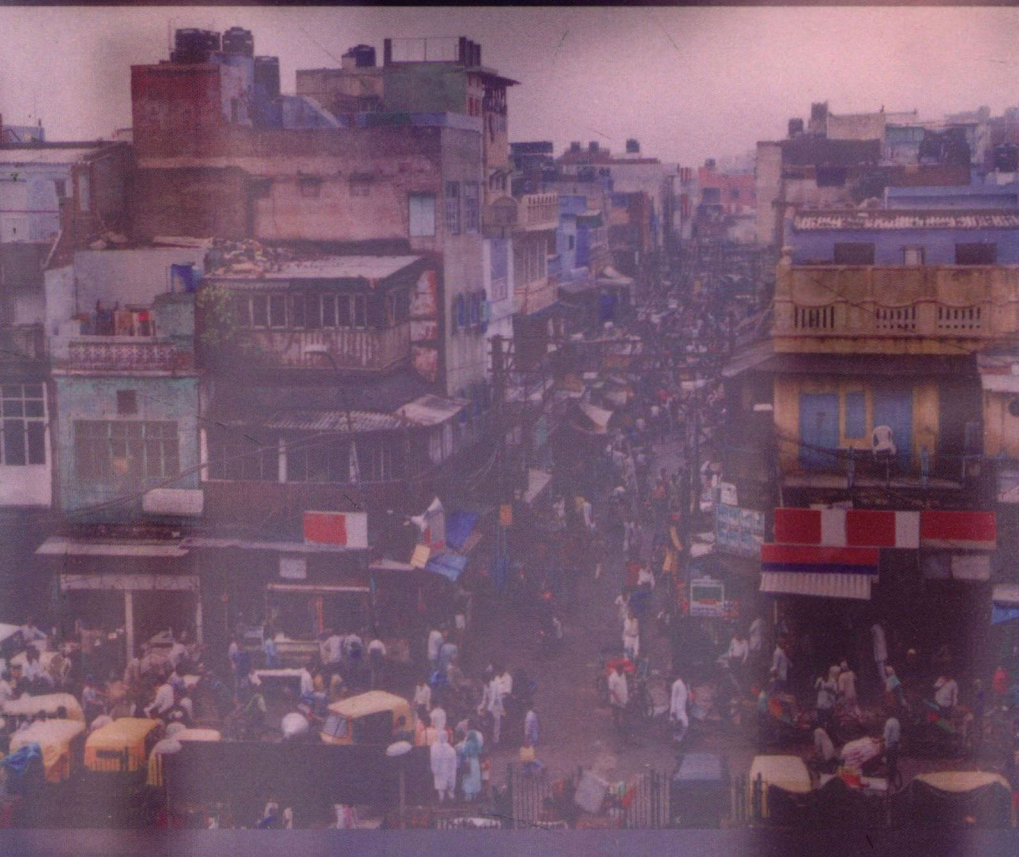
SELECTED ESSAYS

INTRODUCTION BY NIVEDITA MENON

PARTHA CHATTERJEE

EMPIRE AND NATION



Partha Chatterjee

Empire and Nation

Selected Essays

with an Introduction by
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Introduction

NIVEDITA MENON

As the old joke goes:

> *Why did the chicken cross the road?*
>
> **Karl Marx:** Given the material stage of development of the road, it was a historical inevitability.
>
> **Jacques Derrida:** Any number of contending discourses construct the meaning of that act and the authorial intention can never be discerned, because the Author is DEAD, DAMMIT, DEAD!

To introduce a set of essays that one has not selected is to risk misreading the curatorial intention. Nevertheless, secure in the knowledge that Author/Curator is dead-dammit-dead, I draw my legitimacy from the simple fact that I am one of those whose engagement with the contemporary has been utterly transfigured by reading Partha Chatterjee's work over the years.

The reader familiar with his work should know that this collection is a new *arrangement* of some of his essential writings. It is also not surprising, for anyone who has followed Chatterjee's slow building up of arguments over the years, to find here earlier versions of some of the most influential of such conceptual innovations as have now passed into common shorthand—'our' modernity, the inner/outer in nationalist thought, and the dyad of civil society/modernity, political society/democracy.

