

Heterogeneous Time in Indian Modernity: Reading *Chowringhee*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the ambiguities inherent in the ways in which the notion of Indian modernity is etched out in our social imaginery, especially in urban middle class-centric ways. To do so, it examines the novel *Chowringhee* (1962) by Shankar, and its 1968 film adaptation (directed by Satyajit Ray). This paper argues—following Partha Chatterjee’s theory of *andar-bahir*, and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s theory of two histories—that the plural, hybrid, modern Indian subject can perhaps be better accessed by examining the interstices between the subject positions one is simultaneously occupying. Examining subjectivity, as performed in intersectional, liminal spaces, rather than exclusive binaries—allows for a more comprehensive representation of the hybrid space and time inhabited by the modern Indian subject, and addresses the anxieties inherent in this hybridity.

Keywords: Indian modernity, urban space, hybridity

Introduction

Chowringhee was written in 1962 by the Bengali novelist Shankar, and has been identified as a part of the modernist realist movement in post-independent Bengali literature. The novel is quintessentially a modern text, explicitly and often aggressively so. One might say that this was unavoidable: the text is situated in a hotel in Calcutta, which is a markedly modern space, and is further concerned with the daily lives and experiences of the hotel staff. From a meta-textual perspective, the choice of the hotel as a site is what in effect makes the text inescapably modern. Any hotel of that stature is inevitably cosmopolitan in nature, and that is often curiously at odds with Shankar’s sensibilities. *Chowringhee* is a modern realist work and realism aspires to offhanded objectivity. Despite such presumptions, what seeps into the text is an anxiety conveyed more persistently through narratorial tone than plot or characterisation. While the facts are not particularly uplifting or damning, the fact that all of them are being talked in terms of only the anxiety and laments of moral depravity is the predominant tenor of the authorial voice, and the interest of this paper. It is painfully obvious that the suave young narrator is not at ease in the modern realm of a cosmopolitan hotel.

Chowringhee is imbued with a self-consciously modern—and even modernist—sensitivity very common in Bangla novels written during the time. It serves to remember that the word ‘urban’ is always-already connected to the word ‘modern’ in the Bengali imaginary. It is very much an urban text, and Shankar himself is very much a city boy, who is charmed by the sophistication and glamour of the Shah Jahan Hotel, and conscious of the prestige involved in working there, and in some way belonging to a premiere institution, even at a relatively low salary. It is interesting, and must be noted, that Shankar’s need to belong does not involve familial ties: in fact, most of the hotel employees are curiously bereft of family. The identity of the hotel staff is

bound up in their employment: they disappear from the text when they attempt to achieve any other identity, even when that attempt is assumed successful.

The post-independence thrusts towards an indigenous economy that appear to inch itself towards capitalism is repeatedly evoked: it forms an integral, rather than incidental, part of the novel, informing the characters and their modes of behaviour. Shankar, of course, is already an inhabitant of the economic world prior to his employment in the hotel, but it is only subsequently that he becomes enmeshed in the games played by the high rollers of Calcutta's commercial bulwark. The hotel functions as a feudal state of sorts within the capitalist matrix. Of course, it shares permeable walls with the rest of the world: there is no structural difference between the Shah Jahan Hotel and the mercantile economy, and in fact the former serves the interests of the latter and profits from these services.

Within the hotel Shankar is enmeshed in a set of relationships which seemingly bring together old and new systems. The hotel is clearly demarcated as a professional space where the personal cannot intrude, and this is enforced strongly enough to effectively erase all personal relationships in the staff, though interactions among the staff retain a strong core of personal emotion beneath the veneer of professionalism.

