – to the author of *Homo Hierarchicus* – Maine's failure to notice the extremely unequal, indeed hierarchical, structure of Indian village society was a major flaw, attributable in part to his relative ignorance of actual villages, and partly to his 'preoccupation with the Indo-European village community' and the 'analogy with the West', so that 'India was to him little other than "the great repository of verifiable phenomena of ancient usage and ancient juridical thought"' (1966: 81). For Maine, the 'eastern' example served to prove that, despite the inevitability of historical progress, in some places like India, 'the distinction between the Present and the Past disappears. Sometimes the Past is the Present' (Maine, 1871: 7). This is a notable exercise in what Johannes Fabian called allochronism, or the creation of different temporalities for different places (2002: 32). As Dumont saw it, Maine's belief in his 'community' as an independent institution led to an 'incapacity to relinquish a substantialist point of view – the community as a thing-in-itself, as an individual – in favour of a relational view: the village in its context of caste and power (or naked force)' (1966: 81).

Dumont's critique of Maine, itself the subject of critique by later scholars, is linked to his own concern with 'the village as a political society' (1966: 69). For him the two-fold idealization of the Indian village, first as a 'little republic' independent of

state control, and second in terms of its internal organization, that of a 'community' exercising joint rights, had obscured the actual political and social context within which villages existed in India. At the same time, Maine is capable of occasional reflections on the historical processes whereby groups of villages became towns, single villages grew to 'exceptional greatness', or tracts of cultivated land were converted into semi-urban royal encampments, so that all village communities could not be supposed to exist in a perpetually undisturbed state. Maine observes that the British capital of Calcutta is an example of how:

A number of different villages have been founded close together on what was perhaps at one time unprofitable waste land, but which has become exceptionally valuable through advantages of situation. This last was the origin of the great Anglo-Indian city of Calcutta, which is really a collection of villages of very modern foundation (1871: 118).

Idyll and Counter-Idyll

If the myth of the self-sufficient, unchanging Indian village was then largely the creation of a succession of British administrators upon whom Maine drew, his own, more radical, contribution to 'the paternalistic impulse of indirect rule' that governed British policy after the Revolt of 1857 was, Karuna Mantena argues, the idea of traditional Indian village life as 'simultaneously intact and vulnerable', the 'notion of a native society in crisis, of the inevitable dissolution of native society under the conditions of modern empire' (2010: 151). A more acute sense of crisis, with a searing indictment of both British imperial greed and 'Oriental despotism', was notoriously articulated by Karl Marx in his article dated 10 June (published 25 June) 1853 in the *New York Daily Tribune*. Marx lamented the spectacle of:

Myriads of industrious patriarchal and inoffensive social organizations disorganized and dissolved into their units, thrown into a sea of woes, and their individual members losing at the same time their ancient form of civilization, and their hereditary means of subsistence (Marx and Engels 2010, 11: 132).

At the same time, he noted that 'these idyllic village communities', with 'their undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life' and bereft of 'historical energies', were 'contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery' (Marx and Engels 2010, 11: 132).

This article is not the place to embark on yet another deconstruction of Marx's notion of 'Oriental despotism'. More interestingly, as C. A. Bayly points out, Maine's *Ancient Law* and *Village-Communities* had a direct impact on the emergence of a strain of conservative, idealist, and historicist thought among Indian civil servants in the later nineteenth century, and upon similar views expressed by Indian nationalists (1991: 390–93). It is true that Maine was criticized – for example by B. H. Baden-Powell – for theorizing in the absence of hard data (Baden-Powell, 1892: II: 104n; 1896: 5–7), but his evolutionist view of society was attractive in a period of social Darwinism, while the myth of 'the self-contained and ageless Indian village' (Bayly, 1991: 395) found adherents across the colonial divide, though with a sharper focus upon contemporary depredations. For Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the Indian village represented a purer and more authentic social reality, one that was constantly threatened by the colonial state, and by the forces of capital, figured by the 'city'. Writing in *Young India* on 13 October 1921, Gandhi asserted:

