

Bhudev's Uchronia: The Temporal Exile of the Colonised

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The word 'frontier' presumably means two different things. On the one hand, it is presented as a border that divides. Here it would manifest as something that lies in between. But a frontier can also stand for a boundary that restricts the extent of a certain totality; thereby playing the role of the perimeter of a given thing, and functioning as an index of a certain limit. Dealing primarily with the latter, this essay is about a certain colonial experience of temporality that leaves the colonised *beyond* a time that they can call their own. It is an experience of a politically implemented mode of temporal dispossession. One may legitimately claim that this fact is germane to any discussion of colonial subjection/subjectivation.

But how and why are the frontier and the border important as concepts within this scheme? This would have to do with certain moves that Bhudev Mukhopadhyay (1827-1894), an educationist, thinker and one of the first authors of nationalist discourse in Bengal, undertakes to come to terms with the fact of the colonised being dispossessed of temporality. Bhudev's production of an uchronia, *Swapnalabdha Bharatbarsher Itihas* (History of India as Revealed in a Dream),¹ might draw out a certain significance of the word 'uchronia' that is most certainly overlooked in the European context where it had been coined and first used. Charles Renouvier (1815-1903), a well-known 19th-century neo-Kantian philosopher, is said to have coined the term for the first time in 1857. The subtitle of Renouvier's French work *Uchronia* is *Utopia in History*; and the book itself gives us an alternate history of Europe as it might have been.² This notion of uchronia is a transposition of the notion of the utopic to the textual ground of a historical narrative. It answers the question: 'What if history had developed differently?'³ A trail of divergence therefore can be

laid from a given history to answer this 'what if' question. However, while Bhudev's text itself bears the marks of an alternate history, it is not comparable thereby to the numerous allohistories (a synonym for alternate history) produced by the West. A certain colonial experience of time contributed to Bhudev's allohistorical production.

Bhudev has been characterised as a "proud Brahmin" whose "orthodoxy was not blind and had nothing in common with the vulgarities of the Hindu reaction" to the colonial project of social reforms (see below). However, he is said to have seen in the reformist efforts "a slavish acceptance of British views on Indian society". His benign critique of the reformist milieu, effected in a rather original and theoretical way, has earned him the epithet of being "the only social theorist that the celebrated age of the Bengal Renaissance produced". In spite of his skepticism regarding both colonial modernity and reformist efforts, his "aspiration as an official in the colonial bureaucracy" has been somewhat remarkable. Tapan Raychaudhari, one of the first historians to have studied Bhudev's life and oeuvre, describes this aspect of Bhudev's life in detail:

The proud Brahmin was bent on making a success of his career in service and starting as a teacher in the Calcutta Madrasa (after a brief spell in non-government schools), he went about as high as any Indian could hope to go in his days – ending his career as a Class I inspector of schools, an office held by members of the civil service from time to time. In cash terms the transition was from Rs 50 to Rs 1500 per month, the latter a very considerable income in those days.⁴

This story of improvement under the colonial aegis stands in contrast to the usual accounts of the educated native's complicated resolve to keep a traditional identity intact within colonised parameters. This apparent dichotomy in fact resonates well with the tenor of Bhudev's oeuvre, which was largely about constructing a "Hindu historical sociology of European modernity" (ibid.). It was the production of the knowledge of modernity from an indigenous perspective, which was more like bracing up for a confrontation often perceived as hostile and disempowering, and strategising to avoid the humiliation that might thereby be incurred.

Bhudev and History

Sudipta Kaviraj, the historian who has discussed Bhudev's work as a "project of indigenist social theory", still finds *Swapnalabdha Bharatbarsher Itihas* (hereafter in this essay, *SBI*) a most bewildering text. According to him, it is "difficult even to say what sort of writing it is". Its "intriguingly paradoxical" form, which has been touted as an extension of Bhudev's enterprise in social theory, is remarkable in its resistance to simple classification. Kaviraj begins his observations on Bhudev with references to *SBI*, and ends his essay thus:

In this paper, I have analysed only one of Bhudev's texts, the *Samajik Prabandha*, partly because it is the principal site of his social theorising. But his intellectual portrait cannot be complete without a supplement, a study of his other, more quizzical work, *Swapnalabdha Bharatbarsher Itihas*. That text describes a most

extraordinary dream, in which the content entirely violates the customary expectations one has of a dream narrative. In a dream of astonishing clarity and consistency, he describes in great, often tiring detail, the social constitution of India under an imagined un-British rule, twisting the line of Indian history away from what had actually happened. This shows the insistence of his social thinking; even in his dreams he is constantly constructing social and political forms.⁵