The staff of the Shah Jahan is arrayed roughly in three groups. Marco Polo, Nata Babu, Mr. Byron the detective—who is, admittedly, not a hotel-staff—and to an extent the orchestra conductor of the first group, and are the product of Shankar's search for father figures in the most unlikely places. While he is mentored by them, he is also conscious of their various weaknesses, and attempts to assist them; he certainly follows orders to the best of his ability, even though he occasionally has to be rescued. The second group comprises of the junior staff, who are dependent on the whims and orders of the senior staff. The female staff—primarily consisting of the typist Rosie, in whose place Shankar is initially hired, the hostess Karabi Gupta, and the belly-dancer Koni—are an autonomous group, who neither order Shankar around, nor take orders from him. Sata Bose the receptionist is in none of these groups, but unique in himself; he is senior to Shankar, but not quite enough to be categorised as a father-figure, and is further unique amongst the hotel-staff in having enough of a private realm, if only of the mind, to be able to feel actively lonely after a full day's work as receptionist. Sata is constituted as the perfect man; he is entirely at ease in the capitalist matrix surrounding and allowing the existence of the Shah Jahan Hotel, and is equally easy within its pseudo-feudal domain, distributing largesse to the junior staff and using his influence with Marco Polo to aid them in whatever way he can: the deep sorrow of all the staff when Bose resigns is the most sincere, explicit expression of emotion in the text, and occurs entirely in the professional sphere of the hotel, which he has transformed by his terrible charm and efficiency into a kinder place, where to care for one's colleagues does no harm to one's reputation.

Shankar himself, as narrator, stands outside the circle of hotel-staff. He is initially separate from them as a newcomer who some of them resent for taking Rosie's place; and, by the time he is at ease in the hotel, and has either overcome or suppressed his ethical problems with the place, it is nearly the end of the novel and of his tenure at the Shah Jahan Hotel. He is only ever an observer, but a privileged observer at that, who is allowed glimpses of private sorrows and lives that the staff does not present to customers and guests. He is also conceptualised—by no less than the man himself—as a sort of successor to Sata Bose, and is tacitly acknowledged as such by the manager.

This intensely burdened modernity, wherein times and places and agendas clash and conspire, stands in stark contrast to the imagined empty times of modernity of the West, which

are bereft of the signs and significations of earlier times. However, Shankar has always inhabited a modern world and the paradigm shift he is suffering through is not properly a shift from the pre-modern into the modern; it is rather a shift from Empire to the indigeneous mercantile economy enveloping the hotel. His discomfort with the shift is also the discomfort of the middle-class, white-collar service-sector modern man with the world of commerce, which the Shah Jahan hotel is explicitly a part of, no matter the genteel veneer of hospitality.

Partha Chatterjee's theory of *andar-bahir*, and Dipesh Chakrabarty's theory of two histories

We can look at the relational spaces of the Shah Jahan Hotel in one of two major ways: Partha Chatterjee's theory of *andar-bahir*, and Dipesh Chakrabarty's theory of two histories. We will do each in turn and evaluate the applicability of each to the text at hand. Partha Chatterjee formulates the notion of the two realms of public and private—*bahir* and *andar*, respectively—as a tool to explain both the interest in female reform during the Bengal Renaissance, and the downswing in political interest in women's issues during the struggle for Independence.

In "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" (Chatterjee, 1999) Chatterjee states that the Indian Nationalist Ideology formed during the colonial struggle articulated itself in terms of two domains: the material and the spiritual. The material largely referred to the Occidental 'good'—developments in science and technology, political rationale, economic organisations, modern methods of governmental administration, civic structures—that allowed the West its superiority, and consequent subjugation of the native colonies. These had to be emulated so that the indigenous colony could match its coloniser both in terms of power and prestige to resurrect its Swaraj. This notion was coupled with the revivalist conviction that the East was spiritually superior to the West. The supposition of Classical cultural (religious) 'traditional richness' evolved as the spiritual aspect of Indian Nationalism.

Such a dichotomy led to the inevitable fear that an unfiltered acceptance and adaptation of the material will compromise the spiritual. Here, the Nationalist Ideology transcended its role as a mere component of a solely political struggle and became, in effect, a filter of what 'should be' adapted or rejected from the West. In doing so, it translated the binary of the material and the spiritual into a more concrete, thus significant, binary of the outside and the inside: where the outside embodies the external material occidental dominance, while the inside preserves the pristine indigenous spirituality. These, when translated in the dichotomy of social spaces, in practice became the *bahir* (outdoor) and *andar* (indoor) respectively; where the man as the breadwinner has to expose himself, even compromise in his negotiations with the materialistic outside, while the inside, as the spiritual cornerstone will be preserved by the woman.