Our cities are not India. India lives in her seven and a half lakhs of villages, and the cities live upon the villages. They do not bring their wealth from other countries. The city people are brokers and commission agents for the big houses of Europe, America and Japan. The cities have cooperated with the latter in the bleeding process that has gone on for the past two hundred years. (Gandhi, *CWVG* 21 (1966): 288–89)

As against this process of impoverishment and exploitation, Gandhi set out his Utopian model of village self-rule, or *swaraj*, in an article in *Harijan* on 26 July 1942:

My idea of Village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus every village's first concern will be

to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it will grow *useful* money crops, thus excluding *ganja*, tobacco, opium and the like [emphasis in original]. The village will maintain a village theatre, school and public hall. It will have its own waterworks ensuring water supply. This can be done through controlled wells and tanks. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on the co-operative basis. There will be no castes such as we have today with their graded untouchability. Any village can become such a republic today without much interference, even from the present Government whose sole effective connection with the villages is the exaction of the village revenue. ... To model such a village may be the work of a lifetime. Any lover of true democracy and village life can take up a village, treat it as his world and sole work, and he will find good results. (Gandhi, *CWMG* 76 (1979): 308)

Although Gandhi repeats Metcalfe's characterization of the village as a 'little republic', he does so on entirely new principles, more or less effacing the actual village with its caste system, poverty, and illiteracy, in order to create it anew on Utopian lines. At the same time, he shows himself willing to claim this village republic, with explicit reference to Maine, as traditional: 'Indian society was at one time unknowingly constituted on a non-violent basis. The home life, i.e. the village, was undisturbed by the periodic visitations from barbarous hordes. Mayne [sic] has shown that India's villages were a congeries of republics' (Gandhi, *CWMG* 71 (1978): 4) Thus, Gandhi's oft-recalled dictum, stated in a letter to Jhaverbhai Patel dated 23 August 1944, that 'For me, India begins and ends in the villages; that is, what I find in one village I would apply to all villages in similar conditions' (Gandhi *CWMG* 78 (1979): 45) turns out to be founded not so much upon the immediate reality of rural existence, but upon a distillation of the ideal village that might become a model for the nation. In July 1946, he stated: 'Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus every village will be a republic or *panchayat* having full powers' (Gandhi, *CWMG* 85 (1982): 32).

India did in fact adopt the model of *Panchayati Raj* (local self-government) through a constitutional amendment in 1992, though its current form may not be what Gandhi envisaged. But the idea of a village Utopia failed to impress Gandhi's most distinguished colleagues, Jawaharlal Nehru and B. R. Ambedkar. In a long and critical discussion of the caste system in his *The Discovery of India* (1946), Nehru notes that it was closely linked to the 'self-governing village communities' and the patriarchal family, conceived in terms set by Maine and his predecessors: 'the old Indian social structure which has so powerfully influenced our people...was based on three concepts: the autonomous village community; caste; and the joint family system' (1985: 247). At the end of the book, however, despite his modernizing distaste for what he saw as an obsolete way of life, Nehru was willing to consider a 'democratic collectivism' with the village as its unit (1985: 521–22). By contrast, B. R. Ambedkar expressed open dislike of the Hindu village, which was for him no more than the concrete embodiment of the Hindu social order. Describing the life of an Indian village in terms of the division between 'touchable' and 'untouchable' castes, he concluded that it was 'the very negation of a republic':

Such is the picture of the inside life in an Indian village. In this Republic, there is no place for democracy. There is no room for equality. There is no room for liberty and there is no room for fraternity. The Indian village is the very negation of a Republic. If it is a republic, it is a republic of the Touchables, by the Touchables and for the Touchables. The republic is an Empire of the Hindus over the Untouchables. It is a kind of colonialism of the Hindus designed to exploit the Untouchables. The Untouchables have no rights. They are there only to wait, serve and submit. They are there to do or to die. They have no rights because they are outside the village republic and because they are outside the so-called republic, they are outside the Hindu fold (Ambedkar, 2014, 5: 26; capitalization as in original).

