

# Deltas and Deities

## Landscapes of the Imperial Picturesque

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I would like to begin with two images. The second may be easily recognizable to the average student of European art history. The first image, less likely to be so, is that of a temple, located on the western ghat or bank of the Hooghly river or estuary of the Ganges, north of Calcutta, the thakurbari (family temple, literally “god’s house”) of the Bally *rajbari* or zamindari estate. For those less familiar with the term, the zamindari class was the intermediate, indigenous class appointed by the British colonial administration for revenue extraction at the close of the eighteenth century in India. Note the principal formal features of the temple: a strong central, Palladian element flanked by a symmetrical series of smaller shrines, laid on the water’s edge, redolently Virgilian as it sits amongst tropical palms. A strong formal parallelism can be drawn between this building and the next. The second image, of course, is that of William Kent’s “Temple of British Worthies” of 1734–35 at Stowe, Buckingham-



shire. The water on which Kent's building stands, the serpentine "River Styx", is artificial, a narrow channel cut out on the edge of the Elysian Fields of the Stowe gardens, manufactured by Kent, unlike the transnational commercial highway that was the Ganges river in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Despite the similarity between the two structures, it would be important at the outset to rule out any direct formal influence of the Stowe folly on the Hooghly temple, although both buildings can be offered as instances of the global eddies of Palladianism that accompanied Britain's rise to empire. My interest here rather is to examine the signification coevalness between the shift in economic systems and the transformations of religion in the socializing apparatuses of empire: the comparative framework that I wish to draw upon in examining the relationship between these two structures is therefore not one of genealogical influence but a structural one. The attempt here is rather to invite the reader to move her imagination to contemplate the strange linkages not only between what appear as the vastly different geographies of Britain, America and India, but also between aesthetics, economics and sociology.

The material presented here draws from a larger study on the aesthetic and the picturesque as features of the "imagination," an expansive faculty more and more brought under a regulative framework in this period, at the forefront of global economic expansion.<sup>1)</sup> Two arguments obtain from this study. First, that, if the broadcasting of the imagination as a positive faculty comprises the corollary of the so-called democratic revolutions of Europe, then the dual front of this secularizing transformation - the aesthetic and the moral - is fundamentally premised

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1) See Arindam Dutta, *Ancestralities: Nature, Architecture and the Debt* (In Progress).

on a transformed *financial* structure. The monopolies granted to the Bank of England and the East India Company following the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688 were economic vehicles designed to ensure Parliamentary suzerainty over the monarchy. This “democratic” triumph was premised on a singular financial entity which these monopolies were also created to service: the Public Debt. This first argument amounts to something of a prolegomena for the second: that is to say, if the tensions of British modalities of power in the financialized era can be said to be captured in the aesthetic forms and follies of the picturesque garden – Stowe being an example – then the Bally rajbari and its ilk offer something of its colonial counterpart: the parallel capture of the intense social upheaval driven by the financial restructuring of Britain’s Indian domains. The rise of the “aesthetic” in Europe, we will argue, offers the socializing complement to something like a restructured, lay *theogony* through which social sanction for new forms of native authority were derived for Britain’s revenue arrangements in India. It goes without saying that the determinants for these revenue arrangements were entirely formulated to address the financing of the Public Debt in Britain. What this paper seeks to do, therefore, is to describe the manner in which something quite secular like finance, more specifically, the expansion of the national debt in eighteenth century Britain, is in effect *premiered on* discursive apparatuses otherwise distinguished from the economic. The religious metamorphosis nestled within the Zamindari temples instantiate this premise.

Let us begin, then, with a passage from 1681, laying out an architectonic that already prefigures the course of the Parliamentary revolt to follow :

... now suppose, which God forbid, that the French were spreading

Canvas to land upon us; the question then is, whether any monies will be lent upon the Credit of the Act or not; and the Second Question will be, whether the body politick will not then be in a great Convulsion... our posture, at present is none of the best; certainly it is our own faults if it be not timely mended, before it be too late; for were our free Lands and Houses under a Register, the dangers premis'd, would speedily vanish; for then the Parliament for a present supply to set out a Fleet, might charge one Million on Kent and Sussex, another million on Essex and Hartford, and another Million on London and Middlesex, and the Credit of the Lands registered in these several Counties, would raise the Sum then wanting in a very short time, and might be reimbursed again by a draught drawn from the rent of the Counties of England and Wales, as the Tax upon the Lands becomes due; for it is certain, and will prove infallibly true.<sup>2)</sup>

The passage is from Andrew Yarranton's *England's Improvement by Sea and Land*. As we can see, the principal question under consideration here is Britain's financial wherewithal to wage war: against the French, to be sure, but more importantly, global war. At issue is the king's credit with international lenders, which is to say, what Yarranton is trying to vouchsafe is the collateral that the British monarch could draw on to requisition the finances to maintain a fleet of ships that would keep its global interests intact and growing. Yarranton's proposal is markedly Cartesian for its moment: that the national debt contracted for war be securitized against discrete quanta of revenue to be extracted from counties in peacetime: "one Million on Kent and Sussex," one million on Essex and Hartford, and so on.

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2) Andrew Yarranton, *England's Improvement by Sea and Land* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1681), 9-10.

Yarranton's presentiment of a great "Convulsion" lest the current financial arrangements "be not timely mended" would only come too true in the ensuing decade, when the erratic revenue demands of the British sovereign would indeed be the primary cause for his deposition. As it happened, Parliament's prevailing over James II depended significantly on the credit-worthiness of their continental backer William of Orange, whose significant landing armies were raised on the strength of strong financial support by Dutch and Jewish bankers such as Francisco Lopes Suasso. Paradoxically, Yarranton's prescriptions were realized by the insurgency against which he had warned. The 1688 revolution and Protestant invasion carried within it an imported financial order, borrowed both in substance and form from the extant financial mechanisms of the Dutch city-states.

The "democratic" emergence in Britain can thus be attributed to a dispute over two primary wherewithals of the state: one, the ground of making war, calculated against the financial benefits accruing therein; two, the reach of the financial mechanisms - the reciprocal relationship between debt and revenue - undergirding the authority of the sovereign. The resolution of this dispute in favor of Parliament entailed shifts both in the financial architecture of Britain and, as Parliamentary authority acquired discursive elaboration into the framework of "rights," an expansion of government into what Foucault called the *functions* of "pastoral power."<sup>3)</sup> Aimed at curtailing the power of the sovereign, the

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3) Foucault's description of this functional role centers — appropriately for the purpose of this essay — the transcendence of the ecclesiastical activity of the pastor beyond the ecclesiastical institution after its loss of vitality in the eighteenth century into a "new distribution" of power, "a new organization of this kind of individualizing power." Drawng from the erstwhile work of confession, "This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a

outcome of this restructured finance and the expanded pastoral field, paradoxically, was towards *greater* economic *expansionism*, a process that would inexorably realize itself in Empire.

The claim here – that the rise of “democracy” in Europe directly hinged on intensified colonization abroad – may appear counter-intuitive to most, if not exorbitant. To say the least, it deserves explication.

The curtailment of the monarchy rested significantly on parliament’s incarnation as an alternative locus of pastoral power, premised on an expanded realm of public “works” and “projects.” Daniel Defoe’s *Essay Upon Projects* of 1697, deriding the “projecting humors– where infinite projects were set on foot for raising money without a Parliament,” offers us a participant’s view into the relationship between commercial exploration abroad, the contingencies and exigencies of war, the new prominence of banking, and the system by which statutory patents and privileges became increasingly linked with the “contrivances” of individual speculation and invention.<sup>4)</sup> In the literature of the period, one discerns a new emphasis on the adjudicative procedures by which individual risk is indexed to “public advantage,” such that Parliament is increasingly foregrounded at the intersection of relations between investment, risk, and private returns, an intersection that is more and more identified with – indeed comes to define – the public good.

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form of power that makes individuals subjects.” Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Power, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–198*, Vol. 3, trans. Robert Hurley et al (New York: The New Press, 2000), 331. Also see Michael Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2009).

- 4) Daniel Defoe, *Essay Upon Projects* (London: Thomas Cockerill, 1697); also see the document ghost-written by Defoe for Robert Harley, Britain’s first Chancellor of the Exchequer, *An Essay Upon Public Credit : Being an Enquiry how the Public Credit Comes to depend upon the Change of the Ministry, or the Dissolution of Parliaments* (London: W. Baynes, 1710, 1797).

In Britain, the crux of this conflation of private return and public good, the coterminous rise of joint-stock company and democratic government, can be said to be vested in three privately-owned creditory monopolies, two of them newly created by Parliament itself to consolidate its debt, the last being reformed by a new charter with vastly reorganized powers. The two institutions are the Bank of England – founded in 1691 – and the South Sea Company, whose monopoly rights for commercial exploration to the west of Britain’s globe were garnered in exchange for loans to Parliament mandated at fixed rates of interest. The same conditions applied to the newly consolidated version of the older East India Company, increasingly exploited by Parliament for preferred rates of interest against the substantial profits accruing from Asia, extracted on pain of retracting its monopoly over trade to the east. The broad transformation here encompasses what P. G. M. Dickson has described as the five-stage, chequered progression of the Public Debt from 1693, the year before the Bank’s first Charter, when Parliament for the first time considered long-term borrowing to create a ‘a Fund of perpetual Interest’ – thus putting public finance on a constitutional basis, grounded in the Declaration of Rights – to the conclusion of the Seven Years War in 1763.<sup>5)</sup>

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5) The analysis in the following sections has been gleaned from the following works: P. G. M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England: A Study in the Development of Public Credit, 1688-1756* (New York: Macmillans, 1967); John Clapham, *The Bank of England, A History*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Bruce G. Carruthers, *City of Capital: Politics and Markets in the English Financial Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); J. Lawrence Broz and Richard S. Grossman, *Paying for Privilege : The Political Economy of Bank of England Charters, 1694-1844*, published paper, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, January 2002; John Francis, *History of The Bank of England from 1694 to 1844* (New York: The Banker’s Magazine, 1862), republished by *The Michigan Historical Reprint Series*.

The political upheaval at the end of that war, as we shall see, were to see drastic curbs introduced on the East India Company (the South Sea bubble having decimated the other institution), the new charter for the Bank of England making it the primary lending institution in Britain, not quite a national bank, but its close equivalent. A private corporation thus came to be the “author” of the public debt.

Over the next hundred years, the strengthening of Parliament as an institution and its power to spend thus directly drew form a triangulated arrangement of economic returns on wars and colonial expansion abroad, the cost of which was borne by advanced credit in anticipation of increased revenues. Through this tripartite ‘incorporation of the public debt’, the government centralized its sources of capital, dealing only with the Boards of Governors of these corporations to extract favorable terms when necessary in lieu of a myriad private investors, the same arrangement also enabling it to stay out of the onerous tasks of debt administration. In the initial phase, government debt to the South Sea and East India corporations substantially exceeded those of the Bank of England. The two colonial companies approximately held half of the public “funded” debt to chartered companies through the 1730s, buoyed by investors drawn by the double promise of commercial profits abroad and the security of regular governmental payments.<sup>6)</sup> By 1713, the debt had reached six times the amount of annual revenues, by 1742, eight.<sup>7)</sup> Between 1755, the year of the onset of the Seven Years’ War, and 1783, the conclusion of the first eight years of the war with America, the

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6) See Fig. 2, “Government Debt to Chartered Companies as a Share of the Funded Debt, 1694-1786”, in Broz and Grossman, *Paying for Privilege*.

7) David Stasavage, *Public Debt and the Birth of the Democratic State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 77.



National Debt in England grew from around £72 million to £262 million.<sup>8)</sup>

Nonetheless, the inherently inflationary nub of this arrangement at home - in order to shore up Parliament's pastoral power, more public works become necessary, therefore involving more and more borrowing - inevitably produced a dilemma, since the parliamentary revolution had been wrought precisely to *lower* the fiscal demands of the state. The political paradox faced by Parliament is emblematic of the many bourgeois revolutions to come: the revolution for more representation against taxes enjoins greater taxes to defend this representative power. The recourse out of this paradox would involve a series of devices that were progressively formalized through the course of the eighteenth century. The principal response can be encapsulated under the strategy somewhat already presaged by Yarranton, with the enhanced expectation of revenue upon the provinces launching what has been described as the "agricultural revolution" of the eighteenth century. This revolution comprised, on the one hand, the exponential expansion of the acreage under cultivation both in Britain and in the Americas, and on the other, the increased sophistication of the financial tools and instruments of risk required to develop productivity and markets.

The key to increased productivity and the stabilization of risk also involved a greater emphasis on the legal apparatuses of ownership, obtained through the exhumation and exponentially greater use of an ancient, seldom-used Manorial right dating back to the Norman conquests, that of *enclosure*. The new statutes of representation established in the

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8 ) For a comprehensive history see J. J. Grellier, *The History of the National Debt from the Revolution in 1688 to the Beginning of the Year 1800 ; with a preliminary Account of the Debts Contracted Previous to that Era* (London: John Richardson, 1810);

new “Bill of Rights”, with its requisite opposition to taxation by royal prerogative, also transferred the adjudicatory power over land rights to Parliament, thus creating its key bargaining chip in both its political and financial autonomy. Consequently, more and more land previously described under the “Commons” came under the exclusive proprietorship of land-owners. Against the maximized, consolidated, “absolute” calculus of debt, the rate of enclosures accelerated to a frenetic pace by the end of the Seven Years War. Between 1764 and 1844, more than 4000 of the 8500 parishes that were “open” at the time of the Reformation were enclosed under the common field system.<sup>9)</sup> The Napoleonic Wars of 1812-1815 resulted in the enclosure of an additional two million acres of land. The expanded pace of tillage, as we can see, is exactly coterminous with the expansion of the public debt.

The technological innovations that so defined – in Whiggish myth – Britain’s “agricultural century” were thus expressly *effects* of this increased financial premium placed on land, whose obverse was the rhetoric of popular sovereignty represented in a new interwoven discourse of charters and rights. The expansion of individual property in land in the eighteenth century was in *fact a divestment away from it*; land was not the basis of capitalist accumulation, its “substance” was in fact the collateral for its conceptual expansion.

The picturesque sensibility in the garden design of this period can be seen as an index – wrought within the discourses of sensibility and beauty – of this very same political and economic upheaval revolving around questions of access, ownership and taxation in land. Stowe’s Temple of

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9) Thomas Edward Scrutton, *Commons and Common Fields, or The History and Policy of the Laws relating to Commons and Enclosures in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1887), 113.

British Worthies is, in this context, a conspicuous testimony to the paradox of representation and taxation that we have identified above. William Kent built the Temple of British Worthies at Stowe after Burlington had turned down a similar design for Chiswick. The Stowe Temple was commissioned by its owner, the Whig Viscount Cobham – Burlington’s political ally – to demonstrate his antagonism towards Robert Walpole, Britain’s first Prime Minister. Their antipathy stemmed from Walpole’s effort to pass the Excise Bill of 1733, a measure aimed at diversifying government revenues from its dominant reliance on landed property to inland duties on commodity imports such as tobacco and wine. Until that point, Excise duties were levied dominantly for East India Company products: tea, chocolate, and coffee. The extension of revenue extraction into trades represented by the Whig faction inevitably brought strong reprobation. The Excise Bill was subsequently aborted after a near commercial rebellion; one partisan commentator reflecting on the entire episode in the following way: “every good Englishman and Friend to his Country must be infinitely delighted to find the silly Denominations of Whig and Tory intirely sunk in our late Contests, and lost in the more seasonable Distinction of Exciseman, or no Exciseman.”<sup>10)</sup>

The Stowe Temple amounts to a veritable Pantheon. On the left hand side are placed busts of “Contemplatives,” the great intellectual and cultural figures of Britain: Inigo Jones, Shakespeare, Bacon, Milton, Locke, Newton and the merchant Gresham. On the right were ranged the “men of action,” explorers, commercial prospectors and their sponsors: the Black Prince, Elizabeth I, Raleigh, Drake. At the end were two contemporaries of Cobham: the since-forgotten Member of Parliament John Barnard,

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10) Cited in *The Country Journal: or, The Craftsman*, Saturday, April 21, 1733.



