

The Categorical Logic of a Colonial Nationalism: Swadeshi Bengal, 1904-1908

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In 1905, the Bengal Presidency of British India was partitioned into two separate provinces in the name of administrative convenience. Bengal, the government argued, had become too cumbersome to govern effectively as a single unit. But if administration alone was at stake, Bengali critics of the scheme were quick to reply, there was no reason why new provinces could not have been carved out of the large, non-Bengali-speaking populations of Orissa and Bihar rather than by dividing Bengal proper. The real motives underlying the government's plan were not difficult to see: firstly, to divide the troublesome Bengalis of Calcutta from the troublesome Bengalis of the eastern districts; and secondly, to promote the interests, and thereby court the favor, of the large Muslim population of eastern Bengal as a communal counterweight to the overwhelmingly Hindu "educated middle class" that dominated the lively politics of the region.¹ The response to the partition has entered the historiography of South Asia as the first major attempt in the history of Indian nationalism at popular mobilization under the leadership of the new middle class that had developed under British rule. Led by a new generation of leaders such as Aurobindo Ghosh, Bipin Chandra Pal and Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, Swadeshi nationalists, calling for a boycott of British manufactures and the promotion of the nation's economic, social and spiritual autonomy, quickly shifted the focus of their rhetoric from the fact of partition to a direct struggle against British rule as such. This essay represents a revisionist attempt to make sense of the internal ideological rationality that structured this new nationalist program.

The Historiographical Problem

The historiography of modern South Asia has fundamentally failed to develop an adequate framework for grasping the specifically *ideological* dimensions of colonial discourse—that is to say, the historically determinate nature of its truth-claims. There has been, first of all, a long tradition in both non-Marxist and Marxist historiography that has sought to interpret the emergence of nationalist discourses in the Indian context as a function

of the competition of social interests. On the non-Marxist side, the Cambridge school argued that nationalist politics emerged from the specific ways in which ambitions were channeled and shaped through the interconnections of structures of power and governance at the local, provincial, and all-Indian levels.² Yet for all the insights of this literature, a crucial remainder stood unexplained: namely, the core ideological content of nationalism itself, "a feeling of national solidarity against imperialism, an alien political and economic force that stood against the interests of the population of the Indian subcontinent *as a whole*," a sentiment that "could not be reduced to a catalogue of rivalries between Indian and Indian vying for government patronage."³ Even within Marxist historiography, it is hardly a new observation that the actual content of nationalist ideologies cannot simply be deduced from competing economic interests in a class society. In a study of the Swadeshi movement that was seminal to the Gramscian turn in the scholarship of modern South Asia, Sumit Sarkar had been forced to conclude thirty years ago that "economic distress"—for which, I submit, one might as easily read "economic interests" in the broadest sense—"could lead to nationalist politics only via the 'mediation' of an ideology."⁴ Yet Sarkar was able to provide few meaningful clues as to how the historical availability of this "ideology" was to be explained if it was not itself the universalization of some particular social interest.

In contrast to these approaches, an alternative tradition has instead emphasized the discursive effectivity of the global, modular replication of certain institutional and tropological forms—most notably, the nation-state itself.⁵ From this perspective, colonial discourse is seen as "derivative," a kind of non-reflective reiteration of Western tropes and thematics due to the interpellative effects of "epistemic violence," which served to "consolidat[e] the self of Europe by obliging the native to cathect the space of the Other on his home ground."⁶ From this perspective, the agency underlying colonial discourse is located in a Western will-to-power, effectively reducing the native subject to a passive mouthpiece of a discourse whose constitutive historical foun-

dations lie elsewhere.⁷ Seen from this perspective, the question of the categorial logic of colonial discourse dissolves into Western intellectual history—or, in a more refined formulation, into the institutionalization of Western thought as “colonial knowledge.”⁸

Faced with the vacuum of ideological content in the first approach and the vacuum of native subjectivity in the latter, one possible resolution was to synthesize the two—an instinct acted on brilliantly in Partha Chatterjee’s well-known work, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. Chatterjee sought to hitch a Gramscian analysis of the ambitions of an “emergent bourgeoisie” to “moral-intellectual leadership” over the peasantry (what he called the “problematic” of colonial nationalist discourse) with a structuralist emphasis on the derivative nature of the epistemic horizons of nationalist truth-claims (its “thematic”).⁹ Reading the “problematic” through the “thematic,” the colonial elite would appear to have attempted a partial appropriation of the popular energies of the peasant masses in order to displace the colonial Master in the name of that Master’s own form of rationality. Chatterjee’s synthesis brought in epistemic violence to remedy the vacuity that “sociological determinism and functionalism” ascribed to nationalist ideology “by emptying it of all content.”¹⁰ Less successful, however, was his converse attempt to bring in class to combat the vacuity of derivative discourse. Even leaving aside questions about the coherence of the Gramscian narrative, it is clear that by the end of his book, Western Reason has triumphed precisely through the success of nationalism’s passive revolution.¹¹ Ultimately, there still seemed to be little room for a reflective intellectual content to colonial discourse beyond the instrumental considerations of class ambition.

In order to push beyond this impasse, we need an approach that speaks directly to the practical constitution of the ideological terrain of Swadeshi nationalism. To this end, I analyze the categories of Swadeshi nationalism as fetishistic expressions of the logic of the commodity-form. By tying the organizing logic of Swadeshi ideology to the mediating practices that structure capitalist society, I seek to explain Hindu nationalism’s linkage of an indigenist cultural politics with a “productionist” vision that grounded rationality in the historical constitution of subjective freedom through labor. This linkage in turn constituted the standpoint for a political-economic critique of British rule, an ethical critique of commercial and civil society, an idealist critique of materialism, and a historicist critique of abstraction. From the critical standpoint adopted in this essay, epistemic frameworks cannot be treated as separable from the historical structures of practice in which they are embedded and the “problematics” to which they give rise. Chatterjee’s acute identification of the “inherent contradictoriness in nationalist thinking” when “it reasons

within a framework of knowledge whose representational structure corresponds to the very structure of power nationalist thought seeks to repudiate” should not then be understood as an invitation to *transcend* the horizons of the global modern in the name of indigenous particularity.¹² Rather, this must instead be read as an invitation, or provocation, to *immanent critique*.

An Alternative Civic Discourse

In the course of public debates over cotton duties and food-grain exports through the last three decades of the nineteenth century, the claim that the British state was the institutional instrument of Manchester had come to attain the status of a truism in Bengal.¹³ By the Swadeshi period, to identify Britain in terms of the Napoleonic quip, “a nation of shopkeepers,” or as a blood-sucking “vampire,” was simply commonplace.¹⁴ Sakharan Ganesh Deuskar’s *Desher katha (About Our Country)*, a best-selling Bengali-language popularization of the Congress critique of Britain’s exploitation of India’s wealth, was hailed as a work which it was “as incumbent a duty of all Bengalis to study as the [Bhagavad] Gita itself.”¹⁵ The Briton, “the greedy son of a needy household,” “was a trader in the beginning and he is still a trader,” his duties as a sovereign having proven unable to “drive the shopkeeper’s instinct out of [his] brain.”¹⁶ Belonging to a world that was but “a shop on an enormous scale in which self-interest is the commodity of trade,” the English rulers took money as the “be-all and end-all of their life.”¹⁷ Selfishness was their “national characteristic.”¹⁸ The “habits, manners and customs” of their civilization served only to make “the struggle for existence harder day by day,” creating “newer and newer artificial wants,” even as, under the “shadow of free trade,” they “sucked all the substance out of India.”¹⁹

There was a time when India had been the “Storehouse of the Goddess of Wealth”—before the Englishman came and converted it into a “bazaar of shopkeepers.”²⁰ Despite the frequent recurrence of famine as a result of British rule, there had never been any genuine shortage of food-production in India. Rather, “while fields of grain stand beside our households, we are dying in droves for want of food” because, plundered of its wealth by the British, India had lost the power to *purchase* its own sustenance.²¹ Not only was the price of rice being pushed up by “the exportation of enormous quantities of that article,” but cultivators were also replacing food-grains with jute, an export-crop, under the “mistaken” impression that “they derive greater profit from jute than from paddy, because jute brings them more ready money than paddy does.”²² Whereas food-grains represented a potential source of national *wealth*, jute represented only the skewed relation of *exchange value* under colonial conditions.