Responding to Constituent Assembly debates on the Draft Constitution of India in 1948–49, Ambedkar cited Metcalfe directly in the context of the supposed continuity of Indian culture through the survival of the village republic, but was unequivocal on the need to abandon it:

I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India. I am therefore surprised that those who condemn Provincialism and communalism should come forward as champions of the village. What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism? I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit (2014, 13: 62).

In the decades following Independence, a number of historians and sociologists, including D. D. Kosambi, Irfan Habib, and M. N. Srinivas, cast a critical eye on the myth of the self-sufficient Indian village. Historically, despite some measure of collectivity and isolation in their constitution, villages had been subject to the depredations and vagaries of state power and the requirements of commodity production: they were by no means a society of equal sharers but manifested every sign of economic hierarchy. Habib comments that 'no evidence exists for communal ownership of land or even a periodic distribution and redistribution of land among peasants' (1963: 123, 119; see also Kosambi, 1956: 320–44). In a 1957 article, Louis Dumont and David Pocock went so far as to assert that 'India, sociologically speaking is not made up of villages' (1957: I: 25). M. N. Srinivas and A. M. Shah took not only Metcalfe, Marx, and Maine, but also 'Mahatma Gandhi and his followers' to task for propagating 'the myth of self-sufficiency of the Indian village', contrasting the illusion with the reality:

The Indian village was thus always a part of a wider entity, subject to the winds which blew from without. The incredibly bad roads, the heavy monsoon, the growing of food crops and vegetables, the existence of barter and the powerful sense of membership of the village community have all given students an illusion of self-sufficiency and of isolation. But it is only an illusion and the reality is quite different (1960: 1377).

Not only was the village dependent on the town (for metal implements, for example), there were more insidious cultural forces at work as well, such as the role of the Brahmin priest in 'the gradual Sanskritisation of the lower castes and in making villagers everywhere an effective part of all-India Hinduism' (1960: 1377). For Srinivas and Shah, the 'falsifying [of] the true nature of the Indian village

community had provided a basis for revivalists' and Utopians' programme of political action' (1960: 1375). At the same time, Srinivas was the author of perhaps the most memorable documentary account of a real village, Rampura, in the state of Mysore, now Karnataka. Srinivas's *The Remembered Village* (1976) was written after all his processed notes from his field-work, carried out in 1948–49, had been burnt in a fire set by arsonists at Stanford University. The account is a classic work of modern anthropology: it is also set at a critical historical moment, since Srinivas entered the village for his fieldwork just 13 days after the assassination of Gandhi, upon the conclusion of the formal mourning period. He records 'I did not see immediately the connection between Gandhi's death and my moving into Rampura', but he later felt a symbolic and psychic connection:

The villagers commemorated the thirteenth day of Gandhi's death with a meeting, group photograph, and snacks. At first sight it looked like a strange way of expressing their sorrow at the death, but traditionally the ending of the period of mourning was marked by a feast. Only the photograph was a new addition. (Srinivas, 2012: 11).

Representing the Village

In *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams wrote eloquently of the historical drive towards a 'metropolitan' mode of existence that he saw as a consequence of global capitalism, industrialization, and the alienation of labor (1973: 279, 302–03). Williams's work suggests that the nineteenth-century idealization of the village was rooted in a kind of utopian thinking in flight from the chaos and violence of modern cities, and that it was bound to fail. That failure is recorded in the great literary form of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the novel, a form linked in its origin to what Fredric Jameson calls:

A properly bourgeois cultural revolution – that immense process of transformation whereby populations whose life habits were formed by other, now archaic, modes of production are now reprogrammed for life and work in the new world of market capitalism (1989: 152).

Jameson suggests that what fell to the novel was ‘the task of producing as though for the first time, the very life world, that very “referent” ... of which the new narrative discourse will then claim to be the “realistic” reflection’ (1989: 152). Theorists of the novel claim it as a form entirely at home in the complex, labyrinthine space of the city, while village ‘stories’ or ‘tales’, as Franco Moretti characterizes them, are set within defined spatial limits and rapidly lose the capacity ‘to represent the most significant aspects of contemporary reality’ (2007: 63). But while the village tale, scene or sketch may be a relatively limited form, villages and rural life provide material for the novel right through the nineteenth century and, for India especially, during the first half of the twentieth. Josephine McDonagh links representations of the village in the nineteenth century English novel to Maine’s characterization of village communities (McDonagh 148).