Even if one provisionally accepts that *SBI* was a certain continuation of Bhudev's earlier concerns, one would still end up with the paradox implicit in its form. This may take us to the interesting observations on history as a form, or the empty formalism of history, made by Bhudev himself in *Samajik Prabandha*. Bhudev is acutely aware that history as a Western science has every possibility of being deployed as an instrument for propagating the idiom of a certain racial superiority. History is not something that is readily accepted, as it is surpassed and superseded by accounts committed to the description of national glory. He observes:

... [T]he rules (*sutra*) of the new historical science that are used in India (*Bhāratavarsha*) are of another variety. All these rules are meant for criticizing the Indians... The historical science of Europe is still in its infancy. It only has a few imprecise rules which aid the European authors, learned in Greek, to delineate their respective national glories (*jatigaurab*)... By History Europeans tend to understand the history of the Greeks and their followers, the Romans; and since it is regarded as their religious literature the Jewish texts are left unmarked by dates. The Greeks and the Romans were deeply patriotic. Patriotism was a part of their fundamental nature. Accordingly they have produced their histories with considerable skill. But their only aim was to declare the glories of their country and their nation.⁶

History, and perhaps truth itself, is reducible to a problem of form. This kind of assertion is made to defend India's Puranic literature against the attempts of colonial scholars to deny it the status of history. Some commentators of Bhudev's milieu take *purana* as a genre that represents poetic compositions on nature and the spiritual world, in contrast to the descriptions of actual history. But Bhudev thinks otherwise. He writes that "although the natural world and natural forces are imparted liveliness and endowed with anthropic ideas, the inspiration for such poetic acts is derived from the historical events themselves". The poets, having experienced actual humans, objects and events, transform them through various tropes (*upama, atyukti, rupakadi alankare bhushito o sharash hoia...*) into a mode of poetic history.

The claim of the Puranas to being a part of history is facilitated here through the legitimisation of a certain *literary* operation effected on the *real* raw material that happens to transpose the factual into the imagined. If history poses a threat to the Puranic tradition through the former's greater claim to truth, Bhudev will find a ready defence in the lack of consensus amongst the various historians of Europe on the competing truth claims of this or that historical account in the intra-disciplinary debates. Now, for once, history is made subject to the kind of scepticism that its disciplinary rules consider legitimate. It is here that

one encounters Bhudev's stubborn argument on truth in history as being primarily not about a set of inviolable facts, but about a certain *form* that supposedly *looks* like truth. To Bhudev, the success of history in transcending national frontiers is therefore questionable. By this re-signifying of history's function as a vehicle for human ideation, he enables a celebration of the mass of Puranic literature as a nationalist narrative of the Indian past.

Bhudev's abiding anxiety about the colonial appropriation of the symbolic and actual past of the colonised is seen in his attempts to salvage a certain archive (Puranic texts) from dismissal by the colonial historiographic operation as material not amenable to being ordered through discursive architectures. This effort to assert the truth claims of 'indigenous' narratives as valid history is undoubtedly one of the earliest nationalist engagements with the question of what constituted history. In the context of Bhudev's discussions of 'history' in *Samajik Prabandha*, one may wonder how to approach Bhudev's alternate paradigm. Was the assertion of Puranic ontology in fact a celebration of historical discourse through the inscription of a new, effective form, an act that rendered the colonised autonomous and capable of imagining a non-/post- colonial future?

SBI certainly doesn't offer us an easy response to that question. In the given situation, the status of alternate history in the colony presumably remains a decisive issue.

Alternate History in the Colonial Setting

Bhudev's engagement with history was not to end within the body of his indigenist sociology found in *Samajik Prabandha*. It was to return to him in *SBI* more like a *supplement*. *SBI* might seem to be an innocuous addition to Bhudev's extant works; moreover, it also seems to stand by itself as something powerfully idiosyncratic, and *not* subsumed within his 'Hindu' sociology. *SBI* represents the sheer force of a form as it appears in a dream, and taken to be empowering by instituting the autonomy of the colonised. History, one might say, comes back with a vengeance, but only as an object of dream. The imagined event of the institution of autonomy of the colonised dons the cloak of historical discourse. In Bhudev's conceptualisation, history, which had failed to empower the colonised in their state of submission, lends its form to the colonised dreaming of autonomy.

