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Modern Indian Utopian Art and Literature: An Introduction

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This is an editorial introduction to the Open Library of Humanities Special Collection on Utopian Art and Literature from Modern India, which has a major focus on literary and filmic imaginings of utopia and dystopia, with the majority of articles examining texts from the period before the Partition and independence of India in 1947. We show how the collection is part of the current scholarly endeavour to recognize the wealth of non-Eurocentric utopian and dystopian texts in literature. The introduction captures key themes such as the rural and the urban, discussed in the collection, and points out the scholarly innovation of paying sustained attention to literature written in *bhashas* (vernacular Indian languages) in both utopian and dystopian modes, and of analysing the work of classic Modernist writers from 20th-century India, such as Satinath Bhaduri and Tarasankar Bandopadhyay.

This Special Collection, 'Utopian Art and Literature from Modern India', predominantly focuses on literary and filmic imaginings of utopia and dystopia, with the majority of the articles examining texts from the period before the partition and independence of India in 1947. Contributions analyze literature, film, and art from Bengal and northern India. The collection is part of the current scholarly endeavour to recognize the wealth of utopian and dystopian texts and images from different parts of the world (Dutton and Sargent, 2013). We build on existing work by scholars of utopia and India such as Michael Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash (2010), Konrad Meisig (2007), Barnita Bagchi (2012), and Anupama Mohan (2012). We also pay sustained attention to literature written in *bhashas* (vernacular Indian languages), and to the work of classic modernist writers expressing themselves in *bhashas* from 20th-century India, such as Satinath Bhaduri (Bagchi, 2019) and Tarasankar Bandopadhyay (Chatterjee, 2019): such work is enormously fruitful to analyze from utopian and literary studies approaches. Besides presenting these aspects, the Special Collection addresses both unique and conventional themes in utopian and dystopian studies; while conventional and canonical themes such as delineation of good places and bad places are adopted in modern Indian utopian writing, the village as a place emerges in modern Indian utopian and dystopian writing as far more important than in canonical Eurocentric utopian narratives.

As illuminated in this collection, the exploration of the spaces of village and city, together with their associated ambience and symbolism, is recurrent in utopian and dystopian writings. A significant number of articles collected in this volume depict South Asia and especially Bengal during the phase of sometimes violent transformation that marked the decisive period before India achieved independence in 1947. These articles consequently provide nuanced insight into the rural/urban trope. Pastoralism, a theme most often associated with the idealization of rural life, has been intricately associated with utopianism and even more so in the case of the subcontinent. In South Asia, 'the village' occupies a place of central importance in utopian envisioning, just as its destabilization and ruin has usually symbolized loss of hope. Rural spaces offered refuge against the onslaught of capitalist modernity, while sustaining humanity in a way that reiterates the popular South Asian trope of Mother Earth nurturing her children. Communion with one's land formed one of the core elements of human lives. The appeal of rural spaces that symbolized innocence, wisdom, satiety, plenitude, preservation, timelessness, and an overall sense of identity and purpose to the inhabitants, also generated scholarly curiosity in the minds of colonial administrators. Charles Metcalfe and Henry Maine, for instance, studied these villages as autonomous units, focussing mainly on their timelessness and self-sustaining capabilities (Mohan, 2012: 2). In the era of colonialism, which heralded great change and transformation in

South Asian societies, the villages represented oases of hopes and dreams. However, modernist writers also drew attention to these idyllic villages as places of suffering and inequity, especially for women and lower castes: underneath the outer coating of contentment lay the darker side of humanity and modernity in the forms of cruelty, selfishness, disregard for others, and greed. One can refer to the dystopian visions of the great Dalit leader, B. R. Ambedkar ([1936] 2014), who also saw villages as sites of social inequality and injustice.

Nevertheless, many influential critiques of colonial modernity, most notably Mahatma Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (Gandhi, 1997), stress the importance of villages to the extent of asserting that true freedom can only be achieved when all people live in villages instead of towns.[1] Gandhi was not alone: many Indian authors, especially modernist writers from pre-independent Bengal, expressed their concern over industrialization and the rise of capitalism, which was seen as a significant drain on villages and their people. The writings of such authors capture the process in which villages were becoming a microcosm of the tumult and turbulence that South Asia was facing more broadly during that period.