The modern novel in India, commencing as an urban form, is marked, fairly early in its history, by a turn to the rural, and especially to the representation of village life. It might be argued that the sudden proliferation, in the early twentieth century, of fictional works set in villages (by, say, Raja Rao or Mulk Raj Anand) or with the word ‘village’ in their titles, reflects the impact of Gandhian ideology while offering, simultaneously, material for a critique – perhaps a deconstruction – of that ideology. But even preceding – or in the absence of – any direct engagement with Gandhian thought, the village emerges in Bengali literature and art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the crucible of modernity, the site where the struggles and failures of a newly modernizing nation must be worked out. The great Bengali modernist fiction of the 1930s and 1940s employs village settings not to return us to a pastoral idyll but to show us that the conditions of peasant life have changed very little from the excoriating depiction of the ills of the Permanent Settlement by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay in his article on ‘Bangadesher Krishak’ (The Peasants of Bengal) published in the journal *Bangadarshan* in 1872:

I have a question to ask in the midst of this profusion of welfare: welfare for whom? Hashim Sheikh and Rama Kaibarta are ploughing their fields under the midday sun, bareheaded, barefooted, working in knee-deep mud with two skin-and-bone oxen and a blunt-edged ploughshare borrowed from

someone. Have they benefited? The Bhadra sun rages directly on their bare heads, their throats are parched with thirst, to quench it they have to drink muddy water from the field with their cupped hands; they are nearly dying of hunger, but cannot afford to go home now for lunch, for this is the sowing season. Back home in the evening they will fill only half their stomachs with a meal of coarse brown rice and salt and green chillies, served on a broken platter (Chattopadhyay, 2004, II: 250, my translation).

Rural Bengal in the first half of the twentieth century was overtaken by a series of catastrophic events, including the first 'partition' of the state and the redrawing of its boundaries in 1905, armed uprisings against British rule and brutal suppression of nationalist insurgencies, two world wars, the famine of 1943, and long, drawn-out peasant movements like the Tebhaga land agitation extending over 1946–51. Above all the later national Partition of 1947, preceded by large-scale communal riots, took an immense toll in human displacement, migration, and homelessness. These events cast their shadow on the literature and art of this period, a shadow visible in realist and modernist fiction as well as in the powerful expressivism of Ramkinkar Baij's sculptural treatments of Santal peasants, and in Zainul Abedin, Somnath Hore, and Chittaprosad's images of the famine. But more interesting is the way in which the idyll and its negation jointly inhabit the rural landscape — above all the *village*. Utopia exists as a ghost of nationalist ideology and hope: hovering even in the name, Nishchindipur, that Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay gave to the village setting of his great novel *Pather Panchali* (1928).

The fractured and painful history of modern Bengal leaves its permanent impression upon forms of artistic representation, resulting not so much in the loss of the Utopian village, but in the recognition of its impossibility. But that impossibility is always-already inscribed, I would suggest, in the making of what we might call a new 'Bengali pastoralism' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, inspired at one remove by medieval Vaishnava lyricism, and more proximately by the letters of Rabindranath Tagore's *Chhinnapatra* ('Torn Leaves', 1912), his short stories composed from the 1890s onwards, and the songs in which he celebrates an unspoilt

rural landscape. Painters Tagore hosted at his *ashram*, later university, in Santiniketan, include Nandalal Basu and Binodebehari Mukhopadhyay, who celebrated this landscape and influenced numerous later studies of the Bengal countryside; the village craftspersons shown in the panels Nandalal painted for the Haripura Congress session in 1938 feed into the nationalist ideology of a vibrant village economy threatened by industrialization and colonialism. Tagore's own hands-on commitment to rural upliftment, embodied in the Institute for Rural Reconstruction at Surul, set up in 1922 with Leonard Elmhirst as its director, and the subsequent creation of Sriniketan with its crafts and artisanal training programmes, would need separate study. That commitment, voiced in a steady stream of letters, essays, and addresses from the 1890s onwards, and receiving notable expression in *Swadeshi Samaj* ('The Society of our Homeland', 1904) and in collected form in *Palli-prakriti* ('The Nature of our Villages', 1920) is non-Utopian: it is practical, reformatory, and modernizing in its outlook, acknowledging the importance of the village but seeing it in conjunction with the town and as part of a larger agrarian economy.