The opposition of an indigenous society embodying

the production of wealth and a superimposed colonial order representing (venal and exploitative) commercial exchange had its roots in transformations in the structure of eastern India's socio-economic order around the middle of the nineteenth century. The failure, in the wake of economic crises in the late 1840s, of collaborative enterprise between European and indigenous capital dramatically undermined the confidence of Bengali investors in the commercial world, leading to a general evacuation of Bengali capital into the safer havens of landed property, where their *rentier* investments had alone stood firm.²³ Compounding this were a number of other factors that together made for an absence of indigenous capital from the commercial sector of eastern India's economy in the second half of the nineteenth century unparalleled elsewhere in the subcontinent: the longer-term process of the displacement of indigenous commercial interests, closely tied to the East India Company and its rise to power, by the increasing and massive inflow of metropolitan capital (intensifying towards the middle of the century); the annihilating power of the overwhelming concentration of that new commercial investment in and around Calcutta; and the complex of institutions and social networks that held together and bolstered the advantage of an increasingly racially-exclusive European business community in Bengal.²⁴ It is from this period that one can date the clear bifurcation of eastern India's colonial economy. The Calcutta-centered commercial sphere of circulation would definitively be marked as "white," against which was contrasted a neo-traditional agrarian sector in the hinterlands, producing cash-crops for export, and identified as quintessentially "native."²⁵

In the first half of the nineteenth century, it had seemed relatively unproblematic to apply the categories of European political economy to the colonial restructuring of the social order of rural India. A category like "rent," for example, functioned in terms of the same Malthusian or Ricardian "differential" calculations as it did in the West.²⁶ But in the wake of the deepening bifurcation of eastern India's colonial socio-economic order, the transparency of this universalization came into fundamental question. British policy advocates, their insecurities further exacerbated in the wake of the major political upheaval of the 1857 Mutiny (followed closely by widespread rural unrest in Bengal in 1859-1860), began to emphasize the perduring differences between the ruling and ruled races, contrasting the liberal, rational, and commercial attributes of the former to the irrational, hierarchical, and customary traditions of the latter.²⁷ It was in this context that Indian "rent" was increasingly seen to be "not rent at all in a Malthusian sense," but rather a payment fixed by "custom." This put it definitively beyond the rationality of political economy, for the "principles of political economy apply

only to rents settled by free competition. In the Mofussil [hinterland] there is no such thing known."²⁸ This implied the necessity of a new, relativized political economy that "takes its date and forms its inferences from the state of society" found in traditional India; for to assume that competition-rents were "more natural than customary rents" represented a flawed attempt to "generalise to the whole world from a part of it."²⁹

Parallel transformations in the terms of social and political discourse in the Bengali public sphere were also contemporaneously evident. From the 1870s, the mid-century liberal discourse of "reform" came under increasing attack from a new generation of proto-nationalist critics. When early nineteenth-century reformists like Rammohun Ray had appealed to the rationality of individual emancipation to challenge the legitimacy of certain instituted forms of inequality, their orthodox opponents had accused them of innovation and worldliness, but "Westernization" was simply not a term in the debate.³⁰ But in the second half of the nineteenth century, it became increasingly difficult to advocate for liberal social reforms without appearing to be "Westernized." Whereas the logic of liberal emancipation was linked to a commercial sphere of circulation that had come to appear as the essential, constitutive attribute of "Western" societies, the new voices began to ground their political and ethical claims in the allegedly immanent rationality of *native* society.³¹

This shift was symbolized above all by an intensified anxiety about the liminal status of a service class of Western-educated, high-caste Hindus, thematized through the ubiquitous stereotype of the effete, ineffective, verbose, and deracinated "Bengali babu."³² It had been precisely by aspiring to become "judges, clerks, deputies and lawyers," wrote a pamphleteer in the heat of the Swadeshi upsurge, that Bengalis had been reduced to a "nation of slaves." In pursuing such service-professions, the Bengali sacrificed the greater interest of the country, along with his own independence, by immersing himself utterly in the pursuit of his own "inessential" selfish interests.³³ For Aurobindo Ghosh, one of the most important leaders of the Swadeshi movement, the weakness of modern Bengal lay precisely in the predominance of this "new middle class," who valued wealth, position, comforts, and luxuries above all else, and who, having "got some little idea of the machinery of English politics...are eager to import it along with cheap Liverpool cloth, shoddy Brummagem wares and other useful and necessary things which have killed the fine and genuine textures."³⁴ As the bastard-children of British rule, the Indian "bourgeoisie" sought to distinguish themselves from their countrymen by aping the ways of the English, and unreflectively mouthing their thoughts. "We read of and believed in English economy, while we lived under Indian conditions, and worshipped

the free trade that was starving us to death as a nation. We professed notions of equality, and separated ourselves from the people, of democracy, and were the servants of absolutism." The consummation of this entire process was the "mendicant," "un-National" Congress itself, "which yearly passed resolutions it had no power to put in practice."³⁵ In other words, the Indian bourgeoisie was a class that had no ground under its feet—in "character, ideas, habits and manners, dress, in everything they are altogether unlike those they are professing to represent...and know nothing of the real wants and grievances of the country."³⁶ At the very moment that it made its rarified appeal for justice in the language of "rights," this bourgeoisie was reinscribing its dependence on the colonial state as the juridical mediator of these claims.

The shallowness of babu-liberalism was intimately tied then to the failure of India's creative and developmental energies under a regime of colonial exploitation.³⁷ The awakening of the productive forces of the nation would provide scope for the fuller exercise of the range of human capacities than the narrow duties of the service-professions. To this end, Swadeshists took a vow not to purchase or use foreign goods, and instead to support indigenous ("swadeshi") manufactures even when they were more expensive.³⁸ For both Congress Moderates and their new critics, it was ultimately in the renewal of native industry—the very heart of the Swadeshi boycott campaign—that India's hopes were placed. The practice of free exchange—and the liberal values that were underpinned by it³⁹—needed then to be (at least) deferred in the name of a protectionism that could establish a level playing field in the face of the political-economic structures of British domination. The great political economists of the Congress—Naoroji, Ranade, R.C. Dutt—had accepted that economic renewal was a necessary presupposition for any meaningful political independence, and questioned the alleged multilateral benefits of integration into the international system of free exchange underpinned by British imperial power. They drew on the writings of the great critic of Smithian "cosmopolitical economy," Friedrich List, who had argued for the necessity of a strong regime of protectionism to allow peripheral economies like those of the German states to develop their productive powers free from the crushing competition of British manufactures. Moderates tended to defer the structure of equal exchange (rather than negate it outright) through the juxtaposition of "natural" economic development under conditions of relative equality, and the deformative influence of the imbalance of political and economic power expressed by and exercised through imperial rule.⁴⁰ In this sense, they sought to salvage the liberal project through the leveling effects of a developmental economics of protectionism, arguing that "liberty and

freedom could not possibly mean freedom to foreigners to ruin India's nascent enterprises through unlimited competition and that, in fact, in Indian conditions real liberty would come only through protection and 'artificial nourishment,' while Free Trade meant giving protection to England, the stronger party."⁴¹

The young "Nationalist" or "Extremist" critics of the Congress, who had emerged to prominence during the 1890s, drew their economic analysis of colonial rule wholesale from these same Moderate political-economists, even as they excoriated their "mendicant" methods.⁴² Extremists, however, were even more inclined to attack the presuppositions of any liberalism grounded in the global sphere of circulation as fundamentally hostile to India's national interest, and alien to India's national genius.⁴³ The old-school liberal opposed the boycott as contrary to "the motives and desires...that guide men in life" and to "the great economic law of supply and demand," argued Aurobindo; but they forgot that "no real student of economics, who must be a student of life, has ever claimed for the postulates of political economy a binding reference to the man of the nation struggling forward to an act of self-sacrifice by a determined effort of the will."⁴⁴ Nationalists saw the boycott of British goods as just one element in an overall program of marginalizing the British state and British capital from India's national metabolism. Extremists quickly consigned the partition to secondary relevance. The politics of boycott was tied to the necessity of a collective agency to pursue a direct political confrontation with the British rulers and thereby achieve India's *purna svaraja*—total independence in every aspect of national life. The "sentiment of unity" could only be completed by the "practice of unity," that is, the practices of the "organic State" that the British had systematically suppressed.⁴⁵ As Brahmabandhab Upadhyay's *Sandhya* explained, "we shall create a new independent system, which will regulate our education, the protection of our lives and our properties, our trade and commerce, our agriculture, our laws and our courts, our rents and our dealings."⁴⁶ Extremists reasoned that none of the nationalist programs could be realistically achieved while India remained politically subordinated to British interests through the machinery of imperial rule. This made the establishment of an independent state as a coordinating agent of national activities the highest priority of all Swadeshi activities.⁴⁷ Cooperation and collective power were the keys to awakening India's dynamism. "It is impossible to save India from destruction now by anything except a combination of the entire Indian people into a great nationality.... A Japanese gentleman on one occasion being asked what his religion was, responded that his religion was the religion of Japan. Similarly henceforth every Indian if similarly questioned must reply that his religion is the religion of