Stourhead, country estate of the Hoare banking family, 1740s onward. Pantheon, Henry Flitcroft, 1753-4. The Hoare bank was a strong shareholder in the East India Company.



Claremont, Surrey, John Vanbrugh (1715), estate of Robert "Clive of India". Landscape by Lancelot "Capability" Brown.



Claremont, Surrey, (1715), estate of Robert "Clive of India". Landscape by Lancelot "Capability" Brown.



*A General Survey of the Manor and Parish of Ampton, and of certain Lands in the County of Mag: and Par: and Timworth in the County of Suffolk, belongg. To Sr. Hen: Gough Calthorpe Bt. including therein certain Lands the **Property of the Earl of Cornwallis** and others, Taken in the Year 1792 by Thomas Warren, Bury St. Edmds.*



Garden of Chiswick House, London: View of the Pantheon, William Kent.

commemorated because of his support to Cobham in defeating the Excise Bill; and lastly, Alexander Pope, who would reciprocate this gesture through his panegyric to Stowe in his *Epistle to Burlington*. Robin Middleton and Marie-Noëlle Baudoin-Matuszek have offered a comprehensive genealogy of the “cult of great men” and their commemoration since the Renaissance, whether in hagiographic account, portraits or pantheons. Beginning with Petrarch’s *De viris illustribis*, this genealogy can be traced from its inception in largely private enclaves, reflecting individual interests, as in the case of the Cardinal Orsini’s *palazzo* at Monte Giordano in Rome, or Catherine de Medici’s hotel, or Richelieu’s *Galerie des hommes illustres* in the Palais Cardinal, to more public apparatuses such as Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon in Paris, the latter undergoing a fraught transformation under the directorship of Quatremere de Quincy and Rondelet after the French revolution.<sup>11)</sup>

By contrast, what marks the Stowe Temple as definitive of the modern, of the “democratic era” so-defined above, is not this passage from the private to the public sphere per se, but its explicit enunciation of a *factional interest*. Simply put, the Stowe epigraphs, fragments, ruins, fakes, allusions, foils and follies – and its dozens of imitators – were manifestly produced as an allegory for the conflict over taxation for which “democracy” is an effect. “Far from being one in which the aristocratic and bourgeois principles were deeply at variance, the Whig regime was founded on an assumed identity of interests between a managerial landed aristocracy and a system of public credit, in which rentier investment in government stock stimulated commercial prosperity, political stability, and

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11) Robin Middleton and Marie-Noelle Baudoin-Matuszek, *Jean Rondelet: The Architect as Technician* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 104–109.

national and imperial power.”<sup>12)</sup> If the picturesque landscape envisages a redesign of land, here *land is no longer the referent*; rather, it is translated into an absent content as collateral of a negative entity: the public debt. Its legibility has been reduced to a signifying cipher, an *anasemic* register opening itself up to radical validation by the supplementary textuality of finance. The patent anachronism of Britain’s “Augustan Age” – the recurrent allusions to Republican Rome, the invocations of Virgil, Horace, Cicero, Longinus (sometimes via their Renaissance displacements) in the rhetorical texts of this period – are affidavits to this anasemia: the proto-capitalist invention of phantasmatic “memories” – of a history – for social transformations that are manifestly without history, without precedent.<sup>13)</sup> The imperialist horizon of this anasemic field of speculation was is evident in the very layout of the picturesque garden: “You are there presented with a View of the different Quarters of the World, bringing their various Products to *Britannia*. It is a pretty Ornament enough for a Bridge, which, like the Art of Navigation, joins one Land to another,” says Callophilus to his itinerant friend Polyphthon, while contemplating Stowe’s Palladian Bridge in William Gilpin’s *Dialogue Upon the Gardens at Stowe*.<sup>14)</sup>

Compare, then, the above cited paragraph by Yarranton with the following description by Henry Pattullo, from the latter’s *Essay upon the Cultivation of the Lands, and Improvements of the Revenue of Bengal of 1772*:

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12) J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 195.

13) Jacques Derrida, “*Fors* : The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok,” in Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man’s Magic Wand*, trans. Nicholas Rand, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, xxxiv).

14) William Gilpin, *A Dialogue upon the Gardens at Stow* (1748) (New York: AMS Press, 1993), 37.

All authors agree, and the chart of the country undeniably shews, that the extent of Bengal and Behar is 600 miles by 300, which is not a great deal inferior to the dimensions of the kingdom of France. In that kingdom it is computed upon the most exact enquiries and observations, that only one third part of the extent is cultivated, in corns, in vines and other annual productions. That another third part consists in woods, forrests, large commons, and in vague pasture lands of small value. And the remaining third is considered to consist in mountains, morasses, with other grounds which cannot be cultivated, also in what is taken up by cities, towns, villages with high roads, lakes, brooks and rivers. Perhaps likewise there would be no great error in supposing the territorial divisions in Britain to bear to each other in much about the same proportions-It may, therefore, perhaps be reasonable to suppose, that one third part consists in rivers, brooks, lakes, and canals- that another third part consists in lands which are actually in culture, and that the remaining third consists at present in woods, forests, and in lands of different kinds, which frequent disturbances have rendered uncultivated: all which last third part may again be brought into cultivation, and no doubt will in time be so, provided proper measures are taken.<sup>15)</sup>

Pattullo's document represents the first systematic attempt to take cognizance of the territory of Bengal after the East India Company's acquisition of the right to its Dewani -its revenue rights on behalf of the Mughal emperor - in the aftermath of the Seven Years War of 1756-1763, which made it the de facto government in the region. It would be important to point out that the Seven Years' War was capitalism's first

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15) Henry Pattullo, *An Essay upon the Cultivation of the Lands, and Improvements of the Revenues of Bengal* (London: T. Becket, 1772), 2-3.

World War, fought as ardently along the expanses of Bengal and the Deccan in India – where Robert Clive made his mark – as along the banks of the Allegheny and Ohio rivers – where a young Virginian officer named George Washington first saw action – in addition to the European mainland. Pattullo’s description above can thus be seen to be driven by the need to reconcile the *terra incognita* of Bengal with some recognizable modality of ascertaining its productive value. What emerges is a purely geometric description: Pattullo’s Bengal is a rectangle, 600 X 300 miles – with shades of Louix XV’s *pre carré* – an area more or less equal to that of France, and like which one third of which is *assumed* to be comprising of rivers, agriculture, and forests. The geometrical conceit reveals the dearth in the Company’s cognitive comprehension, of either the geographic or the economic elements of the land whose governance it had inherited. The comparison to France, inasmuch as it offers a quantitative parallel, is more an evidence of Patullo’s – and the Company Board’s – intellectual debt to the Physiocrats Turgot and Mirabeau, particularly Quesnay’s *Tableau Economique*, which had been translated into English six years before. That British appraisers were implicitly referring to French models of estimation when confronted with unmapped territory such as Bengal, in a sense, demonstrates the degree to which the extremely complicated tenurial – and mostly untheorised – arrangements of British land-ownership were themselves of little help in this regard. (Adam Smith’s description of this intricacy as fundamentally irrational and atavistic in the well-known chapter on Rents in the *Wealth of Nations* was still a few years into the future.)

What this Cartesian calculation also brought into the fray was an inordinate emphasis in the Bengali context on the question of settling land assessments in “perpetuity,” a theoretical premise whose provenance



derived strongly from the emphasis on “systems” in mid-eighteenth century Europe.<sup>16)</sup> “Perpetuity” appears repeatedly in a series of tracts published in the 1770s referring to subjects as varied as trade rights and agricultural tithes. It comprises the principal argument toward which Alexander Dow’s *Enquiry into the State of Bengal to his History of Hindostan*<sup>17)</sup> is directed, in terms of its proposals to restore “that Kingdom to its former Prosperity and Splendour”, as also in Pattullo’s *Essay*, “Mr. Dow is greatly in the right in recommending the disposal of these lands in *perpetual* property; for no measures can so effectively ensure good culture and improvements, as the assured possession in *perpetuity*...” The emphasis on perpetuity was at the core of Cornwallis’s Permanent Settlement Act of Bengal of 1793, enacted with the objective of promulgating “assessment for ever,” the “permanent” rentiership which in Ranajit Guha’s memorable words, constituted an inordinately “long lease- matched by an exceptionally prolonged gestation,” and was to “remain in force for one hundred and sixty years” until Indian independence,<sup>18)</sup> and which would have an afterlife in post-independence India in the landowner alliances that would scuttle the first, “socialist” phase of land reform.

What is critical to emphasize here is the *ancillary structure* of the Company’s emphasis on “perpetuity” in Bengal to the *infinitezation* – the growth of borrowed principal beyond the finite means to repay – of public

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16) See Jessica Riskin, “The ‘Spirit of System’ and the Fortunes of Physiocracy,” in Margaret Schabas and Neil De Marchi, *Oeconomies in the Age of Newton* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

17) Alexander Dow, *The history of Hindostan: from the death of Akbar, to the complete settlement of the empire under Aurungzebe. To which are prefixed, I. A dissertation on the origin and nature of despotism in Hindostan. II. An enquiry into the state of Bengal*, 3 volumes (London: T. Becket and P. A. de Hondt, 1772).

18) See Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

debt in Britain. Assessment “for ever” in Bengal was a patent displacement of the perpetuity of debt in the City of London. This ancillary character was realized through the various contradictions and crises that define Parliament’s relationship to the Company throughout the latter’s monopolistic tenure, culminating with the Mutiny of 1857 when monopoly was finally revoked. The political contradictions that this arrangement threw up between Parliament’s claims as a “representative” body and the financial conditionalities essential to its authority were patent in its capricious dealings with the East India Company. On the one hand, the tendency to treat the trade with India as a cash cow – without the political cost of taxes at home – led to increased borrowing from the Company, directly brooking the Company’s greater rapacity in the East. At the same time, this costless access to credit left the British state vulnerable to international military confrontations provoked by the Company in its headlong pursuit for colonial territory. The high principal of the Company’s loans increasingly led to its perception as collateral – both in popular opinion and in the eyes of the Company Nabobs, to opposing argument – against frequent calls to military intervention on its behalf. Parliament’s vulnerability on this score became patent at the conclusion of the Seven Years War when public sentiment significantly turned against the Company. The perception was that lives and money had been inordinately risked in the British state’s commitment to war in India, that the Navy (and the Exchequer) had been unnecessarily employed at a time of severe military and monetary pressure upon the state to mostly benefit the shareholders of a private company. The resulting recriminations resulted in Parliament’s curb upon the Company’s influence, with the Bank of England now appointed as sole lender. Concurrently, the House of Commons used the threat of retraction of the Company’s monopoly to

significantly reduce the interest rate on its outstanding loans. We do not have the space in this article to detail the internecine dynamics that here intruded between the Houses of Commons and Lords and the King as well as the returned East India Nabobs, its Board, its investors, as well as other chartered trade corporations, but Karl Marx's estimation of this moment a century later still reads as astute:

The events of the Seven-Years-War transformed the East India Company from a commercial into a military and territorial power. It was then that the foundation was laid of the present British Empire in the East. Then East India stock rose to £263, and dividends were then paid at the rate of 12 ½ per cent. But then there appeared a new enemy to the Company, no longer in the shape of rival societies, but in the shape of rival ministers and of a rival people. It was alleged that the Company's territory had been conquered by the aid of British fleets and British armies, and that no British subjects could hold territorial sovereignties independent of the Crown. The ministers of the day and the people of the day claimed their share in the "wonderful treasures" imagined to have been won by the last conquests. The Company only saved its existence by an agreement made in 1767 that it should annually pay £400,000 into the National Exchequer.<sup>19)</sup>

It was from this transformed relationship of debt in the creation of a "people" or of a nascent popular sovereignty that we see the kind of increased Parliamentary oversight over the Company's affairs that was to culminate in the legalized rapacity implied in the quest for a "perpetual"

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19) Karl Marx, "The East India Company—Its History and Results," London, Friday, June 24, 1853 (first published in the New York Daily Tribune, July 11, 1853), MECW, Volume 12, 121-2.

landed arrangement on the one hand, and on the other, the successive impeachments of Clive and Hastings.<sup>20)</sup> Certainly, with the loss of the American colonies, this process of oversight would become more fraught. The tensions that become patent in the 1780s are pronounced for their implications for British governance as much *at home* as abroad. Edmund Burke's articulate censure of the Company's affairs - and of Parliamentary complicity and abeyance in the same - in his speech supporting Fox's East India Bill, for instance, makes a labored attempt to distinguish between "the *chartered* rights of men" and the "(natural) rights of men," a distinction which in his eyes the Company's supporters were ever willing to muddy, drawing on the fact that *both* Parliament and the Company drew their privileges from royal charter. "*Magna Charta* is a charter to restrain power, and to destroy monopoly. The East India charter is a charter to establish monopoly, and to create power."<sup>21)</sup> The willful conflation between corporate body and representative body by the Company's agents, in this sense, drew on a real blurring of political power given the pressures and influence that could be mutually brought to bear between Parliamentary debt, Bank of England debt, and East India Company debt, given the pressures and influence that each could bring on the other. To say the least, the isomorphism in the principle of limited representation manifested in each was pronounced, and indeed was exploited / foregrounded by the Company's advocates by bringing its privileges within the sphere of "rights."

Burke's invocation to Parliament to act as the guarantor of "natural right" thus distinctly turned on the eighteenth century logic of

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20) See for instance C. H. Philips, "Clive in the English Political World, 1751-64," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3-4, 1948.

21) Burke, ... *Fox's East India Bill*, 6.

“improvement” or the expansion of pastoral power: as opposed to the private profits generated by the debt sold by other corporate bodies, parliamentary taxation is justified in that it in principle takes on the ancient role of “retributory superstition” manifested in the person of the monarch, in the carrying out of “works” that benefit the people as a whole. In the following paragraph, Burke is pointing to the difference therein between the Company’s extractions of revenue from India and Parliament’s role likewise in Britain. What is crucial to observe is the manner in which the subsumption of “natural right” into the fiscal systems generated by public debt produces a representative body - Parliament - as its *alibi*, the latter instantiated on the ground through the proliferation of what Foucault would describe as *dispositifs* or apparatuses. The Company claims its rights *in Britain*, but its fall into despotism as the *de facto* government of India stems from its charter to produce profits for interests that lie elsewhere. Thus,

Every rupee of profit made by an Englishman is lost for ever to India. With us are no retributory superstitions, by which a foundation of charity compensates, through ages, to the poor, for the rapine and injustice of a day. With us no pride erects stately monuments which repair the mischiefs which pride had produced, and which adorn a country out of its own spoils. England has erected no churches, no hospitals, no palaces, no schools; England has built no bridges, made no high roads, cut no navigations, dug no reservoirs.<sup>22)</sup>

As is well known, the Burkean ethos - at the cusp of the French revolution and in the shadow of the American one - does not favor popular sovereignty. Parliament’s “representative” power lies in its

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22) *Mr. Burke’s Speech on the 1st of December 1783... on Mr. Fox’s East India Bill* (London: J. Dodsley, 1784), 31.

reprising of a traditional paternalism: the “retributory superstitions” and “pride” which in the long run repair the injuries violently wrought by power at the juncture of its establishment. “Natural right” has as its counterpart the responsibilities embedded in tradition and natural law: parliamentary legitimacy can only be brooked by its assumption of a pastoral function. “We do indeed represent, by the knights of the shires, the landed interest. By our city and borough members we represent the trading interest; we represent the whole people of England collectively.”<sup>23)</sup> In Britain, the expanded parliamentary assumption of public debt puts this pastoral ability at risk by substituting the old landed basis of power relations – Hume’s triad of “nobility, gentry and family– a kind of independent magistracy in a state, instituted by the hand of nature”<sup>24)</sup> – by a new set of commercial interests whose ascendance drew on speculative scrips of commercial paper. For Burke, the Company’s conduct in India, in its indifference towards the establishment of apparatuses, in this sense *epitomizes* the inveteracy of the depredations wrought by these new interests when left to their own devices.