For even in the moment of its inception, the strain of Bengali pastoralism that Tagore himself had helped to create was unable to overcome the equally urgent reminders of suffering, poverty, and narrow-mindedness in village life, notably in the unsentimental recognition of cruelty and pain in Tagore's rural stories, and in scathing attacks on village society by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in novels like *Palli Samaj* ('Village Society', 1916). If the city clerk in Tagore's poem 'Banshi' ('The Flute', 1932) remembers the young village bride dressed in a Dhaka sari with vermilion in her hair, the memory is one of an idyll never realized, indeed lost almost at origin. The novelists of the later twentieth century, Bibhutibhusan (1894–1950), Tarashankar (1898–1971), and Manik Bandyopadhyay (1908–56), as well as Satinath Bhaduri (1906–65) and Adwaita Mallabharman (1914–51), all focus on the Bengal countryside, but see the 'unchanging' Indian village as battered by the winds of change, wasted by poverty and dearth, and unsettled by migration to the all-consuming city. The project of modernity had been a central concern of the Bengali novel from its inception, driving its search for subjects and its experiments

with representational techniques. What emerges in the twentieth century is a new kind of social realism, employing a modernist idiom but seeking to render above all the anger and hopelessness of the rural poor. (An interesting historical parallel is the Italian author Ignazio Silone's 1933 novel *Fontamara*, an anti-Fascist work set in a remote village in the Abruzzo, and apparently translated into Bengali in the 1940s; see Pugliese, 2009: 120). At the same time, the lyric power of novelists like Bibhutibhushan and Adwaita Mallabarman conveys the ecologically threatened beauty of the landscapes in which their novels are set. Immortalized by Satyajit Ray's film trilogy, Bibhutibhushan's novels convey a profound, almost poetic, grasp of natural and human detail, while they describe the bleak necessities that impel the priest Harihar's family to leave its ancestral village and seek a livelihood elsewhere. Apu, the hero of this *Bildungsroman*, makes the transition from village boy to urban intellectual, a trajectory that becomes representative of Bengali modernity.

In fact, when the educated estate-manager in *Aranyak* ('Book of the Forest', 1938) undertakes the reverse journey to the forests of Bihar, narrating in visionary prose the inevitable destruction of forest lands and the displacement of ancient tribal communities, the novel appears to be interrogating the ghosts of a past always out of reach. Bibhutibhushan's last major novel, *Ashani Sanket* ('Distant Thunder', 1959) deals with the Bengal famine of 1943, showing the Brahmin Gangadhar moving with his family from village to village to secure the caste benefits attached to his priestly occupation, only to be overtaken in the end by a catastrophe that disproves, once and for all, the myth of the 'self-sufficiency' and 'isolation' of village communities. The famine of 1943 taught Bengali peasants that despite crops in the fields and grain in the storehouses, despite an apparently 'self-sustaining' village economy, food – rice – could disappear from the market, and that people could die of hunger even when the harvest had not failed. What fails in the end is the ideal, almost visionary image of Gangadhar's wife Ananga as a type of *grihalakshmi* ('goddess of the household'): an image suffused with the plangent lyricism characteristic of Bibhutibhushan's fiction (Chaudhuri, 2011: 231–35; Chaudhuri, 2014: 113–15).