Articles in this collection address and analyze the writings of authors such as Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay, who wrote (Bandopadhyay, 1968) with urgency and poignance about the dearth, deprivation, and suffering that was, as early as 1928, a challenge to the idyllic image of Indian villages. Forced immigration to cities due to the Great Depression related economic crisis led to an agrarian crisis in the 1930s and the ensuing breakdown of the economic and nutritional network in villages became a major cause for concern for thinkers and writers of the period. Not long after, the devastating Bengal Famine of 1943 claimed millions of lives, mostly from rural areas. Starving villagers who flocked to Calcutta in search of food contradicted the image of self-sustaining villages. Although rural spaces occupied a position of such central importance to utopian hopes and desires, the eventual breakdown of the rural economy, values, and life structures that characterized the final decades of colonial regime manifested the dystopian nightmares and left a strong imprint on the arts and literature of the period, as apparent in Chittoprasad's and Somenath Hore's body of work on the Bengal Famine and the Tebhaga peasant uprising, (Chaudhuri, 2019; Chaudhuri, 2011; Sunderason, 2020). This Special Collection on utopian art and literature from modern India addresses the spectrum of the rural/urban binary with all its conflicts,

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[1] See Gandhi's correspondence with Nehru, 'I am convinced that if India is to attain true freedom and through India the world also, then sooner or later the fact must be recognized that people will have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts not in palaces. Crores of people will never be able to live at peace with one another in towns and palaces. They will then have no recourse but to resort to both violence and untruth' (Gandhi and Nehru, 1945).

concurrences, and myths. Writers like Tarashankar Bandopadhyay and Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay exposed the realities of idyllic, utopian villages, which not only failed to offer sanctuary to their inhabitants but also mirrored and channelled the decay and demolition of hopes and dreams through their wilting environment.

Utopia and dystopia in art, literature, and in practice, is nothing without its inhabitants. These spaces are receptacles for the emotions and visions of their inhabitants, and integrally connect humans with their environment. This connection becomes more acute and prominent in turbulent societies, like colonial and postcolonial South Asia. *Bhasha* utopian and dystopian literatures provide a unique insight into pre-independent South Asian crowd psychology, which is especially relevant in exploring the revolutions and nationalist movement that punctuated the era. Contextually, these texts are a documentation of collective bonding; they contain within them human hopes and dreams yet to be fulfilled. The texts imaginatively represent collectivism that, at its finest, brought great energy and impetus to the movements for independence but, at its worst, repressed voices and displaced and disrupted lives.

It would be an incomplete endeavour to speak about utopia while neglecting dystopia. This Special Collection balances the two through contributions that focus on each form, and sometimes demonstrate their coexistence. Both utopia and dystopia signify fictionalized spaces: one is an aspiration to be achieved, while the other comes with a warning of an undesirable future, perhaps one which might be just around the corner. In utopian, as in dystopian literature, the now-here of the present fundamentally supplies the ingredients of a dream or nightmare. Dystopias employ, to an extent that is under-recognized in scholarship, social realism. This collection contains articles that emphasize such social realism in futuristic visions where dystopias are very close to home, grounded in the times in which the writer lives: times often rife with starvation, fear, greed, and the loss of refuge.

The decade before India achieved independence was one of special turbulence, with the anti-colonial movement gaining momentum. The onslaught of colonialism had inflicted irreparable and irreversible damage to the social, political, and cultural fabric of India. The cumulative effect of this damage brought to the fore not only tangible results in the country but also a distinct shift in the literary culture, with writers moving away from Rabindranath Tagore's brand of romantic poetics and toward more realistic forms of expression that included the feelings of frustration and hopelessness of the people.[2] *Bhasha* dystopian literature, a major constituent of dystopian literature

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[2] In this context, however, it is worthwhile remembering how starkly anatomical, realistic, and unflinching Tagore's short stories can be.

from South Asia, imaginatively represents hunger, starvation, violence, and poverty, and brings these everyday lived realities of colonial societies to the genre of dystopian writing. Thereby, *bhasha* literature reconstitutes and broadens the horizon of the canon of utopian and dystopian literature. What makes this literary genre so potent is not just the social factors but the adjustment of the forms of dystopian and utopian writing to accommodate *bhasha* stories; that literary forms grow and travel across boundaries of nations to fit societies and cultures and their demands and realities (Levine, 2015). While the western dystopian canon is typically occupied with fears of surveillance and post-industrial and post-apocalyptic scenarios, in colonial India the genre accommodates social realities which pose no less threat and horror.