India.”⁴⁸

It was precisely because Bengalis had inverted “the natural relation between the home and the outside world” that they had become like “algae in the current,” swept along by heteronomous forces.⁴⁹ Self-determination was to be realized not through the pursuit of worldly things—the regulative principle of worldly affairs pursued in civil society—but through the renunciation of that desire—the regulative principle both of capital accumulation and of a “Hindu tradition” reconstructed through the patrilineal and patriarchal practices of the Bengali middle class.⁵⁰ The secret key to Asia’s imminent rebirth was this ability to “go down to the roots, this gift of diving down into the depth of self and drawing out the miraculous power of the Will, this command over one’s own soul.”⁵¹ Against the pettiness of English materialism and “the fighting, the pushing, the materialistic, I was going to say, the cruel democracies of Europe and America,” the Swadeshi generation sought to pit an alternative civic discourse that grounded a protectionist economics in the higher culture of indigenous social principles wherein democratic equality was founded not on the free pursuit of individual interests in civil society, but on “the equality of the divine nature, the divine possibilities and the divine destiny of every individual being.”⁵² The new freedom was grounded in a *critique of consumption*—and especially of the consumption of luxuries and foreign goods—in the name of a political subject who renounced any desire for the fruits of his activity through the practice of *nishkama karma*, the ideal of selfless, desireless action taught in the Bhagavad Gita (the newly privileged scripture of neo-Hinduism⁵³). In its overtly political-economic form, the emphasis on accumulation through self-sacrificing labor would not only have the more obvious consequence of stemming the flow of money out of the country that resulted from the purchase of foreign commodities, but it was also linked to a theory of capital accumulation through joint-stock practices that would combine the small capitals accumulated through self-restraint into more effective magnitudes of investable capital available to society. At the ethical level, emancipation was to be conceived on a profoundly different model from classical liberalism’s grounding in free exchange, wherein the pursuit of private interests was validated so long as it remained regularized in accordance with law and the rights of others. “There is a world of difference between a *bania* (trader) and a *Vedantist* (follower of the Vedanta philosophy),” argued the *Navashakti*. Nationalists wanted the real substance of “autonomy, not certain rights; independence, not happiness; emancipation, not self-gratification.”⁵⁴ By welding an ethical critique of the (heteronomous) desiring subject of civil society with a political economy of accumulation through renunciatory practice, Swadeshi na-

tionalists were seeking to elaborate a mode of political subjectivity adequate to serving a “nation” conceived, as we shall see, as a productive organism.

Against the debilitating practice of freedom through exchange in an alien sphere of circulation, Swadeshi discourse counterposed an alternative political and ethical imperative: “There is only one way to prevent our intelligence, our heart, and our sensibility being sold off on a daily basis for a pittance: we must consciously, forcefully, dynamically and totally become precisely what we ourselves are.”⁵⁵ Whatever the differences of emphasis among the new Nationalist voices of Bengal, “they are united by a common faith and a common spirit; a common faith in India, not in an Anglicised and transmogrified nation unrecognisable as Indians.”⁵⁶ While “a strong central authority” was necessary to act as “a means of self-expression and united actions,” its actions and policies could not be guided by principles external to the society it was to represent and govern, but rather would need to be founded on the immanent propensities of Indian society, in its traditions of man-making and ethical life.⁵⁷ “If a nation were an artificial product that could be made,” Aurobindo explained, “then it might be possible for one nation to make another. But a nation cannot be made,—it is an organism which grows under the principle of life within.”⁵⁸ To reconnect with these immanent propensities of the collective life, the educated people of the land would have to give up imitating the English and “wander about the villages and pathways in search of that heart of the country,” so as to reacquaint themselves with the illiterate masses through “intimate intercourse, sympathy and service.”⁵⁹ When a “natural bond of unity” had been reestablished between intellectual and manual labor, “then what the head will decide the hand will carry out.”⁶⁰

The Discourse of Immanent Monism

The “radical reformer” and “abstract cosmopolitan,” Bipin Pal explained in 1904, “believes that man is man, and there exists nothing on earth of any vital value, except the individual here below and God above.” He therefore must necessarily regard “all racial differences and national peculiarities as superstitions and shortcomings, which, in the highest stages of ethical and spiritual life, are absolutely overcome and obliterated.”⁶¹ Pal was thinking above all of the reformist and cosmopolitan tradition that stemmed from Rammohan Ray—a tradition with which he had himself earlier identified. Rammohan had been a relentless critic of idol-worship and Brahmanical priestcraft, that is, of institutions that mediated the individual’s relationship with God. The egalitarianism and social reformism so characteristic of Brahmoism, Rammohan’s Hindu-Unitarian religion, instead aimed to release individuals from these corrupt agencies and restore their capacity, regardless of caste or

status, to seek direct knowledge of the Absolute—while at the same time coming to enjoy worldly prosperity as a result of their new-found emancipation into civil society.⁶² Pal was thus not wrong in drawing attention to a *social* correlate to this kind of theological argument. “The prevailing and popular social philosophy of the Brahma Samaj has so far been more pronounced on the cosmopolitan than on the national side. As in Brahma theology nothing mediates between the individual and the Universal, so in Brahma sociology nothing stands, as a medium of relation or realisation, between individual man and universal humanity.”⁶³

For Bipin Pal, then, this cosmopolitan reformer of Brahma Vedantism was closely related to the subject of civil society—a figure who could only confront social structures of institutional authority from a primordially external standpoint of individual autonomy.⁶⁴ As a result of their English education, Bipin Pal complained, many young Bengalis had gotten caught up in “the contagion of European rationalism of the last century, and thus set up [their] individual conscience as the ultimate arbiter of both what is true and what is good.”⁶⁵ But this “individualistic rationalism,” epitomized by the Brahma Samaj, “ignored the fact that neither our individual reason nor our individual conscience works by itself but is practically dependent for its conclusions upon what may be called the social reason and the social conscience.”⁶⁶

Against this illusion of isolated individuality, Pal posited the idea of the *organic* constitution of society. A nation is not just one more form of “association,” of the kind one sees in civil society, wherein individuals “stand by themselves” even when “moved by a common impulse.”

In a nation, the individuals composing it stand in an organic relation to one another and to the whole of which they are limbs and organs.... Organs find the fulfillment of their ends, not in themselves but in the collective life of the organism to which they belong... An organism is logically prior to the organs. Organs evolve, organs change, but the organism remains itself all the same. Individuals are born, individuals die,—but the Nation liveth for ever.⁶⁷

That all members of society are of a single organic substance beneath their phenomenal variety is an insight grounded in what Pal claimed was the fundamental principle of Hindu thought: the underlying *non-duality* of self and not-self.⁶⁸

The monistic doctrine had been most famously posited in Shankaracarya’s *advaita* (non-dualistic) Vedantism, which argued that the phenomenal world was a mere “illusion” (*maya*) cloaking a transcendental, unchanging, and undifferentiated divine reality. This form of Vedanta had risen to prominence in Calcutta in the early nineteenth century and had been adopted as the theological underpinning for Brahmaism’s critique of all

concrete mediations between the individual consciousness and the “pure consciousness” of the abstract Godhead as forms of worldly attachment grounded in illusion. But a somewhat different understanding of Vedantism could also be taken to underpin the metaphysics of *shakti* (power). The “*mataram*” or “Mother” in the ubiquitous Swadeshi war-cry, “*bande mataram*” (“Hail to the Mother”) was the “*adya shakti bhagabati*,” the goddess who embodied the primordial substance that constitutes, shapes, and moves the phenomenal world. While Shiva represented the masculine principle of the godhead’s transcendent and eternally unchanging aspect, his female consort represented the active quality of the godhead’s powers. So whereas Shankaracarya’s disciples argued that the multiplicity of the phenomenal world—including individual selfhood—was a false overlay to the indivisible, indescribable, and undifferentiated substance of the pure consciousness of the Godhead, the Tantric tradition of *shakti* worship, which dominated the religious life of Bengal’s upper castes, instead posited the necessity of approaching the godhead’s unity from *within* the phenomenal world, which, it held, was more than just illusion. In the best-known Bengali defense of Tantric theology against Brahma reformism, the pundit Siva Candra Vidyarnava Bhattacharya explained in the 1890s that:

Despite the essential truth of the monistic principle, its comprehension by all is an impossibility in this dualistic phenomenal Samsara [flux of worldly attachments].... The Tantra Sastra does not, therefore, at the outset ignore this visible, palpable dualistic world. As, to ascend a precipice, one must advance slowly, stepping on the earth itself, so also, in order to realise monistic truth, one must progress slowly through the dualistic world.... When direct knowledge of the truth of Sakti is gained, the Sadhaka [one striving for spiritual realization] will perceive that the entire Samsara is nothing but the wealth of the Sakti of Visvesvari [the World-Goddess].⁶⁹

In Bengal’s *shakta* tradition, *maya* was not, then, simply false as such; rather, its “illusoriness” lay specifically in its tendency to obscure the spiritual substance that permeated its phenomenal multiplicity. The devotee who was able to separate himself from attachment to materiality was able in turn to recognize the flux of existence as the *embodiment*, rather than the negation, of the underlying monistic unity of the divine consciousness.⁷⁰ Not only was such a monism compatible with devotion to embodied deities, as a practice mediating the approach to the absolute, but it was specifically the *female* representations of the godhead that were the primary object of worship.

