Third World Quarterly

Writing the Nation's Destiny: Indian fiction in English before 1910

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines the representation of proto-national identity in Indian–English fiction before the formative nationalist novels of the 1920s and 1930s. Questioning theoretical connections between Indian–English fiction and the secularism of the Nehruvian national project, my essay argues that primordialist nationalism and culturally transacted concepts of communal/ racial identity were key elements in the political imagining of early Indian fiction in English.*

In his magisterial, historically-layered vision of Indian identity, *The Discovery of India*, the third in a 'complex triptych' of works which synthesised life-writing, political memoir and public history[1], Jawaharlal Nehru described Hindu nationalism as an undeniable but redundant part of the nation's ideological maturing. It was, he stated, 'a natural growth from the soil of India, but inevitably it comes in the way of the larger nationalism which rises above differences of religion or creed'.[2] As Gayanendra Pandey argues, for nationalists such as Nehru, caught up in the momentous anti-colonial struggle of the 1920s and 1930s, 'communalism appeared as a great political threat, the most obvious source of danger for the advancing cause of nationalism'.[3] The answer, for India's future Prime Minister, was to advocate a progressive 'refurbished' nationalism that focused on inter-communal tolerance and syncretism, a counter-version of political identity that would become India's grand narrative in the immediate post-independence period.

We need only refer to an earlier political memoir, the highly successful *An Autobiography,* to realise how important it was for Nehru to distance his 'new' nationalism from what he perceived as an earlier, less secular sense of identity. Here, Nehru's anxieties about this political transition are dramatised in a particularly striking way in an account of a journey to Switzerland made with his ailing wife Kamala and their daughter Indira in 1926. While Kamala received treatment for TB at a Swiss sanatorium, Nehru took the opportunity to visit a number of older political radicals and exiled activists. Amongst these was the aged Shyamji Krishnavarma, a revolutionary nationalist, Sanskrit scholar and former member of the Hindu reform movement the *Arya Samaj*, who had operated a revolutionary terrorist network from

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London two decades earlier. Living as a semi-recluse with his wife on the top floor of a Geneva apartment-house, Krishnavarma is presented in *An Autobiography* as a senile, bookish obsessive and becomes a salutary warning of the way politics can go bad if it is divorced from the real world:

> The aged couple lived by themselves...and their rooms were musty and suffocating and everything had a thick layer of dust...[Krishnavarma] was suspicious of all comers, presuming them, until the contrary was proved, to be either British agents or after his money. His pockets bulged with ancient copies of his old paper, the *Indian Sociologist* and he would pull them out and point with some excitement to some article he had written a dozen years previously...the walls of his rooms were covered with shelves full of old books, dust laden and neglected, looking down sorrowfully on the intruder. Books and papers also littered the floor; they seemed to have remained so for days and weeks, and even months past. Over the whole place there hung an atmosphere of gloom, an air of decay...with relief one came out of that flat and breathed the air outside.[4]

In Nehru's account, one of Krishnavarma's contemporaries, Madame Bhikaiji Cama, a Parsi activist who had famously unfurled the Indian flag at the Stuttgart Socialist Congress of 1907, receives the same irreverent treatment:

> In Paris we saw old Madame Cama, rather fierce and terrifying as she came up to you and peered into your face, and, pointing at you, asked abruptly who you were...the answer made no difference (probably she was too deaf to hear it) for she formed her own impressions and stuck to them, despite facts to the contrary.[5]

Written while Nehru was a political prisoner in Almora jail, these descriptions of an earlier nationalist generation beg comparison with fictional examples of nineteenth-century gothic, and one wonders if Nehru recalled *Great Expectations* as he worked on his memoirs and wrote letters to Indira, inquiring 'Have you read much of Thackeray or Dickens? They are rather old-fashioned now but I remember how I used to enjoy them in the old days'.[6] In terms of his political situation, the inter-text could not have been more apt. *Great Expectations*, with its motif of the present arrested and imprisoned by the past, might have echoed Nehru's fears about his own incarceration. More profoundly, Dickens's sleight-of-hand plot, in which a long-expected inheritance is suddenly exchanged for one which reconnects Pip with his deepest fears, could have spoken to Nehru's worries about the repressed aspects of India's 'religious attitude', an attitude which he associated, in Krishnavarma's gloomy apartment, with 'blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition and exploitation and the preservation of vested interests'.[7]

In retrospect, Nehru's evocative representation of his revolutionary predecessors alerts us to conceptual *aporia* in his work, and the involved nature of his own political heritage. By the time he met Krishnavarma in the mid-1920s, communal politics seemed to be polarising the nationalist movement as a whole (following events such as the Mapilla rebellion of