This Special Collection's consideration of utopian art and literature from modern India is timely because explorations and theorizations of, and dialogues surrounding *bhasha* literatures are a fundamental part of decolonizing the utopian and dystopian canon. The parameters of the utopian and dystopian canon were earlier firmly grounded in western models, as the term utopia itself comes from Thomas More's treatise about an imagined island of the same name. The Eurocentric canonical form of utopia often conforms to the convention of a traveller who visits the utopian community from outside and writes a detailed description about the land and its people, delineating comparatively superior features that pinpoint why such a community can be aspirational for other societies. *Bhasha* utopian literature circumvents such conventions with its own forms and narration—as the articles in this collection show. Moreover, Eurocentric dystopias have typically focused on technologically advanced societies which, in their post-industrial/post-apocalyptic state, deal with issues that have greater relevance in such societies.

Both utopian and dystopian narratives overlap with other genres: science fiction is one such genre. Certainly, South Asia has produced science fiction texts but these have received sparse attention from scholars. Within them, critiques of colonialism and patriarchy figure prominently. Important texts in this emerging canon include: Shoshee Dutt's 'The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the Twentieth Century' (1845), his cousin Kylas Chunder Dutt's companion-piece 'A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945' (1835), Hemlal Dutta's Rahasya 'The Mystery' (1882) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905). Satire is another genre that has supported utopian and dystopian forms: *Heshoram Hushiyarer Diary* [*The Diary of Heshoram Hushiyar*] (1922) is an example of the amalgamation of satire and science fiction, penned by the prolific Bengali writer Sukumar Ray (Ray, 1983). However, due to the dominance of the western canon as a framework for understanding utopia/dystopia/science fiction, these significant contributions from *bhasha* literature have often been

overlooked and under-studied. This Special Collection seeks to rectify the issue. Through its article contributions, which qualify and explore the contradictions at the heart of the canon, this collection foregrounds the artistic voices and models that are engaged in an ongoing dialogue with their western counterparts. In their conceptualizations of dystopia as much as utopia, texts produced in colonial and postcolonial societies that are ravaged by civil war, mass immigration, violence, and food shortages, rarely find scholarly space. In addition, this collection evidences that the *bhasha* utopia/dystopia genre provides a novel way to study the affordances of form (Levine, 2015), and what forms can achieve when used in different societies and cultures to voice distinct and unique concerns. The following summaries of the articles included within this Special Collection will elucidate the issues raised thus far.

Supriya Chaudhuri's article uncovers a persistent contradiction in Indian and specifically Bengali literature of the 20th century, between the myth of an ideal or utopian village and the actual experiences within them of suffering, inequality, and deprivation. In the social thought of the 19th-century British jurist Sir Henry Maine, the self-sufficient and unchanging Indian village community was idealized. Indian anti-colonial nationalists too often envision the village in pastoral terms, as well as a place of utopian dreams, but Bengali writing also critiques rural decay and suffering. Chaudhuri argues that the category of the utopian village proves to be impossible to sustain in Bengali writing. *Nishchindipur*, meaning 'place of contentment', the village setting for Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's Bengali novel *Pather Panchali* (1928)—which was made into an iconic film (1955) by the director Satyajit Ray—is depicted as a place of lyrical, idyllic beauty but also a place of harsh, rural suffering.

