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Cities of the Mind – Villages of the Mind

imagining Urbanity in Contemporary India

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Abstract: Deep into the second half of the twentieth century the traditionalist definition of India as a country of villages remained dominant in official political rhetoric as well as cultural production. In the past two decades or so, this ruralist paradigm has been effectively superseded by a metropolitan imaginary in which the modern, globalised megacity increasingly functions as representative of India as a whole. Has the village, then, entirely vanished from the cultural imaginary in contemporary India? Addressing economic practices from upper-class consumerism to working-class family support strategies, this paper attempts to trace how 'the village' resurfaces or survives as a cultural reference point in the midst of the urban.

"Village women wear such fabulous clothes. Really, I think they know how to dress like nobody else. Villages are beautiful. They are the *real India*": This praise of rural chic comes from Bina Ramani, up to her self-chosen retirement in 2005 one of India's most prominent fashion designers, lifestyle professionals and glamorous socialites (qtd. in Tarlo 1996, 301; emphasis in original). Of course, Bina Ramani has never actually lived in an Indian village. Nor have her creations ever been rustic. Instead of Gandhian homespun, Ramani offered "ancient fabrics – modern designs," and catered to the tastes and desires of the late-twentieth-century urban high society in India's megacities, an elite with an apparent yearning for precisely that kind of rural flavour that Ramani's fashion seemed to provide. Bina Ramani's success apparently bespeaks an upper-class nostalgia for the village in the heart of the metropolis. Her enthusiastic endorsement of village India as "the *real India*," however, will come somewhat unexpectedly at least to the European reader familiarised with a wholly different notion of subcontinental culture today. After all, the most prominent and powerful genres that shape the image of contemporary India in the West emphatically construct India as buzzing and chaotic but metropolitan and urban. With few exceptions,[1] high visibility Indian fiction – at least the one that is mostly received in the West, i.e. Indian fiction in English – virtually omits the existence of villages altogether and is instead set in fast-paced, buzzing megacities like Mumbai, Delhi or Kolkata: the mythologisation of Mumbai, in the wake of Rushdie, by writers like Vikram Chandra, Sukethu Mehta, Kiran Nagarkar, Vikas

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[1] The most prominent of such exceptions – Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, and the village chapter in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* – relentlessly demystify village India as a dystopian site of underdevelopment, stifling caste oppression, and destitution.

Swarup or Aravind Adiga comes to mind as much as the Calcutta narratives of Amitav Ghosh or Amit Chaudhuri, or the representations of Delhi by Githa Hariharan, Kushwant Singh or Anita Desai. None of these, of course, idealise the modern metropolis but in concert certainly contribute to the remarkable circumstance that, in the cultural imaginary, India has shifted from the Gandhian notion of a 'country of villages' to an essentially urban one.

Similarly, most of the blockbuster Bollywood productions that have been so popular in Europe (and not least, Germany) for the past decade or so are invariably set in the big cities and more specifically in the posh and glamorous urbanity of upper class enclaves.[2] An entire genre – the so-called 'nativity film' set in the rural areas and generally eulogizing intact village communities – has all but disappeared from the scene (Chakravarty 1998, 257), and classics like *Devdas* or *Mother India*, let alone *Pather Panchali*, have long ceased to inspire emulation. As Dipankar Gupta pertinently observes, "it is hard to recall a film made after the late 1990s that extols the Indian village, or glorifies it at the expense of the city" (Gupta 2005, 758). This diagnosis can easily be applied to literary fiction as well where villages, if thematised at all, largely figure as dystopian sites delinked from the modernity of the urban centres.

