

THE LITERARY THING

history, poetry, and the making
of a modern cultural sphere



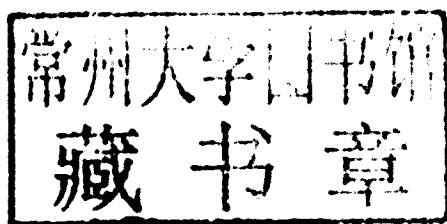
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For Amit

*I follow the smoke like a path I might take,
And I enjoy, at a sensitive and suitable moment,
Liberation from all speculation
And the awareness that metaphysics is a consequence of being out of sorts.*

Fernando Pessoa, 'Tobacco Shop,' trans. Keith Bosley, in
A Centenary Pessoa (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995), p. 95

Preface

When I first presented this research project at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC), I had conceived of it as a companion volume to my D.Phil. on English poetry in India in the nineteenth century. *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project* (a title that militated against the trend of giving books names such as *Writing the Nation*) had just been published, and I wanted to take that work forward by turning to Bengali writing in the same period. As far as this book's title is concerned, it remains only to acknowledge Pierre Macherey, from whose essay, 'The Literary Thing', published in *Diacritics* in 2008 and discussed extensively in the Introduction here, it is taken. In no sense did the book remain a companion volume to my first book, though, as both research preoccupations and research methods evolved in very different directions.

The book has been almost ten years in the writing, charting its own course while other projects, such as *Derozio, Poet of India: The Definitive Edition*, *The Indian Postcolonial*, and *Freedom and Beef Steaks: Colonial Calcutta Culture* were completed and published in this period. This has meant that it has grown arbitrarily in the course of my career at the CSSSC, benefiting enormously from both the academic environment within it and the stimulation of conversation with the like-minded outside of it. The people I discussed this book with the most incessantly in the first category are certainly Gautam Bhadra and Partha Chatterjee; Gautam-da's fine instincts towards the literary and immense fund of knowledge in the historical have defined the direction many arguments in the book have taken, while much else within it has benefited not only from Partha-da's analytical and observational acumen,

but also his infinite patience with the minutiae of research, from diacritical marks to library holdings. Outside of the Centre, I should first and foremost mention Arvind Krishna Mehrotra for his insightful contributions to conversations on poetry; also Peter D. McDonald, Sunetra Gupta, and Elleke Boehmer, friends since student days, and all at Oxford at this time. Brian Hatcher, David Curley, Michael Dodson, Bruce Robertson, Dan White, Mary Ellis Gibson, and William Radice have been occasional interlocutors over the years on this and related subjects. Raj Chandavarkar invited me to both give a talk and publish an occasional paper from a chapter at the Centre for South Asian Studies, Cambridge, in 2005 when it was still in Laundress Lane; to his memory and to Chris Bayly's continuing encouragement and generosity, I am grateful. Dipesh Chakrabarty is neither not of the CSSSC nor entirely of it—for his involved engagement with some sections of this book, and his ready responses to all and any queries, I am much indebted. But to me, more astonishing than anybody else with time and generosity was Ranajit Guha, who allowed neither time difference nor health issues to impede his style, reading, and commenting at length over the telephone on material sent to him by post.

My colleagues—past and present—at the CSSSC have provided invaluable support, friendship, and camaraderie, so essential to any congenial intellectual environment; for this I would like to thank especially Tapati Guha Thakurta, who has always thrown up relevant questions, apart from turning the visual archives at the Centre into an informing principle in my research generally, as well as Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, for his individual help with Bengali material. Manabi Majumdar, Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, Keya Dasgupta, and Bodhisattva Kar, closest on this corridor; and Janaki Nair, Lakshmi Subramaniam, Pradip Bose, Udaya Kumar, P.K. Datta, Manas Ray, Anirban Das, Rajarshi Dasgupta, Priya Sangameswaran, and Prachi Deshpande, all added and continue to add to the texture of daily life through discussion and debate, much of it at the canteen lunch table; Anjan Ghosh was integral to the ethos here, and will always be missed. The librarian, Siddhartha Ray, and the library staff, especially Sanchita and Jayati (not to forget Kali babu, even long after he retired), and the Archives office, especially Abhijit, Kamalika, and Ranjana, deserve unending gratitude, as do my students over the years. The

National Library, Kolkata, would have been a sealed book without Ashim Mukherjee and Swati Ghosh, and its splendid current Director General, our friend Swapan Chakrabarty, long may he prosper. The British Library was instrumental in the publication of my book *Derozio, Poet of India* in 2008, but much of what I put in there has, of course, informed the course of this book too.