What this collection of essays does, then, is to set some of Chatterjee's key writings within the framework of *Empire and Nation*, thus enabling a particular counternarrative of modernity to emerge—not an alternative modernity nor a non-modernity (both terms leaving untouched European modernity as the norm)—but rather, an account

that reveals *both* 'our' modernity as well as European modernity to be particular cases of a general history of modernity.

Modernity: Consumers and Producers

In an interview a few years ago, Chatterjee said that he comes to Western social theory 'at a tangent':

> there was a time early in my career when . . . I probably would have said that . . . if one was approaching political theory, one should approach it irrespective of one's cultural or geographical location . . . I am far more aware now of the ways in which my location in India influences the questions about politics and society that seem more urgent . . . In trying to approach those concerns, I often find myself in a position of relative remoteness from the body of Western social theories . . . Even when Western social theory approaches these issues, it actually misrepresents, often misidentifies, the problem . . .
>
> The theory that will explain Indian democracy or the theory that will explain China's capitalism today will actually be a far more general theory of which Western theory will just be a particular case.[1]

Chatterjee began his travels in theory from the late 1970s when, as a young Marxist, he was armed with certainty and the confidence to advance 'on behalf of a class, an alliance or the people as a whole, a rival claim to rule.' Today he is certain only of his scepticism of utopias, even while his central concern remains the same—the 'politics of the governed'.[2] His perspective: 'oppositional, negative, resolutely critical'.[3] For many who came to scholarship in the 1990s, in a period already deeply marked by the tracks of such troubled journeys—those of Chatterjee of course, but also of Ashis Nandy and writers in the early Subaltern Studies volumes (Susie Tharu, Sudipta Kaviraj, and Dipesh Chakrabarty in particular)—there was never that moment of innocence, the assumption that 'one could approach political theory irrespective of one's cultural or geographical location.'

Chatterjee's work foregrounds the question of location, a move that has been often misunderstood to mean something like indigenism, as

[1] Interview with Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Sephis e-Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2004.

[2] Partha Chatterjee, *A Possible India. Essays in Political Criticism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. vii.

[3] Ibid., p. ix.

for example when Sarah Joseph, terming Chatterjee and Nandy 'critics of modernity',[4] reads their argument as counterposing 'Indian communitarianism' against 'Western individualism'. This conflation of Nandy and Chatterjee's positions is unsustainable. Nandy could certainly be called a neo-Gandhian 'critic of modernity', or at least of 'actually existing' modernity, if I may so term it—a particular strain of modernity that triumphed in Europe and was then exported all over the globe on the back of imperialism. Chatterjee on the other hand is not so much a *critic* of modernity as a *historian* of modernity. The position Joseph attributes to him is this: 'His thesis is that the introduction of alien, modern institutions, values and concepts into a traditional society like the Indian led to consequences that were unexpected and different from . . . [those] on European societies. This he attributes to the persistence of indigenous life forms and practices in India . . .'[5]

However, when Chatterjee invokes location it is not about 'India versus the West' (with the imputation of greater authenticity to the Indian side of the equation); nor does he frame the question within the tradition/modernity framework, and certainly not in terms of 'persistence' of the traditional. The idea of persistence assumes a teleological journey from traditional to modern, an assumption alien to Chatterjee. His project, rather, is to map the various formations of modernity 'in most of the world', thus showing both Europe and 'us' to be particular cases of a general history.

Chatterjee's insistence on location is a productive conceptual development inflected by later scholars in their different ways. I suggest that location in the sense in which Chatterjee uses it must be understood as gesturing towards the materiality of spatial and temporal co-ordinates that inevitably suffuse all theorizing. A sensitivity to location invariably leads to a productive contamination of the purity of empty universalist categories and challenges their claim to speak about everywhere from nowhere. Pradeep Jeganathan has argued that the question of location does not refer to some 'more authentic' point of epistemic access, but rather underlines the need to engage with the

[4] Sarah Joseph, 'Modernity and its Critics: A Discussion of Some Contemporary Social and Political Theorists', in V.R. Mehta and Thomas Pantham, *Political Ideas in Modern India: Thematic Explorations,* vol. x, pt 7 (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), p. 422.

