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Our Modernity

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OUR MODERNITY

There are a few unusual features I have noticed about today's lecture.¹ First of all, I was stunned by the discovery that, unknown to me, I had somehow acquired the standards of sagacity, ancientness and grandiloquence usually expected of people who are asked to deliver formal lectures of this kind. Second, there can be nothing more unusual than the fact that I am delivering a lecture in memory of Srijnan Halder who was my student and barely old enough to be a younger brother. Indeed, had Srijnan been delivering a lecture in my memory, it would have been far more in conformity with the laws of nature as well as with social convention. Third, in a short but dramatic life marked by his long battle against an incurable disease, and in a still more dramatic death, Srijnan has left behind for us unforgettable evidence of his deep intellectual curiosity, an unshakable commitment to his own beliefs and principles and his irrepressible love for life. I have neither the language nor the thoughts to match that evidence. There may not be anything very unusual in this but, faced with Srijnan's memory, I must, before I begin my lecture, own up to a feeling of utter inadequacy.

CONCEPTUALIZING OUR MODERNITY

My subject is 'modernity,' but more specifically, 'our' modernity. In making the distinction I am trying to point out that there might be modernities that are not ours, or, to put it another way, that there are certain peculiarities about our modernity. It could be the case that what others think of as modern, we have found unacceptable, whereas what we have cherished as valuable elements of our modernity, others do not consider to be modern at all. Whether we should be proud of these differences or embarrassed by them is a question I will take up later. For the moment, let us consider how we have conceived of our modernity.

In 1873, Rajnarayan Basu had attempted a comparative evaluation of *Se kal ar e kal* [Those Days and These Days]. By

¹ The Srijnan Halder Memorial Lecture, 1994 delivered in Bengali in Calcutta on 3 September 1994. Translated by the author.

‘those days,’ he meant the period before and after the full-fledged introduction of English education in India. The word *adhunik*, in the sense in which we now use it in Bengali to mean ‘modern’, was not in use in the nineteenth century. The word then used was *nabya* [new]: the ‘new’ was that which was inextricably linked to Western education and thought. The other word that was much in use was *unnati*, an equivalent of the nineteenth-century European concept of ‘improvement’ or ‘progress,’ an idea we will today designate by the word *pragati*.

Rajnarayan Basu, needless to say, was educated in the *nabya* or new manner; he was a social reformer and very much in favour of modern ideas. Comparing ‘those days’ with ‘these days’, he spoke of seven areas where there had been either improvement or decline. These seven areas were health, education, livelihood, social life, virtue, polity and religion. His discussion on these seven subjects is marked by the recurrence of some familiar themes. Thus, for instance, the notion that whereas people of ‘those days’ were simple, caring, compassionate and genuinely religious, religion now is mere festivity and pomp, and that people have become cunning, devious, selfish and ungrateful.

Talking to the people nowadays, it is hard to decide what their true feelings are.... Before, if there was a guest in the house, people were eager to have him stay a few days more. Before, people even pawned their belongings in order to be hospitable to their guests. Nowadays, guests look for the first opportunity to leave.

Rajnarayan gives several such examples of changes in the quality of sociability.

But the subject on which Rajnarayan spends the longest time in comparing ‘those days’ with ‘these days’ is that of the *sarir*, the body. I wish to present this matter a little elaborately, because in it lies a rather curious aspect of our modernity.

Ask anyone and he will say, ‘My father and grandfather were very strong men.’ Compared with men of those days, men no have virtually no strength at all... If people who were alive a hundred years ago were to come back today, they would certainly be

surprised to see how short in stature we have become. We used to hear in our childhood of women who chased away bandits. These days, leave alone women, we do not even hear of men with such courage. Men these days cannot even chase away a jackal.

On the whole, people — and Rajnarayan adds here, ‘especially *bhadralok*’, respectable people have now become feeble, sickly and short-lived.

Let us pause for a minute to consider what this means. If by ‘these days’ we mean the modern age, the age of a new civilization inaugurated under English rule, then is the consequence of that modernity a decline in the health of the people? On ethics, religion, sociability and such other spiritual matters, there could conceivably be some scope for argument. But how could the thought occur to someone that in that most mundane of worldly matters — our biological existence — people of the present age have become weaker and more short-lived than people of an earlier age?