My record of usually reluctant conference-going has nevertheless acquired weight and girth through the years. Working backwards over time, I would like to thank people who have heard portions of the book and enriched it with their comments in this long period. Chapters or sections from the book have been presented at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi, for which thanks to Amiya P. Sen; at the Crafts of World Literature conference at Oxford, thanks to Jarad Zimble and Ben Etherington; at the English Department at King's College, London, thanks to Ruvani Ranasingha; as many as three times, I realize, at the Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, thanks to Chris Bayly's continued support; at the Centre of 'Civilisations, Cultures, Littératures Et Sociétés', University of Paris-Sorbonne, thanks to Alexis Tadie and Laetitia Zecchini; at the Postcolonial Writing and Theory Seminar, University of Oxford, thanks to Elleke Boehmer; at an International Conference on 'Rabindranath Tagore in the World' at the Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata, thanks to Amiya Bagchi; at a workshop on 'Translation, Migration, and Modernity: South Asia and Beyond' at Newcastle University, thanks to Neelam Srivastava; at SOAS, University of London, as part of the South Asia History Seminar, thanks to Sunil Kumar and Shabnum Tejani; at a two-day conference on History and Teleology in Berlin, where I benefited from the comments of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Sanjay Subrahmanyam; at the European Conferences on Modern South Asian Studies at Lund and Manchester, thanks to William Radice; at a Sahitya Akademi conference hosted by the English Department at Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, thanks to Somdatta Mondol; at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, thanks to Neeladri Bhattacharya, and at the Department of History, Delhi University, thanks to Sunil Kumar. Through the years, honouring a hoary tradition, chapters have also been regularly presented at the staff seminars of the CSSSC, as well as at the New Cultural Histories Conference organized by the CSSSC in

2010, while many encounters at its Cultural Studies Workshops have no doubt permeated the interstices of my thinking on many related issues.

Lastly, as always, comes family. Thanks are due to my parents, Ruba and Ranjan Khastgir, and parents-in-law, Bijoya and Nages Chandra Chaudhuri, especially the former, whose love of Bengali writing was infectious and enlivening. Also, for this book, my aunt, Anjali Ghosh, who first brought me to Bengali literature in the unrewarded hours of my schooldays, and my uncle, Kamal Ghosh, for making me part of their family at that time. To Radha I can only offer consolation that maybe later if she reads this book she will forgive me the interminable hours she has spent trailing around lecture halls; and to Amit, who informs my understanding of the literary thing in every way, and for whom anything I say here will be too little, my gratitude for his support.

Note on transliteration

In transliterating Bengali words the Bengali Romanization table from the Library of Congress has been used, with the exception of content within quotation marks, where the original spellings within the quote have been retained, and, of course, proper nouns. The only departure has been that the implicit vowel *a* that is mandatory after all consonants and consonant clusters in transliteration has generally not been used at the end of a word unless pronounced. Titles of Sanskrit works have been represented in their Bengali pronunciation. Bracketed Bengali words have also been liberally inserted both to clarify and highlight words and connections that are difficult to translate, and to link the translated portion more closely to the Bengali text. Also, the Indian custom of referring to authors by their first names instead of their surnames has been generally followed.

Introduction

The world—and even the world of artists—is full of people who can go to the Louvre, walk rapidly, without so much as a glance, past rows of very interesting, though secondary, pictures, to come to a rapturous halt in front of a Titian or a Raphael—one of those that have been most popularised by the engraver's art; then they will go home happy, not a few saying to themselves, 'I know my Museum.' Just as there are people who, having once read Bossuet and Racine, fancy that they have mastered the history of literature.

Fortunately from time to time there come forward righters of wrong, critics, amateurs, curious enquirers, to declare that Raphael, or Racine, does not contain the whole secret, and that the minor poets too have something good, solid and delightful to offer; and finally that however much we may love general beauty, as it is expressed by classical poets and artists, we are no less wrong to neglect particular beauty, the beauty of circumstance and the sketch of manners.

—Charles Baudelaire¹

What is at stake is not to portray literary works in the context of their age, but to represent the age that perceives them—our age—in the age during which they arose. It is this that makes literature into an organon of history; and to achieve this, and not to reduce literature to the material of history, is the task of the literary historian.

—Walter Benjamin²

¹ Charles Baudelaire, 2008, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in Jonathan Mayne (tr. and ed.), *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, London: Phaidon Press, p. 1.

² Walter Benjamin, 1999, *Selected Writing, Vol. 2 (1927–34)*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. 464.