Moreover, Gupta's assertion implicitly points to the fact that this disappearance of the rural from the cultural imagination in favour of the cultural production of a decidedly metropolitan India is a relatively new phenomenon. Indeed, anti-colonial and post-Independence Indian nationalism was to a large extent grounded in an ideology that put a premium on the village, not the city, as a repository of authentic Indianness, and deep into the second half of the twentieth century both fiction and cinema contributed to a stereotypical ideological and aesthetic dichotomy between the "calculating city and the spontaneous […] village" (Mohapatra 2008, 65). At the level of cultural self-representation, then, there seems to have occurred nothing less than an 'urban turn,' a complete reversal from the erstwhile paradigm of envisaging India as a 'country of villages' to the newly fashioned mode of representing the country through the urban mythology of megacity India (see Karsholm 2004, 18-25).

How and where does village India figure in this modern scenario of globalised India? Even if the number of people (self-)employed in agricultural labour has been significantly on the wane since the beginning of this century (see Gupta 2005, 753-5), the fact remains that, according to the latest official government census (2011) only 27.8% of the country's total population live in urban centres as opposed to the 72.2% of Indians who live in rural areas (Government of India 2011). If more than two thirds of the country's population reside in one of those "638,596 traditional villages" (*ibid.*) that make up rural India, is it then not pretty accurate to claim that 'villages are the *real India*'? Is there then not a conspicuous disparity between socio-demographic data, and a well-nigh consensual cultural

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2   Again, a few exceptions – most notably Amir Khan's *Lagaan* with its sanitised heritage village *mise-en-scène* – confirm rather than challenge this convention.

mode of representing the country, quite counterfactually, as if it were a predominantly metropolitan hub of megacities?

As this paper will attempt to argue, however, a closer look makes clear that the village has not fully vanished from the cultural imaginary but remains a spectral presence in the new dominant, indeed a defining contrast foil against which the booming big city gets profiled for better or worse. It will only be possible to tentatively trace a few avatars of village India in contemporary subcontinental culture by looking at three aspects: a discourse of commodified rurality; the possibilities but also limits of a sociology and aesthetics of the country/city divide; and finally a few textual examples of representing 'the village' through an urban/metropolitan lens. First, however, a brief (and no doubt superficial) survey of traditional nationalist conceptions of the village-city dichotomy require to be rehearsed in order to make out the point of departure from which current engagements with the Indian village proceed.

1. The Indian Village in the Nationalist Tradition

A statement like Bina Ramani's, who declares that 'villages are the *real India*,' certainly feeds off and harks back to the influential cultural politics of the traditionalists within the Indian nationalist movement, most prominently Gandhi himself, who powerfully defined India as a country of villages. Bina Ramani's enthusiasm for the rural, however, is a postmodern revision that propels Gandhianism into the consumer aesthetics of Indo chic. If Gandhi and his followers defined the village as the essential economic, political and cultural unit through which authentic Indian culture unfolded, their view of the good society was an Arcadian vision set far in India's past. It was the pristine Indian village, where contented villagers would hand-spin their own yarn, hand-weave their own cloth, and serenely follow their bullocks in the fields. All this, to be sure, was to a very large extent already an *urban* imaginary in which the "village has often been essentialised as an idyllic locale where community ties bind the population together" (Gupta 2005, 753). Therefore, if "the nationalists looked to the village [not the city] in defining India" (Prakash 2002, 3), then the village that they 'looked to' was itself constructed (perhaps ironically in collaboration with late nineteenth-century British allochronic idealisations of Indian rurality; see Cannadine 2000, 34-42; Metcalf 1998, 160-3) as an "orientalised timeless village" (Mohapatra 2008, 63): the idealised Indian village was conceived of as a depot of a transhistorical essence of Indian economic, cultural and spiritual existence and as such an extension of the *ghar* ('home'), that site at which, for the nationalist movement, Indian civilisation proved itself to be superior to that of the West (Chatterjee 1993, 116-34). The nationalist cult of the village, then, posited this latter polemically against the 'outer domain' of the *bahir* ('world') – the sphere of history, politics, technology – where the coloniser's culture prevailed. The village, in short, became an ideal precisely because it could be constructed as untouched by a 'polluting' colonial modernity whose epitome was the contaminating, yet also alluring new "colonial city" (Nandy 2007, 12).

