

## Talking About Our Modernity in Two Languages

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I had promised the editors of this number that I would do an English version of something I had written in Bengali. Here it is. But I cannot offer it without considerable qualification.

In September 1994 I delivered in Calcutta a public lecture in memory of a student of mine who had died the year before of an incurable kidney ailment. The subject of that talk was 'Our Modernity.' Needless to say, my intention was to problematize the much talked about notion of modernity by focusing on the pronoun 'our.' One implication of using the pronoun was to suggest that there might be modernities that were not ours. If we could have 'our' modernity, then others could just as well have 'their' modernities. It could be the case, I said, 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. By playing upon the distinction between 'us' and 'them', I was hoping to lead the discussion into an area where I could question commonsensical notions about the existence of certain universally held values of modernity and suggest that modernity was a contextually located and enormously contested idea.

In that lecture I did not go into any explicit discussion of who I meant when I said 'our.' I had assumed that when I played with the range of meanings available to the term 'we' and 'they' in the particular context in which I was talking, my Calcutta audience would follow me the whole way. When I said 'our', we—I and my audience—would have meant, depending on the context, Indians, or Bengalis, or perhaps more specifically the Indian or the Bengali middle class, or perhaps in an even more limited sense the literati or intelligentsia of the last hundred years or so, a group possessing an articulate historical consciousness of being modern and, what is more, of being modern in a way that was, in significant ways, different from 'their' modernity. By 'them', there could have been little ambiguity about what we meant. We meant the modern West, sometimes more specifically modern Europe. We were aware of course of the many debates and disagreements within Western thought about the meanings of modernity; we also knew that not everything in contemporary Western society was necessarily modern. But we nevertheless felt it meaningful to hold on to a certain notion of Western modernity as something that was 'theirs', with reference to which we needed to define 'our' modernity.

In assuming this complicity between me and my audience, I was not being unjustifiably hopeful. There was, I knew, a fairly well established tradition of talking about 'ours' and 'theirs' in exactly this way in the immediate intellectual tradition to which both I and most of my audience belonged. This was, of course, the nationalist tradition of social and historical thinking that had emerged, in Bengal along with other parts of India, over more than a hundred years, a tradition built up for the most part by bilingual intellectuals who were conversant with the rhetorics and modes of thought of the modern West as well of their own indigenous cultures. Speaking as I was to a roomful of listeners having practically the same intellectual background as myself, most of them being teachers and researchers in the social sciences and many of them indeed being my colleagues or former students, I had no doubt that my gesture of inclusiveness would easily draw my audience into a comfortable enclosure of shared texts, shared memories and shared languages.

I propose now to give the readers of this English-language journal a glimpse of that space and to let them hear some of those conversations. For a substantial part of this lecture, now, you will have to imagine yourself transported to an uncomfortably warm September evening in Calcutta, looking into a somewhat dingy room crammed with nearly a hundred people, and listening—let us say—to a simultaneous English translation of my Bengali lecture. After you have heard me out in this way, I will pose for you a problem to which I have no answer.

## I

I began my talk that evening by going directly into a 19th-century account of the consequences of modernity.

In 1873 Rajnarayan Basu had attempted a comparative evaluation of *Se kal ar e kal* (Those Days and These Days). By 'those days' and 'these 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 19th century. The word then used was *nabya* (new): the 'new' was that which was inextricably linked to Western education and thought.

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 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 now 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 shortlived.

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 shortlived than people 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 judgement on the miraculous advances of modern medicine in the 20th 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, that 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 illness were common fevers which could be cured in a few days by an 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 abundant and villages 'teemed with healthy, happy and robust people, who spent their days in manly sports.' I can produce a more recent example. Kalyani Datta in her *Thor bori khara* 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 late 18th century seem to have been very much around in the inner precincts of Calcutta houses in the 1930s. After having a 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 how 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 the 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' to 'these 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: excess of 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 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 in performing even the simple task of opening his eyelids. His body feels wretched, he has a hangover, things look like 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 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 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 gentleman 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 a 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 universal or 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.

## II

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 and does 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 the 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 behaviour, 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 the 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 grounds of religion or any 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 licence, 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.

### III

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 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 had made 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 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.

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 the 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 Bengal. 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 opinions.

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 practising 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 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 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 were 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 principal driving force of our modernity.

#### IV

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 a frosty violet, like the colour 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 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 behaviour 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 favour 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, 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 a 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 outcastes, 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 fulfilment, 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 be deeply 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 own 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. May be we need to think now about 'those days' and 'these days' of our modernity.

## V

This is where I ended my lecture that warm September evening in Calcutta. Four months later, when I began to think of trying out the same ideas on an English-reading public, it immediately struck me that a mere translation would not do. The shift was not just one of language; I would in fact need to indicate a shift in the very terrain of discourse.

Let me therefore point out first what it is that remains the same. It was possible for me, as you would have noticed, to talk about Kant and Foucault in terms that would be entirely familiar to practitioners of the social sciences in modern academies the world over. This was possible precisely because of the successes of the struggle carried out by bilingual intellectuals in the last hundred years to 'nationalize' the modern knowledges by creating and constantly invigorating a field of modern social-scientific discourse in the Indian languages. On the other hand, even as I spoke of Kant and Foucault from texts that were familiar, or were at least in principle accessible, to my audience, I was marking them out as situated at some distance from 'us.' These texts, we knew, were produced in a domain that was accessible to us; their results were available for us to use in ways that were, so long as we chose

to remain within the precincts of the modern academy, authorized in the land of their emergence. But there was no way in which we could count ourselves as belonging to the community of producers of that discourse. The distance was marked in the very language I was using.