Both Ideas About the Thing and the Thing Itself

This series of studies is intended to be neither a history of Bengali poetic practice, nor a history of representations, but a succession of discrete cross-sectional examinations of moments in time in the history of ‘poetry’—the quotation marks have a certain importance. My aim was not to write a history of poetic practices, tracing their successive forms, their evolution, and their dissemination; nor was it to analyse the specific forms, styles, or philosophical ideas through which these practices have been represented. Mediated through the quite recent and banal notion of ‘modernity’, the chapters in this book attempt to interrogate the history, aesthetic theory, or politics behind the poetry—in order to stand detached from it, bracketing its familiarity in order to analyse the theoretical and practical contexts within which it has been practised and published. Modern Bengali poetry itself did not appear until the middle of the nineteenth century, a fact that should be neither underestimated nor over-interpreted The use of poetry was established in connection with other phenomena: the development of diverse fields of knowledge and the establishment of a set of rules and norms—in part traditional, in part new—which found support in religious, political, pedagogical, and literary institutions; and in changes in the way individuals were led to assign meaning and value to their conduct, their duties, their pleasures, their feelings and sensations, their dreams. In short, it was a matter of seeing how ‘poetry’ came to be constituted in modern Indian societies, an experience that caused individuals to recognize themselves as subjects of a ‘modernity’, which was accessible to very diverse fields of knowledge and linked to a system of rules and constraints. What I planned, therefore, was a contingent history of the experience of modernity in poetry, where experience is understood as the correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture.³

³ With apologies to Michel Foucault’s introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*. The original passage reads:

This series of studies is intended to be neither a history of sexual behaviours nor a history of representations, but a history of ‘sexuality’—the quotation marks have a certain importance. My aim was not to write a history of sexual behaviours,

The preceding passage is a reworking of the introductory paragraph of Michel Foucault's *The Use of Pleasure*, the second volume of his *History of Sexuality*, with changes made to replace key words and phrases with ones that answer the cause of this book; the correspondences of the objectives set out in relation to his study of sexuality and that of this book's interrogation of a critical discourse on the literary were startling and obvious at the same time to a degree where its use became irresistible in the force of its applicability. In defence it might be possible to mention the well-known fact that Walter Benjamin's 'greatest intention', as mentioned by Hannah Arendt in her introduction to *Illuminations*, 'was to produce a work consisting entirely of quotations';⁴ an extremity to which it would be near impossible to aspire. Nevertheless, a second quotation further serves the purpose of outlining the parameters defining this study. In an interview between Tariq Ali and Edward Said published in the *New Left Review* in 2003, Said had emphasized yet again what he conceived his life's work to have been about:

tracing their successive forms, their evolution, and their dissemination; nor was it to analyse the scientific, religious, or philosophical ideas through which these behaviours have been represented. I wanted first to dwell on that quite recent and banal notion of 'sexuality': to stand detached from it, bracketing its familiarity, in order to analyse the theoretical and practical context with which it has been associated. The term itself did not appear until the beginning of the nineteenth century, a fact that should be neither underestimated nor over-interpreted. ... The use of the word was established in connection with other phenomena: the development of diverse fields of knowledge ...; the establishment of a set of rules and norms—in part traditional, in part new—which found support in religious, judicial, pedagogical, and medical institutions; and changes in the way individuals were led to assign meaning and value to their conduct, their duties, their pleasures, their feelings and sensations, their dreams. In short it was a matter of seeing how an 'experience' came to be constituted in modern Western societies, an experience that caused individuals to recognize themselves as subjects of a 'sexuality', which was accessible to very diverse fields of knowledge and linked to a system of rules and constraints. What I planned, therefore, was a history of the experience of sexuality, where experience is understood as the correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture (Michel Foucault, 1987, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, translated from French by Robert Hurley, London: Penguin, pp. 3–4).

⁴ Hannah Arendt, 1992, 'Introduction to Walter Benjamin', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, London: Fontana Press, p. 9.

It confirmed my sense that the study of literature was essentially a historical task, not just an aesthetic one. I still believe in the role of the aesthetic, but the 'kingdom of literature'—'for its own sake'—is simply wrong. A serious historical investigation must begin from the fact that culture is hopelessly involved in politics. My interest has been in the great canonical literature of the West—read, not as masterpieces that have to be venerated, but as works that have to be grasped in their historical density, so they can resonate⁵

An affirmation, after Said, that the 'study of literature' (in itself a phrase gone out of currency) is essentially a historical task, and asserting, additionally, that literariness or the aesthetic is itself historical and a force in history, must lead us to contemplate that other phrase that is of importance in the preceding statement: 'I still believe in the role of the aesthetic' An invocation of Foucault at the top of a piece of writing can automatically lead readers to assume exactly the opposite, and despite the well-worn criticism of Said's impossible mission to reconcile Foucauldian discourse theory with Auerbachian high humanism, it is the precise cohabitation of a new amalgam of those irreconcilables that the present study will at least partly be concerned with.