At the same time, however, Gandhi was fully aware that this kind of ideal village actually existed nowhere in India; in fact, he readily acknowledged that "the village of my dreams" had not very much in common with "our village life as it is today." In his important treatise, *Hind Swaraj* (1909), he writes:

> In the Indian village an age-old culture is hidden under an encasement of crudeness. Take away the encrustation, remove the villager's chronic poverty and illiteracy and you will find the finest specimen of what a cultured, cultivated, free citizen should be. (Gandhi 1997, 148)

This assertion slides easily – and much more easily than Gandhian traditionalists would like to acknowledge – into an engineering utopia in which the actual, 'encrusted' village as site of arrested development gets rigorously modernised. This, again, is Gandhi in a letter to Nehru:

> My ideal village will contain intelligent human beings. They will not live in dirt and darkness like animals. Men and women will be free to hold their own against anyone in the world. […] It is possible to envisage railways, post and telegraph offices etc. (Gandhi 1997, 150-1)

Even if a dedicated moderniser like Nehru sharply rejected Gandhian pastoralism and denounced the "village, normally speaking, [as] backward intellectually and culturally" (qtd. in Gandhi 1997, 152), he yet acknowledged the centrality of village India not only as the indispensable reservoir for anticolonial mobilisation but also as a site of instruction and education for urban nationalist activists:

> Gandhi sent us to the villages, and the countryside hummed with the activity of innumerable messengers of the new gospel of action. The peasant was shaken up and he began to emerge from his quiescent shell. We saw, for the first time as it were, the villager in the intimacy of his mud-hut. We learnt our Indian economics more from these visits than from books and discourses. (Nehru 1985 [1946], 361-2)

Therefore, the village that both traditionalists and modernisers in the nationalist movement looked to in order to define India was always also imagined as incomplete, insufficient, a site of lack, a place of arrested development waiting to be propelled into the present. This, clearly, holds true for all the fictional villages that provide the settings for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indian novels. The allegedly first Indian English novel, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), opens with the exposition of an ostensibly idyllic "small village on the river Madhumati" (Chattopadhyay 2010, 1). In the course of the narrative, though, it becomes apparent that the village, far from being the abode of some harmonious community, is instead a site of endemic 'traditional' corruption whose main representatives (the eponymous Rajmohan as well as the local landlord) are all characterised by their lack of exposure to urban modernity; by contrast, the novel's positive hero stands out by virtue of the big-city (and 'English') education

he received in Calcutta's Hindu College[3] so that the narrative itself seems to suggest that the village 'in the raw' requires to be reformed, or completed, by urban and modern input.

In the 1930s, when Indian writing in English went through its first 'boom' with writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan or Raja Rao, novels were still invariably set in villages. Narayan in fact centred his whole oeuvre around the fictional small town of Malgudi in which "the village is a constant shadowy intruder […] as the surrounding villages are telescoped into the town" (Nandy 2007, 19). Meanwhile, the more writerly- minded Raja Rao developed a sketchy poetics of the village as such:

> There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich *sthala-purana*, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village – Rama might have rested under this pipal tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and the gods mingle with men […]. One such story from the contemporary annals of a village I have tried to tell. (Rao 2001, i)

Here, the blending of apparently incommensurate temporalities into complex time-knots fuses legend and history, hoary past and actual present, into a specifically rural suspension of progressivism. However, Rao's own narrative cannot uphold such an idyllic vision but instead culminates in the wholesale destruction of the village of Kanthapura that then only 'survives,' as in an "allegory of salvage" (Clifford 1986, 113) in the elegiac narrative that Rao presents. The village of remembrance has either to adapt itself to modernity, or perish. It is true, concedes Partha Chatterjee, that

> two or three generations of social and political thinkers, scholars and artists, poets and novelists, living and working in the era of nationalism, devoted most of their imaginative energies to the task of producing an idea not of the future Indian city but of a rural India fit for the modern age. (Chatterjee 2003, 179)

Therefore, however much mental space the Indian village occupied in the political imaginary, none of the nationalist ruralists would ever have dreamed of declaring that Indian villages *are* beautiful. In the nationalist agenda, the good, the beautiful village was always a project, a futuristic promise, but never an established reality in the present.