Let us reflect for a moment on the name, Nishchindipur ('place of contentment'), that Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay gives to the village in which *Pather Panchali*, later made into an iconic film (1955: *Song of the Little Road*) by the Indian director Satyajit Ray, is set. In both novel and film, the hamlet appears to be a fictional, invented location (though there is at least one village called Nishchindipur in West Bengal, and the choice of name therefore suits the novel's realist canvas). But there is a residual irony in the title, at least for Bengali readers, since his narrative offers a harsh, unsparing vision of village life, and the poor rural family at its center finds no contentment there, being forced in the end to migrate to the city. Despite the fact that both novel and film quickly achieved classic status, with Ray's *Pather Panchali* winning a national award and international recognition at the Cannes Film Festival in 1956, many viewers across the world, and in India, were made uncomfortable by its exposure of rural poverty (Robinson, 2004: 327). Responses to the film have tended to link epithets such as 'idyllic' with 'impoverished' to describe its setting (Sengupta, 2015: n.p.), a conjunction that signals, so I will argue, not so much the loss of a village utopia as the persistence of a structural ambiguity. The remembered village is a site of nostalgia *at the very same time* as it carries memories of suffering and deprivation.

The lost village? Myths of Partition

For some commentators this was the result of an historical rupture. In a much-cited article, Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote of the generic Bengal village as 'a powerfully nostalgic and pastoral image', which appeared, through the mist of memory and in the context of the traumatic events of the Partition of India in 1947, as 'the true spiritual home' of the urban Bengali, but a home that had been lost forever in the chaos and displacement of the post-Partition years (1996: 2147–48). Chakrabarty noted that this ascription of a 'modern cultural value' to the village was not the product of Partition, since we can trace its genesis in the letters of Tagore's *Chhinnapatra*, written during the 1880s and 1890s. *Pather Panchali* was itself serialized in 1928, and poverty and obscurantism had been associated with village life from the nineteenth century, forming part of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's

searing critiques of rural existence (1996: 2148). Certainly, the upheavals of Partition converted large sections of the rural population to homeless urban refugees, and produced an unhealable trauma in the body of the nation-state, powerfully captured in post-Partition fiction and in the films of Ritwik Ghatak. Ghatak's use of Tagore's song, *Aj dhaner khete roudra chhayay luko-churi khela* ('Today sunshine and cloud play hide-and-peek in the paddy-fields') in *Subarnarekha* (1965), his bleak, terrifying story of Partition, displacement, the breaking-up of a village family, and sexual trafficking, expresses what I would describe as the mirage, perhaps the ghost, of a rural Utopia: a ghost that haunts modernist art and literature in Bengal. Ghatak's contemporary, Satyajit Ray, raised in the city, recorded his own discovery of the unknown rhythms of village life when filming *Pather Panchali* in the village of Boral, a short drive from Kolkata (Ray, 2005: 33). Ray later mourned the obliteration of that village by the refugee camp, as wave upon wave of displaced, homeless settlers from East Bengal established their 'colonies' south of the railway track that had marked the city's former limit. In a conversation with the film director James Blue, Ray said about Boral: 'It's unrecognizable now. It's no longer pure. It's spoiled. It was once very nice, indeed, with long areas of no huts, no refugee huts' (Ray, quoted in Blue, 1968: n.p.).

This characterization of the lost village of modernity is so familiar that it does not need repeating. In post-Partition film and art, there seems to be something inescapably melancholy even in the direct experience of the rural setting: Moinak Biswas, writing of the pull of Nishchindipur on the protagonist Apu's consciousness, notes that it is always sliding into the past: 'the village as present-past cannot just appear, it always returns' (2006: 48; see also Gooptu, 2010: 147–49). But it is my argument in this article that while the 'nostalgic and pastoral image' of the village may be a special characteristic of post-Partition literature, the impossibility of a village utopia was *already* a concern for modernist authors from the 1920s onwards. While the film of memory may have added idealizing elements to the imagined village, the great achievement of modernist fiction in the early twentieth century was to look at the village as the here-and-now of modernity, of the nation, and of society. The later myth of a village left behind or lost in the chaos and displacement of Partition (memorably captured, for example, in Shanta Sen's memoir *Pitamahi* (Grandmother], 2009) has in some ways overwritten that earlier, unsparingly critical assessment.