If my historian friends are awake at this moment, they will of course point out straightaway that we are talking here of 1873 when modern medicine and health services in British India were still confined to the narrow limits of the European expatriate community and the army, and had not even begun to reach out towards the larger population. How could Rajnarayan be expected in 1873 to make a judgment on the miraculous advances of modern medicine in the twentieth century?

If this be the objection, then let us look at a few more examples. Addressing the All-India Sanitary Conference in 1912, Motilal Ghosh, founder of the famous nationalist daily, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, said that sixty years ago, this is to say, more or less at the time Rajnarayan referred to as ‘these days’, the Bengal countryside of his childhood was almost entirely free from disease. The only illnesses were common fevers which could be cured in a few days by appropriate diet. Typhoid was rare and cholera had not been heard of. Smallpox occurred from time to time, but indigenous inoculators using their traditional techniques were able to cure their patients without much difficulty. There was no shortage of clean drinking water. Food was abun-

dant and villages 'teemed with healthy, happy and robust people, who spent their days in mainly sports.' I can produce more recent examples. Reminiscing in 1982 on her childhood in Barisal, Manikuntala Sen, the communist leader, writes, 'The thought brings tears to my eyes. Oh Allah, why did you give us this technological civilization? Weren't we content then with our rice and *dal*, fish and milk? Now I hear there is no hilsa fish in all of Barisal!' Even more recently, Kalyani Datta in her *Thod badi khada* published in 1993 tells so many stories from her childhood about food and eating habits that the people Rajnarayan Basu talks of as having lived in the eighteenth century seem to have been very much around in the inner precincts of Calcutta houses in the 1930s. After having full meal, she says, people would often eat thirty or forty mangoes as dessert.

Examples can be easily multiplied. In fact, if I had suitably dressed up Rajnarayan's words and passed them off as the comments of one of our contemporary writers, none of you would have suspected anything, because we ourselves talk all the time about people of an earlier generation were so much stronger and healthier than ourselves.

The question is: why have we held on to this factually baseless idea for the last hundred years? Or could it be the case that we have been trying all along to say something about historical experience of our modernity which does not appear in the statistical facts of demography? Well, let us turn to the reasons that Rajnarayan gives for the decline in health from 'those days'.

The first reason, Rajnarayan says, is change in the environment.

Before, people would travel from Calcutta to Tribeni, Santipur and other villages for a change. Now those places have become unhealthy because of the miasma known as malaria.... For various reasons it appears that there is a massive environmental change taking place in India today. That such change will be reflected in the physical strength of the people is hardly surprising.

The second reason is food: lack of nutritious food, consumption of adulterated and harmful food, and excess of drinking.

‘We have seen and heard in our childhood of numerous examples of how much people could eat in those days. They cannot do so now.’

The third reason is labour, untimely labour and the lack of physical exercise.

There is no doubt that with the advent of English civilization in our country, the need to labour has increased tremendously. We cannot labour in the same way as the English; yet the English want us to do so. English labour is not suited to this country.... The routine now enforced by our rulers of working from ten to four is in no way suitable for the conditions of this country.

The fourth reason is the change in the way of life. In the past, people had few wants, which is why they were able to live happily. Today there is no end to our worries and anxieties. ‘Now the European civilization has entered our country, and with it European wants, European needs and European luxuries. Yet the European way of fulfilling those wants and desires, namely, industry and trade, is not being adopted.’ Rajnarayan here makes a comparison between two old men, one a ‘vernacular old man’, the other an ‘anglicized old man’.

The anglicized old man has aged early. The vernacular old man wakes up when it is still dark. Waking up, he lies in the bed and sings religious songs: how this delights his heart! Getting up from bed, he has a bath: how healthy a habit! Finishing his bath, he goes to the garden to pick flowers: how beneficial the fragrance of flowers for the body! Having gathered flowers, he sits down to pray: this delights the mind and strengthens both body and spirit.... The anglicized old man, on the other hand, has dinner and brandy at night and sleeps late; he has never seen a sunrise and has never breathed the fresh morning air. Rising late in the morning, he has difficulty even in performing even the simple task of opening his eyelids. His body feels wretched, he has a hangover, things look like they are getting even worse! In this way, subjected to English food and drink and other English manners, the anglicized old man’s body becomes the home of many diseases.