It is this spectre of commercial authority superseding the “institutes” of moral law, an upside down condition where the “whole exterior order of its political service is carried on upon a mercantile plan and mercantile principles– a state in the disguise of a merchant,”<sup>25)</sup> that we see Burke’s

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23) Edmund Burke, “Speeches on the Impeachment of Warren Hastings,” Fourth Day of Reply, Thursday, 5<sup>th</sup> June, 1794, *The Works*, Vol. III (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1857), 154.

24) David Hume, “Of Public Credit,” q. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, 203. For a general treatment of Burke’s relationship to debt, see chapter 10, “The political economy of Burke’s analysis of the French Revolution.”

25) Edmund Burke, “Speech in Opening the Impeachment [of Warren Hastings],” First Day, Friday, February 15, 1788, *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, Vol. IX (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1881), 350.

exposition of law as divine covenant, and of power itself as *subject to* rather than author of law.<sup>26)</sup> The “retributory superstitions” by which ancient despots compensated for their excesses still evince an acknowledgement of the primacy of this covenant; by contrast, the “arbitrary” despotism of the Company in India – as in the new constitutional fervor on the continent – acknowledges no such prior, “primeval, indefeasible, unalterable” basis of law.<sup>27)</sup> This theme is reprised throughout Hasting’s seven-year prosecution, its career exactly straddling the turbulent years of the French revolution, thus offering a companion archive to the *Reflections*.

At issue was Hastings’s claim that the extant practices of government in India presumed a necessary despotism – Burke’s distaste for this presumption is clear in the following characterization – “that actions in Asia do not bear the same moral qualities which the above actions would bear in Europe- [tantamount to] a plan of *geographical morality*, by which the duties of men,... are not to be governed by their relation to the great Governor of the Universe,- [but] as if, when you have crossed the equinoctial, all the virtues die, as they say some insects die when they cross the line-”<sup>28)</sup> The emphasis on the great Governor – an epistemic concept in the distinct shadow of Newton and Descartes – explicitly positions the state as an *posteriori* predicate of a more primal ordination of law. In citing the *extant* corruption and collapse of the state in India as

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26) For a study of the history of natural law, see A. P. d’Entreves, *Natural Law : An Introduction to Legal Philosophy* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1951, 1972).

27) Edmund Burke, “Speech in Opening the Impeachment [of Warren Hastings],” Second Day, Saturday, February 16, 1788, *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, Vol. IX (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1881), 459.

28) Burke, Second Day, Saturday, February 16, 1788, 447–8.

occasion for his own despotism, it is this prior suzerainty that Hastings had abrogated by the Company's "arbitrary" assumption of sovereignty. In both his 1788 and 1794, speeches, Burke refers Parliament to the "institutes" of Akbar, Timur and Islamic law, emphatically asserting that the statutes of Islam and the East even more enjoin the king to acknowledge this primacy, "that there is not a trace of sovereignty in them- they are, to all intents and purposes, mere subjects,"<sup>29)</sup> and that Islamic "law [was] enforced by stronger sanctions than any law that can bind a Christian sovereign- Their law- given by God- has the double sanction of law and religion."<sup>30)</sup>

Let him run from law to law; let him fly from the common law and the sacred institutions of the country in which he was born; let him fly from acts of Parliament, from which his power originated; - Let him fly where he will, from law to law; law, I thank God, meets him everywhere- I would as willingly have him tried by the law of the Koran, or the Institutes of Tamerlane, as on the common law or statute law of this kingdom- In Asia as well as in Europe the same law of nations prevails- Asia is enlightened in that respect as well as Europe.<sup>31)</sup>

This isomorphism leads Burke to make a distinction between "an abject and barbarous populace- [the] gangs of savages like the Guaranies and Chiquitos" to be found in the Amazon, presumably immured within a state of nature, as opposed to the complex apparatuses of power already extant in India, with formal hierarchies composed of "the chiefs of tribes

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29) Edmund Burke, "Speeches on the Impeachment of Warren Hastings," Third Day of Reply, Friday, 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1794, *The Works*, Vol. III (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1857), 8.

30) Burke, Second Day, Saturday, February 16, 1788, 463.

31) Burke, Second Day, Saturday, February 16, 1788, 480-1.



and nations- an antient and venerable priesthood- a nobility of great antiquity and renown- a multitude of cities- merchants and bankers, individual houses of whom have once vied in capital with the Bank of England, whose credit had often supported a tottering state.”<sup>32)</sup> A strong distinction therefore avails between colonialism in America and colonialism in India: the former pertains to the pure extraction of resources, the latter implicitly despoils the Westphalian accord between nations. Indeed, Burke follows through with a series of identifications between Indian potentates and European states, comparing India with the German “nation,” equally fragmented into multiple principalities, bishoprics, and duchies, but a coherent nation nonetheless. Thus “the Nabob of Oude might stand for the King of Prussia,” Arcot could be compared to the Elector of Saxony, Cheyt Singh of Benares with the Prince of Hesse, and “the Polygars and the northern Zemindars- might well class with the rest of the Princes, Dukes, Counts, Marquisses, and Bishops in the [German] empire.” European feudalism is thus equated with the political arrangements of the late Mughal Empire. The rhetorical force of Burke’s obdurate comparison between Indian and European polities draws on a subtext that runs continuously through his extensive study and speeches on India: to countenance the despotic depredations of a commercial entity such as the East India Company in India, with its “extinction of the native landed interest”<sup>33)</sup> is eventually to concede similar erosions of pastoral power in Europe (a premonition only confirmed in Burke’s eyes by the Jacobin purges a few years later).

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32) Burke, ... *Fox’s East India Bill*, 14.

33) Edmund Burke, “Speeches on the Impeachment of Warren Hastings,” Eight Day of Reply, Saturday, 14<sup>th</sup> June, 1794, *The Works*, Vol. III (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1857), 357.

The Burkean invocation of “retributory superstitions” and the “great Governor,” despite the epistemological priority accorded to divine law, cannot be described as a theocratic preference. Rather, it speaks to the fraught, internecine epistemological debates on causality within the Enlightenment as new economic transformations rent the *ancien regimes* of the European continent. The devolution away from the unifying force of a single Christian macrocosm was first “produced” by new circuits of economic power – embodied in the rising discourses on “utility” – and then politically “declared” in the terms of the Westphalian peace, sequestering (single) church from (secular) state, and thus (sovereign) state from (sovereign) state. As Michel de Certeau has described it, the political and aesthetic debates that refer to the emergence of the autonomous “subject” in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, also subsume the religious field, “[they] turn... its structure... quite differently..., take them en masse into the political element.”<sup>34)</sup> “Charity” is thus transformed into “public works”, the basis for a prospective political economy; the “passions” are transformed from being the receptacle of religious revolution to the locus of an error, to be displaced by paradigms of “mores” and “behavior” governed by the science of sociology; doctrine is replaced by ethics; eschatology is reproduced in the new discipline of “history.” The political economy of debt is also a theologically encrypted one, a “move from a *religious* organization to an economic or political ethic.”<sup>35)</sup> The bodies which administered the Enclosure Acts of eighteenth century Britain continued to be the ancient institution of the church parish; notices of intention to enclose were by law required to be posted

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34) Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 158.

35) de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 147.

on church doors.

We are taking about the writing of Christianity into secularism; there is another side of it in the history of [art]: the turning of a Christian psychobiography into the secular psychobiography of the [creative] imagination so that Wordsworth rewrites Milton [and Dryden discovers Virgil]. In the opening of the *Prelude* is an echo of *Paradise Lost* when Wordsworth speaks to the imagination. And Blake rewrites Milton in the same way.<sup>36)</sup>

Burke's apprehensions are one of a piece with, as positive law increasingly appeared to subsume natural law, those we sense in the questions put to the great constitutional exercises of the eighteenth century over the ontological foundations of authority. His commentary on India explicitly offers us an allegory of the Eurocentric debates on causal foundations and the limits of freedom, of constitutional modesty, and the legal challenges thrown up as the question of sovereignty increasingly took on the expanded claims for representation from the of the debt.<sup>37)</sup>

Rather than seeking the restoration of the divine law of kings, Burke's

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36) Afsaneh Najmabadi and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Interview with Gayatri Spivak," *Social Text*, No. 28 (1991), 131.

37) Nicholas B. Dirks's *The Scandal of Empire* offers an estimation of Burke's discussion of sovereignty and statehood that might be considered parallel to this essay. Focused broadly on the Indian theater, Dirks's discussion on what he correctly describes as the ambivalences of state and sovereignty in Burke's and Hastings' practice patently evades the dynamics of finance and representative authority that were roiling both British debates on governance and European establishments at this time. Dirks's analysis thus ends something of a blunt charge: that Burke "resolved" these ambivalences in favor of a (constitutional) decisiveness that was ultimately "for" Empire. By contrast, the thrust of this essay, as will hopefully be evident, focuses on a different historical substrate: the structural transformations by which the architectonics of finance might be figuring questions of "state," "sovereignty," "religion," and "constitution" as fronts of socialization for a transformed economic structure. See Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Wealth* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2006, 2008).

arguments speak precisely to the protocols by which the so-called “secularization” of the Christian world would come to constitute less the eradication of religion than its allocation into a subsidiary form of legitimacy *for* the secular state. That the positive subsumption of law, with its inveterate tendency towards despotism, was triggered by an exorbitant *negative* entity – the debt – speaks to the core of Burke’s concerns of a *spurious* or defective secularization.

Thus, inasmuch as we sense an ambivalence in the Burkean corpus regarding the question of sovereign power over the ontological primacy of natural law and popular representation, the censure of Hastings and parliamentary complicity with the East India Company also offers us an affidavit to the adamant force of this broader transformation. It is precisely in the continuance of the Christian element within the secularized carapace of representative politics that a Burke can now equate the sovereign principle as embedded within both the contemporary threats to European jurisprudence and lapsed Islamic law in India. In not carrying out “public works” in India as return – undoing “retributory superstition” – for revenue extracted, Hastings’s primary crime, as agent of the burgeoning interest of international trade, was to abrogate the dissembled Christianizing force within what was promulgated the primacy of “reason” in enlightenment. In 1794, already in hindsight of the Jacobin purges, and with Cornwallis ensconced in Bengal, Burke could not be clearer: better a Cornwallis who, justifiably empowered by Parliament to make war, *loses* the war for the Americas than a Hastings, a non-military man, who, with no such representative sanction wins the wealth of the Indies for Britain. *Fiat justitia, et pereat mundus.*<sup>38)</sup> Reason without

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38) “Let justice be done, though the world perish” Statement by Ferdinand I, the Holy Roman emperor, in the sixteenth century. See Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 21.

precedent in Christian ethics was in effect a corruption of reason; the rationality exercised by popular sovereignty or a (chartered) parliament without such a ground is merely a front for commercial interest.

It is precisely to reestablish this dissembled – theosophical rather than theological – ground of reason over the new threat of financial primacy – under pain of parliamentary revocation of monopoly – that Cornwallis was dispatched to rationalize the Company’s revenue procedures in Bengal, an action culminating in the Permanent Settlement of 1793. What is critical to keep in mind here –this is the principal point of this essay – is the *transactional* element of dissembled religious ethics that undergirded the “responsible” exercise of rationality that was to culminate in Permanent Settlement. In subsequent sections, I will attempt to demonstrate that the religious function of the Bally *rajbari* temples – and many such hundreds of its ilk – need to be seen as the manifestation of this transactional element. To demonstrate this element, it would be important to return once more to Cobham’s Temple of Worthies.

Let us now recount that well-known excision of a phrase from the opening half-stanza from Virgil’s third *Georgic* written, in the original Latin, on the pyramid-roofed centerpiece of the Stowe Temple. I cite J. B. Greenough’s resplendent nineteenth century translation rather than the John Dryden version with which Cobham and Pope would have been familiar, for reasons that will become evident shortly:

I, Mantua, first will bring thee back the palms  
Of Idumaea, and raise a marble shrine  
On thy green plain fast by the water-side,  
Where Mincius winds more vast in lazy coils,  
And rims his margent with the tender reed.  
Amid my shrine shall Caesar’s godhead dwell.

To him will I, as victor, bravely dight  
In Tyrian purple, drive along the bank  
A hundred four-horse cars.<sup>39)</sup>



Belurmath, Bali, Hooghly district, West Bengal.



Rani Rashmoni Ghat, Barrackpore, Hooghly district, West Bengal.

Again, the imperial precinct of the new Whig imagination is evident. The phrase that Cobham elided in the Latin stanza was “... *templumque tenebit*”, “... *and he will have Temple*,” the religious reference being anathema to the Whig sensibility of history and historical precedent. “It is significant that no priest appears among the national heroes; the Whig version of history is Protestant history.”<sup>40)</sup> The chamfered pyramidal cupola capping the centerpiece of the Temple has an oval niche which contained rather the head of Mercury, pagan god of trade, profit and commerce. Dryden’s translation of 1697, “-Of Parian stone a temple I will raise-,” written in the immediate aftermath of the Glorious Revolution,<sup>41)</sup> likewise, excises the name of Caesar, speaking to the Whig’s other *bete noire*: the monarchy. If these excised phrases are an indication of the

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39) Vergil [sic], *Bucolics, Aeneid and Georgics*, trans. J. B. Greenough (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1900).

40) John Martin Robinson, *Temples of Delight: Stowe Landscape Gardens* (London: The National Trust, 1990), 91.

41) Publius Virgilius Mario, *The Georgics*, trans. John Dryden (New York: The Heritage Press, 1973), 75-76.

manner in which the new economic order sought to eviscerate the dual claims of crown and religion, then the pantheon of Worthies also speaks to a modality wherein the Whig interest placed the prerogative of sovereignty on the ideological bridgehead of an acquired “history.” A chiasmic substitution, in other words, where allegorical monuments citing the ancients institute a new epistemic authority for a transformed economic terrain: nothing emblemizes this substitution more than the paradoxical naming of Kent’s exedra as a Temple from which the very word “temple” is removed.

As opposed to this secular thrust of commerce, what interests me by contrast in Bengal is the *resurgence* of “ecstatic” expressions of religion as the displaced effect of debt in Britain. In other words, the reversion to religion was the activating basis of the colonial political economy in Bengal, and it is here perhaps that one can see the most prominent contrast of the Stowe Temple with the other temple – the Bally *thakurbari* – that we encountered at the onset of this essay. As opposed to Stowe’s excision of the theological element, entangled in the peregrine dispensation of the picturesque in Bengal, however, is the flowering, *without ellipsis*, of religion in the garden, a manifest deism botanizing in the shadow of a supposedly secular commerce. Like the picturesque gardens of Britain, the Zamindari mansions of colonial Bengal – on whose garden estates these folly-temples are located – also represent the distant spoor of British finance, being as they were expressions of the new revenue-extractive and plantation system set into force after Cornwallis’ landmark promulgation of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793.

The Bally *thakurbari* is not the only one of its kind. Over half a dozen similar structures dot the banks of the Hooghly, including the two built in the 1850s by the zamindari matriarch Rani Rashmoni on the opposite



Dakshineswar temples, built by Rani Rashmoni, 1847-1855, and domicile of the saint Ramakrishna, Hooghly district, West Bengal.



James Moffat, (1775-1815); "Pagoda at Tittaghur", 'Views along the Hooghly'. River Hooghly. Uncoloured aquatint with etching, Calcutta, 1798. Courtesy British Library Photo P232.