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1921), and Nehru's attempt to disassociate himself from earlier Indian nationalist groups reflects his increasing disquiet about the activities of the Hindu Right under the direction of Krishnavarma's contemporaries such as VD Savarkar. Even so, for all Nehru's rhetorical investment in a new or 'refurbished' mass-nationalism, it is equally clear now that during this period the secularism of the Congress Party was more notional than Nehru's political writings claimed. Indeed, there is persuasive historical evidence that a continued ideological investment in primordialist nationalism was maintained across the national movement even as ideas of Hindu–Muslim unity were promoted by the Congress. As Chetan Bhatt points out:

> ...an overarching process of the interpellation of discovered archaic and primordial Hinduism was a major, significant and before the 1920s often a dominating strand in the national movement such that secularism itself was neither sufficiently interrogated nor adequately developed beyond an elemental if often strong and principled, commitment to anti-communalism...given its importance, there was an absence of detailed, elaborate and sufficient national discussion of what secularism might mean across both state and civil societies until arguably *after* the Nehruvian period.[8]

While immediately challenging a simplistic periodising of Indian nationalist thought, Bhatt's insight also has important implications for our reading of the politics of contemporary Indian–English fiction, and invites us to reappraise the widely-assumed connection between 'secular' Congress nationalism and the emergent novel form.

Judging from his letters, Nehru's literary tastes were decidedly conservative, and he cared little for contemporary (modernist) fiction, preferring the work of authors such as HG Wells and Samuel Butler. However, the stylistic impact of his writing on the development of the Indian novel in English, during its formative nationalist phase, was considerable. Both Nehru's and Gandhi's life-writings were profoundly influential in their use of 'an Indian prose committed to clarity and humanist principles'[9] and recurring thematic features in their work such as the village pastoral and the 'image of return' were recycled by Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand in their novels of the 1930s and 1940s. With the appearance of specialised nationalist genres like the 'Gandhi-novel', stylistic contiguities grew into close relationships of citation and hagiographic cross-reference, and after independence the Indian–English novel maintained and strengthened an investment in what Ashis Nandy has termed the 'rational...secularism [that] has dominated India's middle class public consciousness'.[10]

We must remember, however, that the literary-historical connections between Indian mass-nationalism and the Indian–English novel have always been qualified (often in a perfunctory way) in critical studies, by an awareness of a substantial body of Indian writing in English stretching back to the 1860s, a largely overlooked tradition that was well-established by the turn of the century. Published decades before the Congress transformed Indian nationalism into a mass-movement, earlier Indian–English fictions drew their political themes from the very texts in Krishnavarma's Geneva

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apartment that made up the 'sorrowful', 'suffocating' political archive from which Nehru's narrative escapes. Moreover, if we appreciate the close formal connections between Nehru's prose and contemporary Indian–English fiction, then might not the same process of disavowal characterise the politics of the Indian novel in English? If the secular version of India's national identity has a concealed or repressed ideological inheritance, then does the Indian–English novel, which has entered so decisively into an interrogation of monologic or primordialist identities in recent years, have cause for a 'postcolonial' embarrassment about its own past?

My aim, in the following pages, is to consider these questions by tracing the political genealogy of Indian fiction in English back to the early 1900s. Concentrating on a highly popular 'middlebrow' romance published in London in 1909, Sarath Kumar Ghosh's *The Prince of Destiny,* but making reference to other contemporary Indian–English novels, this paper inter-rogates the automatic critical equation of the Indian–English novel with a secular or pluralist national imagining, and pays special attention to a closely interwoven fabric of political discourses, amongst them forms of regional nationalism, Vedic Aryanism and European theories of racial efficiency, that provide a political source-text for Indian writers and intellectuals in the first years of the twentieth century. As I will argue, far from representing the political antithesis of the 'cosmopolitan' Indian novel in English, the rise of Hindu majoritarianism and Hindu nationalism in the last twenty years in India is, instead, prefigured in one of the earliest, most popular examples of the form.

Before the development of modes of humanist social-realism and new experimental narrative techniques in the 1920s and 1930s, a major generic template for Indian–English novelists was the (historical) romance. For migrant London-based writers such as Sarath Kumar Ghosh the bias towards the romance must be seen partly as a commercial choice, reflecting the contemporary popularity of 'romancers' such as Maud Diver and Flora Annie Steel, but Indian authors also exploited the genre as a way of entering into discursive negotiation with their metropolitan and colonial audiences. Because of his awareness of a potentially hostile British readership, Ghosh adopts a revisionist narrative position, using the romance—or what I have called elsewhere the 'informative romance'[11]—as a way of correcting colonial prejudices whilst simultaneously exploring variations on a conciliatory cultural-nationalist theme in their work. In striking contrast to the interest in rural settings and village-life of many later nationalist novelists, earlier romance writers also used the 'princely' kingdom as the setting of their fictions, the reasons for which are partly tactical (their critical focus is, ostensibly, not 'directly ruled' British India) and partly because representa-tions of Hindu dynastic leaders, who often claimed direct descent from heroes in the Puranas and epics such as the *Mahabharata,* could be used as a figurative link with a mythical Hindu past.