Thus, though the Nationalist social 'upliftment' imported a revised renunciation of decadent patriarchal practices like Sati, in themselves immediately readable as repulsive to the 'modern' Western outlook, patriarchal hegemony restructured itself to be imbued in Indian modernity in newer manifestations. In constructing the image of the 'new woman' vested with the spiritual inheritance of the community a specific, liminal gender role—in practice as restricted as its predecessor—was created. The changes initiated as a part of the avant-garde project of Indian modernity either remained superficial, or served the older priorities in newer modes.

¹ Chatterjee, P. (1999) The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question. *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

The new woman's liberated role was even modelled on the older superstructure: she would be the utopian blend of pseudo-British refinement and traditional ethos—learned in the knowledge designed for her by the high culture, as well as dexterous in traditional housewifery. Attached to this was the symbolic significance of her staying indoors: while the man was compelled to compromise and imitate the outsider, the woman became the hallowed icon of cultural identity, thus an icon of male prestige tokens like 'culture' and inspirational Muse, besides older symbols of honour, land, and fertility. This is just a step away from attributing her the symbolic status of a goddess, which in its dehumanised sanctification of her symbolic representation further entrenches the lack of agency experienced by her flesh-and-blood self.

Thus in the real life representation of such an ideal post the Bengal Renaissance, whether in specific liberated modernised spaces like the Brahmo Samaj or otherwise, the modern Hindu *bhadromahila* was negatively defined in terms of what she wasn't: the blindly anglicised wives of Indian bureaucrats she despised and, at the other end of the social corpus, the coarse 'uncultured' domestic maid she employed. This stereotyping of pluralities got further entrenched in the (pseudo) Brahminical revival of the notion of 'feminine virtues' or *streedharma*: a distinct list of non-masculine 'Angel of the House' attributes manifested within an insular domestic space as the utopian. The goddess-preserver embodiment of the new woman, while updated in modern refinement imported from the West, would, unlike the men, never essentialise the occidental acquisitions.

Chatterjee further discusses how the politicisation of Women's Issues during the Bengal Renaissance stops entirely during the Gandhian National Movement—women's issues no longer belong to the political sphere of coloniser/colonised interactions, but are rather confined to the cultural sphere. As such, even in the very notion of woman, only the very outward form is altering, the inner, core, notion remains the same. This mainstream idea of the ideal Indian woman—middle-class, Hindu, upper-caste, 'refined', educated, confined—at once ignores the mobility and active life of the subaltern woman—who is regarded as female at best, but not as a woman—and the very real socio-cultural changes wrought by the flesh-and-blood actualisations of the domestic goddess.

These People in their individual capacities are quite near—if not exactly identical to—the men who staff the Shah Jahan hotel. Yet, while they are certainly modern men and citizens who occupy both Chatterjee's *bahir* and Habermas' public sphere, we do not actually see them doing so within the text. We might rather say that the Shah Jahan hotel occupies several overlapping configurations of the *andar/bahir* binary, and that its staff consequently do the same.

The overlap of circles is too great to assume any single species of behaviour, and the resultant confusion is evident in the way the hotel staff switch from one mode of behaviour to another: from joking or squabbling amongst themselves to being polite and subservient towards the guests. Sata Bose is presented as the perfect man at least in part because of his chameleon-like ability to change perfectly, and be all things to all men while still retaining a core sense of self, such that he finds himself lonely after a full day's work, and such that he can begin and continue a romantic relationship within the walls of the hotel; yet even this paragon among men cannot marry and settle down while retaining his job as the chief receptionist of the Shah Jahan hotel. His colleagues find it far more difficult to navigate these overlapping worlds.