Friedrich Fiebig, "Hindoo temple at the banks of the Hooghly," Daksineswar temple under construction, 1851. Courtesy British Library Photo 247-1-3.



Frederick Fiebig, above: "Dwelling of a Native Gentleman near Calcutta," 1851; below: "Native garden scenery near Calcutta," 1851



bank: the first being the Rani Rashmoni ghat in Barrackpore, where the East India Company laid out its own picturesque gardens around its military headquarters; the second being the Dakshineswar temple in Belur.



Neo-classical Ghat pavilions, Panihati, Hooghly. Above: Trannath Bannerjee estate; Below: Mallik *bari*, Bara Mandir *ghat*, Sodepur, Hooghly district, West Bengal.

The architectural designs of these temples are hybrid and derive from varied traditions. The smaller shrines tend to be the two-tiered *chou-chālā* (hipped, twin-hut) temple-types, their roofs referring back to inscriptions from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. The tall, central spires are usually

composite *rekha* or *sikhara* type structures.<sup>42)</sup> European features intermingle amongst this stylistic potluck. The Rani Rashmoni *ghat* showcases a free-standing Palladian portico, as does the Puthia Rajbari in

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42) For a classification of historical types of Bengal temples, see Bimal Kumar Datta, *Bengal Temples* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1975); George Michell (ed.), *Brick Temples of Bengal, from the Archives of David McCutcheon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983). Also see Pika Ghosh, *Temple to Love: Architecture and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Bengal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Sankar Prasad Ghosh, *Hindu Religious Art and Architecture* (on temples in Nadia district) (Delhi: D. K. Publications, 1982); Asim Mukhopadhyay, *Chobbish Parganar Mandir* (Calcutta: Anandadhara Prakashan, 1971); P. C. Choudhury, *Temples and Legends of Bengal* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1967); Dilip Kumar Goswami, *Puruliya Mandir* (Puruliya: Choudosh Shaal Shahittyo Shonshod, n.d.); Mihir Choudhury Kamilya, *Aancholik Debota : Loksanskriti* (Calcutta: Bardhaman University, 1992).

Rajshahi (now Bangladesh). A striking Palladian feature in the latter is the double circular staircase at its rear, leading from the water-level to the main plinth. The emergence of this hybrid European type in the architecture of Hindu temples can be evinced as early as 1798 in James Moffat's painted impression titled 'Pagoda at Tittaghur' and included in his portfolio of 'Views along the Hooghly.'<sup>43)</sup> British travelers to Bengal habitually described these shrines as redolent of a picturesque sensibility: "Just below Barrackpore Park a group of twenty-four small Hindu temples, clustered together, form an imposing and picturesque object on the bank, as seen from the river- the Tittaghur temples- of comparatively recent date, having been built by a wealthy Hindu family about the close of the eighteenth century."<sup>44)</sup>

Like the Stowe follies, the Bally or Titaghar *thakurbaris* were not merely the architectural and iconic representation of the taste predilections of individual patrons. Their typological proliferation throughout the lower Bengal delta, along the Hooghly river around Calcutta - the capital of Britain's eastern empire - points to this aesthetic / religious efflorescence as a structural feature of a new political economy. To understand this structure, it would be incumbent on the observer to notice the very location of the temple, the *ghats* or landings that are a leitmotif of India's riparian landscapes. In that sense, these sites in the Ganges delta must be perceived as the counterpart to the landings of the tobacco, rice, and cotton plantations on the James, Ashley, Savannah and Potomac rivers on the Atlantic seaboard. In the slaving South, the economic vignettes of the river, the landing, the rice mill, the paddock

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43) India Office Library, The British Library, Photographs Collection, Folio No. P323.

44) Kathleen Blechynden, *Calcutta, Past and Present* (Calcutta: Thacker and Spink, 1905), 234.

were as much features of the landscape as much as the borrowed repository of the Palladian bridges and the Greek busts that were strewn across the picturesque plan of gardens created by the Anglophile plantocracy at Middleton, Magnolia, Shirley and Gunston Hall. In both the slaving South and in the neofeudal Zamindari estates of Bengal, these *ghats* and landings constitute *the dispersed - and disparate - infrastructure of a single economic system*: a single mode of economic circulation consolidated by the centrality of British finance and markets. If in America, the recognition of this economic dependence was sublimated through the aesthetic production of a secular “vista” - as at Middleton and Magnolia in South Caroline or Mt. Vernon and Monticello in Virginia - then in Bengal the function of sublimation distinctly retains its theological roots. In contrast to the parataxis of the economic and the *aesthetic* faculties - ensconced in the “speculative” element of the imagination - that becomes so evident in the picturesque estates of Britain and America, in Bengal the socialization of the colonial economy is transparently realized in an operative parataxis between economy and *religion*.

Take for example the *ghats* of the Mallik family mansion or Mallik *bari* in Sodepur, called the Bara Mandir *ghat*, again on the eastern side of the Hooghly, on the extreme outskirts of present-day Calcutta. The *ghat* stairs lead up to an open, neo-classical pavilion, walking through which, a few dozen yards along, one comes into the (remain- ing) garden surrounding the Renaissance-style mansion. The pavilion explicitly commemorates



*Chou-chālā* temples, Bara Mandir *Ghat*, Mallikbari, Sodepur, Hooghly district, West Bengal.

the *ghat's* commercial function: the work of shipping jute, rice and travel to the markets and mills of Calcutta from where the big ships sailed to England on this maritime transnational highway. On either side of the pavilion, and a few yards behind the waterfront, are symmetrical arrays of double-storeyed *chow-chālā* temples – quite like Stowe – six on each side, each here dedicated to a different Hindu deity. The symbolic element that links the new commercial interest commemorated in the pavilion and the “retributory superstitions” of religion – manifested in the heterodox stylistic effusion of the temples – sits right at the corner of each of these two arrays: a duo of British lions, a veritable gateway marking the estate as an outpost of an imperial system.

Like Ledoux’s toll-gates on the edges of Paris, these *ghats* mark the boundary between production and its valorization, between the hinterland and the market. The busts in the *folies* of rural Bengal are of Vishnu, Shiva, Kali, Durga. Unlike Paris in the wake of the Revolution, the Pantheon is here intact. If for the likes of Cobham, Pope, Pitt and Bolingbroke, “great men” such as Bacon, Raleigh, Locke, Drake and Newton appeared as the fantasmatic architects of a new mechanics of natural accumulation, the historical upheavals of capitalism at its periphery are worked through by dint of a resurgence of agonistic spirituality. The relationship between beauty and the sublime – the subject of hundreds of European tracts of the period, including Burke’s – finds a unique equivalent in the Bengali landscape in a correlation between rapture and devout communion.

That this reinscription of religion was not merely an organic manifestation of indigeneous piety is attested to by the Company’s policy. Aligned with the Whig interest, one privileging “representative” or “chartered” authority over religious sanction, the Company’s perception of

itself as an exclusively commercial entity initially led it to effect a ban on Christian missionary activity.<sup>45)</sup> In Bengal, paradoxically, this same disinterest in religion was the basis for its realpolitik, solicitous patronage of Hindu and Islamic religious institutions. The earliest coins struck by the British in India were *pagodas*, containing “some oriental characters stamped on it, and the representation of a Hindu temple.”<sup>46)</sup> For Protestant proselytizers like William Carey, this profanation represented an unspeakable outrage. The Company, he noted, had taken

... under their management and patronage a large number of Hindu temples. They advanced money for rebuilding important shrines and for repairing others, and paid the salaries of the temple officials, even down to the courtesans... They granted large sums of money for sacrifices and festivals and for the feeding of Brahmans. Salvoes of cannon were fired on the occasion of the greater festivals; and government officials were ordered to be present and show their interest in the celebrations. Even cruel and immoral rites, such as hook-swinging, practiced in the worship of the gods, and the burning of widows, were carried out under British supervision. In order to pay for all these things, a pilgrim-tax was imposed, which not only recouped the Government for their outlay, but brought them a handsome income as well.<sup>47)</sup>

Was it coincidence that the geographic tentacles of the expanding British economy in northern India were also coincident with the path of its

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45) This policy was subsequently reversed, again at Parliament's behest, in the renegotiated Charter of 1813.

46) Thurston, *History of the Coinage... of the East India Company...*, 12.

47) q. J. N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (Norwood, MA: The Macmillan Company, 1915), 9.

holiest river? Or was it that the sanctity conferred on rivers in ancient Indian culture was itself a function of their commercial and economic centrality? Was it that in the course of the many civilizations that flourished and perished on its banks, that the East India Company was merely the next one in line (as Hastings claimed)? Was it a matter of 'moral luck,' in Bernard Williams's term, that when the British sought to insinuate a new regulative order in India promulgated by the new secularizing "morality" of enlightenment, they met a society uniquely in a process of churning and laicization *more active* than the one currently underway in Europe itself, such that when one speaks of the religiously-inflected "Renaissance" of Bengal in the nineteenth century, with its mixed thrust towards and against a "modernity" so-called, the features of inheritance and invention are inevitably confused, evidence yet again of the double-barreled cosmology of the imperial footprint? Should we perceive the new upchurning of religion in Bengal, manifested in these folly-temples and their use, as colonialism's effect, as its efficient cause, as ideological handmaiden, as (displaced) symbol, as compensatory vehicle, or as the manifestation of a "retributory superstition" of the new relationship of exploitation between Zamindar and tenant? Is "religion" here merely the metalepsis - the substitution of effect as cause - of the "economic"?

To say the least, the word "religion" must be seen as determinist a term as the word "economy," words which, in a sense, the Enlightenment puts on the two poles of a dialectic: the latter controlling the rational and the former gesturing towards the extra- or super-rational. (For Burke and his cohort, the progressive infinitization of debt is to be declaimed precisely for its having a "metaphysical" power over government that appears to rival Christian metaphysics.) My response to the questions

above rather focuses on the frame of eschatology and temporality: which is to say, the degree to which the secular eschatology of debt and interest carried forth from London is seen to be, in the Bengal context, substantially transposed into the more archaic forms of eschatology concerning the debt of *existence* itself. In the last part of this essay, we will see the Brahmo Debendranath Tagore effecting precisely such a transposition. In other words, what concerns us here is the entanglement of two kinds of infinity, foregrounded in the parataxis between the *ghat pavilions* and the *ghat temples*.

To understand this entanglement further, it is perhaps necessary to revisit the circumstances in which the Company found itself with its assumption of Dewani, and the diffuse frame of piety whose supposedly unalloyed precedents Burke accused the Company of having flouted, and whose defective present Hastings claimed to have merely emulated. If “secularization” in Europe was the outcome of new economic forces insinuated by the Westphalian peace between states, the *laicization* implicit in the emergent Sufi-Bhakti cults of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century in India distinctly drew their strength from the disintegration of the Mughal empire. Far from being the outcome of the Mughal empire’s dissolution, as both Burke and Hastings portrayed it, syncretism had been in fact its operative hallmark, an effect as much of the multid denominational religious adherence of its diffused vassalage as of the signature dissociation in most of its tenure between scriptural and customary authority in state affairs.

Richard M. Eaton’s landmark study on the relationship between political and religious authority in Bengal under the sway of the Islamic empires in Delhi turns on a stark, hitherto little observed, conundrum. After the Arabs, Bengali Muslims are the second biggest ethnic group within Islam. The question that emerges is: why did Islam expand in such

numbers at the *periphery* – Eaton calls it the Bengal “frontier” – of the terrestrial empires rather than at its subcontinental center in Delhi? The paradox runs further: “namely, that mass Islamization occurred under a regime, the Mughals, that as a matter of policy showed no interest in proselytizing on behalf of the Islamic faith.”<sup>48)</sup> It is not within the scope of this essay to do justice to Eaton’s protean response to this question. But it is clear that the answer turns, on the one hand, on the *weak* construction of the Islamic – particularly the Mughal – empires, and on the other, the patterns of agrarian settlement by which the forested delta of the meandering Ganges was successively turned over to rice cultivation by waves of migrants.

Burke’s description of the Delhi sovereigns as “subjects” of Islamic law bound by constraints stronger than Christian kings, despite its reprimand of the plaintiff’s realpolitik despotism, was of a piece with Hastings’s assumption of Mughal sovereignty as a *centralized* polity. Confronting what appeared like an arcane mélange of tenurial arrangements on the ground, ill-equipped to either translate from the Persian (in which records were kept) or ascertain the sanctions granted by custom, Company officers were hard put by both predilection and circumstance to understand the hybrid arrangements by which Bengal had been brought under agrarian cultivation. Most of this economic expansion had been accomplished – with increasing intensity – only since the sixteenth century, much of it therefore practically under the noses of the earliest European factors in the region. In fact – Eaton argues – this expansion was given further stimulus by the monetary surplus occasioned

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48) Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 134.



by New World bullion re-exported through these agencies to India in exchange for Bengal's burgeoning output of rice and textiles.

The Mughal Empire's hold over this expanding frontier drew on the creative extrapolation of principles of sovereignty already established as its *raison d'être*. As is well known, the expansion of Islam's great terrestrial empires occurred *after* the decline of its various Caliphates. If the Ottoman Empire - the Mughals' contemporary - bolstered its claims to power by co-opting the Caliphate, Mughal sovereignty conspicuously drew its legitimacy from the piety accorded to Sufi saints. The successive inroads of the Turkic tribes of Central Asia into South Asia significantly exercised their institutional weight through the shrines and mosques associated with the charismatic power of Sufi holy men. Inasmuch as the Sufi order evinces a particular theological perspective, the extensive grants of land to persons variously described (in Mughal revenue records) as *pirs*, *hajis*, *shaikhs*, *dervishes* by the Delhi potentates and their regional governors - particularly the Mughals who considered themselves in thrall to Sufis such as the Chistiyah - defines them as much as a landed establishment. Combined with their charismatic power, the doctrinal learning of the Sufi holy men also conferred on them magisterial and adjudicatory roles, thus instantiating within the decentralized polity the inseparability of divine and temporal realms. This localized instantiation had the air of placing the distant edicts of Delhi within customary, such that tribute and devotion to the regional saint was seen and indistinguishable from the larger imperial norms of tenancy, revenue and tribute.<sup>49)</sup> Remarkable in this hierarchical delegation of authority - despite

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49) See Barbara Daly Metcalf, "The 'Ulama in transition: the Eighteenth Century," *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982, 2002).

frequent censure by various rigorist interpreters and movements who advocated a return to Shar'iah - was the Mughal's explicit dissociation between state and religion. As Eaton reports, Mughal regional officials, while themselves Muslim, were extremely circumspect about adjudicating Hindu disputes according to Hindu custom. Again, quite unlike the Ottomans, who despite their professed syncretism, converted the elite sections of their army - the Janissaries - to Islam, the Mughal army (and court) was multid denominational. It was the Hindu Raja Man Singh, one of Akbar's top-ranking officials and generals, who in 1590 commissioned the temple of Govindadeva in the Vaisnav holy land of Vrindavan, whose shrines had been devastated during previous raids by Mahmud of Ghazni and Sikander Lodi.<sup>50)</sup> Likewise, the Hindu Malla kings of Bengal, who built the extensive temple city of Vishnupur, contributed troops to various Mughal campaigns against the Afghan lieges of the Bengal frontier.

The expansion of the Mughal Empire - and Islam - into the Bengal interior extrapolated this weak arrangement into the novel circumstances of an as-yet economically unexploited but fertile frontier. Eaton describes two distinct stages. In the western part of the delta, established Hindu "capitalist" zamindars worked in tandem with Muslim contractors who employed Muslim labor to clear forests and cultivate rice. It was these established zamindars who were responsible for the wave of brick temple building - immersed in the Gaudiya Vaisnava system of goswamis and *gosains*, the Bhakti counterpart to the Sufi *pirs* - that occurred here during the Mughal period, as well as a series of inscribed mosques that testify to a similar dynamic occurring with Muslim zamindars. The second, distinctly different, phase can be said to have occurred in the eastern part

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50) Pika Ghosh, "Tales, Tanks and Temples: The Creation of a Sacred Center in Seventeenth-Century Bengal," *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (2002), 204.