The imponderable value of the literary to critical discourse on literature is given pre-eminence in this study of cultural turning points in the history of Bengali literature so that we might investigate the place of the aesthetic in the composition of a literary culture without denuding it of its significance and aura, or, for that matter, of its historicity.⁶ The focus, whether in Saidian postcolonial analysis or traditionally, has been on the 'great' writers of the past; however, the

⁵ Edward Said, 2003, *New Left Review*, No. 24, Second Series, November–December, p. 62.

⁶ I have used the term 'Bengali' rather than 'Bangla' throughout this book. 'Bangla' is the Bengali word for Bengali, and is used in Bangladesh to denote its official language, which is why the UN and its agencies also use 'Bangla' for the language of Bangladesh. However, 'Bengali' is still the official term in India and is used by the Census of India and in all Indian universities. Although 'Bangla' is often used nowadays in English prose to refer to the Bengali language, the practice seems both unnecessary and inflected with compulsions of political correctness. Crucially, I have also preferred 'Bengali' in order to be true to the spirit of the language in which this book is written.

emphasis here will mostly be on the minor poets rather than on the grand diachronic sweep of the canon, on the detail or the moment in time rather than on the march of history. While endorsing Said's claim regarding the political nature of literature, the concerns of this study (contrary to Said's lifelong contrapuntal readings of the great works of the Western canon) will be in the local and the marginal—doubly distanced not only because the works dealt with here from the nineteenth-century Bengali literary sphere were locationally marginal in the context of metropolis and empire, but because the figures discussed here (most, not all) have generally been regarded as being in the minor key even in the culture to which they were specific. The emphasis here, therefore, will be on demonstrating the importance of the less important to the constitution of a literary culture in particular and to the cultural sphere at large. The debates generated around the works dealt with in this book, the issues involved in their formulation of a literary culture for Bengal (rather than simply for 'Bengali literature'), and the political implications of the cultural space of literature in this period are read here, to reiterate Said, then, 'as works that have to be grasped in their historical density, so they can resonate'.

The period that is dealt with in this book, from when Iswar Gupta, the most famous poet in Bengal in the years preceding the great rebellion, started his career at the *Sambād Prabhākar* in 1831 as a nineteen-year old, to when Rabindranath wrote his first successful poems, also nineteen years old, around 1881, constructing his craft and his sensibility in a form distinct from his predecessors, is a fifty-year period that is fundamental to any understanding of the premises upon which modern Bengali literature and culture were founded. It was a unique period, as every period necessarily is, but it was also one in which an answer to the question of the shape of the Indian modern in part lies. The nineteenth century in Bengal has been celebrated and then reviled as a period of renaissance or false renaissance, and it is now time perhaps to move beyond those sterile parameters to an alternative understanding of the interactive, living, and cataclysmic nature of events. Names such as those of Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay or Akshaychandra Sarkar, Nabinchandra Sen or Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, or even the sixteen-year-old Rabindranath, were connected immediately to politics in a way that resists domestication, and which, because of their minority status, are not easily assimilable

into 'great literature', allowing us, crucially, to address a brief era just prior and contiguous to the formation of 'high' canonical Bengali literature. Michael Madhusudan Datta, readily the 'great' poet among his peers, on the other hand, marks the space of 'deterritorialization' of a colonized writer in this context in his inhabitation of a space which had no access to power, which could have no real way out, which in relation to the universal, had no hope of taking centrestage.⁷ In their location, all these writers are always irremediably connected to the political, and their active solidarity is therefore form-giving for modern Bengali culture or, indeed, for the shape of the putative Indian modern. The leap here from the Bengali to the Indian is not presumptuous or developmentalist; until we recognize that every regional Indian language crafted for itself, at this time, important relationships with the national, the cosmopolitan, and the modern in ways that were uniquely influential in constituting the particularities of Indian modernity at large, the discourse on India's many-hued modernity will never gain the multivalence it requires in order to function productively.