Of course, the conflict felt by all the employees is in no way as severe as Karabi's—whose search for an interiority, an *andar* of the mind, culminates in suicide—though it is also rarely as well managed as Sata's. The older employees seem to have effected their own acts of compromise: for instance, the spaces of the institution which are reserved for the staff form an *andar* into

which the guests cannot intrude unless expressly invited. These juxtapositions of space and behaviour, while they mark a compromise between the various roles the staff is expected to play, also mark a decided failure in distinguishing between the *andar* and *bahir* that Chatterjee so meticulously separates. Similar cases can be seen throughout the text: the conductor of the orchestra allows his love of Western Classical music to heavily colour performances, and eventually chooses being sacked by the new manager over playing more cheerful tunes; the dancer Koni allows her love for her brother to deprive her of a job, as he allows his protectiveness of her to get in the way of his stage persona; Mr. Marco Polo himself leaves his beloved Shah Jahan to travel to the Gold Coast in hopes of a new start with his ex-wife.

Partha Chatterjee's theory of *andar-bahir* therefore does not suffice to explain the gendering, or any of the other patterns of behaviour seen amongst the staff, who might be gendered as functionally feminine by the nature of their jobs, but seem fairly unconscious about this in their daily lives.

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in 'The Two Histories of Capital' in *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, looks at the two ways in which history in a capitalist system may be thought of as being constituted. Both these histories—or sets of histories—are for the most part pre-capital, and can therefore be variously regarded as comprising the pre-history of capital; both are referred to and described at various lengths by Marx, though the latter with much more brevity. What Dipesh Chakrabarty calls History 1, is what we generally think of as the Marxist historiography of capital, wherein capitalism, once established, reconstitutes all past history as leading inexorably up to it: the history of the pre-capitalist world becomes effectively the pre-history of capitalism, which is regarded as predestination.

It goes without saying that it is not the actual process of history that does the "presupposing"; the logical presuppositions of capital can only be worked out by someone with a grasp of the logic of capital. In that sense, an intellectual comprehension of the structure of capital is the precondition of this historical knowledge. For history then exemplifies only for us—the investigators—the logical presuppositions of capital even though capital, Marx would argue, needs this real history to happen, even if the reading of this history is only retrospective. "Man comes into existence only when certain point is reached. But once man has emerged, he becomes the permanent pre-condition of human history, likewise its permanent product and result." Marx therefore does not so much provide us with a teleology of history as with a perspectival point from which to read the archives. (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 63)

This, then, is History 1, which Marxist historiography designates the primary form in which capitalism constitutes history. History 1 is well-known to most people, and appears in most histories—and most history text-books—as part of the inexorable march through modes of production into capitalism. However, Marx himself conceptualises what Chakrabarty calls History 2, which might be briefly described as the history of the pre-capitalist world which is not subsequently reconstituted as the pre-history of capitalism.

Marx opposes to History 1 another kind of past that we will call History 2. Elements of History 2, Marx says, are also "antecedents" of capital, in that capital "encounters them as antecedents," but... "not as antecedents established by itself, not as forms of its own life-process." To say that something does not belong to capital's life process is to claim that it does not contribute to the self-reproduction of capital. I therefore understand Marx to be saying that "antecedent to capital" are not only the relationships that constitute History 1 but also other relationships that do not lend themselves to the reproduction of the logic of

capital. Only History 1 is the past “established” by capital, because History 1 lends itself to the reproduction of capitalist relationships. Marx accepts, in other words, that the universe of pasts that capital encounters is larger than the sum of those elements in which are worked out the logical presuppositions of capital. (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.64)

One can almost instinctively correlate this to the problem of the homogenous time of modernity and to what we might call Chakrabarty’s primary thesis in the text: the task of bringing India out of the waiting rooms of history; the simple acknowledgement of history that has not been reconstituted as an integral part of capitalism allows for the alien nature of capitalism in this country. It further allows one to argue that capitalism, before it was imported to India as part of the colonial intervention, had no proto-form in the country that was simply awaiting the Occidental touch to grow to full maturity; and even acknowledges that the brutal measures adopted in order to establish big business and big industry in the country have not been part of the inexorable progress of the Juggernaut of development. But then it grows even more interesting:

Marx’s own examples of History 2 take the reader by surprise. They are money and commodity, two elements without which capital cannot even be conceptualized. Marx once described the commodity form as something belonging to the “cellular” structure of capital...Yet Marx appears to suggest that entities as close and necessary to the functioning of capital as money and commodity do not necessarily belong by any natural connection to either capital’s own life process or to the past posited by capital. Marx recognizes the possibility that money and commodity, as relations, could have existed in history without necessarily giving rise to capital. Since they did not necessarily look forward to capital, they make up the kind of past I have called History 2. This example of the heterogeneity Marx reads into the history of money and commodity shows that the relations that do not contribute to the reproduction of the logic of capital can be intimately intertwined with the relations that do. (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 64)