Nationalists adopted this precolonial figure of the Mother to represent and embody the *collective* power of

the Indian nation, not as an assemblage of individuals in civil society, but as an organism logically prior to that assemblage.⁷¹ Denying their base instincts and worldly desires, devotees would be able to re-appropriate their bodily selves and worldly environments as modalities of *shakti*, spiritual substance. Subjective freedom would thus lie not in the negation of the mediating authority of Brahmans and idols (the negative freedom of Brahmoism and of civil society), but in the use of concrete mediations to see beyond the material particularity of the phenomenal world to its reality as the embodiment of divine spirit. The social fabric of indigenous society was understood as a uniform substance in this *shakta* understanding of Vedanta, an authentic reality that subsumed the apparently isolated individual of civil society, whose apperception of social disembeddedness was the result of a failure to pierce the veil of *maya*, the diversity and ephemerality of *shakti*'s form of appearance that causes individuals to experience themselves as separate nodes of consciousness rather than moments of one indivisible godhead. The capacity to harness both world forces and the nation's own immanent power, this rhetoric argued, presupposed the capacity to see beyond the fractiousness of private interests to the underlying unity of an organic substance that pervaded the phenomenal world of the social. While classically tied to the philosophical problematic of the relationship of the phenomenally particular and ephemeral to universal essence, *shakti* was thus being appropriated in the Swadeshi era as a foundational category of an *indigenist, idealist sociology* that attempted to grasp the substance of national society beyond the commercial, contractual, and associational forms of civil society; that is, to grasp the nature of abstraction in modern society.

Adherents of Vaishnavism—the worship of Krishna and Radha that was the other great current of Bengali Hinduism—were contemporaneously developing strikingly similar formulations. The theology of Bengali Vaishnavism had posited as homologous the relationship between God and the devotee and the relationship between God and his own “powers” (a homology symbolized above all by Radha, both Krishna's lover and his *shakti*). Yet this tradition had long understood itself as critical of Shankaracarya, because it held that God and his powers were *not* identical despite the commonality of their substance. By positing a relationship of *acintyabhed-abbeda* (inconceivable difference-and-non-difference) between devotee and deity, Vaishnavism claimed to subsume *advaita* Vedanta's critique of the appearance of phenomenal multiplicity, but *without* negating the reality of the phenomenal as a self-differentiated moment of the divine.⁷²

The important late-nineteenth-century guru, Bijoykrishna Gosvami, had, after a youthful conversion to Brahmoism, gradually drifted back to his Vaishnavite

roots until he left the Brahma fold entirely in 1886.⁷³ His disciples would include four of the most prominent Swadeshi leaders, including Bipin Pal. To Pal, engaged in a self-conscious struggle over his guru's legacy, the importance of Bijoykrishna lay in his recovery of Bengali Vaishnavism's immanent rationality through the re-emphasis of an allegedly *monistic* substratum to its thought: “I myself heard from his own lips that no one could understand the message of Sree Chaitanya Mahaprabhu [the mediaeval founder of Bengali Vaishnavism] who had not acquired a knowledge of Brahman [the Absolute].”⁷⁴ He thus extracted an immanent monism from the *acintyabhedabbeda* doctrine: “Every object is a thought of God—materialised; every man is the Spirit of God—incarnated. So is every nation the manifestation and revelation of a Divine Ideal.”⁷⁵ Vaishnavite devotional practices were privileged vehicles for the sublimation of all human relations and affections into a spiritual connection with God, leading to a vision of “the Spiritual Being manifested in or as Man.”⁷⁶ Pal was thus adopting the Vaishnavite idiom to elaborate an indigenous idealism capable of articulating a unified but differentiated *rational substance of the social* against the principle of “competition,” which, “economic or otherwise, was a sin against God and man.”⁷⁷

The Social Logic of Idealism

Both Shaktism and Vaishnavism were being adopted as the bases of an *immanent monism*. These theological alternatives to abstract monism did not, of course, have to be invented in the late nineteenth century: they drew upon the rich theologico-philosophical tradition of *nishishtadvaita* (qualified monism). But to get from the orthodox reaction of Rammohun's contemporary critics to the idealist sociology of the Swadeshi era did demand more than a debate internal to Hindu tradition. It is hard to understand how we otherwise might derive the rational unfolding of the Idea in history, which both Aurobindo and Bipin Pal expounded as the heart of the national ideal, from the conception of the phenomenal world as the fluctuating form of appearance of *shakti*.⁷⁸

It is therefore hardly surprising to find this Swadeshi-era reconstruction of Hindu idealism being mediated by themes drawn unmistakably from German idealism. In fact, Pal could make it sound as if Hinduism was virtually Hegelianism *avant la lettre*.

[A]s in higher Christian thought and philosophy the ideal of humanity has grown around the conception of Logos, even so in higher Hinduism the ideal of humanity has grown around the conception of Narayana. Narayana is the Indweller, severally in individual souls, and collectively He is also the Soul, so to say, of the whole human race. And this dual conception of Narayana as manifested in human units and constituting the basal unity and continuity of individ-

ual life and consciousness, and as eternally revealing and realising itself—to use Hegelian terminology—in and through the progressive evolution of the collective life and consciousness of the human race, lends a much deeper significance to the Hindu's conception of humanity than is found anywhere outside the very highest level of Christian idealism. But the underlying monistic or pantheistic ideas of Hinduism have lent a strength to the Hindu ideal of humanity both in its individual and collective aspects, which, owing to its essential dualistic emphasis, Christianity has not been able to impart to it in either of these aspects.⁷⁹

The fact that Vedantism was being rearticulated with Hegelian insights in mind should not really strike us as surprising, given Hinduism's longstanding positioning by German philosophers and Indologists as the primitive ancestor of modern idealism; the ascendancy of philosophical idealism in Britain at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries; and the explicitly Hegelian allegiance of Brajendranath Seal, one of the most influential and prominent philosophers in Bengal at the time.⁸⁰ But just as the internal logic of Hindu theology cannot explain the development of this new Hindu idealism at the end of the nineteenth century, nor can this appeal to German philosophical concepts stand in as a sufficient cause—for intellectual lineages will not do to explain the *plausibility* of particular conceptual frameworks in particular historical contexts.

That Hindu idealism was being understood in Swadeshi discourse as a preeminently *social* category particularly marked it as profoundly modern, despite the archaic sources of its idiom. The declaration of Swami Vivekananda (one of the immediate ideological precursors of Swadeshi thought) that social work was the highest path to self-realization represented a crucial break even from his own guru, Ramakrishna, who had been deeply suspicious of “philanthropy” as a form of worldly attachment. “Dare you say that you have the power to do good to others?” Ramakrishna had reprimanded Bankimchandra Chatterjee. “Those who want to build hospitals and dispensaries and are satisfied with that, are also good people, but they are of a different grade. The real devotee seeks nothing but God.”⁸¹ The intense, sensual immediacy of the relationship between man and God—a relationship that mediated the Tantric relationship between man and the phenomenal world (understood as *shakti*), and even the relationship between man and man—was interrupted by Vivekananda's interposition of the category of *society* which, in mediating the relationship between men, could also stand in as the medium of one's devotion to God.

The individual's life is in the life of the whole, the individual's happiness is in the happiness of the whole; apart from the whole, the individual's existence is in-

conceivable;—this is an eternal truth, and is the bedrock on which the eternal is built. To move slowly towards the infinite whole, bearing a constant feeling of intense sympathy and sameness with it, being happy with its happiness and being distressed in its affliction, is the individual's sole duty.... This is the law of Nature; and who can throw dust in her ever-watchful eyes? None can hoodwink society and deceive it for any length of time. However much there may have accumulated heaps of refuse and mud on the surface of society,—still, at the bottom of those heaps the life-breath of society is ever to be found pulsating with the vibrations of universal love and self-denying compassion for all.⁸²

“Society” has become an embodiment of the universal rather than, as it had been for Ramakrishna, an instance of phenomenal form that exercised a strong pull away from the immediate striving to see God.