2. The Village as Commodity

It is only in a fully postmodernised pocket of the social palimpsest of India that Bina Ramani's fashion-conscious assertion that "villages are beautiful" makes sense: as a statement that is symptomatic of a nostalgia for the authentic that haunts

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[3]   The positive connotations of an Anglophone education are virtually omnipresent in nineteenth-century Indian writing in English, even in such insurrectionary texts as Dutt's "A Journal of Fourty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945" (1835); see Tickell 2005, 10-4.

parts of the urban elite in post-liberalisation India. This yearning is not satisfied with ethnic chic in *haute couture* or interior decoration, but has brought forth in the past decades a whole new concept of small-scale development and civic activism in the name of a variety of gentrification that transforms exclusive and strictly demarcated urban spaces into virtual villages where metropolitan anonymity gives way to a class-conscious peer-group responsibility. Upper-middle class enclaves are thus turned into 'neighbourhoods.' In the context of Bangalore, Janaki Nair observes the rise of the "the idea of neighbourhood as a site from which to address strictly municipal concerns" (Nair 2006, 129). These middle-class initiatives, mostly articulated as a defence against the encroachment of the poor, operate locally as neighbourhood politics. The residential enclave is posited as a living community that requires border maintenance against the intrusion of undesirable elements. What thus emerges is a network of neighbourhood NGOs who, as Sharit Bhowmik observes, "claim to represent the citizens [but] invariably refer to residents of upper middle and middle-class housing societies" (Bhowmik 2006, 155). As a consequence, a privileged and empowered, organised minority rallies its defences against the unorganised majority. The area of *Hauz Khas* in South Delhi is one of the earliest cases in point, and it is not by coincidence that the gentrification process imposed a virtual village structure on that area, transforming *Hauz Khas* into something like a theme park village.

Again, Bina Ramani is at the centre of things: it is she who in the late 1980s initiated the revival, or rather invention, of *Hauz Khas* as an 'ethnic' village in the the capital city – a quiet pocket of South Delhi that rapidly developed into a trendy and expensive "ethnic shopping centre with an 'exclusive village flavour'" (Tarlo 1996, 293). Ever since the late 1980s, *Hauz Khas* Village has been a conglomerate of very expensive boutiques specialising in arts and craft, colonial-style furniture and ethnic fashion, accompanied by exclusive rooftop restaurants and cafés serving regional-flavour items. None of these, of course, were exactly new arrivals to the Indian commodity circuit. Far from it: handicraft emporia and *khadi* outlets had for decades catered to Western tourists and Indian consumers alike. What was new about *Hauz Khas* was not so much the commodities on display but rather the display itself: borrowing a phrase from Naomi Klein, in *Hauz Khas*, products were "presented not as 'commodities' but as concepts: as experience, as lifestyle" (Klein 2001, 21). As one *Hauz Khas* customer asserts:

> People love the adventure of coming here. They are curious to know what a village is like. And they enjoy the experience and novelty of buying traditional dress in a real village setting. It's more authentic than the boutiques of South Delhi somehow. (qtd. in Tarlo 1996, 302)

Even if this is an individual customer's assessment that cannot claim representativeness, it is safe to assume its symptomatic value. Obviously, then, *Hauz Khas* stands not only for the marketing of village fashion; it also stands for the village as fashion. Shopping turns into a fully fledged experience, even an adventure. In order to provide for this experience and adventure, the whole enclave had to be revamped into that theme park village that *Hauz Khas* now is, a process initiated,

implemented and maintained by the Creative Arts Village Association (CAVA), an NGO founded by the newly moved in boutique owners in the area. CAVA's politics are basically about the implementation of 'improvement' measures:

> to 'preserve' the village atmosphere, to keep each shop as unique as possible, to choose where possible harmonious architecture and ethnic interiors, to keep the village small and exclusive, to build a large parking lot, to cobble the streets to prevent people getting their high-heeled shoes stuck in he mud, and to stop the villagers leading their buffaloes down the main shopping street while customers were still in the village. This last request was initiated after an almost tearful customer had complained that a dirty buffalo had flicked its tail over her best coat. In other words, what they desired was some kind of sterilised village which they could fill with the most aesthetically appealing features of village life. (Tarlo 1996, 304)

Cultural critic Emma Tarlo, who has conducted field research in, and has written extensively on *Hauz Khas*, observes that "as far as many boutique owners were concerned, the village [in its original condition] was not nearly 'villagey' enough" (Tarlo 1996, 313). Clearly, *Hauz Khas* is not a village, not even the reconstruction or reproduction of some 'original' village; it is instead the simulation of a village – a simulation that, as Jean Baudrillard classically puts it, "substitutes signs of the real for the real itself" (Baudrillard 2001, 170).

Other locations in Delhi have picked up on the trend; thus, the gated open-air handicraft compound of *Dilli Haat* is designed as an equally hyperreal village market. Obviously, the urban elite dreams of villages. At the height of the urban turn in Indian culture at large, a rural turn in taste betrays a classically postmodern nostalgia for some allegedly lost, authentic origin that in truth never existed. Highly unreflexive, this "restorative nostalgia" (Boym 2001, 41) apparently gets gratified through hyperreal simulations, mock-authentic fabrications that cater to metropolitan middle-class Indians no less than to Western tourists, and that constantly reconfirm the stereotyped, handed-down stock images of villagey-ness and rurality.

Of course it would be tempting to dismiss such nostalgia on the side of the *nouveau riches* of post-liberalisation India as shallow, hackneyed, and reactionary. The question is, however, whether such dismissal would not be somewhat facile itself, and whether even such exclusive spaces like *Hauz Khas* or *Dilli Haat* could not just as much point to a desire that one should take seriously even when it is elitist. After all, even rich people are not necessarily fully in accordance with the social structure that grants them their privileges, and may be haunted by potentially productive utopian energies. In that vein of speculation, it would be possible to suggest that *Hauz Khas* may well be a Baudrillard-style simulation but not automatically a dupe. Couldn't one just as well think of these spaces in terms of what Michel Foucault has called "heterotopia" – that is, spaces that disrupt the continuous normalcy of the established social reality (Foucault 1986, 22-7)? And if so, what does it mean for upper middle-class consumers to be attracted to this virtual village that offers a spatio-temporal alternative to the dominant time-space regime of the metropolis? Could it be, as Ashis Nandy proposes, that "the cultural logic of the Indian city demands the presence of the village" (Nandy 2007, 20)?

3. The Village of the Poor

Before coming back to this question, I will now make a sharp cut to the other end
of the social spectrum of India's big cities, which, as in many other southern coun-
tries, is defined by what Arjun Appadurai has called "financial apartheid" (Appa-
durai 2002, 65). The insurmountable gap between the rich – the denizens of *Hauz
Khas* – and the poor finds its most apparent expression in terms of housing with
a substantial sector of the population left practically unroofed. This applies espe-
cially to the continuously expanding group of internal migrants from the rural
areas, who attempt to escape not only from crushing economic deprivation but
also "from the culture of feudalism and face-to-face repression in the village"
(Bhagwat 1996, 115). Pavement dwelling is a well-known phenomenon of India's
contemporary urbanity where a vast proportion of 'citizens' are reduced to "bodies
that are their own housing" (Appadurai 2002, 65). Yet in her study on mobility
patterns of houseless people in Old Delhi, French sociologist Véronique Dupont
insists that "pavement dwellers in big cities should not be considered merely as
the victims of dire poverty, but also as dynamic agents capable of implementing
their own economic strategies" (Dupont 2000, 99). One first terminological conse-
quence of this take on the issue is that Dupont "deliberately avoids using the term
'homeless' since it implies not only a situation of deprivation in terms of shelter
but also a loss of familial moorings" (Dupont 2000, 101). In the Indian context,
according to Dupont, houselessness does not necessarily mean homelessness pre-
cisely because many pavement dwellers in the metropolis retain an imaginary –
and often practical – bond to the villages from which they migrated to the city.