History, change, and decay: the impossibility of a village Utopia

Thus for Bengali novelists in the first half of the twentieth century, the village, even more than the town, is *the* radical modernist subject, as in Manik Bandyopadhyay's great novel of village life, *Putulnacher Itikatha* ('Tale of the Puppet-dance', 1936). His contemporary Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay wrote a series of rural novels that reflect the grim social realities of the 1930s and 1940s in Bengal, describing a decaying feudalism, the increasing impoverishment of the peasantry, and a newly profiteering middle class. In a sense there is a progression from a muted idealization of village community in *Dhatri Debata* ('Earth Goddess', 1939), to the more political analyses of *Kalindi* (1940) and *Gana Debata* ('God of the People', 1942). Yet here, as in *Kabi* ('The Poet', 1944), Tarashankar offers no real solution for the ills of the caste-ridden, oppressive rural society that he describes with such power and truth.

Tarashankar's vision is rooted in a sense of place, especially the landscape of his own native Rarh: river, ploughed field, and village dominate novels like *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* ('The Tale of the River's Bend', 1951). Even this small pocket of rural Bengal contains intricate histories of land, work, and capital: within living memory the British-owned indigo plantation has yielded, first to rent-collecting landlords ('zamindars'), then to small-holding, prosperous middle castes, the Sadgop gentry of Jangol village who carry on trade and employ the Kahars to till their land (Bandyopadhyay 2015: 5). Once classified by colonial ethnographers as a 'criminal tribe', the Kahars are not native to Bengal, though they have been settled there for generations. Brought to the indigo plantation as palanquin bearers and bodyguards, they now toil as sharecroppers in fields owned by the Sadgop gentry. Despite the hold of customary law and tradition upon their community, therefore, the Kahar village is anything but ageless and unchanging: they are an already displaced tribal group brought to their present location by internal colonization, not one immemorably settled on the same land. The novel captures the inexorable breaking-up, with the attendant loss of tradition, of their village community. This history is entirely representative of those patterns of internal work-driven migration to which India's villages also bear witness. Not only has the tribe been dislocated from any presumed point of origin and learnt new habits as tillers of the soil, but its living rhythms, its

music and memory, are spelt out against the signs of a hybrid modernity: the railway train crossing the bridge; warplanes passing overhead; and money changing hands. Against the background of World War Two, and seeing new work opportunities being opened up by the railways, the Kahar community seeks to hold on to its customs, its laws, and its memories, but the battle has already been lost to history.

Between 27 July 1963 and 27 May 1968, Tarashankar wrote a series of weekly 'letters' in the Bengali daily newspaper *Jugantar*, under the title *Gramer Chithi* ('Letters from the Village'; published as a single volume in 2017). Bengali commentators view these writings as something more than 'reportage', although they are weekly bulletins on rural conditions and problems, rather like the poet Subhas Mukhopadhyay's earlier series, *Amar Bangla* ('My Bengal'), *Dak Banglar Diary* ('Diary of a Country Outpost'), and *Abar Dak Banglar Diary* ('Another Diary of the Country Outpost'). In his youth, Tarashankar had been an anti-British revolutionary – he was arrested by the colonial government in 1930 – and was later a socialist member not only of the Progressive Writers' Movement but also of the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association. In his later life he became a Gandhian, and it was very much under the influence of a Gandhian ideology of the village, and from a close identification with his native village of Labhpur in Birbhum, West Bengal, that he composed this series, never published as a book during his lifetime. The letters feature topics including village politics, welfare, agricultural improvements, and social concerns. In *Letter 70* (2 January 1964), Tarashankar cites Metcalfe, referring to his encomium of the 'unchanging' character of the Indian village, which had retained its stability and internal cohesion despite wave upon wave of political invasion or even revolutionary change in the country as a whole. The old Gandhian is unimpressed: in the new age of 'internationalism', he notes, the idea of the unchanging village is *achal* ('unworkable', with a play on 'unmoving', the literal sense of *achal*). The village must change, but how is this change to be brought about? It is necessary to do away with the divisions of caste (*chhut-achchhut*, 'touchable-untouchable'), with indebtedness and usury, with *zamindari* and the class system, and with oppressive customs. Nevertheless, the life of the village, Tarashankar says, remains rooted in *chash-bash*, a familiar collocation that he interprets as 'ploughing and living', or even 'ploughing

to live'. If the country is to live, the village must live: it must live in its agriculture, which is the core of its existence. In a Nehruvian turn, he urges that the nation must plan for this in the long term. Just as the Gandhian *charkha* ('spinning-wheel') is in the end only a symbol, so too the traditional, 'immemorial' village crafts serve only a symbolic purpose: village India must be renewed and remade for a modern century (Bandyopadhyay, 2017: 208–10).