- towards Chittagong - where no such agrarian order existed, thus occasioning a process of settlement and state building that inverted the sequence of authority. Moving further and further into the interior, Muslim holy men would clear a patch to build a thatched mosque, subsequently approaching the governor for a grant of land for the upkeep of the shrine. Having secured a grant against an agreed amount of revenue, it was then incumbent on these holy men to act as entrepreneurs to find the wherewithal and labor to clear the forests and bring them under cultivation. It is this new mobilization and immigration to the frontier that explains the much higher rates of conversion to Islam in this region, significantly above the rates seen at the centers of Islamic power where - prior to the Mughals - expatriate emperors and clergy often sought to keep themselves and their doctrine distinct from the indigenes that they governed.

Companion to the Sufi centers, the Gaudiya Vaisnava cult that emerged in Bengal after the passing of the saint Chaitanya in 1533 was an attempt at discursive cohesion in a dispersed, peripheral imperial arrangement, and as such its strongly agonistic character structurally reflected the “weak” relationship of state and religion in the Mughal Empire. The temple complexes that came up in the seventeenth century such as the magnificent brick temples of Vishnupur erected by the Malla kings were conspicuous attempts to win allegiance in this scattered organizing impulse.<sup>51)</sup> In many ways, the Vishnupur temples replicated the political economy of agrarian cultivation under the Mughal realm, while basing themselves in an entirely different cosmogony. As elsewhere in Bengal, the Malla kings came to power by clearing forests and turning

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51) Ghosh, *Temple to Love*, 19.

lands over to grain cultivation. As vassals, their power waxed with the expansion of the Mughal Empire, as they contributed troops to Mughal campaigns to quell restive satraps and Maratha raids. The building of the temple town thus in fact comprised a transformed but comprehensive economic system, where the populations of the forested regions of Vishnupur were gathered into royal retainership under the umbrella of a religious community.

In her extensive study of the history and myths surrounding Vishnupur, Pika Ghosh has described the temples and gardens of the town as created in the image of Vrindavan, the primordial pastoral landscape in whose orchards which Krishna spent his youth. This second Vrindavan was brought to fruition on the basis of a genealogical connection with the reinstitutionalization of the original. In Gaudiya texts, the itinerary of the medieval Bengali saint Chaitanya, in the early part of the sixteenth century, had been instrumental in the theological recuperation of Vrindavan after the despoliation attributed to Muslim raiders. “[They] describe how Chaitanya unveiled this now invisible site of Krishna’s pleasures to the devotional community once again. Specifically they attribute agency to the saint’s visit to Vrindavan in 1514, when he mobilized the reclamation of the land of Krishna’s biography, a restoration process that continued to the end of that century,” further institutionalized, as we have seen, by Raja Man Singh.<sup>52)</sup>

Chaitanya six appointed disciples, the *goswamis*, selected Srinivas Acharya as the third generation leader of the Vaisnava movement; a series of apocryphal events further describe the process by which Srinivas came to be the guru of Raja Bir Hambir of the Malla dynasty. The

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52) Ghosh, “Tales, Tanks, and Temples,” 203.

emergent sacredness of Vishnupur lay as much in this new – political – partnership as its geographic location on the “Nilachaler path” or “Jharikhander Path,” the route that Chaitanya took to travel between Vrindavan and the temple town of Jagannath Puri, another Vaisnava center. That the Malla kings drew on the charismatic authority of the Vaisnava lineage to set into play the economic processes of cultivation and revenue is evident from a hagiographic account of Srinivasa’s life, the *Bhaktiratnakar* composed by Narihari Chakravarti, c. 1926: “Without Prabhu, Vishnupur would be nothing more than the forest.”<sup>53)</sup> Reflecting their Mughal context, the architecture of the Vishnupur temples is strongly characterized by a canopied form borrowed from the congregational mosques and mausoleums of Islam: a “paradigm shift” in Ghosh’s account, from the Nagara style of temple architecture. (Colonial archaeologists and historians such as James Ferguson would be ill-equipped to grasp this hybrid genealogy, relegating them as aberrant forms outside the pure religious “styles” devised by their “comparative” discourse.<sup>54)</sup> These edifices literally symbolize the political status of the new kings, positioned as they were as the temporal representatives of a nominal empire, while the temple retainerships created a mediatory relationship with a nascent, vigorous, socio-cultural movement from below.

The doublet of temporal and theological legitimacy is literally demonstrated by the terracotta friezes on the Vishnupur-style Jagannath temple on the estate of the Puthia zamindars in Rajshahi district (in today’s Bangladesh). Again, the establishment of this zamindari is attributed to a gift by Raja Man Singh to the *tantrik* Batsacharya as the former campaigned against the recalcitrant Pathan jagirdar of Rajshahi,

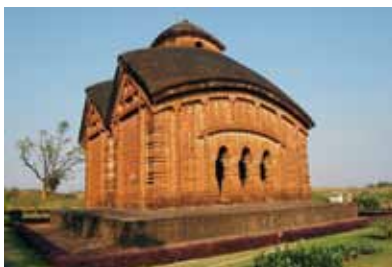
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53) Q. Ghosh, “Tales, Tanks, and Temples,” 196.

54) Ghosh, *Temple to Love*, see Chapter 2.



Rasmancha, Vishnupur, Bengal, commissioned by Bir Hambir, 1600 A.D.



Jor Bangla or Kestaray temple, Vishnupur, Bengal, commissioned by Malla King Raghunath Singh, 1655, AD



Madan Mohan temple, Vishnupur, built by the Malla king Durjan Singh, 1694.



Shyamrai temple, Vishnupur, 1643 AD, commissioned by the Malla king Raghunath Singh



Vishnupur temples.



Radhashyam temple, Vishnupur, commissioned by Malla king Chaitanya Singha, 1758 AD

Lashkar Khan. Confiscating the land of the Pathan, Man Singh offered the land and its tithes to Batsacharya, upon whose refusal the *jagir* passed to his son Pitambar.<sup>55)</sup> In the two seventeenth century friezes shown here, the lower frieze, pitched battles with horses, elephants and soldiers depict the family's contribution to various Mughal campaigns. In the upper frieze are serialized scenes of Krishna's many exploits and escapades narrated in the Mahabharata. The abutting friezes create an asymptotic relationship between two kinds of time sequence. It would be crude, however, to describe this asymptote as one of "history" and "mythology." Quite to the contrary, both narrative sequences summon from the faithful the same modus of reading, where the temporal actions of the zamindar or satrap, in service to a greater power, are annotated within the frame of practical ethics that define the agonistic exploits of the heroes of the Mahabharata.

The strong popular fervor that marked the Vaisnava movement in its broader denominations also incorporated non-Brahmanical practices of religion - the worship of local deities, nature spirits, animist icons, and so forth - as well as Islamicate features into the making of a *coherent and mainstream* theogony. Indeed, the movement gathered the fealty hitherto given to thousands of gods throughout the land into one reserved for the "classical" Hindu pantheon, with Vishnu at its center, albeit in multiple forms. The "syncretizing" effect of the new Vaisnavite field - one affecting as much its contending Saivite and Sakta sects as these were in turn influenced by Islam - must be seen as much as the emblem of the *systematizing*, cohabiting impulsion of the Mughal empire. Thus, even as "nomadic" practices of mendicancy acquired currency in tandem with the state's adoption of forms of profane spirituality such the "ecstasy" and

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55) Nazimuddin Ahmed, *Buildings of the British Raj in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press, 1986), 101.



Friezes showing scenes from the Mahabharata, above, and more contemporary exploits of the Puthia satrap, below. Vishnu temple, built c 1616 by Prema Narayan Ray, Puthia Rajbari, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.



Bhubaneswar Pancha Ratna Shiva temple, built 1823 by Rani Bhuban Maya Devi, overlooking the Siva Sagar tank, Puthia Rajbari, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.



Puthia Rajbari from the north, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.



Vishnu temple, built c 1616 by Prema Narayan Ray, Puthia Rajbari, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

experience of divine love engendered in *kirtana*, these practices were interpellated by a vigorous organizing network from above in the shape of





Dol Mandap, Puthia Rajbari, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.



Bhubaneswar Pancha Ratna Shiva temple, built 1823 by Rani Bhuvan Maya Devi, overlooking the Siva Sagar tank, Puthia Rajbari, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

the different religious centres and seats of goswamis or gurus, who in turn formed a governmental partnership with the new kings.<sup>56)</sup> Likewise, through their participatory displays of piety and their patronage of

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56) Sumanta Banerjee has speculated on the appending of the Radha myth to the Krishna myth as the insertion of a servile, subservient element. "Thus, the tenets and rituals constructed by the six Goswamis in Vrindavan which were institutionalized in the form of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, ultimately led to upper-caste hegemony over the masses of the socially and economically depressed followers of Chaitanya, who had earlier broken down the traditional order of social taboos, and could have posed a further challenge to the ruling Brahmanical establishment. It was necessary, therefore, for this elite to impose a religious symbol on these masses which they could internalize and which would enable them to play the required role of submissive followers. What could serve this purpose better than the newly reconstructed image of Radha in the texts of the Vrindavan-based Goswamis? Thus Radha was turned into a symbol of servility, all her attributes of unquestioning subservience to Krishna (no longer her *sakhi* or friend, but her Lord) upheld as the ideal qualities." Sumanta Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form: Essays on Popular Religion in Bengal* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002), 88. Durgadas Mukhopadhyay, *Religion, Philosophy and Literature of Bengal Vaisnavism* (Delhi : B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1990); for a Hegel-inflected description, which is the best that one can say about some markedly *post-colonial* writing on this topic, see Bipinchandra Pal, *Bengal Vaishnavism* (Calcutta: Yugayatri Prakashak, 1962).

temples tithed to the gurus, the “sub-contracting” rajas of Bengal were likewise instrumental in the processes of laicization already witnessed around the Sufi shrines.

In the eighteenth century, it was the braids of this laicized political economy that the East India Company, prodded by the financial demands of a Parliament struggling to establish its own sovereignty, apprehended as defective despotism. If the decline of power in Delhi had led to the increased autonomy of the regional governors – including Siraj-ud-Doulah from whom the Company seized the Mughal Dewani in the course of the Seven Years War – one also sees a comparable autonomy in the power of religious establishments in the eighteenth century. “In general, the religious leadership profited from the decline in central authority in the eighteenth century. This was true not only of the ‘ulama but also of the Sufi *pirs* of the medieval shrines who had continued to form the religious leadership-”<sup>57)</sup> The expansion of British authority in Bengal actively availed of the increased political autonomy of regional administrators, while turning it to an entirely different economic architectonic, one dictated from afar by the City of London. Thus, even as the Company moved to consolidate its revenue arrangements over the interior, the new class of Zamindars palpably established their legitimacy by incorporating the ethics of the old system.

The palimpsest of new mode of extraction over old is literally visible in the two temples of the Bansberia zamindari in Hooghly district. The zamindari was first acquired by Raghav Dutta Ray in 1656 during the reign of Shah Jahan. His son, Choudhury Rameshwar Dutta, was responsible for the richly-adorned terracotta temple to Ananta Vasudeva

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57) Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 25.

(an incarnation of Vishnu) that stands today on the side, built in 1679. As the last of the line passed away intestate, at the end of the eighteenth century, several *parganas* of the estate were granted by Warren Hastings to Nrisingha Dev - a “posthumous” heir suitably scrambled up for the occasion, *à la* the Louis Napoleon of Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* - who had made a map of the region for the Governor General. Within a few years however, Nrisingha Dev became a *tantrik*, and devoted himself to building a temple to Haneswari, an incarnation of Kali, next to the older Vishnu temple. After his death in 1802, the temple was finished by his widow Rani Sankari in 1814. Twenty one



Ananta Vasudev temple, Vishnupur style, in brick and terracotta, constructed in *ekaratna*, built in 1679 by Raja Rameshwar Dutta, Bansberia, Hooghly district, West Bengal.



Ananta Vasudev temple, Vishnupur style, in brick and terracotta, constructed in *ekaratna*, with Haneswari Temple in background, built in 1679 by Raja Rameshwar Dutta, Bansberia, Hooghly district, West Bengal.



Haneswari Temple, 1801-1814 Bansberia, Hooghly district, West Bengal. Built by the zamindar Raja Nrisingha Dev.

meters high, capped with thirteen turrets, and composed of a mishmash of influences, both Mughal and European, both its stylistic eclecticism and its contrast – both in architectural form and religious denomination – visibly speak to the transition of empires. In the transcendence of his temporal authority by his metamorphosis into thaumaturgic agent, the *tantrik* Nrisingha Dev speaks precisely to the manner in which the new zamindari moved to appropriate the carapace of the old, literally sublimating the new structure of (capitalist) accumulation by dint of the personal renunciation of worldly interest.

Nothing emblemizes this radically new structure of accumulation than the epistemic enterprise in which Nrisingha Dev had received his recompense as an informant: cartography. I remind you again of the ground of Pattullo's estimation of Bengal's wealth: "– the extent of Bengal and Behar is 600 miles by 300, [equal] to the dimensions of– France." This geometric estimation drew from what we may term the "architectonic" of finance – Yarranton being the precursor – where, under given climatic conditions, a given acreage may mathematically be expected to yield a certain return. James Rennell's cartographic surveys of Bengal, commissioned by Clive and Hastings – compiled in his *Bengal Atlas* of 1781<sup>58)</sup> – comprises in that sense an effort to reconcile that abstract financial architectonic with the empirical picture on the ground. Geometry is being filled in by geography. It is in this sense that cartography can be considered the counterpart to the picturesque, in that both genres of drawing negotiate the experiential chasm between a given visual field and an (*a priori*) epistemic expectation. The subtitle of Rennell's folio

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58) James Rennell, *A Bengal Atlas Containing Maps of the Theatre of War and Commerce on that Side of Hindoostan* (1881).

designates Bengal as a “Theatre of War and Commerce”; William Hodges’s invocation of a certain terroristic thrill in witnessing Hastings’ subjugation of Chait Singh, the Raja of Benares referred this cartographic rewriting to the imagination in the terms of the sublime. The apprehension of boundlessness inherent in the picturesque thus comprises the inexorable companion-piece to the totalizing finitude represented by the cartographic translation of Bengal into a “theatre”. Cartography and the picturesque represent two faces of the Cartesian coin. Operating as a dyad, map and painting precisely map the dissonance between geometry and geography, between the architectonic of finance, investment, returns and revenue on the one hand, and on the other, the contingent calculus comprising the morass of historically-derived land usage, the variegations of the administrative residues of the crumbling Mughal empire, environmental factors, and the geopolitical ambitions of contending European powers.<sup>59)</sup>

As we have seen, so long as the norms of tribute and revenue were followed, Mughal authority was *realized* through the charismatic power often accorded to regional governors and local zamindars. It is was this devolutionary arrangement, and the relative autonomy and uncertainty it afforded in terms of determining market supply, that Cornwallis felt most called upon to address in his “reform” of Hastings’s prior excesses. Indeed, it is clear from the correspondence relating to Permanent Settlement that the juridical framework of checks and balances that the Company moved to establish in the 1790s securely placed the “check” part of the equation

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59) This complementarity is evident in Hodges’s description of Benares’s architecture: “Major Rennell, however, entertains a different opinion on this subject... and I have too great a deference for such an authority, to be at all inclined to dispute it, whatever may be the claims to antiquity which are preferred in favour of this old city.” William Hodges, *Travels in India during the Years 1780, 1781, 1782, and 1783* (London: [J. Edwards], 1794), 59.

in the “geometric” or mathematical architectonic of finance as its epistemic precondition. It is from this epistemic standpoint that Baden Henry Baden-Powell, reprising the history of Permanent Settlement a century later in 1896, describes the Mughal arrangement – in its inability to determine the size of the economy as an abstract calculus – as evincing on the ground a lack of “control.”