The newness of this re-conception of Hindu idealism as a social discourse is marked not least by the absence of any term in Sanskrit that would adequately denote the modern concept of “society” that lay at the heart of both Vivekananda's and the Swadeshists' concerns. As Daya Krishna has suggested,

This is perhaps because what we call society today was not a natural unit, but an artificial, logical construction from existing groups for which there were a myriad of names. The terms *varna*, *jati*, *kula*, *sangha*, *sreni*, *gana*, *puga*, *vrata*, *naigam*, *samuha*, *parisad*, *carana* found in the *Smṛti* literature of India refer to actually existing and functioning organizations which deal with familial, commercial, civic, craft and administrative functions. The idea of something overarching all of these and interrelating them was indicated by such concepts as *loka*, *parampara*, *dharmā vyavahara* (in the sense of law) and *rajya*.⁸³

If, then, classical Indian thought tended to see “society” as a scale of specific social institutions and functions structured in relation to a transcendental cosmic order, the concept of “society” in the *modern* world seems to represent something more fundamental and, as Krishna puts it, “natural” than this cumulative scale of forms. But what?

Marx suggested an answer in *Capital*.⁸⁴ Individuals in modern capitalist society, he argued, tend to produce primarily in order to acquire the products of others. (From this perspective, a “subsistence peasantry” that “subsists” by cultivating cash-crops is very different from a “subsistence peasantry” that “subsists” on its own product.) But the relationship between individuals in the sphere of circulation is one that takes the practical form of “a social relation between the products of labour;” that is, in the relative exchange values of those products. Commodities, in so far as they are universally exchangeable, embody a certain *value* which can be

measured in relation to any other commodity in terms of a single, homogenous substance—*abstract human labor*—which is constituted by the practice of production for exchange, but which is indifferent to the concrete specificities both of the labor that produced the product, and of the product itself (its “use value”). But while what fundamentally mediates the relationship between the individual and other individuals with whom the products of labor are exchanged is *labor*, it appears to be a function of the relative values inhering in the objects themselves. The commodity-form thus “reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers.”⁸⁵

The socially mediating function of labor, in other words, does not appear transparently as labor, but as a value-property that regulates the exchange of the product of labor. Exchange relations between individuals, therefore, are always mediated by abstract labor, that is to say, by the totality of value-producing labor. This regulative, mediating function of labor thus appears to stand outside of the individuals who exchange their product, despite the fact that abstract labor is itself continuously reconstituted by the generalized practice of exchange. Juxtaposed then to the individuals who, as we have already argued, appear to stand disembodied from external social determinations precisely through the act of exchange in the sphere of circulation, is the homogeneous, abstract substance that becomes the social ether in which those individuals operate and through which their relationships with each other are, at the most fundamental level, regulated. It is this abstract mediation that is reified as *society*. Modern “society” is not then to be understood primarily as a cumulative scale of institutions and arrangements; for in capitalist society, it is labor itself, in the guise of a relationship between objects, that forms the most fundamental mediation between individual and individual—and abstract labor, that historically peculiar quality of labor under capital, which therefore constitutes the substance of the social whole. From this critical-Marxian perspective, “society” cannot simply be assumed as a foundational category for social-scientific analysis. Rather, it becomes a category which itself is grounded in the structures of practice constitutive of, and constituted by, a capitalist social formation.⁸⁶

The class-interest analyses that have dominated the critical historiography of modern Bengal have commonly interpreted the political turn to religious idioms in the Swadeshi era as the compound result of, on the one hand, an incomplete modernization on the part of the educated middle class themselves, and, on the other, their manipulation of popular religious icons to mobilize a mass political base in the context of a pre-modern society.⁸⁷ Yet, while it was an openly avowed aim of the new nationalist program to appeal to the masses

through religion, the interest-based instrumentalism of this kind of analysis still gets us no closer to understanding the sincerity with which the nationalist leadership appeared to pursue their agenda as a genuine ethical imperative in their own personal lives—visible, for example, in Aurobindo’s own transformation after the subsidence of the Swadeshi movement into the renowned yogi of Pondicherry. We need, then, to ground the nigh-universal turn to the idiom of Vedantic idealism in something more fundamental than the instrumental convenience of class interest.

The younger Marx had undertaken a critique that had famously sought to turn Hegelian idealism “on its head,” by showing that the subject of historical process was not the Idea, but rather the concrete, alienated worker laboring under conditions of bourgeois private property.⁸⁸ As Moishe Postone has argued, however, Marx’s mature critique of Hegelian idealism was of a fundamentally different nature from this more familiar mode of ideological critique. In capitalist society, labor’s peculiar role as a socially mediating activity necessarily relates each instance of concrete labor to the totality of social labor functioning as abstract human labor. While Marx’s later critique still attempted to ground abstract categories in real social practices, it also recognized that abstract human labor was a structure of social practice that had no specific concrete subject (classically, the proletariat). In other words, the “identical subject-object” of history was not any specific *class*, but rather, as Hegel had suggested precisely through the language of idealism, the abstract Subject of a historical process that did not directly depend on the volition of individual agents for the reproduction of its constitutive practices—but was not distinct and separate from those individual agents either (since it was continually reconstituted by their labor). Marx’s mature “materialism” did not mean reducing the abstract to an obfuscation or legitimation of concrete social relations and agents. Rather, it meant grounding this (real) abstraction in historically-specific structures of mediating practice. The “rational core” of Hegel’s philosophy was in fact its *idealistic* apprehension of the abstractness of the Subject of modern history, even as it misrecognized that Subject as transhistorical Spirit.⁸⁹

Swadeshi discourse, I suggest, articulated this very same idealist insight into the nature of social mediation when it set Vedantism on its dialogical relationship with Hegelianism. “[B]ehind the best work lies a quiet super-consciousness—knowledge that the work itself is not the great thing but the spirit that speaks in it,” explained Aurobindo in 1909. “Nationality will be the synthesis of all righteous forms of effort.”⁹⁰ By juxtaposing the deeper truth and spiritual primacy (*sattva*) of the total social organism to the *maya* (illusion) and *tamasa* (darkness and inertness—the quality of *maya* that obfuscates

its real spiritual substratum) of both the culture of civil society and the “inessential” selfish interests that structured it, Swadeshi discourse was struggling to develop an indigenous philosophical language with which to grasp the nature of the social, as something more fundamental and abstract than a mere assemblage of individuals or scale of institutional forms.⁹¹

The Nation as a Critique of Exchange

For Nationalists, however, it was not simply an opposition of individual and society that was at stake, for the generality of the category “society” does not quite capture the concrete specificity of the *nation-form* which, they insisted, constituted its natural organic unit, and therefore the proper subject of the aspiration to historical and political self-realization.⁹² “God is one, and Humanity is also one,” Bipin Pal acknowledged. “But, at the same time, as the Divine Unity is not an undifferentiated but a self-differentiated Unity, even so the unity of the human race is also a unity which exists in and realises itself through endless varieties—some personal and individualistic and some national and collectivistic.”⁹³ The *spatial* structure underlying Indian national discourse can be grounded non-functionally in the contradictions of the process of infrastructural integration that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century. The rapid extension of infrastructures of transportation and communication in the post-Mutiny era—part and parcel of the attempt to lock the subcontinent into the dual role of producer of primary goods for export on the one hand and consumer of British manufactures on the other—more tightly articulated Indian practices of production and consumption with the world-market, yet simultaneously constituted a more integrated economic space *within* the subcontinent. It was this bounded social and economic space that was articulated through the categories of “nation” and “national economy,” and against which the international structure of imperial domination and exchange was counterposed.⁹⁴

This bounded national space was, however, also the category through which Swadeshi nationalism sought to negate the heteronomous realm of civil society where “[m]en in their ordinary utilitarian course of life do not feel called upon to serve any one except themselves” and each individual “is propelled by the inertia of his own individual needs.”⁹⁵ Alongside a process of the *spatial* differentiation of (in principle) formally equivalent national entities, there was also a process of *qualitative* differentiation between the imperial and national scales of polity. For nationalists, British rule represented a superimposed, parasitical and unnatural global structure of *exchange* relations. The nation represented a *natural* unit of *productive activity* and the genuine *substance* of wealth. In an explicitly economic sense, this distinction is not

difficult to see: the ubiquitous juxtaposition of fertile fields of grain and recurrent famine, of natural wealth and financial poverty, of the hard work of India’s masses and their lack of remuneration, precisely articulated the contradictions between productive forces and exchange relations, between a potentially autarchic national economy and a superimposed global market, between the nation and the imperium.