[5] Ibid., p. 428.

'density of arguments within a lived community'.[6] Satish Deshpande, seeking a 'sense of location that can maintain a critical distance from both cosmopolitanism and patriotism', points us towards the range of intellectual and political 'oppositional stances'—the '"Asianism" movement in Japan, China, and other parts of Asia at the turn of the [nineteenth] century; the "Negritude" movement associated with the names of Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor', the Bandung project of the mid-twentieth century 'and its various avatars', and so on.

So Chatterjee's invocation of locality must be grounded within a larger global political/intellectual field of reworkings of the question of modernity, of colonial modernity in particular. In such a field, other kinds of engagements with the problematic of location become visible; to cite a few random examples—Dipesh Chakrabarty of course; but also Tejaswini Niranjana on translation; Mahmood Mamdani deconstructing the slogan 'Out of Iraq and into Darfur' as the denial of a history and a politics to the non-West; the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, founded in 2000, which assumes a pan-Asian location for exploring the relationship between cultural theory and political/cultural movements; Achille Mbembe's exploration of the modernity into which Africa was thrust by colonialism, so that after its conquest Africa has served as 'the supreme receptacle of the West's obsession with, and circular discourse about, the facts of "absence", "lack" . . .'[7]

To insist on location is precisely to contest 'lack' as the predominant way of characterizing Europe's Other, and there is no doubt that Chatterjee's contribution here has been formative. In 'Our Modernity' (essay 7 in the present volume), moving between sceptical nineteenth-century Bengali responses to the transformations brought by modernity and Kant's celebratory 'What is Enlightenment' as an instance of 'Western modernity representing itself', Chatterjee says:

[6] Malathi De Alwis, *et al.*, 'The Postnational Condition', *Economic and Political Weekly* (*EPW*), 7 March 2009, vol. XLIV, no. 10.

[7] Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 4; see also Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), key parts of which were published in journals and edited volumes throughout the 1990s; Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Mahmood Mamdani, 'The Politics of Naming: Genocide, Civil War, Insurgency', *London Review of Books*, vol. 29, no. 5, 8 March 2007.

> There must be something in the very process of our becoming modern that continues to lead us, even in our acceptance of modernity, to a certain scepticism about its values and consequences . . .
>
> My argument is that because of the way in which the history of our modernity has been intertwined with the history of colonialism, we have never quite been able to believe that there exists a universal domain of free discourse, unfettered by differences of race or nationality. Somehow from the very beginning we have made a shrewd guess that given the close complicity between modern knowledges and modern regimes of power, we would forever remain consumers of universal modernity; never would we be taken seriously as its producers. It is for this reason that we have tried, for over a hundred years, to take our eyes away from this chimera of universal modernity and clear up a space where we might become the creators of our own modernity . . .
>
> . . . There is no promised land of modernity outside the network of power. Hence one cannot be for or against modernity; one can only devise strategies for coping with it.

A lingering question here in my mind plays with the 'our' of 'our modernity'—is there a way in which this pronoun acts as a homogenizing move, dissolving counter-identities within the nation for whom 'their' (European) modernity was far preferable to 'our' non-modernity? A little later there occurs this claim:

> [W]hereas Kant, speaking at the founding moment of Western modernity, looks at the present as the site of one's escape from the past, for us it is precisely the present from which we feel we must escape. This makes the modality of our coping with modernity radically different from the historically evolved modes of Western modernity.

Rajnarayan Basu may well have contrasted the decline to ill-health and selfishness in '*e kal*' (these days) from the compassion, genuineness, and good health of '*se kal*' (those days), but for many middle-class women and historically untouchable castes of that same nineteenth century it was in fact the present which worked as the 'site of escape' from the past. The nostalgia of upper-caste men could not, it seems to me, ever have been available to women and Dalits who rebelled against illiteracy, untouchability, forced and early marriage, and the fetters of Hinduism—the features of their *se kal*.