Dupont's study reveals that a majority of the houseless migrants "visit their
native place and family more or less regularly (at least once in two years)" (Dupont
2000, 100) and that they share "future plans to return to the native village (in the
near or distant future)" (*ibid.*, 111). These findings are largely in tune with the
results of a 2001 survey conducted by the Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan (a Delhi-based
NGO campaigning for the right to shelter). Drawing on the responses of 690 inter-
viewees, the AAA study confirms Dupont's conclusion with respect to the mental
space that the native village occupies in the imaginary of Delhi's houseless poor.
Thus, 59% of the respondents stated that they send money home to their families;
considering that only 60% of the interviewees stated that they could save money
at all, this figure is immensely high. Likewise, a majority of pavement dwellers
maintain regular contacts to their families and visit their native place annually or
once in two years; however, only 22% positively asserted that they are planning
or at least hoping to return to their native village in the conceivable future:

> Only 4% are certain that they will return to their native place. While many hoped to go
> back, some of the respondents said returning home was dependent on how much money
> they were able to earn. Decisions to return home are probably also affected by the
> economic situation in the person's native place, so that even if he was able to save a
> significant amount of money, he would be forced to continue working in Delhi be-
> cause of the poor prospects at home. (Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan 2001, 38)

Despite the continuous bond to the native village, then, this latter does not necessarily figure as a realistic or even desired point of future return; it rather remains for most internal migrants a site of oppression to be escaped from. However, as both Dupont's study and Nandy's speculations agree, internal migrants from the same rural area tend to recreate village-like structures of mutual responsibility in the metropolis: "As an escape from the oppressive village, the slum captures, within the heartlessness of the city, the reinvented 'compassionate village'" (Nandy 1998, 17). Of course it would be out of the way to suggest that the urban elite and the urban poor share the same imaginary bonds to the village; what I would like to assert, however, is that the experience of metropolitan life is in both cases articulated with the village as counter-imagination. This last term, the "village as counter-imagination" is derived from Ashis Nandy's complex study on the ambiguities of urbanity in contemporary India. In our time, Nandy claims,

> [t]he Indian city has re-emerged in public consciousness not as a new home, from within the boundaries of which one has the privilege of surveying the ruins of one's other abandoned homes. It has re-emerged as the location of a homelessness forever trying to reconcile non-communitarian individualism and associated forms of freedom with communitarian responsibilities, freely or involuntarily borne. (Nandy 2007, 25)

Clearly this ambiguous hovering between metropolitan anonymity and freedom on the one hand, and social integration and obligation on the other, can be observed on both ends of the social spectrum: the neighbourhood politics of upper-middle class civic activists definitely work towards a transformation of the urban residential complex into a communitarian, albeit exclusive space shared by the select peer group of co-residents. *Hauz Khas* as a hyperreal village, in that light, may figure as an ideal model that embodies the straddle between possessive individualism and organic communal affiliation as apparently effortless realisation.

Meanwhile, the pavement-dwelling migrants in Old Delhi operate in a very different way along the same lines: highly individualised, reduced to precarious life, and out for a modest living if not mere survival, these people maintain and practice their communitarian responsibilities by upholding family ties through regular communication, through financial support for those back 'home,' but more than anything else through the enactment of village-like responsibility patterns in the city itself. In both cases, Nandy's description of the city as a non-home seems to fully apply: the city either needs to be reworked into some model village by way of neighbourhood 'improvement' (the bourgeois strategy), or to be devalued as a transitory site of spectral abode against which the native village is pitted as a site of constant belonging. In both cases, then, the city is taken to be the other of the true imaginary home. "Few seem to love the city in its own terms in India," writes Nandy, and goes on to argue that, in the Indian cultural imaginary, "home is [...] a rediscovered village" (Nandy 2007, 28).