This was somewhat inescapable for the two conjoined operations of historical discourse in the colonial era. History within colonialism was not just an account of the past, but also a subjectivity and agency shaping the future. Not only did it appraise the past of the colonised in a manner that justified colonialism, it also denied the ideal of historical agency to the colonised. History is what the colonised *lacked*; it was therefore also the thing that they most coveted. The colonial rendering of a particular history as a valued discourse was definitely influential to a great extent. Bhudev does nothing in *SBI* to controvert the conventions of a historical prose – and yet the event of Maratha dominance described in his text is an event that a historical discourse committed to producing the 'true' rendition of the past cannot accept as valid. In Bhudev's dream, the desire to inhabit history

adheres to its discursive form while remaining unable to accept the event of colonisation inscribed in its content.

Bhudev's alternate history will be radically different from similar such works produced in the modern West. Alternate history had been written in Europe since the early 19th century, and has by now made a place for itself in contemporary Western popular culture as well, whereas the mode has not found acceptance in modern India. It is worth examining the difference between Bhudev's project and 19th-century Western alternative histories, keeping in mind that the colonisers and the colonised clearly have different experiences of temporality and the historical continuum as well as historical fractures. In order to fully understand the experience of temporality by the colonised, the Western subject is arguably required to suspend his/her normative interpretation of history; and also required to scrutinise the discursive forms in which it is embodied, and through which it is transmitted.

Historian Reinhart Koselleck's exposition of the emergence of modern historical temporality is instructive here. Koselleck plots the emergence of modern temporality – a temporality that also founds history as a separate order of knowledge – in the temporality of prognostications, as opposed to the notion of time that was implicit in apocalyptic prophecies. Prognosis is a “conscious element of political action” which steers away from a certain sacral time – the enunciation of futures that form teleological prophetic statements:

Prognosis produces the time within which and out of which it weaves, whereas apocalyptic prophecy destroys time through its fixation on the End. From the point of view of prophecy, events are merely symbols of that which is already known. A disappointed prophet cannot doubt the truth of his own predictions. Since these are variable, they can be renewed at any time. Moreover, with every disappointment, the certainty of approaching fulfilment increases. An erroneous prognosis by contrast, cannot even be repeated as an error, remaining... conditioned by specific assumptions.⁷

With prognosis, the age of Enlightenment desacralises time and opens up the future as a sphere of autonomous human intervention. The present becomes thick with speculations on future events, and history emerges as a domain of human freedom.

Alternate history or allohistory works through the principles of prognosis and weaves the narrative of other possible futures – those that formed the speculative horizon of any given present. The present of which alternative futures are narrated is the locus of the point of divergence from where the alternate concatenations begin. In these instances, allohistory is nothing other than celebrating the subject (both in the sense of subjectivity within an order of knowledge and in the sense of political agency) of history that the West would produce.

Bhudev's alternate history cannot be affiliated with such an enterprise. Far from articulating a speculative freedom, *SBI* is marked by an acute weight of temporal subjection. Alternate history happens to be here quite the reverse of what it would have meant to 19th-century Europeans. It is characterised by an ingrained despondency rooted

in the sense of not having an autonomous account of the collective/civilisational self. Colonial policies were designed and undertaken along the axes of this logic and its pathological repercussions. Colonial prognosis became the art of denying the colonised not just agency but also an autonomous experience of time.

SBI begins with a description of the context in which it was written. Apparently, a relative of Bhudev is writing a book on Indian history. Bhudev is asked to review the text, but while he is reading the account of the Third Battle of Panipat, he falls seriously ill and cannot bear the event of the Maratha defeat. It is important to reiterate here that the event of Maratha victory could well have obviated a colonial intervention amidst the chaos and instability of the 18th century. Bhudev, unable to accept the erstwhile historical narration of the events leading to the colonial subjection of India, sets out to perform in his uchronia what Marathas themselves failed to perform in the world of 'real' history.