Rajnarayan Basu wrote *Se kal ar e kal* in 1873. About two decades earlier, in 1855, the Marathi journal *Dnyanodaya* carried an essay

written by 11-year-old Muktabai, a Dalit student at the school in Pune established by Savitribai and Jotiba Phule:

> Earlier, Gokhale, Apate, Trimkaji [a series of other Brahmin surnames] . . . who showed their bravery by killing rats in their homes, persecuted us, not even sparing pregnant women, without any rhyme or reason. That has stopped now . . . Harassment and torture of mahars and mangs, common during the rule of Peshwas in Pune, has stopped. Now, human sacrifice for the foundation of forts and mansions has stopped . . . Now, our population is growing in numbers. Earlier, if any mahar or mang wore fine clothes, they would say that only brahmans could wear such clothes . . . they would tie them to trees and punish them. But under British rule, anybody with money can buy and wear clothes . . .[8]

And so it goes on: 'Earlier' (*se kal*) was hell; 'now' (*e kal)* is the time of liberation.

Or take Pandita Ramabai at the turn of the nineteenth century, challenging the authorities of the Church of England: 'I have a conscience and a mind of my own . . . I have with great effort freed myself from the yoke of the Indian priestly tribe so I am not at present willing to place myself under another similar yoke by accepting everything that comes from priests as the authorized command of the Most High.'[9] 'At present' is the time in which Ramabai sees herself entering the adulthood of Kant's enlightenment. Crucially, she finds this adulthood denied her by the English priesthood, but she challenges it fiercely. *Now*—now that she has broken free of one kind of fetter, a new kind is intolerable. For many like Muktabai and Ramabai, it was *e kal* that offered some promise of escape from suffocating and humiliating pasts.

I draw attention to these voices that complicate Chatterjee's narrative of 'our' modernity precisely in order to acknowledge his conclusion that 'to fashion the terms of our own modernity, we need to have the courage at times to reject the modernities established by others.'

There is now a great deal of self-reflexivity about Eurocentrism among Western scholars. So, for instance, Charles Taylor's warning against the easy transposing of the state–civil society opposition derived from the experience of Western Europe to other parts of the world

[8] Braj Ranjan Mani and Pamela Sardar, trans. and eds, *A Forgotten Liberator: The Life and Struggle of Savitribai Phule* (New Delhi: Mountain Peak, n.d.), pp. 74–5.

[9] Cited in Uma Chakravarty, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000), p. 322.

and his proposal to enrich the concept of civil society by including within its purview other forms of state–society interaction in non-European contexts. However, in his response to Taylor (essay 16), Chatterjee points out that the central assumption of Taylor's proposal continues to be an understanding that 'it is only the concepts of European social philosophy that contain within them the possibility of universalization.' His own project, therefore, is to explore the specificity of the European concept of civil society and demonstrate the ways in which 'that concept could be shown to be a particular form of a more universal concept'; in other words, 'to send the concept of civil society back to where I think it properly belongs— the provincialism of European social philosophy.'

The four essays in the final section, 'Capital and Community', including this response, explore in different and tangential ways, through studies of peasant resistance and linguistic and religious nationalisms in Bengal (essays 18 and 19) and a history of Subaltern Studies (essay 17), Chatterjee's assertion in his response to Taylor:

> If there is one great moment that turns the provincial thought of Europe to universal philosophy, the parochial history of Europe to universal history, it is the moment of capital—capital that is global in its territorial reach and universal in its conceptual domain. It is the narrative of capital that can turn the violence of mercantilist trade, war, genocide, conquest and colonialism into a story of universal progress, development, modernization and freedom.

For this narrative to take shape, the destruction of community is fundamental, says Chatterjee; yet community could not entirely be suppressed either. Therefore, '[n]otwithstanding its universal scope, capital remained parasitic upon the reconstructed particularism of the nation.' At the same time, community is not easily appropriated within narratives of capital and the contradictions between the two are seen clearly in histories of anti-colonial nationalist movements. Indeed, one might say that the core of Chatterjee's explorations is precisely this tension posed by the contradiction between capital and community in, so to speak, the rest of the world.