Rajnarayan himself admits that this comparison is exaggerated. But there is one persistent complaint in all of the reasons he

cites for the decline in health from the earlier to the present age: not all of the particular means we have adopted for becoming modern are suitable for us. Yet, by imitating uncritically the forms of English modernity, we are bringing upon us environmental degradation, food shortages, illnesses caused by excessive labour and an uncoordinated and undisciplined way of life. Rajnarayan gives many instances of uncritical imitation of English manners as, for instance, the following story about the lack of nutritious food.

Two Bengali gentlemen were once dining at Wilson's Hotel. One of them was especially addicted to beef. He asked the waiter, 'Do you have veal?' The waiter replied, 'I'm afraid not, sir.' The gentlemen asked again, 'Do you have beef steak?' The waiter replied, 'Not that either, sir.' The gentleman asked again, 'Do you have ox tongue?' The waiter replied, 'Not that either, sir.' The gentleman asked again, 'Do you have calf's foot jelly?' The waiter replied, 'Not that either, sir.' The gentleman said, 'Don't you have anything from the cow?' Hearing this, the second gentleman, who was not so partial to beef, said with some irritation, 'Well, if you have nothing else from a cow, why not get him some dung?'

The point which this story is supposed to illustrate is that 'beef is much too heat-producing and unhealthy for the people of this country.' On the other hand, the food that is much more suitable and healthy, namely, milk, has become scarce: English officials, Muslims and a few beef-eating Bengalis 'have eaten the cows, which is why milk is so dear.'

Many of Rajnarayan's examples and explanations will seem laughable to us now. But there is nothing laughable about his main project, which is to prove that there cannot be just one modernity irrespective of geography, time, environment or social conditions. The forms of modernity will have to vary between different countries depending upon specific circumstances and social practices. We could in fact stretch Rajnarayan's comments a bit further to assert that true modernity consists in determining the particular forms of modernity that are suitable in particular circumstances; that is, applying the methods of reason to identify

or invent the specific technologies of modernity that are appropriate for our purposes. Or, to put this another way, if there is any universally acceptable definition of modernity, it is this: that by teaching us to employ the methods of reason, universal modernity enables us to identify the forms of our own particular modernity.

WESTERN MODERNITY REPRESENTING ITSELF

How is one to employ one's powers of reason and judgement to decide what to do? Let us listen to the reply given to this question by Western modernity itself. In 1784, Immanuel Kant wrote a short essay on *Aufklärung*, which we know in English as the Enlightenment, i.e. *alokprapti*. According to Kant, to be enlightened is to become mature, to reach adulthood, to stop being dependent on the authority of others, to become free and assume responsibility for one's own actions. When man is not enlightened, he does not employ his own powers of reasoning but rather accepts the guardianship of others as he is told. He does not feel the need to acquire knowledge about the world, because everything is written in the holy books. He does not attempt to make his own judgements about right and wrong; he follows the advice of his pastor. He even leaves it up to his doctor to decide what he should or should not eat. Most men in all periods of history have been, in this sense, immature. And those who have acted as guardians of society have wanted it that way; it was in their interest that most people should prefer to remain dependent on them rather than become self-reliant. It is in the present age that for the first time the need for self-reliance has been generally acknowledged. It is also now that for the first time it is agreed that the primary condition for putting an end to our self-imposed dependence is freedom, especially civil freedoms. This does not mean that everyone in the present age is enlightened or that we are now living in an enlightened age. We should rather say that our age is the age of enlightenment.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault has an interesting discussion on this essay by Kant. What is it that is new in the way in which Kant describes the Enlightenment? The novelty lies,

Foucault says, in the fact that for the first time we have a philosopher making the attempt to relate his philosophical inquiry to his own age and concluding that it is because the times are propitious that his inquiries have become possible. In other words, this is the first time that a philosopher makes the character of his own age a subject of philosophical investigation, the first time that someone tries from within his own age to identify the social conditions favourable for the pursuit of knowledge.

What are the features that Kant points out as characteristic of the present age? Foucault says that this is where the new thinking is so distinctive. In marking out the present, Kant is not referring to some revolutionary event which ends the earlier age and inaugurates the age of enlightenment. Nor is he reading in the characteristics of the present age the signs of some future revolutionary event in the making. Nor indeed is he looking at the present as a transition from the past to some future age that has not yet arrived. All of these strategies of describing the present in historical terms have been in use in European thought a long time before Kant, from at least the Greek age, and their use has not ceased since the age of Kant. What is remarkable about Kant's criteria of the present is that they are all negative. Enlightenment means an exit, an escape: escape from tutelage, coming out of dependence. Here, Kant is not talking about the origins of the Enlightenment, or about its sources, or its historical evolution. Nor indeed is he talking about the historical goal of the Enlightenment. He is concerned only with the present in itself, with those exclusive properties that define the present as different from the past. Kant is looking for the definition of enlightenment, or more broadly, of modernity, in the difference posed by the present.