4. The Spectral Villages of the Indian Urban Novel

Yet no Indian writer today is likely to set out, as Raja Rao did in the late 1930s, to eulogize and bemoan the village as a fragile and endangered site of some vanishing alternative temporality. Nor, however, has the village been fully exorcised from Indian writing. Instead, it could be argued, it comes back intermittently to haunt the metropolitan imagination neither as a commodified and sanitised simulacrum nor only as a dystopia of casteism, bonded labour and famine. I would like to concentrate on a small selection of extracts from novels whose characters – upper class or subaltern – strive to overwrite the city they actually inhabit with features of that 'rediscovered village' that Nandy is pointing to. It will turn out, however, that it is not so much as 'home' that the village resurfaces but rather as a heterotopian disruption of the emergent 'normalcy' of urban modernity.

In Amit Chaudhuri's debut novel *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), the protagonist, six-years-old Sandeep who lives with his parents in a modern Mumbai highrise, spends his vacation at his aunt's sprawling house in Calcutta, a city far less 'modern' than Mumbai. Indeed, Chaudhuri describes Calcutta as a "city of dust," an amorphous and anarchic city that gains its distinctiveness as a site of incomplete – or, as Partha Chatterjee would put it: 'impure' – modernisation:

> The roads are always being dug up, partly to construct the new underground railway system, or for some other obscure reason, such as replacing a pipe that doesn't work with a pipe that doesn't work. At such times, Calcutta is like a work of modern art that neither makes sense nor has any utility, but exists for some esoteric aesthetic reason. (Chaudhuri 1998 [1991], 8)

Instead of streamlined, utilitarian modernisation, then, Calcutta seems shaped by an aesthetic modernism that always constituted itself *in opposition* to modernisation. Therefore, the 'modernist' as opposed to 'modern' metropolis cannot be "clearly demarcated from the folk-tale Bengal that surrounded it so thickly" (Chaudhuri 1998, 63). It is a palimpsest of different temporalities and historical periods in which the futuristic – the underground railway – and the atavistic rub shoulders. To identify this coexistence of different times, this synchronicity of the non-synchronous, with artistic modernism is of course based on a line of analysis that is itself postmodernist:

> Modern art drew its power and its possibilities from being a backwater and an archaic holdover within a modernizing economy: it glorified, celebrated and dramatized older forms of individual production which the new mode of production was elsewhere on the point of blotting out. (Jameson 1991, 307)

Chaudhuri is keenly aware of this often overlooked alliance that the 'work of modern art' entertains with the residual, individual forms of production. Hence Calcutta is 'modernist' precisely because it allows you to "move forward in space and backward in time simultaneously" (Chaudhuri 1998, 63), and more pointedly, because the whole city appears to have retained an original 'villageness':

> Calcutta, in spite of fetid industrialisation, was really part of that primitive, terracotta landscape of Bengal, Tagore's and the travelling Vaishnav poet's Bengal – the Bengal of the bullock-cart and the earthen lamp. It had pretended to be otherwise, but now it had grown old and was returning to that original darkness: in time people would forget that electricity had ever existed, and earthen lamps would burn again in the houses. (Chaudhuri 1998, 33)

Read as a fantasy of degeneration – the anxiety of a retrogression back to an 'original darkness' – this passage is triggered by the typical middle-class complaint about inefficient amenities on those occasions "when the fans stopped turning because of a power-cut, when the telephone went dead because of a cable-fault, when the taps became dry because there was no power to pump the water" (Chaudhuri 1998, 33): Calcutta, however modern its facades, is thus revealed as retarded in its development, as a city that only masquerades as one while in fact being a village. True, this incompletely modernised Calcutta appears to be measured against a normative modernity defined elsewhere, hence as a signature of India's participation in the scramble for modernity. In this light, Calcutta would figure as a site of transition towards the goal of a fully accomplished modernisation in a narrative that, as Sudipta Kaviraj succinctly puts it, "create[s] the increasingly untenable illusion that given all the right conditions, Calcutta would turn into London" (Kaviraj 1997, 113).