Bengal lost her independence not when the English acquired political power in the country, but only...when her people began to depend on foreigners for such necessities of life as food and clothing. And any country which depends upon a foreign country for food or clothing or any other article of domestic use is a subject country. In this sense, for England also loss of independence has begun.⁹⁶

Nationalists therefore proposed, in Aurobindo’s formulation, “to establish a popular government which may be relied upon to foster and protect Indian commerce and Indian industry conducted by Indian capital and employing Indian labour.”⁹⁷ Only thus could the sphere of circulation be rationally subordinated to the productive propensities of the nation. The organic relationship between capital and labor would be overtly grounded in the common substance that constituted both, so that the expansion and accumulation of capital would become the foundation of the growth and development of the nation rather than, as under imperial rule, the cause of its impoverishment and degeneration.

Less obviously, yet perhaps more fundamentally still, the nationalist critique of the absorption of the Bengali middle class in the professional and clerical sectors was itself undertaken from the perspective of a philosophy of practice which saw the expansion of human powers taking place through the exercise of those powers.⁹⁸ The nation, argued Aurobindo, required a state, not just to defend it from external attack and internal disorder, but to create the “proper conditions which will give free play for the development of its activities and capacities—physical, moral, intellectual.” Unlike the individual, the nation could not afford to specialize, but needed a many-sided development of all “these functions of the organism” in order to remain fit “for the struggle for life. No government, therefore, can really be good for a nation or serve the purposes of national life and development which does not give full scope for the development of all the national activities, capacities and energies. Foreign rule is unnatural and fatal to a nation precisely because it throws itself upon these activities and capacities and crushes them down in the interests of its own continued existence.”⁹⁹

National renewal would thus have to rely heavily on a system of pedagogy that would redress the one-sided development of the national character through a comprehensive program of intellectual, moral, spiritual, and

physical culture deeply grounded in indigenous traditions.¹⁰⁰ Through the free functioning of a national life underpinned simultaneously by a renewed ethic of renunciation and by an organic and independent state, man was to be given the opportunity to “adjust the physical environments in a manner favourable to the expansion of his soul” and thereby “bring forth its latent energy.”¹⁰¹ Both the nation and freedom were, in the end, categories of collective practices of self- and world-constitution—that is to say, in Hegelian terms, subjective freedom realized through practices of objectification.¹⁰²

The Historical Nation

A critique of the isolated individual of civil society—the “abstract cosmopolitan” who views the particularities of national history from the debilitating perspective of an illusory “outside” to time and place¹⁰³—was thus being undertaken in the name of a subject who through his practical activity shared a common substance both with his fellow men and with a physical environment inscribed by the nation’s collective history. As Vivekananda had put it, “All the actions that we see in the world, all the movement in human society, all the works that we have around us, are simply the display of thought, the manifestation of the will of man.... [T]his will is caused by character, and character is manufactured by Karma” where “Karma,” it was noted, should be understood “in its widest sense” of “work” or activity in general.¹⁰⁴ Through practical activity, explained another philosopher of the Swadeshi era, humanity would pass through the three conditions of spirituality: “(a) recognition of matter, (b) coordination of matter and (c) conquest and conversion of matter.” Matter was thus reduced from “an alien order to be obeyed and borne with” to “a submissive vehicle of life’s expression,” as a very Hegelian “Spirit” reappropriated “its own echo, reflex, eject.”¹⁰⁵

The nation, as the collective embodiment of both living and objectified labor, was not “a mere *word*, a mere *abstraction*, a mere *idea*,” explained Bipin Pal. “It is something very tangible, something very concrete. It is both word and thought, both an idea and its symbol and manifestation,—*it is both abstract and concrete*.”¹⁰⁶ Consequently, the basis of the new politics, rather than being “evolved out of the head” of the individual reformer from purely abstract precepts, would have to “be sought for in the past history and evolution of the nation itself,” where the process and logic of the successive concrete manifestations of the “regulative idea” of the nation could be seen unfolding. “A right understanding of the meaning and purpose of Indian history” is, therefore, the “primary duty of every nation-builder in modern India.... Patriotism that does not feed upon history is like religion that rejects the help of the scriptures—rootless, fanciful, unreal.”¹⁰⁷

otless, fanciful, unreal.”¹⁰⁷

Swadeshi nationalism’s “nation” was, as I have suggested above, the reified embodiment of the abstractness that inhered in concrete laboring activity. If the nation was thus the negation of the homogeneous empty time of a civil society inhabited by atomized individuals pursuing their own personal ends, *history* was the specific mode of temporality in which the collective substance of the nation had been constituted through the concrete process of objectification through labor.¹⁰⁸ The *alien* quality of abstract labor—that is to say, its appearance as a form of social mediation external to the individual subject and embodied in the act of exchange in the sphere of circulation—was substantialized in the colonial context in terms of a Western propensity to pursue materialistic ends in a spirit of utilitarian individualism. The impersonal structure of civil society was thus understood to be an expression of a foreign rule that cloaked mercantile interests in the regularities of the rule of law. The overthrow of foreign rule would not just remove an oppressive regime as such. More fundamentally, it would negate abstract mediation in the sphere of circulation in the name of a concrete collective subject that constituted itself through the idealized process of concrete labor. The nation would cease to be the servant of (foreign) capital, and become instead the historical embodiment of capital’s constitutive activity and substance. The culmination of this process of the realization of subjective freedom was, in the view of most Swadeshists, the development of modern industry in the hands of indigenous capital (“to the almost complete exclusion of interests purely commercial”).¹⁰⁹

By seeking to ground the new politics in the immanent propensities and latent dynamics of the nation, Swadeshi nationalism imagined the possibility of hitching political autonomy and national development to the dynamic temporal dimension of capital. At the same time, by resuming their organic connection with a nation whose immanent potential for rationality resided in its productive propensities, nationalists saw themselves as negating the heteronomous forces that structured their “babu” existence in civil society. By reintegrating themselves as the political center and intellectual “head” with the social “body,” they would draw together the scattered energies of the nation into a coordinated organism actively pursuing the dynamic logic of development inscribed in its history of practical constitution. The Indian nation could claim such an autonomous dynamic development because the temporality of capital was projected back into the pre-colonial history of the nation, in its social practices and its systems of thought, even in its (Aryan) “racial” constitution.

Against the historical particularity of modern practices of free exchange (what Vivekananda called the age of the Vaishya) was posited the historical universality of

the *laboring subject*. Such a subject did not negate the particularity of national history and indigenous society in the name of cosmopolitan individuality. Yet nor did it have to negate the universally human, for universality inhered (as abstract labor) in the concrete history of labor that constituted particularity. Whereas the emancipatory rationality of exchange in the sphere of circulation constituted only the *negative* freedom of an individual unobstructedly pursuing his own interests in a realm of necessity that seemed to confront him as an external means to his own ends, Swadeshi envisaged a form of *positive* freedom whereby the rationality of the abstract-universal was to be approached through concrete practices that simultaneously constituted the ethical self, and the capacity of that ethical self to command nature to its own spiritual ends. The individual's cultivation of worldly agency and ethico-spiritual development thus re-integrated him into the dynamic, concrete temporal dimension of "history," the unfolding process of the nation's collective subjective appropriation of the environment to its own spiritual nature. The subjective freedom that had been achieved through man's progressive self-liberation from subjection to nature would from this standpoint represent a simultaneous process of universalization and particularization—the first because concrete labor embodied the substance of abstract labor; the latter because, as activity that definitionally always took concrete forms, concrete labor always embodied the abstract *historically* in specific ways and in specific environments. As Satishchandra Mukherjee put it, the "spirit of universalism, the very breath of all progress upwards, is not inconsistent with, but is highly co-operant towards a special study of systems of thought and belief which is equally necessary to a special evolution of each individual spirit. Each race, therefore, should cultivate this double line of progress."¹¹⁰

India's "spiritual" predisposition was, then, precisely its privilege. Hindu social institutions—the hierarchies of caste and the patriarchal family, the guru-disciple relationship, and even the observance of idol worship—were to be understood neither as utilitarian instruments for the regulation of relations between atomized individuals pursuing selfish ends, nor as arbitrary and oppressive forms of authority to be negated in the name of the cosmopolitan subject of reform. Rather, in their proper place and time, they became instances of the concrete historical realization of the abstract—the mediating institutional forms that tied the individual to the nation's collective history of objectification.¹¹¹ Whereas the "West is full of interest in phenomena," Hindu society had been engaged for thousands of years in gathering the "collective strength of society" through the genius of its social institutions, a form of strength far superior to mere force of arms—a dormant force that "permeates our life in every aspect of it" and has merely

awaited awakening.¹¹² This was the basis of India's ability to "go to the roots" and "draw out the miraculous power of the Will" with which its new nationalism, "the politics of the twentieth century," would combat a rootlessly alien and spiritlessly materialistic foreign regime.¹¹³ In this sense, the "movement of which the first outbreak was political, will end in a spiritual consummation," as Asia teaches Europe how to overcome the shallowness of its social and political imagination and thereby attain an ethical collective life.¹¹⁴ Once again, India was to be the world's guru.