If, as Chakrabarty makes explicit from Marxist doctrines, one can have a history which includes commodities and money but does not signal a predestined capitalism as its only possible future, then it grows conversely possible to bear non-proto-capitalist/pre-capitalist histories in one’s blood and brain, even while inhabiting a capitalist world. We cannot supply proof positive of History 2, nor of the impact it has on one, but it remains nonetheless implicit in our beliefs and mannerisms and patterns of behaviour.

To revert to the text, we may now inspect Shankar’s sense of longing for his last place of employment through the lens of History 1 and 2 simultaneously, whereby the first adjudges his translation as occurring simply from one capitalist set-up to another, while the second sees it as a translation from a non-capitalist system which nonetheless involves currency to an explicitly capitalist system. A feeling of dislocation and alienation is inevitable with such a paradigmatic shift. Furthermore, it is, of course, not only Shankar who grows explicable: the interactions of the hotel-staff, with their kindnesses and moments of generosity and patronage, which must be slotted in Chatterjee’s model as part of the private space of the *andar*, can now be again relegated to the public spaces of which they are properly part. Where Chatterjee marks off spaces, Chakrabarty acknowledges a multiplicity of times all located in the same place and embodied in the same person and set of mannerisms: he effectively thickens time, employing the trick of “Indians [being] capable of living in several centuries at once.”² What seems strange on a middle-

² Ibid., pg. 49

class, upper-caste, educated young Indian man, would have fit his great-grandfather like a glove. Yet the strangeness itself is proof positive of its continued existence.

Shankar, who thinks of himself and of his place of employment as entirely situated in the modern era, attempts to characterise all his engagements with colleagues and clients as modern, and often falters or creates convoluted theories to explain them with his limited purview. However, through the lenses of the two histories, we can see how these characters all individually and collectively carry a memory of other histories and possibilities within themselves. Nata Babu—the elderly impoverished Brahmin who bathes in the Ganga to cleanse himself and the hotel, and is in charge of providing bedding that embodies their sinful uses enough that he carries a bar of soap with him—is the obvious example, with his belief in sexual sin and in its being capable of being both passed on and washed away with the very ‘modern’ soap and water; but even the fact of Satyasundar Boshu existing within Sata Bose is an artefact of History 2. And in a way, the heterogeneous times of modernity imbue and inform the manner in which Shankar is taken up by the management of the Shah Jahan hostel, and the radical modernity which he believes informs the existence of women in the workplace can also be similarly explained. At any rate, the homosocial circle of the hotel is clearly rooted in older forms of loyalty and friendship; it is simply that by following Chakrabarty we no longer have to term that a pre-modern set of relations. If all things that touch modernity become themselves modern, and if capitalism fails to entirely subsume and consume past histories as the pre-history of capitalism, but relics of the latter remain and make impossible the complete realisation—the totalisation—of capitalism, then nothing is in the least complicated about sincere friendships and love-affairs occurring in the Shah Jahan hotel alongside alliances which are rooted entirely in financial transactions and profit.

While both Chatterjee and Chakrabarty present interesting models for the interpretation of urban modernity, and both are applicable to the text at hand, neither is entirely capable of effecting a comprehensive analysis; there are some blind spots left in each case, some spaces whether neither paradigm fits entirely well.

Victor Turner's rereading of Arnold Van Gennep's original formulations on liminality is seminal in many ways. Liminality is the characteristic of an object/individual of having left the jurisdiction of one set of rules/codes without having entered the realm of another set: liminality is drawn from *limen* (threshold) and the liminal being is conceptualised as in a state of transformation upon this ambivalent, equivocal threshold and partaking of both worlds while being, strictly, a member of neither. Because of this, quite often individuals partaking in rituals, especially rituals of farewell and initiation, can be seen as liminal beings at least during the duration of the ritual. The most significant take-away from Turner is in his treatment of the liminalising ritual as just as pivotal as the liminal being created therein.