Let us underline this statement and set it aside for a moment; I will return to it later. Let us now turn to another interesting aspect of Foucault's essay. Suppose we agree on the fact that autonomy and self-reliance have become generally accepted norms. Let us also grant that freedom of thought and speech is acknowledged as the necessary condition for self-reliance. But freedom of thought does not mean that people are free to do just as they please at every moment and for every act of daily life. To

admit that would be to deny the need for social regulation and to call for total anarchy. Obviously, the philosophers of the Enlightenment could not have meant this. While demanding individual autonomy and freedom of thought, they also had to specify those areas of personal and social living where freedom of thought would operate and those other areas where, irrespective of individual opinions, the directives or regulations of the recognized authority would have to prevail. In his essay 'What is Enlightenment?' Kant did specify these areas.

The way he proceeds to do this is by separating two spheres of the exercise of reason. One of these Kant calls 'public', where matters of general concern are discussed and where reason is not mobilized for the pursuit of an individual interest or for the support of a particular group. The other is the sphere of the 'private' use of reason which relates to the pursuit of individual or particular interests. In the former sphere, freedom of thought and speech is essential; in the second, it is not desirable at all. Illustrating the argument, Kant says that when there is a 'public' debate on the government's revenue policy, those who are knowledgeable in that subject must be given the freedom to express their opinions. But as a 'private' individual, I cannot claim that since I disagree with the government's fiscal policy I must have the freedom not to pay taxes. If there is a 'public' discussion on military organization or war strategy, even a soldier could participate, but on the battlefield his duty is not to express his free opinions but to follow orders. In a 'public' debate on religion, I may, even as a member of a religious denomination, criticize the practices and beliefs of my order, but in my 'private' capacity as a pastor my duty is to preach the authorized doctrines of my sect and to observe its authorized practices. There cannot be any freedom of speech in the 'private' domain.

This particular use by Kant of the notions of 'public' and 'private' did not gain much currency in later discussions. On the contrary, the usual consensus in liberal social philosophy is that it is in the 'private' or personal sphere that there should be unrestricted freedom of conscience, opinion and behavior, whereas the sphere of 'public' or social interaction should be subject to

recognized norms and regulations that must be respected by all. But no matter how unusual Kant's use of public/private distinction, it is not difficult for us to understand his argument. When my activities concern a domain in which I as an individual am only a part of a larger social organization or system, a mere cog in the social wheel, there my duty is to abide by regulations and to follow the directives of the recognized authority. But there is another domain of the exercise of reason which is not restricted by these particular or individual interests, a domain that is free and universal. That is the proper place for free thought, for the cultivation of science and art — the proper place, in one word, for 'enlightenment'.

It is worth pointing out that in this universal domain of the pursuit of knowledge — the domain which Kant calls 'public' — it is the individual who is the subject. The condition for true enlightenment is freedom of thought. When the individual in search of knowledge seeks to rise above his particular social location and participate in the universal domain of discourse, his right to freedom of thought and opinion must be unhindered. He must also have the full authority to form his own beliefs and opinions, just as he must bear the full responsibility for expressing them. There is no doubt that Kant is here claiming the right of free speech only for those who have the requisite qualifications for engaging in the exercise of reason and the pursuit of knowledge and those who can use that freedom in a responsible manner. In discussing Kant's essay, Foucault does not raise this point, although he might well have done so, given the relevance of this theme in Foucault's own work. It is the theme of the rise of experts and the ubiquitous authority of specialists, a phenomenon which appears alongside the general social acceptance of the principle of unrestricted entry into education and learning. We say, on the one hand, that it is wrong to exclude any individual or group from access to education or the practice of knowledge on the grounds of religion or and other social prejudice. On the other hand, we also insist that the opinion of such and such a person is more acceptable because he is an expert in the field. In other words, just as we have meant by enlightenment an unrestricted