[Mughal] treasury officials- only cared for the comparatively short list of “estates” and the total due from each. The local officials were soon completely atrophied or turned into the mere creatures of the “farmers.” They neither could nor would exercise any control over their proceedings. If the farmer raised the demand on the villages or committed extortion on his own account, no one cared. Had a local officer attempted to interfere, he would have failed: the farmer would have had his excuses ready; and the treasury, looking only to the safety of the stipulated total sum, would have sided with the farmer rather than with the officer.<sup>60)</sup>

In other words, if in the Mughal arrangement the “form” of tribute was (ideally) identical with the very structure of empire, then with Permanent Settlement the efficacy of this form is referred back to an extraneous, distant architectonic, the “price” of the intimate codependence between parliamentary system and joint-stock corporation. The “controls” pressed into force by Cornwallis Permanent Settlement, with its financial levers in London’s Square Mile, would thus attempt to superimpose a new map of maximized accumulation on the ground in Bengal, with the zamindars now placed as agents of a financial architectonic rather than of tributary government. The comprehensive demands thus made on

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60) Baden Henry Baden-Powell, “The Origin of Zamindari Estates in Bengal,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (October, 1896), 41.

agrarian production by the British assessment system were far stronger than the remote requisitions of the Mughals. “By 1799, there was a 37 per cent increase in the incidence of land revenue demand in the course of five years in the settled part of the district.”<sup>61)</sup> Within half a century, the settlements had changed the face of rural production, whether in terms of the technological means employed, the exponential consolidation of land under fewer and fewer owners, or the remuneration of labor invested

through rent and share-cropping. The effects of this absolute architectonic were tremendous. The fact that it was made “without any survey, and without any record of landed rights and interests... proved more fraught with evil consequences than any other feature of the



Above: *Thakur Dalan* or temple courtyard in Zamindari mansion. Raychowdhuri *Rajbari*, Baruipur, 24 Parganas district Below: *Thakur Dalan* or temple courtyard in Zamindari mansion. Gyne *Rajbari*, Dhanyakuria. Indo-Bangladesh border, West Bengal.



*Thakur Dalan*, mansion of the zamindar Trannath Bannerjee, Panihati, Hooghly District, West Bengal.

61) Chitta Panda, *The Decline of the Bengal Zamindars: Midnapore 1870-1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 11.

62) Baden Powell, *The Land Systems of British India*, Vol. 1, 289.

Settlement.”<sup>62)</sup> Its immediate effect was a significant rise in indebtedness and financial precariousness of the new zamindari class. In 1885, William Irvine, the Settlement Officer for Ghazipur district in Benares, estimated that since 1795 more than three-fourth of the land had changed hands, most of it from bankruptcies.<sup>63)</sup>

Like the new squires of Britain, the new “commercial” zamindars that arose in the wake of Permanent Settlement were dominantly not of the traditional elite; if they were, there was no mistaking the radically transformed market conditions to which they were now subject. In an economic environment of heightened risk, the reinforced religiosity that came to be embraced by the new commercial classes reflected as much their precarious economic status as their attempt to ground or re-situate their tenuous power in the discursive structures of the old empire. Rather than subside in the face of this secular extraction, temple-building on the zamindari estates recorded a dramatic upsurge after the settlements. In fact, most of the active temples of Bengal today – Kalighat included – were created during the colonial period, all of them without exception the outcome of zamindari *noblesse oblige*. The series of new festivals popularized during this time – Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Jagadhatri Puja – were also the creation of new patronage by zamindari estates, aligning their neofeudal power with manifestations of popular piety.

The layout of the Zamindari estates reflected the social tensions implicit in this putative alignment. Typically, zamindari families would pray in a temple located within the main courtyard of the house, ritually purified for the purpose, called the *thakur dalan*. Ensnared within the

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63) Bernard S. Cohn, “Structural Change in Indian Rural Society, 1596 1885,” in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).



neo-classical mansions preferred by these elites, the *thakur dalan* was typically a Renaissance ensemble. The Gaine mansion in Dhanyakuria, located close to the southern Bangladesh border on the Indian side, for instance, has a triple-arched *thakur dalan* on a plinth raised four feet high, the scalloped arches resting on Romanesque-type composite columns, with overlooking colonnaded balconies on the first floor. This stylistic arrangement may be considered typical: the mansion built by Trannath Banerjee in Panihati - again, whose *goswami* Raghunath Das is said to have offered succor to Nityananda, Chaitanya's friend and disciple<sup>64</sup> - exhibits similar features, with four arches instead of three. As such, they more or less mirror the spatial interplay evinced in the aristocratic mansions of the Bengali gentry in Calcutta.<sup>65</sup>

If the *thakur dalan* was exclusively devoted to private worship, public displays of piety would be performed at the folly-temples scattered around the estate, consciously positioned either in a prominent place of commercial traffic - the *ghat* temples above mentioned being an example - or a place of congregation, such as the village pond. These religious structures were not limited to Hindu zamindars alone. The Dhonbari garden estate (*bagan bari*) in Tangail - itself an exquisitely ornamented garden pavilion adorned with a large array of Corinthian columns - contains a heavily ornamented three-domed mosque with an open pavilion and *ghat*, strongly influenced by the Hindu *ghat* pavilions that we have already surveyed. For that matter, it is more the norm to find temples in Hindu estates dedicated

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64) Kamal Choudhury, *Chobbish Pargana: Uttar, Dokkhin, Shundarban* (Kolkata: De's Publishers, 1999), 217.

65) See Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism and the Colonial Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 156-7; also see Debashis Bandopadhyay, *Bonedi Kolkata Taar Ghorbaari*, photography by Alak Mitra (Calcutta: Ananda, 2001).

to several gods rather than one, reflecting as much the much the multiple denominations of the zamindari retainers and tenants. During festivals, large *pujas* or celebrations would be performed during the course of which the ryots and tenant-farmers would be entertained, clothed and fed. The temples thus partook of a dispersed architectural network whose stylistic continuity defined them as territorial markers - *folies* - of the extent of the Zamindar's domain: the ornamented gateways at the edge of the estate, neo-classical fountains, raised Nawabat Khanas atop which *shehnai* players laid down long melodies during festivities.

Various narratives associated with these follies inconspicuously reverted this transformed economic terrain to the shared rubric of archaic

custom. Just as the *chow-chala*, *jor-bangla* and *pancha-ratna* spires of Vishnupur invoked the image of a second Vrindavan, the temple-*folies*, gardens, or-  
chards of the nineteenth century zamindars also drew upon a widely intuited doctrinal



Above: The Kachahri building of the Dhonbari Nawab, with *Do Chālā* hut, mid-nineteenth century, Tangail, Bangladesh. Below: Estate mosque, Ghaznavi Estate, Deldua, Tangail, Bangladesh.



Mosque renovated in 1901 by the Dhonbari Nawab Ali Chaudhury, Tangail, Bangladesh.

immersion. Indeed, many of these gardens were pointedly adorned with flora - the *champa* tree, etc. - associated with Krishna, their horticultural element reminiscent of the juvenile god's cavorts in the mythic orchards of Vrindavan. In the seventeenth century, the legacy of Gaudiya Vaisnavism and Chaitanya's "Nilachaler path" running through the length of Bengal had lent to its landscape the redolence of a beatific, rapturous, ludic terrain. The zamindari estates of the nineteenth century distinctly drew on this mythic landscape, commemorating its apocryphal events both through built form as well as ritual participation in *kirtana* sessions.

Indeed, what is critical in Bengal is the degree to which the novice class of zamindars read their economic vulnerability as rendering them subject to the *same* cosmogony and the vicissitudes of fate as their villagers or tenants. Thus, if the mendicant Chaitanya's appropriation of *kirtana* assemblies with participation from both upper and lower castes "nurtured among the participants a sense of collectivity and camaraderie," what has been called a veritable "spiritual democracy" of sorts,<sup>66)</sup> the zamindars' patronage of and participation in *kirtana*, with tenants and share-croppers in attendance, palpably placed their power within a *shared* or porous cosmogony, albeit one in whose hierarchy they occupied a superior position owing to their power of better promulgating the cosmogony through ostentatious acts of piety such as the building of temples. Unlike the allusive, high-cultural, Latinate textuality of the European *folies*, the garden *folies* of Bengal were machines of mass socialization, actively moving away from Sanskritic or Brahmanical high-culture in order to vigorously identify with the practices of the below.

As Gautam Bhadra has pointed out, the cultural world produced by

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66) Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), 80-1.



Above: Frederick Fiebig, "Native garden scenery near Calcutta", 1851 Below: Ceremonial "duari" of Raychowdhuri family, Baruipur, 24 Paraganas, West Bengal.

the zamindars comprised of an amalgamation of two elements, "the classical or *marga* with the popular or *jana*."<sup>67)</sup> In this two-way process, it is important to understand that it was not just the lower orders who absorbed the classical doctrine in their own idiom, but also that the zamindars's power was also significantly exercised - for exactly the same reasons - by way of strongly absorbing the popular idiom. In other words, it was through the *participatory* rubric of *popular* religion that the most direct elements of "control" between financial architectonic and the distant peasant subjects of the City of

London was exercised. The new socius of empire was thus contracted in the swaying, whirling, ecstatic forms of worship,<sup>68)</sup> the *dhyan* (transcendence) and *maghnata* (trance) wrought in the follies of the zamindari garden. These new Vrindavans thus became sites where the

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67) Gautam Bhadra, "The Mentality of Subalternity," in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 63.

68) See June McDaniel, *The Madness of the Saints; Ecstatic Religion in Bengal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

## Deltas and Deities



Above: Nawabat Khanas, Gyne Estate and Ballabh estate, Dhanyakuria, Indo-Bangladesh border. Below: Family temple, Trannath Bannerjee estate, Panihati, west bank of the river Hooghly, north of Calcutta, West Bengal.

Above: Shrine to a deceased family member, Smriti Mandir, Mitra Rajbari, Ghotmajhi, Madaripur, district, Bangladesh. Below: Temple, Trannath Banerjee estate, Panihati, Hooghly, West Bengal.

secular cosmology of agrarian economics was handily codified as a lay theogony. The flip side of this piety was the exponentially increased phenomenon of mendicancy as a correlate of the rising numbers of a floating, dispossessed peasantry. For both the rural peasantry undergoing a forced migration at scales unprecedented in history and the financially precarious zamindar, the eschatology of the Sufi-Bhakti cults offered both sanctuary and sanction, thus absorbing the pressures of an exotically-driven economy within an indigenous biome.

In many situations, this apocryphal continuity was realized, literally, through the reappropriation of Mughal-era shrines. A widely prevalent tactic of appropriating the old legends was simply to build a new temple or mosque right next to the old. This tactic is evident both in Nrisingha Dev's Hansaswari temple - mentioned above - as well as the tall, neo-classical Shiva temple and five-storied grand *Dol Mandap* built at the end of the nineteenth century by the Puthia Rajas in Rajshahi. Another tactic of absorbing the past was simply to renovate older structures, such as is evident in the case of the Atiya mosque in Delduar, Tangail. Built in 1609 during the reign of Jahangir by the Afghan Sayeed Khan Panni - his father, Baizid Khan had received the family's honorific for having fought in the second battle of Panipat (1556) - in honor of the Sufi Shah Baba Kashmiri, the Atiya mosque has distinct Bengali features, as opposed to the strong Central Asian features of the early mosques built in western Bengal during the earlier Delhi empires.<sup>69)</sup> The mosque is a remarkable hybrid in its amalgamation of north Indian domes and the use of terracotta ornament that identifies it strongly with the Hindu temples built in the vi-



Twentieth century version of a Pancharatna temple, Trannath Banerjee estate, Panihati, Hooghly district, West Bengal.

cinity in the same period. Clearly availing of the same sets of artisanal skills and technology, the terracotta panels on the Islamic edifice can be distinguished from those in Vishnupur-type temples by its evident aniconism, as opposed to the narrative friezes of the latter which depict the exploits of the various gods. As the

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69) Eaton, *Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, 171-4.

lands around the mosque came into Permanent Settlement, the decrepit mosque was restored in 1837 by Rowshun Khatoon Chowdhurani, representing the new landed interest; and then once again by Abu Ahmed Ghuznavi Khan in 1909, with the assistance of the now significantly reduced Panni estate, this time commemorating the colonial government's new administrative interest in recuperating a secular "heritage." At each point, therefore, we see the same structure revisited by a distinctly new, ascendant interest availing of a distinctly different discursive structure of heritage.

The apocryphal recuperation continuity did not stem from the zamindars alone.<sup>70)</sup> By the late nineteenth century, for example, as adherents and descendants of the Gaudiya faith perceived their doctrine as increasingly corrupted and weakened by a mixture of Christian influence and new urban constituencies, one sees heightened attempts at textual redaction and scholarly collation. Rebecca J. Manring has written about the circumstances surrounding the publication of a tract called the *Advaita Prakasha* in 1896, attributed to one Ishana Nagara - a disciple and servant of Advaita Acharya, the elder companion of Chaitanya and universally recognized as the progenitor of the Gaudiya faith - who was described as having composed the work in 1568. As it so happened, the book had been written not by Ishana Nagara in the sixteenth century but

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70) Scholars have pointed to the emergent genre of *pata* paintings in eighteenth and nineteenth century which anthologized Hindu epics — in serial form and through a kind of performative ekphrasis where stories were told by pointing to the figures on the canvas — by adapting European representational techniques and technologies. See Pika Ghosh, "Unrolling a Narrative Scroll: Artistic Practice and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Bengal," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (August, 2003); also see Kavita Singh, "Stylistic Difference and Narrative Choices in Bengali *Pata* Paintings," *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 27-28, March 1995.

one Achyutacharana Chaudhuri Tattvanidhi in the 1890s.<sup>71)</sup> Ishana Nagara had hitherto been merely a cipher in hagiographies of the Advaita Acharya. The peculiar appearance of an entirely new account on the Acharya's life, written from the subaltern perspective of a follower who subsequently settled in Achyutacharana's native district of Sylhet is as fascinating in its circumstance as the skepticism it caused amongst the scholars and genealogists who questioned its authenticity. Focusing more on questions of hagiographic provenance and linguistic style, Manring advances a few reasons for this apocryphal print production in the context of the late nineteenth century: the burgeoning breakaway, lower caste, sects within the Vaisnava fold; the rising dominance of Shakta (Goddess-) worship amongst the new colonial bourgeoisie; the prominence of monotheistic denominations such as the Brahma Samaj and their carriage of Christian critiques of the Hindu religion into the core of Hindu practice; and most importantly, the declining charisma of the *goswamis* in the face



Ateya Mosque, Delduar, Tangail, Bangladesh, built by the Afghan Sayeed Khan Panni, 1609. Restored 1837 by Rowshun Khatoon Chowdhurani and in 1909 by Abu Ahmed Ghuznavi Khan.



Terracotta detail, Ateya Mosque, Delduar, Bangladesh, 1609.

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71) Rebecca J. Manring, *Reconstructing Tradition: Advaita Ācārya and Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism at the Cusp of the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).



of an advancing print culture.