Prima facie, there is nothing unique about Bhudev's imagination of the Maratha victory that would make a comparison to other allohistories worthwhile. The critical difference lies in the two senses in which the term 'alternate' can be used. In the 19th-century European context, it might well have meant exploring how any given event is fraught with different possible outcomes. But *SBI* was an alternate history in the sense of history (of autonomy) being unavailable otherwise. It was a response generated from a sense of a certain profound and profoundly experienced *lack* that was very much a product of colonial rule; or more precisely, a product of the colonial operations in the complex realm of temporality. Bhudev did attempt to save the past of the colonised from being appropriated and disparaged as ahistorical. But another acute concern for the colonised was that the future too was subject to the colonial extrapolations from which the colonised 'citizen' was excluded, owing to once again an inexorable rationale and dialectic of domination and submission.

For instance, Lord Macaulay's speech in the English House of Commons (delivered on 10 July 1833) is worth citing in detail. This was a moment when the empire's scandalous beginnings in India were being palliated through the relentless deployment of the self-serving logic of colonial historiography, a discourse which explains away the progression of the colonial endeavour as a process inexorably destined:

[...] The calamities through which that country passed during the interval between the fall of the Mogul power and the establishment of the English supremacy were sufficient to throw the people back whole centuries... The people were ground down to the dust by the oppressor without and the oppressor within, by the robber from whom the Nabob was unable to protect them, by the Nabob who took whatever the robber had left to them. All the evils of despotism, and all the evils of anarchy, pressed at once on that miserable race.⁸

Through the consistent rhetorical staging of such a desolate spectacle, it was easy to argue in favour of a supposedly paternal despotism as an effective strategy of political governance. A certain historiography was mobilised to legitimate the British subjection of India, prodding the coloniser to create 'citizens' out of 'slaves' and vindicating the

colonising/civilising mission. The 'patron' coloniser waits for the 'proudest day' when his protégé becomes self-sufficient, allowing him to finally end his rule. Macaulay continues:

To have found a great people sunk in the lowest depths of slavery and superstition, to have so ruled them as to have made them desirous and capable of all the privileges of citizens, would indeed be a title to glory all our own.⁹

And as critic Ramchandra Guha astutely remarks in relation to *SBI*:

The great Bengali writer, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, once published a marvellous alternate history of India... which speculated on what might have been if the British had not conquered the subcontinent. Bhudev assumed that in such an eventuality, Indians would have ruled themselves. In truth, there was no earthly chance of this happening. The choice was between the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese and the British.¹⁰

There are indications in *Samajik Prabandha* that Bhudev would have agreed completely with Guha. At the very beginning of his text, Bhudev clarifies to his Irish interlocutor that "[...] We don't want independence from the colonial authorities at least for some time to come"¹¹. This is a grudging admission of the time of colonial tutelage, and no alternative is being brought forth here. The pathology of existing and functioning as the colonial protégé was something that had been clearly introjected by the colonised by the time Bhudev was writing, and many of his contemporaries had similar perceptions of their future. The colonised had already submitted to this vision; and from its inception, the colonial historiographic project had been given to a certain production of the time of tutelage, making such submission by its 'citizens' possible. William Jones' pronouncements in the famous 10th Anniversary Discourse of the Asiatic Society can be considered a case in point:

He (one who reads history) could not but remark the constant effect of despotism in benumbing and debasing all those faculties which distinguish men from the herd that grazes; and to that cause he would impute the decided inferiority of the most *Asiatic* nations, ancient and modern, to those in Europe who are blest with happier governments... In these *Indian* territories, which Providence has thrown into the arms of Britain for their protection and welfare, the religion, manners, and laws of the natives preclude the idea of political freedom; but their histories may possibly suggest hints of prosperity, while our country derives essential benefit from the diligence of a placid and submissive people"...¹²

A historical explanation had to be given for the "inferiority" of the Asiatic "herd", a quality that suits their being appropriated submissively into the role of protégé to those effecting the colonising mission. The project of colonial historiography is essentially directed to the purpose of recovering a past that the colonised themselves supposedly *cannot* recuperate. This act of particular inscription functions as an instrument for the legitimising of colonial rule. The agent who recovers the past is also the agent who rules over the future of the colonised. Colonial authority straddles both temporal planes of the colonised, the future as well as the past, while the present is the harrowing moment of literal and epistemic subjection.