and universal field for the exercise of reason, so have we built up an intricately differentiated structure of authorities which specifies who has the right to say what on which subjects. As markers of this authority, we have distributed examinations, degrees, titles, insignia of all sorts. Just think how many different kinds of experts we have to allow to guide us through our daily lives, from birth, indeed from before birth, to death and even afterwards. In many areas, in fact, it is illegal to act without expert advice. If I do not myself have a medical degree or license, I cannot walk into a pharmacy and say, 'I hope you know that there is unrestricted access to knowledge, because I have read all the medical books and I think I need these drugs.' In countries with universal schooling, it is mandatory that children go to officially recognized schools; I could not insist that I will educate my children at home. There are also fairly precise identifications of who is an expert in which subject. At this particular meeting today, for instance, I am talking on history, social philosophy and related subjects, and you have come here to listen to me, either out of interest or out of plain courtesy. If I had announced that I would be speaking on radiation in the ionosphere or the DNA molecule, I would most definitely have had to speak to an empty room and some of my wellwishers would probably have run to consult experts on mental disorders.

Needless to say, the writings of Michel Foucault have in recent years taught us to look at the relation between the practices of knowledge and the technologies of power from a very new angle. Kant's answer two hundred years ago to the question, 'What is Enlightenment?' might seem at first sight to be an early statement of the most commonplace self-representation of modern social philosophy. And yet, now we can see embedded in that statement the not-very-well-acknowledged ideas of differential access to discourse, the specialized authority of experts and the use of the instruments of knowledge for the exercise of power. The irresistible enthusiasm that one notices in the writings of Western philosophers of the Enlightenment about a modernity that would bring in the era of universal reason and emancipation does not seem to us, witness to the many barbarities of world history in

the last two hundred years — and I say this with due apologies to the great Immanuel Kant — as mature in the least. Today our doubts about the claims of modernity are out in the open.

A MODERNITY THAT IS NATIONAL

But I have not yet given you an adequate answer to the question with which I began this discussion. Why is it the case that for more than a hundred years the foremost proponents of our modernity have been so vocal about the signs of social decline rather than of progress? Surely, when Rajnarayan Basu spoke about the decline in health, education, sociability or virtue, he did not do so out of some post-modern sense of irony. 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 skepticism 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 had a shrewd guess that given the close complicity between modern knowledges and modern regimes of power, we would for ever remain consumers of universal modernity; never would 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.

Let us take an example from history. One of the earliest learned societies in India devoted to the pursuit of the modern knowledges was the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge, founded in Calcutta in 1838 by some former students of Hindu College, several of whom had been members of ‘Young Bengal,’ that celebrated circle of radicals that had formed in the 1820s around the free-thinking rationalist Henry Derozio. In 1843, at a meeting of the Society held at Hindu College, a paper was being read on ‘The Present State of the East India Company’s

Criminal Judicature and Police.’ D.L. Richardson, a well-known teacher of English literature at Hindu College, got up angrily and, according to the Proceedings, complained that:

to stand up in a hall which the Government had erected and in the heart of a city which was the focus of enlightenment, and there to denounce, as oppressors and robbers, the men who governed the country, did in his opinion, amount to treason.... The College would never have been in existence, but for solicitude the Government felt in the mental improvement of the natives of India. He could not permit it, therefore, to be converted into a den of treason, and must close the doors against all such meetings.

At this, Tarachand Chakrabarti, himself a former student of Hindu College, who was chairing the meeting, rebuked Richardson:

I consider your conduct as an insult to the society... if you do not retract what you have said and make due apology, we shall represent the matter to the Committee of the Hindoo College, and if necessary to the Government itself. We have obtained the use of this public hall, by leave applied for and received from the Committee, and not through your personal favour. You are only a visitor on this occasion, and possess no right to interrupt a member of this society in the utterance of his opinions.

This episode is usually recounted in the standard histories as an example of early nationalist feelings among the new intelligentsia of Bengali. Not that there is no truth in this observation, but it does not lie in the obvious drama of an educated Indian confronting his British teacher. Rather, what is significant is the separation between the domain of government and that of ‘this society,’ and the insistence that as long as the required procedures had been followed the rights of the members of the society to express their opinions, no matter how critical of government, could not be violated. We could say that at this founding moment of modernity we did genuinely want to believe that in the new public domain of free discourse there were no bars of colour or of the political status of one’s nationality, that if one could produce proof of one’s competence in the subjects under discussion one had an unrestricted right to voice one’s opinion.