Scholars interested in the practices of the below have written at length about the challenges posed by breakaway sects to the “pure” stream of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, corralled as it was by families claiming direct genealogical descent from the sixteenth



Terracotta, Madan Mohan temple, Vishnupur, built by the Malla king Durjan Singh, 1694.

century saints, and increasingly identified in its “high” form with obsequiousness to the zamindars.<sup>72)</sup> The new Vaisnava sects that emerged under the umbrella of the *Sahajiyas* - the Kartabhajas, the Bauls, Darveshis, the Sahebhdhanis, and Kishori-bhajas - citing Chaitanya’s storied inclusivism, castigated the Gaudiya’s doctrinal exclusivity and its hankering for temporal power and wealth under colonial rule. In the *Bhaver Gita* of the Kartabhaja sect, for instance,

Gaudiya Vaisnavism is referred to as the Big Company, controlled by rich kings and emperors and their greedy managers who exploited the poor porters. It was because of their greed that the Old Company became bankrupt and on its ruins grew up [*sic*] the New Company. The metaphor in no uncertain terms draws parallels between the religious oppression of the orthodox school of Gaudiya Vaisnavism and the political subject and economic exploitation perpetrated by the East India Company, which were integral to the lived experiences of

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72) Partha Chatterjee, “Caste and Subaltern Consciousness,” in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

the Bengali villagers.<sup>73)</sup>

Parallel to the challenges posed within the Vaisnava fold was the rise of the competing Shakta sect, whose “violent” cosmogony has been described as more amenable to the economic vulnerability that both zamindar and emergent colonial bourgeoisie experienced under colonialism.<sup>74)</sup> If the Hanseswari temple and Nrisingha Dev’s conversion to *tantricism* attests to its beginning, then by late nineteenth and early twentieth century Shakta belief had a strong hold over the clerks, businessmen, office workers who increasingly struggled to reconcile their commercial vulnerability and immersion in the urban pressures of competition and professional strife with a strong sense of the decline of the old religious values. The exemplar of this new urban dynamic was the seer Ramakrishna, priest of the Kali temple in Dakshineswar, Belur, built, as we have noted earlier, by the zamindari matriarch Rani Rashmoni: one of the very Hooghly riparian temples that we have discussed at length in this essay. Sumit Sarkar has written of the ambivalent cultural attributes of the cult of Ramakrishna and its attraction for the emergent Calcutta middle class of the nineteenth century. The rustic, coarse manner of this mystic saint and disregard for worldly rank – he is said to have once slapped Rani Rashmoni for not paying attention to his sermon – crystallized for his *bhadralok* followers the uncertain terms of their own route to status and wealth, producing amongst the devout a classless simulacra in a world beleaguered by class.

The Shakta-*bhakti* fervor that beset the Calcutta bourgeoisie was

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73) Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, 91.

74) For a broad anthology of the uses of the Kali myth, see Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, At the Center, In the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

markedly one of coping with the anxieties of work, family, and the stresses of honor and prestige produced in the sharp hierarchies of colonial society. As opposed to the “transcendent” cosmogony of the Vaisnavas, it may thus be plausible to place



Eighteenth century temple ruins of the Natore Rajbari, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

Ramakrishna, as Sarkar does – citing Carlo Ginzburg’s Menocchio<sup>75)</sup> – as espousing a “religious materialism,”<sup>76)</sup> fully absorbing the new commercial interest into the core of devotional practice. What was distinctive about this form of *bhakti* was its lack of demand for any kind of renunciation. The follower of Ramakrishna had to merely affect a kind of detachedness while continuing to perform worldly duties that would shelter them from the anxieties that came with their immersion into the colonial economy. As mentioned above, the Dakshineswar temples were syncretic, comprising shrines pertaining to all the three major sects of Hinduism in the Ganges delta. Such was also the character of the bourgeois *bhakt* who now flocked to Ramakrishna’s doorstep, the Christianity-inflected monotheistic Brahmos finding him as much of a saviour as adherents of the Vaisnava and Saivite sects.

Manring infers that Achyutacharana Chaudhuri’s historically-composition of the *Advaita Prakasha* may have been an attempt to re-establish the Vaisnavites’s doctrinal core by re-centering attention on the

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75) See Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

76) Sumit Sarkar, “Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti: Ramakrishna and his Times,” *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 298.



Dakshineswar temples, built by Rani Rashmoni, 1847-1855. The Dakshineswar temple complex has twelve Shiva temples, one Kali temple and one Vishnu temple. Hooghly district, West Bengal.

lives of the founding saints in the face of this heterodox dissolution. In addition to this text, Achyutacharana also published two other documents, the *Balya Lila Sutra* and the *Sita Charitra*, both of them purportedly written by medieval figures. Upon its publication, the first was decried by at least one major scholar as a “black forgery,” while Manring conjectures the events within the second as having been written specifically to corroborate the authenticity of the *Advaita Prakash*. The reasons for Achyutacharana’s exertions are glossed over in Manring’s book as a mixture of casteist fervor, incipient nationalism, regional pride, and rigorist temper (factors that have been also adduced, in the Islamic context, for the emergence of Deoband in the same period<sup>77)</sup>). Her principal effort is to wrest this production of apocrypha from imputations of “inauthenticity.” Even if Achyutacharana did in fact fabricate these tracts, she argues, both his unquestioning adherence to orthodox doctrine, and the acceptance of these documents as real relics by large numbers of the faithful, makes this hagiographer no more or less authentic than others. In other words, he may just as well be described as *exercising* – not impersonating – the hagiographer’s textual prerogative in his use of alias and adoption of sixteenth-century linguistic style, both features in fact being a hallmark of hagiography. In this sense, Achyutacharana is not an impersonator because the signature of the hagiographer draws its

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77) Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*...

authority not from itself but from following certain narrative protocols, which both the Advaita Prakasha and the Sita Charitra – whoever their author – scrupulously follow. “He thus essentially was ‘restating a tradition in relation to a sacral past,’ thereby constructing a conduit– for that sacred past and the authority of that past to travel to the author’s present and adhere to the new devotionalism.”<sup>78)</sup>

Manring’s recasting of Achyatacharana’s historicist contrivance can be extended to the Zamindari temples as well. If these “follies” are temples, it is because all temples are, in a certain way, follies. Indeed, despite their mainspring in a distant financial architectonic, it would be misplaced to describe the “familiarizing” and controlling stake of the new colonial temples as merely a kind of willful, insinuating co-option of the practices of the below. Rather than discern the authenticity and instrumentality of what is posed as tradition, our interest here is in the metalepsis of one kind of transcendence by another: the processes by which one kind of abstract force – the negative power of debt – acquires juridical legitimacy in a given field of ethical practices. To conceive of “tradition” in this context as anything less than transactional would, on the one hand, caricature tradition as some pristine, unadulterated stream of indigenous consciousness, and on the other, accord colonial neo-feudalism with Archimedean powers of adjudication with no reference to the world of lived practice. Indeed, the argument here looks at the equation from “right to left, instead of left to right,” as it were: that the limits of financial realization are intricately caught up in the limits of socialization, even as an exogenous architectonic can be seen to be eroding the very *raison d’être* of that socius. In a manner of speaking, this was the

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78) Manring, *Reconstructing Tradition*, 134-5, 250.

thrust of Burke's double argument: first, that the subject, *qua* subject, is inalienable from some tradition. Second, that *all* tradition has prefigured within it a transcendent form of authority: the pre-judicial element that renders the exercise of "compensatory prejudice" as an authentic exercise in natural justice.

Thus, what we have to notice here in Achyutarcharana's case is that most of the accusations of fraud leveled at his "black forgery" came from competent (and competing) authorities *within* the tradition. Here lies our crux: *both* Achyutarcharana's simulacrum *and* his contenders' accusations of fraud against him stem from the same interest: to guard the authenticity of the doctrine. The "reproduction" is produced in order to remake the archaic, pre-lapsarian "aura"; its work is to expressly dissemble its own originality in the service of a worldly re-enchantment. In both temple/folly and apocryphal text, it is only through this dissembling of the new structure that the exogenous determinations of capital could be absorbed wholesale into the terms of an indigenous *agon*: the subjection to the Bank of England's interest has, by a series of displacements, realized itself into a conflict over the authenticity or inauthenticity of a religious text *within* a tradition. Capitalist socialization has thus been performed, *can only be performed*, through what Derrida has described as a "citational" structure. "This citationality, this duplication or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is neither an accident nor an anomaly [neither copy nor original], it is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could not even have a function called 'normal'."<sup>79)</sup>

To elucidate this conception of citationality, perhaps it would be pertinent to turn to that blackest forgery of all: Rabindranath Tagore's

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79) Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Melman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1977, 1988), 12.

*Gitanjali*. As we have seen above, skepticism of the new religion of the zamindars and the goswamis was not limited to the brahminical few. The breaking away of the *Sahajiya* and other “deviant” sects – mostly identified with the lower castes – from orthodox Vaisnavism, as Ramakanta Chakrabarty has argued, was an exact reflection of attempts to corral these practices within a unified doctrine.<sup>80)</sup> The cosmogony of the Bauls – a crossover sect with adherents of both Hindu and Muslim birth – for instance, explicitly rejected both the Hindu scriptures and the shar’iah, emphasizing instead an inner numen the awareness of which comprised the active cultivation of deviant corporeal (scatological and sexual) practices, as well as living as mendicants on the fringe of society. In his Hibbert Lectures at Oxford delivered in May 1930, later expanded into book form in his *Religion of Man*, Rabindranath Tagore put one section under the heading “The Man of My Heart.”

The English would be immediately familiar to any Bengali, referring to the Baul conception of an inner numen, *moner manush*. Born to one of Bengal’s largest zamindari families, the Jorasanko *Thakurs* or Tagores, Rabindranath had met a number of Bauls at the Tagore Kuthibari (literally, *la petite maison*) in Silaidaha in Kushtia district of North Bengal where he was often deputed to draw revenue. Parallel to the emerging critiques of the extractive colonial economy voiced by Bengali proto-nationalists such as Romesh Chandra Dutt, Silaidaha was also the site of Tagore’s earliest attempt at agricultural reform: a process of experimentation that involved the establishment of an agricultural bank, a cooperative basis for public works (including the clearing of forests and

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80) Ramakanta Chakrabarty, *Vaisnavism in Bengal* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1985); also see Ramakanta Chakrabarty, *Bange Boishnob Dhormo* (Calcutta: Ananda, 1999).

expanding land under cultivation), decentralization of administrative procedures, the establishment of schools, and new technological input in reaping, sowing and processing activities.<sup>81)</sup> Kushtia town, a few miles from Silaidaha, is the site of the *mazhar* of Bengal's arguably most well-known Baul, Lalan Shah; nearby is the site of Lalan's akhra or circle,<sup>82)</sup> Siuriya. Born to a Kayastha family but abandoned as a child upon having contracted small pox, Lalan had been adopted and brought up by a Muslim *fakir*. The Lalan songbook speaks to the alienation of the singularity of the self - the surest imprint of the divine - in the face of a heterodox field of religions and castes. When he passed away in 1890, Lalan was reputed to have 10,000 followers, a congregation defined by no external constraints except the recitation of the songs attributed to Lalan.

Through his encounter with the Bauls at Silaidaha, Tagore came to know of the Lalan songbook, which he was subsequently instrumental in popularizing amongst the urban elite of Calcutta through his writing. In the section of the Oxford lecture on *moner manush*, for instance, Tagore brings together, within a few passages, extracts from the Upanishads, the medieval Vaisnava poets Rajjab and Chandidas, Wordsworth, and the songs of a Baul minstrel. The list speaks impeccably to Tagore's sense of his aesthetic antecedents, a hybrid sensibility that saw itself as grounded in the reconciliation of two distinct strands of indigenous culture: the high

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81) See Sudhir Sen, *Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1943).

82) Eaton has argued that that the flat and uniformly fertile terrain of the Bengal delta did not result in the kind of nucleated settlement pattern — *mauza* — that is evinced in north India. By contrast, it was the concept of the “circle,” — *millat* or *samaj* — foregrounding social gathering rather than geographical entity, that defined settlements in the Bengal delta. See Eaton, *The Rise of Islam on the Bengal Frontier*, 231-4.



traditional and the folk. The talk focuses on a recognizably Romantic theme, the ascension of Man's exertion into realizing the unity of God and nature present within him, and it is towards this realization that Baul and Wordsworth converge in focusing on the same, eternal truth. Peculiarly, though, while reciting Lalan's lyrics, Tagore does not name him, referring to him only as an anonymous "mendicant singer of Bengal." Indeed, his entire description of the Bauls tends to cast them as unselfconscious conduits of some autochthonous truth, carried forward in "simple song—neither grossly concrete, full of crude details, nor metaphysical in its rarefied transcendentalism." The specific doctrinal content of the Baul songs is glossed over by Tagore as "overencumbered by [the] exuberant distraction of legendary myths."<sup>83)</sup> In afterthought, conscious that his "aesthetic" reduction of Baul cosmogony may have been a travesty, Tagore included a more thorough study of the Baul's in the book's appendix, penned by his Santiniketan colleague Kshiti Mohan Sen.

In many ways, Tagore's aesthetic can be compared to Whig sensibility in its attempt to shift the terms of the colonial *agon* from theological *revival* to poetic *revisionism*. The impatience towards "overencumbered- exuberant distraction[s]" reflects an aesthetic predisposition, precisely predisposed against scriptural reference. Tagore's passage on



The *sindook*, or treasure chest, of the Tagores, used by Rabindranath to collect revenue from his tenants. Tagore Kuthibari, Kushtia, Bangladesh.

83) Rabindranath Tagore, "Man of My Heart," *The Religion of Man*, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 3 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), 129.

his encounter with the Bauls follows one in which he describes his renunciation of his *own* religion on similar grounds. Tagore was born into the Brahmo Samaj, a monotheistic sect founded by, amongst others, his father Debendranath Tagore in mid-nineteenth century. Dominantly peopled by a select urban and landowning Brahmin elite – *Kulin* Brahmins, ostracized for their collaboration with the Mughals – the Samaj might be said to have absorbed the Sahajiya and Christian critiques of Brahmanical orthodoxy by crafting a hybrid, aniconic theology derived from Vaishnav, Judaeo-Christian, and Islamic practices. If the Samaj may be seen as moving the schisms wrought in the old theology to a new, associational congregation professing an explicitly “invented tradition,” Rabindranath’s account of his own disenchantment with the Brahmoism unmistakably points to *aesthetic* singularity as the emergent carrier of universal sentiment:

I took part in its services mainly by composing hymns which unconsciously took the many-thumbed impression of the orthodox mind, a composite smudge of tradition. Urged by my sense of duty I strenuously persuaded myself to think that my mental attitude was in harmony with that of the members- [However] I came to discover that in my conduct I was not strictly loyal to my religion, but only to the religious institution. This latter represented an artificial average, with its standard of truth at its static minimum, jealous of any vital growth that exceeded its limits. I have my conviction that in religion, and also in the arts, that which is common to a group is not important. Indeed, very often it is a contagion of mutual imitation. After a long struggle with the feeling that I was using a mask to hide the living face of truth, I gave up my connection with my church.

For Tagore, the songs of the anonymous Bauls speak strongly to his sense of the aesthetic as the expression of an inner numen, manifesting

itself beyond the limits imposed by temporal order. In critical ways, then, Tagore, no stranger to Keats and Byron, even the “late Romantic” and revisionist corpus of Yeats,<sup>84)</sup> might be said to be operating a “strong” mechanism of the Enlightenment: graduating the citational *agon* – implicit in Achyutacharana’s and the Brahmos’ doctrinal inventions – into the realm of the aesthetic. In comparing religion with art, it is “the arts” that now have doctrinal prerogative. Citationality is specifically articulated as a critique of mimesis, where the access to inner numen must move beyond the “artificial- contagion of mutual imitation.” Rather than work out the exegetical conundrums of a *particular* tradition – Achyutacharana’s burden – this aesthetic prerogative here literally unfolds the canvas of the modern by situating the *agon* as the confrontation of *all* tradition, tradition *as such* as the contagion of mimesis: from the cleansing of muddied streams to the terms of what Bloom has termed, in a very problematic manner, the “anxiety of influence.”<sup>85)</sup>

Despite the Bauls’ arcane cosmogony, it is clear that Tagore’s subsequent addition of Kshiti Mohan Sen’s article is meant to indicate their affinity with his aesthetic conception. Thus, if Tagore places the numen as the source of singular autonomy – and of doctrinal religion as only the imposition of “limits” – Sen likewise focuses on the Baul conception of erotic love for the divine as “incompatible with any kind of compulsion.” The problem of tradition and citation is paramount here. Sen pointedly asks a Baul, “why is it that you keep no historical records for

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84) See Arindam Dutta, “Style/Theosophies: Character and Descent in the Celtic Revival,” in *Conversations on Art in Ireland*, series ed. Kathleen James-Chakraborty, forthcoming.