If there is constructive hope here, there is also, in the series as a whole, profound acknowledgement of national failures. In the much later *Letter 195* (2 September 1967), Tarashankar writes against the background of the armed peasant uprising in the Santhal village of Naxalbari that had taken place earlier that year. While deploring the violence, assaults on women, and loss of life, he poses a larger question:

The fundamental demand of Naxalbari stands before the nation like a huge question. To give food to the hungry, land to the landless, dignity to the downtrodden: in this lies the true glory of freedom. That is the real self of independence. And this promise is one that has been made to the people by the leaders of our nation. Food, land, home and dignity. In this twentieth year of our Independence, why have our people not received these? Why do we stand, heads bowed, silent, as this question is put to us? (Bandyopadhyay, 2017: 579, my translation).

Expectedly, perhaps, the series of letters concludes on 27 May 1968, almost exactly a year to the day of the police firing in Naxalbari. Tarashankar died in 1971, three years after this last 'Letter from the Village', which begins with an extended reflection on 'seeing'. What the ageing Gandhian ruralist has seen in the villages of Bengal over the course of a long life are scenes of great beauty, but also of utter darkness. It is in darkness that he awaits, at the close, 'something like an explosion', perhaps a 'suicidal conflict or calamity: the storm is coming' (Bandyopadhyay, 2017: 686).

What, if anything, is a village Utopia? I have argued that the idea is absent from More's work, though some Utopian imaginings drive what Anthony Low (1985) has called a 'Georgic Revolution' in seventeenth century England, an enterprise rooted in

agriculture, but not in the village. So too, reading J. M. Coetzee's novel *The Childhood of Jesus*, a strange, dystopian, and disquieting narrative of refugees arriving at a resettlement camp in a bleak foreign country run on quasi-socialist principles with enforced labor for all and a vegetarian diet, we may reflect that More's *Utopia* should be counted as one of its principal sources. The idea of a Utopian village – with greater or lesser qualifications – is certainly proposed by Maine and his predecessors for India during the course of the nineteenth century. It imbues nationalist ideology, but it is not only doomed to failure, it produces a crisis of trust. What it leaves by way of a legacy in early twentieth century art and literature is a potential idealization of the rural and pastoral, the sense of an idyll close at hand but always eluding one's grasp, always needing to be set against the realities of rural oppression, neglect, and suffering. Bengali cinema, looking back at this body of work in the 1960s and early 1970s, after Partition, which had placed the idyll permanently out of reach, is quick to capture the impossibility of a village Utopia.

But let me conclude by offering a late, postmodern turn to this narrative, briefly citing a much later cinematic work, a Bengali film from our own time, Manas Mukul Pal's *Sahaj Pather Goppo* (2015). The film is based on a literary source, the short story 'Tal-nabami' by Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay, and it echoes, cites, and is haunted by the great work of Pal's predecessors, Ray and Ghatak. Like them, Pal sees the village as a place of extreme dearth and suffering at the same time as it is a place of extraordinary beauty. But the film's inescapable condition of cultural and political belatedness, when both nation and village are no more than phantoms of what they were in the early and middle twentieth century, renders its treatment of village life spectral, almost uncanny. It is as if those debates on the place of the village in national life, those ideological struggles with the 'modern', and those aesthetic experiments with modernist form, that representing the village had required of at least two generations of Bengali artists, have all receded into the past, and what we are left with is a shadow – impossibly beautiful, impossibly melancholy – of the village in Bengali imagination.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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