It did not take long for the disillusionment to set in. By the second half of the 19th century, we see the emergence of ‘national’ societies for the pursuit of the modern knowledges. The learned societies of the earlier era had both European and Indian members. The new institutions were exclusively for Indian members and devoted to the cultivation and spread of the modern sciences and arts among Indians, if possible in the Indian languages. They were, in other words, institutions for the ‘nationalization’ of the modern knowledges, located in a space somewhat set apart from the field of universal discourse, a space where discourse would be modern, and yet ‘national’.

This is a project that is still being pursued today. Its successes vary from field to field. But unless we can state why the project was at all considered feasible and what conditions governed its feasibility, we will not be able to answer the question I had asked at the beginning of this talk about the peculiarities of our modernity. We could take as an example our experience with practicing any one of the branches of the modern knowledges. Since I began this talk with a discussion on the body and its health, let me tell you the story of our acquaintance with the modern science of medicine.

In 1851, a Bengali section was opened at the Calcutta Medical College in order to train Indian students in western medicine without requiring them first to go through a course of secondary education in English. The Licentiate and Apothecary courses in Bengali were a great success. Beginning with a mere twenty-two students in its first year, it overtook the English section in 1864, and in 1873 it had 772 students compared to 445 in the English section. Largely because of the demand from the students, nearly seven hundred medical books were published in Bengali between 1867 and 1900.

But while the courses remained popular, complaints began to be heard from around the 1870s about the quality of training given to the students in the vernacular sections. It was alleged that their lack of facility in English made them unsuitable for positions of assistants to European doctors in public hospitals. This was the time when a hospital system had begun to be put in place in Bengal and professional controls were being enforced in

the form of supervision by the General Medical Council of London. From the turn of the century, with the institutionalization of the professional practices of medicine in the form of hospitals, medical councils and patented drugs, the Bengali section in the medical school died a quick death. From 1916 all medical education in our country is exclusively in English.

But the story does not end there. Curiously, this was also the time when organized efforts were on, propelled by nationalist concerns, to give to the indigenous Ayurvedic and Yunani systems of medicine a new disciplinary form. The All India Ayurveda Mahasammelan, which is still the apex body of ayurvedic practitioners, was set up in 1907. The movement which this organization represented sought to systematize the knowledge of ayurvedic clinical methods, mainly by producing standard editions of classical and recent texts, to institutionalize the methods of training by formalizing, in place of the traditional family-based apprenticeship, a college system consisting of lectures, textbooks, syllabuses, examinations and degrees, and to standardize the medicines and even promote the commercial production of standard drugs by pharmaceutical manufacturers. There have been debates within the movement about the extent and the form of adoption of Western medicine within the curricula of ayurvedic training, but even the purists now admit that the course should have ‘the benefit of equipment or the methods used by other systems of medicine... since, consistent with its fundamental principles, no system of medicine can ever be morally debarred from drawing upon any other branch of science, ...unless one denies the universal nature of scientific truths.’

The very idea of the universality of science is being used here to carve out a separate space for ayurvedic medicine, defined according to the principles of a ‘pure’ tradition, and yet reorganized as a modern scientific and professional discipline. The claim here is not that the field of knowledge is marked out into separate domains by the fact of cultural difference; it is not being suggested that ayurveda is the appropriate system of medicine for ‘Indian diseases’. It is rather a claim for an alternative science directed at the same objects of knowledge.

We have of course seen many attempts of this sort in the fields of literature and the arts to construct a modernity that is different. Indeed, we might say that this is precisely the cultural project of nationalism: to produce a distinctly national modernity. Obviously, there is no general rule that determines which should be the elements of modernity and which the emblems of difference. There have been many experiments in many fields; they continue even today. My argument was that these efforts have not been restricted only to the supposedly cultural domains of religion, literature or the arts. The attempt to find a different modernity has been carried out even in the presumably universal field of science. We should remember that a scientist of the standing of Prafulla Chandra Ray, a Fellow of the Royal Society, thought it worth his while to write *A History of Hindu Chemistry*, while Jagadis Chandra Bose, also an FRS, believed that the researches he carried out in the latter part of his career was derived from insights he had obtained from Indian philosophy. In particular, he believed that he had found a field of scientific research that was uniquely suited to an Indian scientist. These researches of Jagadis Bose did not get much recognition in the scientific community. But it seems to me that if we grasp what it was that led him to think of a project such as this, we will get an idea of the principal driving force of our modernity.