'History and the Nationalization of Hinduism' (essay 3) is an analysis of the break marked by the advent of the idea of universal history via modern historiography, in indigenous ways of telling stories of the past. On the other hand the oblique and witty response to 'Dronacharya' (Ranajit Guha) from 'the third Pandava' (Partha Chatterjee), wickedly

titled 'Tribute to the Master' (essay 8), is a sharp questioning of Guha's critique of universal history in *History at the Limit of World-history.* Chatterjee charges Guha with 'assimilating all forms of proto-historical narrative in India to the *Mahabharata*' and with applying 'the conditions of antiquity or tradition and succession or continuous retelling in order to privilege the two Brahmanical epics over all other narrative specimens.' Ouch.

Essays 1, 2, 4, and 6, including two pieces now seen as classics, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' and 'The Constitution of Indian Nationalist Discourse', lay out Chatterjee's controversial and much-debated argument on anti-colonial nationalism, familiar now from *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* and *The Nation and its Fragments*, which I will not go into here.[10]

There are in addition four short pieces—a playful review of Sudipta Kaviraj's *Unhappy Consciousness,* a sharp attack on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's 'fond memories of the Raj', a defence of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses,* and a demolition of anti-reservation arguments in the post-Mandal scenario.

Civil and Political Society

Chatterjee's conceptual innovation of 'political society' has captured the imaginations of many scholars who have struggled to understand that domain where democracy seems to be actually in action, but which meets none of the standards set by political theory for what is permitted to count as democracy—rationality, deliberation, reasonable justification, control over excess, non-violence. What is exciting about

[10] To name just a few serious engagements with Chatterjee's argument on nationalism: Sumit Sarkar, 'Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva', in David Ludden, ed., *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Ayesha Jalal, 'Nation, Reason and Religion: Punjab's Role in the Partition of India', *EPW,* vol. 33, no. 32, 8 August 1998; Aamir R. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); and the following three essays in Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail, eds, *Unmaking the Nation. The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientists Association, 1995): Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail, 'Introduction: Unmaking the Nation'; Qadri Ismail, 'Unmooring Identity: The Antinomies of Elite Muslim Self-representation in Modern Sri Lanka'; and Malathi de Alwis, 'Gender, Politics and the "Respectable Lady"'.

the concept is precisely that political society seems to 'raise the spectre of pure politics', and that there, in its messy spaces, 'the foundations of a new democratic order' may be coming into being (essay 11).

In this now well-known and well-developed argument (here represented in essays 10 and 11), Chatterjee suggests that in order to escape the confines of the modernization narrative, in which the conceptual domains of state and society are either sharply distinguished (with the central state institutions carrying the burden of an interventionist modernizing project) or collapsed entirely (so that state practices are seen as completely under the influence of social institutions), we need to think of a field of practices mediating between state institutions and civil society. In essay 11 Chatterjee says he thinks of civil society in Hegelian/Marxist terms as 'an actually existing arena of institutions and practices inhabited by a relatively small section' of people, marked by the 'characteristic institutions of modern associational life originating in Western societies' and based on equality, freedom of entry and exit, contract, deliberative procedures of decision-making, recognized rights, and so on. Civil society is thus the sphere of modernity.

In terms of the formal structure of the state as given by the constitution, all of society is civil society. But in actual fact 'most of the inhabitants of India are only tenuously, and even then ambiguously and contextually, rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution.' However, they are not excluded from the domain of politics; rather, as 'populations' they have to be both looked after and controlled by various governmental agencies. This is the zone of 'political society', distinct from both state and civil society, the domain of democracy.

The 'hiatus' between civil and political society thus defined (essay 10) is 'the mark of non-Western modernity', in which 'modernization' is an always incomplete project, to be carried out by an enlightened elite 'engaged in a pedagogical mission in relation to the rest of society.' So, what lies outside civil society/modernity is not tradition but a realm 'relegated to the zone of the traditional', that is, political society, which copes with the modern in ways that often do not conform to the Western bourgeois secularized Christian principles of modern civil society. Civil social institutions, if they are to conform to the model presented by Western modernity, must necessarily exclude from their scope the vast mass of the population. But this does not lead Chatterjee to expand the definition of civil society, as neo-liberal discourse does, in whose rhetoric every non-state organization is consecrated 'as the