Swadeshi nationalism was, then, much more than a strategic inversion of an Orientalist thematic or the recuperation of a subaltern realm of consciousness.¹¹⁵ Such intellectual genealogies may be in an immediate sense accurate, but they can tell us very little about why any specific ideological paradigm should have been compelling to any particular subject in any particular historical context. This essay has instead argued that the plausibility of Swadeshi ideology for Bengalis of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was grounded fundamentally neither in interest nor in Western intellectual authority nor in indigenous tradition, but rather in a one-sided critique of the circulatory dimensions of capitalist society from the standpoint of its productionist logic.

NOTES

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¹Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908* (New Delhi: People's Publishing, 1973), 9-20; Amales Tripathi, *The Extremist Challenge: India Between 1890 and 1910* (New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 1967), chapter 3.

²See especially Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); and Anil Seal et al., eds., *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics 1870-1940*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

³Rajat K. Ray, "Political Change in British India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 14, no.4 (1977): 503.

⁴Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement*, 512.

⁵The term "modularity" is of course drawn from Benedict Anderson's ubiquitous work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

⁶Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur," in *Europe and its Others*, ed. Francis Barker et al. (Colchester: University of Essex, 1985), volume one: 128-151.

⁷See especially Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Cambridge, MA:

Blackwell, 1990).

⁸The study of “colonial knowledge” began with the brilliant essays in Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁹Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (London: Zed Books, 1986), chapter two.

¹⁰Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 40.

¹¹Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, chapter six.

¹²Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 38. Chatterjee would subsequently try to critique the “modular” understanding of colonial nationalism from such an external standpoint of “inside” particularity in *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹³*Sandhya*, Nov. 16, 1906, *Reports on Native Papers, Bengal* (RNPB hereafter), No. 47 of 1906; Aurobindo Ghosh, *Bande Mataram: Early Political Writings* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972), 120.

¹⁴E.g. “The Vampire,” in the *Kbulnavasi*, Sept. 21, 1907, RNPB, No. 39 of 1907.

¹⁵Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar, *Desher katha* (Calcutta: the author, 1904); *Murshidabad Pratidinidhi*, April 24, 1906, RNPB No. 21 of 1906.

¹⁶*Sandhya*, Jan. 8, 1907, RNPB No. 2 of 1907; *Basumati*, March 23, 1907, RNPB No. 13 of 1907.

¹⁷*Daily Hitavadi*, Oct. 29, 1907, RNPB No. 44 of 1907; *Sonar Bharat*, Dec. 21, 1907, RNPB No. 52 of 1907.

¹⁸*Hitavadi*, May 4, 1906, RNPB No. 19 of 1906.

¹⁹*Navasakti*, March 20, 1908, RNPB No. 13 of 1908; *Charmubir*, Jan. 9, 1906, RNPB No. 3 of 1906.

²⁰*Howrah Hitaisi*, July 7, 1906, RNPB No. 28 of 1906.

²¹Jyoti Lal Mukherji, *Svadeshi brata* (Calcutta: Svadeshi Pracharini Sabha, 1906).

²²*Bangavasi*, June 6, 1908, RNPB No. 24 of 1908; *Howrah Hitoishi*, July 6, 1907, RNPB No. 28 of 1907; *Samajdarpan*, April 13, 1908, RNPB No. 17 of 1908; *Bangavasi*, June 6, 1908, RNPB No. 24 of 1908. The “drain of food-wealth” argument had become common since the protectionist turn in Bengali opinion in the 1870s, and already was linked to the production of export-crops like jute—*Bharat Sangskarak*, Jan. 1, 1875, RNPB No. 1 of 1875; *Hindu Hitoishini*, March 2, 1878, RNPB No. 10 of 1878. See also Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India: Economic Policies of Indian National Leadership, 1880-1905* (New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1966), 162-167.

²³Blair Kling, *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) chapter 9; Narendra Krishna Sinha, “Indian Business Enterprise: Its Failure in Calcutta (1800-1848),” in *Entrepreneurship and Industry in India, 1800-1947*, ed. Rajat K. Ray (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 70-82.

²⁴D.A. Washbrook, “India 1818-1860: The Two Faces of Colonialism,” in *Oxford History of the British Empire Volume III: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Andrew Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 410-411; Rajat K. Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875-1927* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 11-21; Amiya Bagchi, *Private Investment in India, 1900-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 165-181; Amiya Bagchi, “European and Indian Entre-

preneurship in India, 1900-1930,” in *Entrepreneurship and Industry*, ed. Ray.

²⁵For an analysis of the disjuncture between the commercialization of product and capital markets and the non-commercial organization of land and labor, see Sugata Bose, *Peasant Labor and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal Since 1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²⁶Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), chapter 2.

²⁷Cf. Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁸Anonymous, “An Amended Rent Law,” *Calcutta Review*, 41 (1865): 161.

²⁹Anonymous, “Enhancement of Rents,” *Calcutta Review*, 39 (1864): 111; Henry Maine, *Village-Communities in the East and West* (New York: Henry Holt, 1880), 183, 233. See also S. Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 110-129.

³⁰Bruce Carlisle Robertson, *Raja Rammobun Ray: The Father of Modern India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 178.

³¹The great Bengali man-of-letters, Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), was emblematic of this shift in intellectual temper: in the 1870s, he was a radical proponent of liberal reform; in the 1880s, he became one of the chief voices of neo-Hinduism.

³²Cf. Jayanta Gosvami, *Samajacittre unabingsha shatabdira bangla prahasana* (Calcutta: Sahityashri, 1974), 463-518; Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), chapter 2; John Rosselli, “The Self-Image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal,” *Past and Present*, 86 (1980): 121-148. For the conventional sociology of this “educated middle class” as a high-caste, intermediate-tenure *rentier* sub-élite primarily dependent on clerical and professional employment, see J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); John McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind: A Qualitative Study of the Bhadrakol in Calcutta, 1857-1885* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1983); Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

³³Kshitinath Das, *Shiksha sankat* (Calcutta: the author, 1906), 2-7.

³⁴Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 18.

³⁵Aurobindo Ghosh, “The Bourgeois and the Samurai,” *Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research*, 2, no.1 (1978); Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 3-56.

³⁶*Sri Sri Vishnu Priya-o-Ananda Bajar Patrika*, Jan. 10, 1907, RNPB No. 2 of 1907.

³⁷*Daily Hitavadi*, March 25, 1907, RNPB No. 13 of 1907; see also *Sri Aurobindo and the New Thought in Indian Politics*, ed. Haridas Mukherjee and Uma Mukherjee (Calcutta: K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1964), 128-130.

³⁸See Sarkar, *Svadeshi Movement*, chapter 2, for a more detailed analysis of the economic program.

³⁹Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 240-245.

⁴⁰Chandra, *Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism*, 146, 169-170, 729, and more generally chapters 4, 6, 14 and 15; Manu Goswami, *The Production of India: Colonialism, Nationalism and Territorial Nativism* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1998), chapter 11.

⁴¹Chandra, *Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism*, 727.

⁴²Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement*, 97.

⁴³E.g. Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 903.

⁴⁴*Sri Aurobindo*, ed. Mukherjee & Mukherjee 126-127.

⁴⁵Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 309-318.

⁴⁶*Sandhya*, Sept. 20, 1906, RNBP No. 40 of 1906.

⁴⁷See Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 83-123.

⁴⁸*Sandhya*, August 13, 1907, RNBP No. 33 of 1907.

⁴⁹Rabindranath Thakur, "Swadeshi samaja," in *Rabindra Ranabali* (Calcutta: West Bengal Government, b.s. 1368 [c. 1961]), vol. 12, 683-702: 687.

⁵⁰Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), chapter 8.

⁵¹Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 468-469.

⁵²Pal, *Swadeshi and Swaraj*, 201; Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 903.

⁵³In Bengal, the key text that inaugurated the new centrality of the Bhagavad Gita was Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Krishnacarittra* (1886). See *Bankima Ranabali: Sahitya Samagra*, ed. Bishnu Basu (Calcutta: Tuli-Kalam, b.s. 1393 [c. 1986]), 407-583.