PRESENT HISTORY IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

Whenever I think of enlightenment, I am reminded of the unforgettable first lines of Kamalkumar Majumdar's novel *Antarjali Yatra*.

Light appears gradually. The sky is frosty violet, like the color of pomegranate. In a few moments from now, redness will come to prevail and we, the plebeians of this earth, will once more be blessed by the warmth of flowers. Gradually, the light appears.

Modernity is the first social philosophy which conjures up in the minds of the most ordinary people dreams of independence and self-rule. The regime of power in the modern societies prefers to work not through the commands of a supreme sovereign but

through the disciplinary practices that each individual imposes on his or her own behavior on the basis of the dictates of reason. And yet, no matter how adroitly the fabric of reason might cloak the reality of power, the desire for autonomy continues to range itself against power; power is resisted. Let us remind ourselves that there was a time when modernity was put forward as the strongest argument in favor of the continued colonial subjection of India: foreign rule was necessary, we were told, because Indians must first become enlightened. And then it was the same logic of modernity which one day led us to the discovery that imperialism was illegitimate; independence was our desired goal. The burden of reason, dreams of freedom; the desire for power, resistance to power: all of these are elements of 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. These strategies are sometimes beneficial, often destructive; sometimes they are tolerant, perhaps all too often they are fierce and violent. We have, as I said before, long had to abandon the simple faith that because something was modern and rational, it must necessarily be for the good.

At the end of Kamalkumar's novel, a fearsome flood like the unstoppable hand of destiny, sweeps away a decadent Hindu society. With it, it also takes that which was alive, beautiful, affectionate and kind. The untouchable plebeian cannot save her, because he is not entitled to touch that which is sacred and pure.

A single eye, like the eye mirrored on hemlock, kept looking at her, the bride seeking her first taste of love. The eye is wooden, because it is painted on the side of the boat; but it is painted in vermilion, and it has on it drops of water from the waves now breaking gently against the boat. The wooden eye is capable of shedding tears. Somewhere, therefore, there remains a sense of attachment.

This sense of attachment is the driving force of our modernity. We would be unjust to ourselves if we think of it as backward-looking, as a sign of resistance to change. On the contrary, it is our attachment to the past which gives birth to the feeling that the

present needs to be changed, that it is our task to change it. We must remember that in the world arena of modernity, we are outcasts, untouchables. Modernity for us is like a supermarket of foreign goods, displayed on the shelves: pay up and take away what you like. No one there believes that we could be producers of modernity. The bitter truth about our present is our subjection, our inability to be subjects in our own right. And yet, it is because we want to be modern that our desire to be independent and creative is transposed on to our past. It is superfluous to call this an imagined past, because pasts are always imagined. At the opposite end from 'these days' marked by incompleteness and lack of fulfillment, we construct a picture of 'those days' when there was beauty, prosperity and a healthy sociability, and which was, above all, our own creation. 'Those days' for us is not a historical past; we construct it only to mark the difference posed by the present. All that needs to be noticed is that whereas 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 very modality of our coping with modernity radically different from the historically evolved modes of Western modernity.

Ours is the modernity of the once-colonized. The same historical process that has taught us the value of modernity has also made us the victims of modernity. Our attitude to modernity, therefore, cannot but deeply be ambiguous. This is reflected in the way we have described our experiences with modernity in the last century and a half, from Rajnarayan Basu to our contemporaries today. But this ambiguity does not stem from any uncertainty about whether to be for or against modernity. Rather, the uncertainty is because we know that to fashion the forms of our modernity, we need to have the courage at times to reject the modernities established by others. In the age of nationalism, there were many such efforts which reflected both courage and inventiveness. Not all were, of course, equally successful. Today, in the age of globalization, perhaps the time has come once more to mobilize that courage. Maybe we need to think about 'those days' and 'these days' of our modernity.

Our Modern Maidens is a 1929 American silent drama film directed by Jack Conway. Starring Joan Crawford in her last silent film role, the film also stars Rod La Rocque, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., and Anita Page. Our Modern Maidens has no audible dialog, but features a synchronized soundtrack and sound effects. Heiress Billie Brown (Crawford), is engaged to marry her longtime sweetheart, budding diplomat Gil Jordan (Fairbanks). When Billie goes to see senior diplomat Glenn Abbott (La Rocque) about ensuring