85) See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Also see Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

the use of posterity?" He is told: "We follow the *sahaj* (simple) way and so leave no trace behind us- Do the boats that sail over the flooded river leave any mark?... There are many classes of men amongst the Bauls, but they are all Bauls - they have no other achievement or history." Asking further why they did not follow the scriptures, the Baul responds: "Are we dogs that we should lick up the leavings of others?... These cowards who have not the power to rejoice in themselves have to rely on what others have left- They are content with glorifying their forefathers because they know not how to create for themselves."<sup>86)</sup> Thus, in refuting anything like a nameable tradition, the Bauls are cited in Tagore's book in their appearing to ventriloquise from below the Tagorean program of poetic misprision; somewhat on the lines of Yeats and Lady Gregory's *Celtic Twilight*.

It is therefore plausible - but only merely so - that the anonymity that Tagore accords to Lalan and his acolytes is merely a reflection of the Bauls' own anti-nominalism. Nonetheless, such a disavowal of the self would not be outside the structure of citation, outside the power of the original, outside of the problem of authorship. For that matter, quite against Sen's nativist description, what is marked about the Lalan songbook - as of Sufi and Bhakti compositions in general as well as a host of premodern literatures worldwide - is its *insistent* emphasis on authorship, albeit of a different kind than bourgeois prepossession. Indeed in Lalan's corpus the song itself is created as a performative citation: "*Lalon bole-*," i.e., "Lalan says." The authorial voice - inexorably in third person - instantiates the agon, focalizes itself as the anguished witness of

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86) Kshiti Mohan Sen, "The Baul Singers of Bengal," Appendix I to Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, 173, 176.

a corrupted cosmogony. Tagore's authorial mode, by contrast, is resolutely captivated by the modern / romantic conundrum of subjecthood, routinely placing the first person pronoun - the "I" - as the object of aesthetic reflection, while being acutely attentive to its own historic moment: each Tagore poem or song is scrupulously annotated with the place and date of its composition.

This authorial discrepancy is indicative of a certain relationship of power, what we could describe as an authoritative vector nestled within revisionism, within citation. Take for instance, the Bauls' recuperation of Tagore's songbook *Gitanjali*, translated and introduced to Western audiences by Yeats, a circumstance which is widely acknowledged to have garnered him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. Baul accounts give an entirely different view of these events. Amongst Lalan's disciples, particularly one Bholai Shah who is credited with having propagated the account, Tagore is described as a disciple of Lalan, who, on one of his trips to Kushtia, took away the fakir's songbook manuscript or *khata* from Lalan's Siuriya *akhra*. It was this manuscript, converted into Rabindranath's own poetic idiom, that realized itself in that great book *Gitanjali*, which brought him global recognition through the Nobel Prize.<sup>87)</sup> The prize, in this sense, was merely the global audience's recognition of the verities of Lalan's message, with Tagore as its bourgeois conduit. *Gitanjali* was thus of a piece with the expanded corpus of Baul cosmogony.

The misprision of the "pluralist aesthete" has been in turn misprised quite into another structure. Or we could say that the modernist's attempt to create an elective affinity - Tagore was an avid reader of Goethe - with

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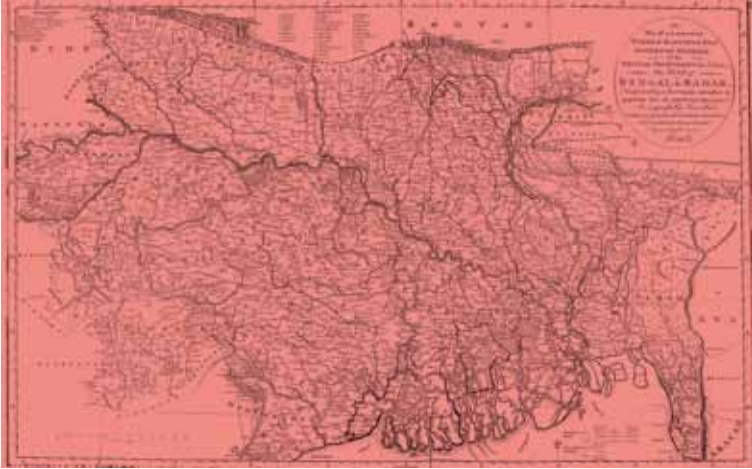
87) Santosh Chakrabarti, *Studies in Tagore: Critical Essays* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2004), 106.

indigenous culture of the below, to create a “weak” structure of influence, has been recast into the “strong” Baul idiom of the master’s influence on the disciple. Poetry that does not accord homage to the guru is a travesty, no poesis at all; the *Gitanjali* is a great work precisely since Tagore had the greatest inspiration of all: Lalan’s secret *khata*.

With this revision of revisionism, perhaps we can venture a response to the set of questions asked earlier in this essay: is “religion” - here studied in the effusion of zamindari temples and religious upchurning in Bengal and its transformation into a modernist aesthetic - merely the metalepsis of “economy”? To say the least, the above instance makes us aware of how the threads are tangled between above and below. Perhaps it would be best to state that our concern here has not been so much with the juridical force of religion. That was Burke’s argument: that India should be administered according its religious texts. The multiple effusions of breakaway cults from the Gaudiya fold - a fold all-too identified with colonialist polity - only demonstrates the degree to which such a “strong” juridicism of religion would inevitably be thwarted given the norms of socialization which British administrators inherited from the Mughal empire.

My argument in this essay has followed a somewhat different trajectory: if in Britain the “imagination” - the organizing rubric for the picturesque follies of the Whig garden - can be described as cohering the radical displacements of the economic sphere into a continuum with archaic republicanism, the effusion of lay theogony witnessed in Bengal in the aftermath of Permanent Settlement can be construed as something of its counterpart. The endeavor in this essay has been to bring attention to the Zamindari temples and gardens as a topos for these transformations, as the staging ground of an *agon* that can neither be described as fully

Deltas and Deities



James Rennell, *Bengal Atlas, Containing Maps of the Theatre of War and Commerce*, 1781



“The Hoogly River from Nuddeah to the Sea: with Balasore Road and Plan of the Attack of Oudanulla.” James Rennell, *Bengal Atlas, Containing Maps of the Theatre of War and Commerce*, 1781

secular or fully religious. I have also suggested that these displacements of religion and revenue, of aniconic cosmogony and aesthetic renunciation, can be seen as the social realizations of a burgeoning, exorbitant and abstract entity - Britain's public debt and its underwriting of Parliament - the governing power of which pre-scribes the emergence of a “public.”

However, if to a certain extent we adduce the relatively late emergence of popular sovereignty in India to this “weak” arrangement of empire, then this lay theogony cannot be seen as merely anticipating that (future) sovereignty. Indeed, the conception of popular sovereignty entails a process of *greater participation* in the secular affairs of the state; by contrast, the Sahajiya sects, in their perception of religion as the corrupted handmaiden of the colonial economy, are marked strongly by a sensibility of *withdrawal*. Tagore’s conception of aesthetic autonomy can be said to be fully grounded in this recessive element, one which we could argue would have strong repercussions on the character of Indian decolonization to follow.

It would perhaps be appropriate to further exemplify this tactic of secular withdrawal by an account of the dual revolt “in the verandah” staged by Rabindranath’s father, Debendranath, against both the religious and business practices of his father Dwarkanath Tagore, multi-millionaire principal of Carr Tagore and Company. In his lifetime, Dwarkanath rose to become the leading entrepreneur in Eastern India in the early nineteenth century, with business interests in steam technology, Chinese opium, coal, tea, silk, indigo, sugar, insurance, newspapers, banking, in addition to a large number of landed estates, and a fleet of ocean-going ships.<sup>88)</sup> The “contributions” of the Tagore family comprises an entire chapter in Claude Campbell’s *Glimpses of Bengal* of 1907; the architectural wonders of their palatial mansions merit a few more, including one solely devoted to Dwarkanath’s Emerald Bower estate, replete with its collection of van Dyck, Rubens and Murillo works. Quite in contrast, Debendranath’s

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88) See Blair B. Kling, *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).



earliest aversion to his father's lifestyle was occasioned by the lavish parties for English and native elite given in the gardens of his Belgachhia villa, an aversion he attributes also to his increasing interest in religious devotion, first in the Tattwabodhini Sabha the Brahmo Samaj. "I put in a [brief] appearance on the scene of gaiety and then hurried back [to the Sabha]. This event clearly demonstrated to my father my utter distaste for the world."<sup>89)</sup> Debendranath's sentiments uncannily echoed popular urban doggerel satirizing the lavishness of the garden feasts of the Tagores: "knives and forks clang (*jhanjaani*) at the Belgacchia garden, What fun there is in that food, what do we know (*jaani*)? Knows only Tagore Company (*compaani*)."<sup>90)</sup>

*Glimpses of Bengal* offers a different description of the Tagore garden: Who shall describe this wilderness of tangled charm? The Zenana has its own avenues and lakes, the male division its own sanctuaries. On a mound, surrounded by water, is the temple,... hung with costly embroideries, where the Maharaja's aged mother spent her days in prayer and contemplation. In the midst of a rocky labyrinth is a domestic chapel, covered with Sanskrit inscriptions, consecrated to the busts of the founders of the family. The Emerald Bower is worthy of its name, and we hope that Indian procrastination will long defer the date when these sacred groves fall beneath the axe, when its

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89) Debendranath Tagore, *The Autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore*, trans. Satyendranath Tagore and Indira Devi (1908) (Calcutta: Rupa, 2002), 25.

90) q. Swati Chattopadhyay, "The Other Face of Primitive Accumulation, The Garden House in British Colonial Bengal," in Peter Scriver and Vikramaditya Prakash (eds.), *Colonial Modernities: Building, Dwelling and Architecture in British India and Ceylon* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 189. Chattopadhyay has pointed to the turn in this popular satirizing to a full fledged nationalist politics, which handily appropriated the older, colonial casting of the zamindar as a uxorious, profligate figure, immersed in drink and nautch..

impressive gloom will be dissipated, when some 'Capability Brown' of India will transform this paradise of loveliness in to the trim suburban neatness of Hampstead or Dulwich.<sup>91)</sup>

There we have it: the equation of Sanskrit inscriptions with the Latinate citations of the Whig folly, complete with the threat to discerning taste by the “democratizing” fervor of some future Indian Capability Brown.<sup>92)</sup> At the same time, “aesthetic” emphasis of Campbell’s *Glimpses* cannot fully evade the scene of the garden as cross-hatched by another terrain. The “sacred grove,” the venerations of the family matriarch, the temple and the domestic chapel, the Sanskrit *scriptural* inscriptions speak to quite another mode of transcendence to which the “imagination” of the pluralist aesthete / garden stroller seems quite at odds. By contrast, Debendranath’s autobiography is replete with instances where the Tagore gardens offer the *mise en scène* of signal religious transformations in his life. Looking back over his life, he writes of his earliest stirrings of spirituality as inspired by his grandmother’s – the “aged mother” above – *katha* and *kirtana* sessions, her trips to the recently built Kalighat temple and Vrindavan, and her hosting of the Vaishnava *Haribasara* festival. His most vital epiphany, we are told, came during the three nights after she

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91) *The Glimpses* borrowed the above description from Oscar Browning’s *Impressions of Indian Travel*. The “impressive gloom” did fall under the axe, although not in favor of a Hampstead. The campus lies on the road between Calcutta and its international airport. After the gardens had run to seed, the buildings of the Emerald Bower were nationalized by the West Bengal government, and eventually made the headquarters of the university that bears the name of Dwarkanath’s more famous grandson, Rabindra Bharati University. See A. Claude Campbell, *Glimpses of Bengal: A Comprehensive, Archaeological, Biographical, and Pictorial History of Bengal, Behar and Orissa* (1907) (New Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, 2003).

92) See Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); also see Nigel Everett, *The Tory View of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

had been moved, on the advice of the family physician, from the family mansion to a cottage on the Ganges river bank, awaiting her death by the holy river. Disconsolate after her passing, Debendranath writes of his many solitary walks and lonely ruminations in Kyd's Botanical Garden where he would go daily choosing a tombstone to rest while seeking ways to quell his spiritual unrest.

It is critical to observe that the picturesque garden is not seen as the emblem of an exogeneous architectonic. Indeed, in the eyes of both urban wit and Brahma apostate, what the ostentatious displays of wealth rather violate is the garden's tenacious link with natural and divine order. The social crime is the vulgar display of excess and indulgence, undoing the threads of customary piety, not expropriation as such. For the young Debendranath, therefore, renunciation of his father's commercial pursuits and social pomp manifested itself less in economic reflection than reconciling himself with a form of pantheistic, natural theogony. "At one time the unrestrained power of Nature used to inspire me with extreme terror. Now I clearly perceived that there was a ruler over nature, and that one true Being



Above: Tagore Castle; Below: Emerald Bower, published in See A. Claude Campbell, *Glimpses of Bengal: A Comprehensive, Archaeological, Biographical, and Pictorial History of Bengal, Behar and Orissa* (1907) (New Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, 2003).

holds the reins of Nature.” Debendranath thus recounts the many religious debates hosted by him in the different Tagore gardens outside Calcutta, ferrying his wealthy fellow-reformers from Calcutta for those occasions: a counter-practice in the picturesque plan. “In the early morning, we raised a p-an of praise to Brahma; and sitting in the shade of a tree adorned with fruit and flowers, we delighted and sanctified ourselves by worshipping God with all our heart.”<sup>93)</sup>

If on the one hand, this turn towards askesis has the air of a turn towards the “modern,” it is also, to a certain extent, no different from Nrisingha Dev’s turn to tantricism. In other words, what I am arguing is that Debendranath’s renunciation in the garden is as much a structural feature of the mechanism of debt as Achyutacharana’s apocrypha, or Rani Rashmoni’s ghats. Withdrawal was in fact a key modus through which the distant imperatives of colonial economy were absorbed into the indigenous mainstream, and it is from this mode of withdrawal that the carapace of the liberal imagination would be deduced as a secular faculty by some such as Debendranath’s son at the turn of the century. Indeed, the power of askesis would become a significant source of solace for Debendranath when confronting the cataclysmic event that would shake both the Tagore family and the Calcutta business world in the 1840s. Within a year of Dwarkanath’s death in 1846, Carr, Tagore would find itself unable to meet cash calls on its outstanding debt, resulting in its being put into liquidation. The entire Tagore business empire came crumbling down. Debendranath, then thirty years of age, poignantly writes of this event as an unsolicited blessing, that in a sense helped him resolve his ambivalence about the trappings of worldly commerce. In the paragraph below, the eschatological

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93) Debendranath Tagore, *Autobiography*, 29.

framing of this event is evident: Debendranath speaks of the “day of days.” If the exorbitant debt contracted by his father’s firm was the basis of the societal pageantry within which he felt so alienated, then it was as if this financial calamity was an act of nature itself, through which the gods had finally opened the way for emancipation:

If, whilst I was praying thus for lightning, lightning came and consumed everything, then what would there be to wonder at? That was a day of days at [my grandmother’s] burning-ground, and this day was just such another. I had taken another step forward.<sup>94)</sup>



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94) Debendranath Tagore, *Autobiography*, 68.