Sukla Chatterjee makes the bold argument that *Caitālī ghūrṇi* (1931), one of the lesser-known novels of the Bengali writer Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay (Bandopadhyay, 1950), deserves recognition as a dystopian narrative. Chatterjee illuminates the relationship of a text like this with the rise of social realism in literature, or *bāstabbādī sāhitya*, in early 20th-century Bengal and the way in which it ushered in literary modernism. The article shows how the novel can expand our interpretive horizon for analysing dystopia as a literary genre, looking beyond western and Eurocentric definitions. In her close reading of the novel, Chatterjee focuses, on how hunger, social and familial relationships, and sexuality are represented in dystopian registers.

Sanghita Sen's article (Sen, 2019) investigates the role of utopian and dystopian spaces in the construction of social realism in Pradipta Bhattacharya's 2013 Bengali movie *Bakita Byaktigato* [*The Rest is Personal*]. Sen analyses the inherent contradiction between the implausible fictional construct of utopian and dystopian spaces and the existing socio-political reality which, Sen argues, is finely foregrounded through

multiple loci of narrative actions. There are two spaces in the depiction of Kolkata: the city that contains the contemporary socio-political reality which is neither utopic or dystopic, and its dystopic underbelly that embodies the absence of hope for redemption or respite for its inhabitants. The dystopian space is riddled with poverty, deprivation, unfulfilled desire, and hopelessness, along with fear and volatility. The final locus is a village called Mohini, a utopian space representing harmony, love, and bliss. Only a select few have the privilege to enter the village. The article argues that by interweaving these spaces in his cinematic experimentation, Bhattacharya addresses issues such as folk-cultural practices and community, economic crises and class, caste hierarchy, and social relationships.

Barnita Bagchi analyses two pieces of Bengali bhasha literature by Satinath Bhaduri, the 1946 *Jagari* [*The Vigil*] and the 1949–51 *Dhorai Charit Manas* [translated into English as *Dhorai Charit Manas*], as utopian literature, with specific reference to competing visions of utopia as crystallized in the anti-colonial Quit India Movement and to Gandhian notions of utopia. Neither of these novels adopts the western or Eurocentric format of a utopian novel, in which a traveller from the outside world experiences a utopian country. Rather, Bhaduri's two novels show us how inhabitants of India in the very last years of British colonialism engaged in social dreaming, with Gandhian utopia and critiques thereof as central themes. Gandhi's modern and radically non-Eurocentric reinvention of utopia—driven through the topoi of Ramrajya, of the ashram as utopian locus, and of the oceanic circle of future Indian villages—demands a reconsideration of utopian writing. Both novels, the article finds, critique idealized Gandhian utopianism and Gandhian, socialist, communist, and militant social dreaming play out dialogically through the novels.

Anne Castaing (Castaing, 2019) focuses on the gendering of the emerging nation generated by literature in India's nationalist period from 1930–1940. She examines two contexts, Hindi and Bengali, through the works of two poets, Harivansh Rai Bachchan and Jibanananda Das. Published in the same year, Bachchan's Hindi collection *Madhuśālā* (1935) and Jibanananda Das' Bengali poem 'Banalatā Sen' (1935) are romantic works exploiting an evanescent female figure who continues to fertilize Hindi and Bengali imaginations. Throughout her article, Castaing explores the function and practice of the two romantic figures in the nationalist imagination and examines the differences and similarities they raise regarding visions of the utopian nation.

Utopian and dystopian studies are more relevant than ever to our current political landscape. These fields are also closely connected to critical posthumanism, an approach which sees the knowing subject as relational, embodied, embedded, affective, and accountable, and which views nature and culture, human and non-human on a

continuum (Braidotti, 2019: 31). In a world that is ravaged by environmental degradation, pandemics, and war, how we imagine threats and dreams becomes more important and tangible than ever. The importance, in our current times of crisis, of listening to voices from the margins, acknowledging social contradictions, and connecting with lived realities, in utopian and dystopian studies as elsewhere, is urgent. While the contributions to this Special Collection speak uniquely to the South Asian context, they simultaneously deepen and broaden our understanding of utopia and dystopia, and further our understanding of societies in the Global South. We hope that the ongoing dialogue between utopian and dystopian writings across cultures will fortify collective understanding, solidarity, and tolerance.

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Competing Interests

Of the two authors of this introduction, Barnita Bagchi is the editor of the Special Collection, while Sukla Chatterjee is a contributor to this Special Collection.

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