On the other hand, lodged in the interstices of my Bengali prose were many figures and allusions that referred to texts and to practices whose meanings could only be available to those who were, like me and most of my Calcutta audience, daily practitioners of contemporary literary Bengali. Even as I tried, in translating for you the text of my lecture, to gloss those terms that were particularly significant for the texture of my argument, I was acutely aware of how much meaning I was losing. For instance, when I translate the binary opposition that recurs throughout my text as 'those days'/'these days', I know I have failed to convey the possibility of the meaning of *se kal* varying with the age of the speaker: for someone affecting the wisdom of old age it could mean 'those good old days', whereas in the impatient voice of a youthful speaker the adjective *sekele* would refer to that which is outdated and no longer suitable for the present. Given the convenient fact that my own age is somewhere in between those two extremes, and with some skilful positioning of my voice between that of the hoary interpreter of tradition and the zealous prophet of modernity, I had tried, in my attempt to problematize the idea of the present, to gain maximum mileage from the deep ambiguities that have accumulated around the very dimension of time in the contemporary Indian languages. I know that in my translation I have lost that mileage.

Perhaps the most obvious, and in some ways the most crucial loss, is my inability to translate several of those terms that are in use in contemporary Bengali which carry a rich load of conceptual meaning derived from various systems of philosophical and religious discourse in India but around which have also accreted a range of meanings borrowed from related concepts in Western philosophy and social sciences. When I said 'plebeians of the earth' in my quotation from Kamal Majumdar's novel, I was not displeased at the implied invocation of some of the rhetoric of modern European socialism. But of course the meaning of *prakritajan* in the original was heavily loaded with the language of a caste-divided society. *Prakrita* therefore would mean not just the populace, but specifically the lowly, the unrefined, the vulgar. But not only that; *prakrita* also carries with it the sense of that which is primordial, natural, close to the earth. The rhetorical gesture of counting oneself as one of the *prakritajan*, therefore, was a move of identifying with the lowly and downtrodden as well as of invoking a human collectivity that is primary and hence in some ways closer to reality.

I have also spoken here about 'attachment to the past.' In Kamal Majumdar's novel the word is *maya*. Some of you will know of the enormous philosophical and religious baggage that this word carries, and I have to say that there was much conceit in my use, within a modernist social science discourse, of this word as a description of our relation to the past. *Maya* not

only means attachment, but in some metaphysical systems an attachment that is illusory; to valorize *maya*, in opposition to that metaphysics, is therefore also to humanise. But in this sense, of course, *maya* would mean not just attachment, but also affection, compassion, tenderness. When I said that the driving force of our modernity was our *maya* for the past, I knew that I would get my Bengali audience to sit up and take notice. I am certain that I have failed to convey the rather startling effect of that formulation when I say it in English.

Much has been said in recent years about the hybridity of post-colonial intellectuals. It can hardly be denied that this recent self-awareness has been immensely productive. No one who was not acutely aware of the sheer pain of an existential location that was always between cultures and never within any one of them could produce the power that Salman Rushdie does when he writes of the ropes around his neck: 'I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, *choose, choose*. . . . Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoes, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose.'

But perhaps there is another figure that is far more ubiquitous in the history of non-Western modernities: that of the bilingual intellectual who is sometimes on one discursive terrain, sometimes on another, but never in between. He or she does not necessarily feel commanded to choose. When he is in the Western academy, he abides by the institutional rules of that academy. But he brings to it a set of intellectual concerns that have emerged somewhere else. Those concerns put him or her in an uneasy and intensely contestatory position in relation to the prevailing disciplinary norms of those institutions. There is no comfortable normalized position for the bilingual intellectual in the Western academy.

On the other hand, when the same person is a participant in an intellectual arena shaped by a modern non-European language, he or she is conscious of being an active agent in the forming of the disciplines in that arena, far more so than would be the case with him or her in the Western academy. But this role in the non-Western intellectual field is, paradoxically, premised on one's membership in the Western academy. Whichever way one looks at it, therefore, the relation between the intellectual and the academy in the two cases is not symmetrical.

One could, of course, say that the bilingual intellectual, operating as a full member in two different academic arenas, has a uniquely advantageous position of being interpretative and critical in both. This undoubtedly is what legitimizes his or her role. In that case, it must follow that what the bilingual intellectual does is actively reproduce the unequal relationship between the two academic arenas. On the other hand, if struggling with the act of translation, whether in this arena or that, is the very stuff of what the bilingual intellectual does, then even in the knowledge that there must always remain an untranslated residue, a loss of meaning, one would still be entitled to the belief that translation is an act of transformation, changing



not only that which is being translated but also that to which the translation is a contribution. And if, as would be the case with many bilinguals, the act of translation works in both directions, then one might be entitled to the further supposition that in spite of the asymmetry between the two intellectual arenas of modernity I have talked about—the Western claiming to be the universal and the national aspiring to be different—one is contributing to the critical transformation of both. But how exactly that might happen, I am unable to tell you. That, as I said at the beginning, is a problem to which I do not have an answer. I can only invite you to ponder upon my predicament.