Apart from the fact that the figures dealt with in this book are mostly 'minor poets' in the canon, although crucial to the determination of the shape of literary and cultural discourse in their time, the other occupant of minority status as far as the subject matter of this book is concerned is, of course, the genre of poetry. The neglect of poetry and its study today is almost equally proportionate to its importance in

⁷ Deleuze and Guattari (1986), commenting on Kafka and the Jewish literature of Warsaw and Prague, famously construct 'deterritorialization' as the condition of possibility within which a minor literature functions. Their thesis, currently over-familiar in the postcolonial arena, while useful in as much as it allows for the reconceptualization of a territory so far colonized by discussions on narrative and nation, is not the sense in which the word 'minor' has been used in the context of some of the poets dealt with here. The deterritorialization of Kafka's language was crucially informed by both its modernist indeterminacy and its location with regard to German and Czech speakers, giving a new reading of the category 'minor' and its location. The concerns of this study, however, are with certain 'minor poets' in the sense in which Baudelaire used it in *The Painter of Modern Life* rather than with what 'a minority constructs within a major language', which might perhaps be more applicable to Indian writing in English in the nineteenth century. (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 1986, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, translated by Dana Polan, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 16.)

the nineteenth-century public sphere; no discussion of modernity in the world of letters in the late nineteenth century anywhere, whether London or Calcutta, can dispense with an understanding of the function of poetry and its criticism and the manner in which it was constitutive of the modern cultural sphere. Yet current discussions on the development of modern literary genres and aesthetic conventions in nineteenth-century Bengal have tended to ignore the seminal role of poetry, perhaps because of its relative neglect in the modern day in formulating the cultural imagination of Indians.

In academic discourse, the coming together of the birth of the novel, the concept of history, and the idea of the nation-state under the sign of the modern has led to an excess of concern with the manner in which the nation was brought into being, facilitating, thereby, a disregard for the structures of literary modernity as they shaped a new cultural consciousness, and a collective blindness towards the forceful intervention of poetry and song within those parameters.⁸ Thus, while Meenakshi Mukherjee edited *Early Novels in India*, a Sahitya Akademi volume consisting of critical perspectives on the genre of the regional novel and its relation to the Indian nation, no such corresponding volume exists on regional poetry, which has seen very little critical work in English on the subject.⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, a critic unusually sensitive to the literary in the domain of the social sciences, paradoxically elides any mention of it in a chapter devoted to poetry in his book *Provincializing Europe*, when he takes his argument about the division between the prosaic and the poetic in Tagore

⁸ Sugata Bose makes this point in a footnote while discussing Partha Chatterjee's work, saying:

Poetry has not received the same attention as prose from students of nationalism. The novel was arguably *the* literary vehicle that transmitted the content and forms of 'Western' nationalism to colonial settings. Poems and songs, despite borrowings of Western forms, represented alternative modes of expression that might suggest a different accent on the question of derivation in particular and the languages of nationalism in general. ('Nation as Mother: Representations and Contestations of "India" in Bengali Literature and Culture', in Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (eds), *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in India* 1997, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 69, fn 29.)

⁹ Meenakshi Mukherjee (ed.), 2002, *Early Novels in India*, Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.

further to conclude (without mentioning the seminal role of poetry) that ‘The new prose of fiction—novels and short stories—was thus seen as intimately connected to questions of political modernity’.¹⁰ Similarly, Partha Chatterjee, in his introduction to *The Nation and Its Fragments*, discusses the shaping of critical discourse in colonial Bengal in relation to drama, the novel, and even art, but ignores completely the fiercely contested and controversial processes by which modern Bengali poetry and literary criticism were formulated. ‘The desire to construct an aesthetic form that was modern and national’, to use his words, ‘was shown in its most exaggerated shape’, it is my contention, not in the Bengal school of art in the 1920s, as he claims, but long before that in the poetry of Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, Madhusudan Datta, and Nabinchandra Sen, and in the literary criticism and controversy surrounding their work in the nineteenth century.¹¹

The ‘modern’ and the ‘national’ are not naturally contiguous terms as they are made to appear in this formulation, and much of the wilful shutting out of the literary and cultural imaginings that shaped most dialogues in this period has come about because of the manner in which these two words have appeared to be almost welded together in current cultural studies discourse. Prying open that space between those two terms, however, this book attempts to demonstrate that political modernity in the colonial years was fundamentally built upon the cultural imagination of the regional public, which, in turn, was formed in close correspondence with global issues of literature and history and the many local controversies and eruptions in society around individual poems examined for sedition, plays performed or proscribed, novels written and rewritten, and critical writings whose polemics formulated ideas of identity anew. We are only just, perhaps, exiting an era of obsession with the nation and the novel, both subsumed under categories of narration in the last twenty years in a manner detrimental to any understanding of the operation of literature outside of those parameters.

¹⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 2001, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 151.

¹¹ Partha Chatterjee, 1995, ‘Introduction’, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.