Mired between the colonial extrapolations of a future of tutelage and the colonial appropriation of the Indian past, the colonial subject invents a dream, an uchronia. This uchronia is not just a dream of autonomy; it is also a place to which the colonised had been exiled by the concerted effort of colonial ideologues.

The effort to invent an uchronia therefore stands testimony to a certain larger trend in the colonial-nationalist politics of time. In colonial elaborations of temporality, the present was a tangible zone of subjection; a prolonged future was given to the time of tutelage of the colonised under the coloniser's supervision; and the past was often a disparaged fiction, a product of 'ungoverned imaginings'. Bhudev's uchronia, the imagination of a non-existent time, is an audacious reworking of this expulsion from the temporal through the rendering of a simple reversal of a historical event. The Marathas manifest in the text as the founders of the Indian nation, and the event of colonial subjection is obviated by the Maratha initiative at nation building. This paradoxical reversal attempts to erase the fact of colonial subjection from Indian history, and avoids confronting the colonial delineation of the temporal subjection of the colonised. A significant act of evasion emerges here as a deeply despondent admission that the symbolic manipulation of time (the historical past, the present as well as future) is all that one can offer in terms of a concrete claim to true agency, authentic citizenship, actual sovereignty. Upon this oneiric foundation of desired autonomy, the colonised's actual exile from time (which in the colonial context is mostly synonymous to history) is writ large.

Afterword

The term 'uchronia', first used in the European context merely as what today would be considered as a synonym for alternate history, assumes a significantly different sense when used to characterise *SBI*. Uchronia, taken in its literal sense, is more a somewhat poignant term for the temporal experience of the colonised, than a utilitarian strategy for demarcating the horizon of alternate history, i.e., *a past that did not occur*. This 'past' is certainly discernible in Bhudev's text. But *SBI* is more than simply an alternate history. As a text created in response to the colonial act of deporting the colonised from the territory of time, Bhudev's uchronia is equivalent to the excruciating infiltration of the colonised into the domain of exile beyond the temporal frontier. Denied time, yet compelled into the production of autonomy through the only means available – uchronia – the colonised cannot escape the condition of their subjection, even if they have somehow retained the capacity to narrate themselves into history through the mode of visionary dream.

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Notes

1. (Ed.) Pramathanath Bishi. *Bhudev Rachanasambhar* [The Collected Works of Bhudev] (Mitra and Ghosh, B.S.1375, 1968, Kolkata), pp. 341-74. All Bhudev quotes in this essay are from his text "*Samajika Prabandha*" in Bishi's compilation.
2. Charles Renouvier. *Uchronie: l'utopie dans l'histoire, esquisse historique apocryphe du développement de la civilisation européenne tel qu'il n'a pas été, tel qu'il aurait pu être* (Bureau de la Critique Philosophique, 1876, Paris).
3. For an account of alternate history as a genre, see Gavriel Rosenfeld, "Why Do We Ask 'What If?' Reflections on the Function of Alternate History", in *History and Theory*, Vol. 41, No. 4, theme issue on Unconventional History, pp. 90-103 (December 2002). For an account of Renouvier's work and similar 19th-century European-language texts, see Paul Alkon, *Origins of Futuristic Fiction* (Georgia University Press, 1987, Athens), pp. 115-18.
4. Tapan Raychaudhuri. *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal* (Oxford University Press, 1988, New Delhi), pp. 54-55.
5. Sudipta Kaviraj. "The Reversal of Orientalism: Bhudev Mukhopadhyay and the Project of Indigenist Social Theory". In (eds.) Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron, *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (Sage, 1995, New Delhi), pp. 278-79.
6. (Ed.) Pramathanath Bishi, op. cit., pp. 22-23, 40-41.
7. Reinhart Koselleck. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (MIT. Press, 1985, Cambridge), pp. 10-11.
8. Thomas Babington Macaulay. *Speeches*, Vol. 1 (Redfield, 1853, New York), pp. 260-61, 280-81.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Ramachandra Guha. "Confessions of a Coconut: Even If the British Were Philistines, They Were Gentlemen". *The Telegraph*, 21 February 2004.
11. (Ed.) Pramathanath Bishi, op. cit., p. 4.
12. William Jones. In (ed.) Sibdas Chaudhuri, *Proceedings of The Asiatic Society*, Vol. 1 (The Asiatic Society, 1980, Calcutta), pp. 206-07.