⁵⁴*Navashakti*, Aug. 13, 1907, RNBP No. 33 of 1907; cf. Pal, *Swadeshi and Swaraj*, 147.

⁵⁵Thakur, "Swadeshi Samaja," 701.

⁵⁶Ghosh, "The Heart of Nationalism," *Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research*, 2, no.2 (1978): 110.

⁵⁷Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 121, 309.

⁵⁸Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 309.

⁵⁹*Navashakti*, Feb. 5, 1908 and Feb. 6, 1908, RNBP No. 7 of 1908; *Yugantar*, April 8, 1906, RNBP No. 15 of 1906; *Nayak*, May 9, 1908, RNBP No. 20 of 1908. On the adoption of traditional forms (theatre, fairs, etc.) as modes of communicating with the people, see Thakur, "Swadeshi Samaja," 687-689.

⁶⁰*Navashakti*, Feb. 5, 1908 and Feb. 6, 1908, RNBP No. 7 of 1908.

⁶¹Bipin Chandra Pal, *Writings and Speeches* (Calcutta: Yugayatri Prakashak, 1954), vol. 1, part 2, 27.

⁶²Robertson, 94, 123, 145, 172-173.

⁶³Bipin Chandra Pal, *Character Sketches* (Calcutta: Yugayatri Prakashak, 1957), 242.

⁶⁴Marx, *Grundrisse*, 84.

⁶⁵Pal, *Character Sketches*, 60-78.

⁶⁶Pal, *Character Sketches*, 65-66, 238-239.

⁶⁷Pal, *Swadeshi and Swaraj*, 289.

⁶⁸Pal, *Swadeshi and Swaraj*, 290-292; Pal, *Writings and Speeches*, 27-33; Pal, *Character Sketches*, 50-51.

⁶⁹*Principles of Tantra: The Tantra-Tattva of Sriyukta Siva Candra Vidyarnava Bhattacharya Mahodaya, Part One*, ed. and trans. Sir John Woodroffe (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1978), 167-172.

⁷⁰Cf. Jeffrey Kripal, *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), chapter 3.

⁷¹Ghosh *Bande Mataram*, 61-71; and Pal, *Swadeshi and Swaraj*, 103-112, 292-295.

⁷²See S.K. De, *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Move-*

ment in Bengal (Calcutta: K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961); and Ramakanta Chakravarti, *Vaisnavism in Bengal, 1486-1900* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1985), chapter 5.

⁷³David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 219-227.

⁷⁴Bipin Chandra Pal, *Memories of My Life and Times Volume II* (Calcutta: Yugayatri Prakashak, 1951), 190. On his turn from Brahma theism to immanentist pantheism, see Pal, *Memories*, 120-122, 132-135. Pal emphasized the rational purity of Bijoykrishna's alleged adherence to monism, in contrast to the guru's "new Hindu" disciples who had not passed through the rationalizing influence of Brahmoism. Pal, *Memories*, 190-195, 213.

⁷⁵Pal, *Swadeshi and Swaraj*, 288-289; cf. Pal, *Character Sketches*, 257.

⁷⁶Pal, *Memories*, 161-165, 182-183.

⁷⁷Pal, *Memories*, 212.

⁷⁸Cf. Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 717.

⁷⁹Pal, *Character Sketches*, 261.

⁸⁰Brajendranath Seal, *New Essays in Criticism* (Calcutta: Som Brothers, 1903).

⁸¹*Life of Sri Ramakrishna, Compiled from Various Authentic Sources* (Almora: Advaita Ashram, 1948), 507-509.

⁸²*Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda Volume Four* (Almora: Advaita Ashram, 1932), 396. Compare Bipin Pal in 1909: "The message of [Bijay Krishna's] earlier Brahmoism was the brotherhood of man, which formulated itself in a propaganda of social amelioration. The message of his later Vaishnavism was the divinity of man, which transformed the service of man into a living service of God, and worked out a noble transfiguration in all human relations and social activities." Pal, *Character Sketches*, 257-258.

⁸³Daya Krishna, *The Problematic and Conceptual Structure of Classical Indian Thought about Man, Society and Polity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 157-158.

⁸⁴I draw heavily from Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). To clarify the status of Marx in this paper, it may be helpful to emphasize that Marxian theory, in this reading, cannot be understood as objectivist science, but rather as itself a reflexive critique grounded immanently in the very practices it seeks to grasp. Its relationship to Idealism (Hegelian or Swadeshi) is thus one of greater explanatory adequacy, rather than one of theory to experience or science to ideology.

⁸⁵Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 164-165.

⁸⁶Cf. Sheldon Pollock, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57:1 (1998): 32; Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, 259.

⁸⁷See for example Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement*, 107-108, 308-316. As Barbara Southard noted, the popular-mobilization argument falters in the face of the socially-limited appeal of a *shakta* religious symbolism closely associated with the higher castes. She, however, then reiterated the instrumental logic of the position she criticized by arguing that Swadeshi leaders were instead trying to forge a link between urban and rural upper-caste Bengali Hindus. See Southard, "The Political Strategy of Aurobindo Ghosh: The Utilization of Hindu Re-

ligious Symbolism and the Problem of Political Mobilization in Bengal,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 14, no.3 (1980): 353-376.

⁸⁸*Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. Loyd Easton and Kurt Guddat (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 152-164, 314-337.

⁸⁹Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, 71-83.

⁹⁰Sri Arabindo Ghose, “Paramhansa Dev & His Birthday Utsav” (1909), reprinted in *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, March 11, 1932.

⁹¹See for example Pal, *Swadeshi and Swaraj*, 69, 241; Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 60-71, 710-713.

⁹²Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 296-299, 304-308.

⁹³Pal, *Character Sketches*, 259.

⁹⁴Goswami, *Production of India*.

⁹⁵Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 703-704. For “inertia,” read *tamasa*.

⁹⁶*Medini Bandhab*, April 11, 1906, RNBP No. 17 of 1906.

⁹⁷Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 91.

⁹⁸The philosophical groundwork of this “philosophy of practice” (*anushilanatattva*) was laid out in Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s *Dharmmatattva: Anushilana* (1888), in *Bankima Racanabali*, ed. Basu, 584-679.

⁹⁹Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 306-307.

¹⁰⁰On the need for an indigenous system of pedagogy—including the emphasis on the revival of *brahmacharya* as a means of protecting young male subjectivity from the corrupting temptations of sensuality (consumption)—see Satishchandra Mukherjee, “The Dawn and the Bhagavat Catuspathi,” *The Dawn*, 1:12 (1898), 353-356; Rabindranath Thakur, “*Shikshasamasya*,” in *Rabindra Racanabali* (Calcutta: West Bengal Government, b.s. 1368 [c. 1961]), vol. 11, 559-579; and more generally, Haridas Mukherjee and Uma Mukherjee, *The Origins of the National Education Movement (1905-1910)* (Calcutta: Jadavpur University, 1957).

¹⁰¹*Sri Aurobindo*, ed. Mukherjee & Mukherjee, 129.

¹⁰²See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹⁰³See for example Pal, *Swadeshi and Swaraj*, 17-20.

¹⁰⁴*Complete Works of the Swami Vivekananda Volume One* (Almora: Advaita Ashram, 1931), 27-30.

¹⁰⁵Pramathanath Mukhopadhyay, *India: Her Cult and Education*, in *The Complete Works of Swami Pratyagatmananda Saraswati Volume One* (Chanduli: Saranam Ashram, 1980), 38, 69-72. Although this work was published in 1912, it was begun during the Swadeshi era when Mukhopadhyay, a Tantric disciple of Siva Candra Vidyarnava Bhattacharya, was on the faculty of the Bengal National College—see *Report of the National Council of Education, 1908*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁰⁶Pal, *Swadeshi and Swaraj*, 85, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁷Pal, *Writings and Speeches*, 25-26, 30-31, 37; cf. Pal, *Swadeshi and Swaraj*, 17-19.

¹⁰⁸See Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, 291-298.

¹⁰⁹Chandra, *Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism*, 170, and chapters 2 and 3. Modern industry also had its Swadeshi critics, who recognized the intimacy between factory labor and the sphere of circulation, and questioned its compatibility with an indigenist ethical order. See Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement*, 100-108.

¹¹⁰*The Dawn*, 1:1 (1897), 1.

¹¹¹See for example Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 536-537; Pal,

Character Sketches, 67-76.

¹¹²*Sandhya*, Feb. 14, 1906, RNBP No. 7 of 1906; Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 712-713.

¹¹³Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 91, 468-469.

¹¹⁴Ghosh, *Bande Mataram*, 465-469, 799-801.

¹¹⁵Cf. Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 50-51; Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*.