The sequence can, however, just as well be read as the invocation of some timeless essence of 'terracotta' village Bengal based on "a primitive, unpretentious means of subsistence" (Chaudhuri 1998, 33). Calcutta and its aspirations to modernity would then appear as temporary (and ultimately abortive) deviations from a more substantial reality to which they must finally return. The original darkness, in other words, need not be read dogmatically in Conradian terms (even though those will not go away). It also signifies a recourse to an imagined 'autonomy' of the village. 'Primitive subsistence,' we are encouraged to assume, would re-replace these modern pretentious amenities with the hearth, the earthen lamp, the bore well and face-to-face communication – interruptions of regulated modern life that are contained in the name of Bengal. All this is not presented as some nostalgically invoked past but very much as the present into which Calcutta, as a modernising site, is heterotopically inserted, and to which it actually belongs. Two competing narratives are thus confronted in this short passage about the city as village: first, the progressivist historicism that measures and condemns the ineffectual adoption of the modern; and second, the assertion of difference by way of recourse to an essentialised substratum of 'Bengal' as a disruptive heterotopia built into Calcutta's modernity.

A comparable transformation of the metropolis into the village seems to be at the heart of I. Allen Sealy's 2003 novel, *The Brainfever Bird*. One of the protagonists, Maya, is a professional puppet maker and theatre director – an academic folk artist whose work gets performed in a fashionable *haveli* (an ancient aristocratic town house) for "a sprinkling of South Delhi types and the gentry" (Sealey 2003, 313): the *Hauz Khas* scene. If this is the upper-class audience that projects their sanitised village dreams onto the actual city, then Maya's puppet play is an ironic inversion of this projection: the entire action of the play turns out to be a

peasant's dream. The opening scene shows the puppet peasant ploughing his field with his buffalo, and after delivering a short prologue to the subsequent action, he lies down to rest under a tree. The ensuing high political drama culminates in a battle over the rule of Delhi, but after a short black, "the battlefield is bare. Now it is cropland again, and Bodh Ram awakes from his slumber under the thorn tree. The buffalo is discovered grazing" (Sealey 2003, 317). Like Chaudhuri's Calcutta, then, Delhi appears to be a dream, evanescent and ephemeral, while 'the real India' remains an apparently unchangeable rural cropland – an India of villages and villagers that subsist, unperturbedly as it were, below the radar of History: "Dynasties may come and go, great wars may be fought by ambitious monarchs or potentates, but the steady hum of village life is scarcely ever disturbed" (Cohn 1987, 213). Maya's performance is of course a polemic sideswipe at the ethno chic fantasies of her audiences: while they try to conjure up a dreamland Disney village India, her play shows them as figments of a peasant dream.

The palimpsest of India – the coexistence of widely discrepant temporalities – certainly perforates the texture of the culture with a multiplicity of pockets of difference. No longer invested with the anti-/post-colonial nationalist loading of essentialised authenticity, the village as a concept has ceased to figure as the defining apex of some transhistorical Indianness; rather, what made the village so appealing to the nationalist imaginary – namely, its apparent immunity to modernity – now mostly works to discredit it as a dystopian other in a culture that has begun to emphatically endorse a modernity in which 'the city' no longer stands in for colonial domination but for postcolonial self-fashioning. Part of this self-fashioning, however, appears to be the rediscovery of the village as a heterotopia that will continue to puncture the continuity of urban modernity as an integral part of it.

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