Conclusion

As stated just previously, neither Chatterjee's, nor Chakrabarty's model sufficiently explain the text in and of themselves; a gap remains which cannot be explained by either half of the binary: it is this liminal, interstitial space, this unexplained gap that the characters in *Chowringhee* occupy, not only the subject positions created in *andar*, or *bahir*, but also the liminal spaces between the two realms of public and private. Similarly, they occupy neither History 1, nor History 2 entirely, but the chronotopes wherein the latter permeates the former. This could of course be read quite literally in terms of the spaces they occupy, since the hotel is itself an intersectional space; but it is also true that this is not limited to the characters: all subjects—fictional or otherwise—always-already occupy liminal spaces, which neither of the two binary models can independently access by themselves. Further, the manner in which Turner characterises the transitional nature of the

liminal space (Turner, 1987) as a rite of transformation, itself makes it a very apt metaphor for the heterogeneous time of Indian modernity that we are trying to address. Because this time does not divorce a “pre-modern” ethos from an ushered-in “modern time”, and thereby becomes the hybrid, plural, but not splintered space that it is. This is where we can truly locate Shankar’s moral reservations when it comes to his gendered workplace. It would be safe to say, following that, that the particular ethical high-road that the novel takes up is itself also—caught between these multiple ethos—a part and product of this heterogeneous time.

Modernity might be best conceptualised as a time whose occupants are aware of their residence in, and through that perception are agentive in shaping, said time. As such, modernity, especially the heterogeneous time (and space) of modernity in India can be better accessed through the study of everyday life as it is practiced or performed, such that we centre the category of everyday life—its performativity in the present—as the informing principle of modern life. The emphasis, therefore, is on performativity, and how everyday life is a site from which to access the liminal, intersectional spaces wherein this performativity might be located.

Erving Goffman, in ‘Front and Back Regions of Everyday Life’, studied the microcosm of the kitchen in a hotel in the Shetland Islands in a characteristic study of micro-sociology. His study concluded in the “discovery” of an inherently plural everyday self, performing across a stage or front-region and a backstage:

A back-region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course... [h]ere the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character. (Goffman, 1990, p. 53)

The performative nature of the job of the hotel staff in *Chowringhee* makes this a particularly apt way of accessing the text. While Goffman’s reads like many other binaries, its emphasis on the performer makes it an agentive binary not bound by either time or space: it is the performer/subject/character who chooses which role to take up, or region of life to inhabit, at any given moment.

Locating meaning, not just in individual subject-positions within binaries, but also in subject-positions located at the intersectional spaces between them, holds tremendous potential in the immediate effect of an expansion of meaning; and this, in locating everyday life and its politics at these interstices, perhaps holds the key to resolving the deadlock Partha Chatterjee concludes in, in ‘Talking about our Modernity in Two Languages’.

The discarding of Western, androcentric notions of modernity and its empty time, and the retrieval of Indian modernity from the waiting room of history have not rescued us from binaries. Both Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakravarty plot Indian modernity—which they acknowledge as hybrid and ambiguous—into binaries, whether the binary of ‘andar/bahir’, or of the two histories of capital. They split space/time in order to allow momentary prominence to one or another aspect of this hybridity. However, the hybrid subject occupies several subject positions simultaneously, and cannot abandon one to occupy another as easily in lived experience as in analysis. The binary pairs conceptualised by Chatterjee and Chakravarty are extremely productive, and necessary analytical tools, but they are in themselves insufficient. However, the creation of these binary pairs simultaneously creates a liminal, intersectional space, wherein the hybrid subject of Indian modernity is located. The Shah Jahan Hotel is not at times ‘andar’ and at others ‘bahir’, nor different things to different people, but simultaneously both: the andar scooped out of and contiguous with the bahir, the bahir seeping in around the shellacked edges of the andar.

Similarly, Shankar's relations with his colleagues, and theirs with each other and the guests, are simultaneously (always-already) business and personal, not successively one or the other. It is the refusal to accept these intersectionalities that creates trouble and signals departures from the imaginarium(s) of the hotel.

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