Sarath Kumar Ghosh's novel, *The Prince of Destiny, or the New Krishna*[12], which appeared in colonial and domestic editions and ran to a second impression within six months of its publication in October 1909, is perhaps

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the most sophisticated early Indian–English presentation of the princely state as a singularly *political* space. Written while Ghosh was still a student, this heavily symbolic work tells the story of Prince Barath of Barathpore, whose role as a messianic national leader is hinted at throughout the text. A *bildungsroman* on an epic scale, the narrative follows Barath's childhood and growth to maturity as he journeys to England for his education, returns to inherit the throne of Barathpore and tries, in a strikingly modern way, to reconcile his loyalty to Britain with his love for his own homeland.[13] Published in London in the same year, similar but less accomplished novels such as SM Mitra's *Hindupore: A Peep Behind the Indian Unrest* also feature idealised aristocratic figures that operate, like Ghosh's Prince Barath, as transcultural representatives of Indian opinion.

In their tense mixing of archetypal characterisation and political critique, these novels are curiously fraught, and their ambivalence is more understandable when we realise that they mediate an early phase in Indian nationalism that Partha Chatterjee has termed, famously, the 'moment of departure'. For Chatterjee this is a founding point in the continuum of Indian nationalist thought, during which it becomes clear to the colonised that

> The West has a superior culture, but only partially; spiritually the East is superior. What is needed, now [in the late nineteenth century] is the creation of a cultural ideal in which the industries and sciences of the West can be learnt and emulated while retaining the spiritual greatness of Eastern culture. This is the national-cultural project at the moment of departure.[14]

Both Ghosh's and Mitra's fictions condense these themes in the figure of the Indian prince and the proto-national space of the princely kingdom, and in doing so both draw on the work of a writer whom Partha Chatterjee selects as a representative of his nationalist 'departure' phase, the Bengali novelist and intellectual Bankim Chandra Chatterji, who is now remembered, primarily, for his landmark historical novel of Bengali nationalism, *Anandamath*[15].

As Chatterjee notes, Bankim's model of political emancipation, 'a project of national-cultural regeneration in which the intelligentsia leads and the nation follows',[16] is marked by an inherent elitism, and this is repeated in the presentation of feudal (and messianic) figures of proto-national leadership in *The Prince of Destiny*. More revealing, in terms of the conceptual reliance of 'departure-phase' nationalism on forms of Hindu primordialism, is the way that novelists such as Ghosh and Mitra cannot conceive of anti-colonial resistance in anything *but* (Hindu) spiritual terms. In Mitra's novel the major threat to British sovereignty in India comes not from 'the [*swadeshi*] movement for "Hind Swaraj"',[17] but from a network of politicised priests and *sanyassi* who form a Pan-Hindu fraternity throughout the subcontinent. Mitra's vision of a Pan-Hindu brotherhood pledged to the Motherland owes much to Bankim's plot of a *sanyassi* rebellion in *Anandamath*, but both authors also mobilise Puranic narratives (especially forms of *bhakti* devotionalism) in their fiction.

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As Bhatt points out, in political prose writings such as *Krsnacaritra* [18], Bankim skilfully avoided both a western metaphysical model and the more 'abstract textualism' of contemporary Hindu reform movements while at the same time 'reconfigur[ing]...Puranic, devotional religion such that Krishna symbolis[es] a "de-sexualised", ethical, militant ideal of what humanity could become'.[19] This politically 'activated' refashioning of Krishna is mirrored very clearly in *The Prince of Destiny*, which is subtitled *The New Krishna*. Indeed, throughout the novel Ghosh continually hints at the potentially mythical, redemptive identity of his hero, in 'the thousand allusions, the thousand suggestions' that Barath hears 'vaguely heard half-uttered...since his childhood',[20] suggestions that finally force the 'New Krishna' into a literal identity-crisis, causing him to renounce his throne at the very moment he seems poised to lead India to independence.

Early Indian–English novelists such as Ghosh did not depend solely on forms of (Bengali) cultural nationalism for inspiration. Nor was their interest in the political potential of Hinduism restricted, following Bankim, to the creative use of Puranic myth. Because the Indian–English writers of the 1910s engaged so closely—and ambivalently—with a spectrum of contemporary nationalist discourses, their work reveals the extent to which an early Indian nationalist intelligentsia excavated Hinduism's religious pre-history, rediscovering a classical South-Asian civilisation already made available in Orientalist scholarship. One of the staunchest defenders of India's lost golden age was Dayanada Saraswati, the leader of a Hindu reform movement, the *Arya Samaj* (society of nobles), founded in Bombay in 1875 and Lahore in 1877. Taking its cue from older reform groups such as the Bengal *Brahmo Samaj,* Dayananda's *Arya Samaj* was effectively a fundamentalist organisation that sought to strengthen and simplify the spiritual basis of Hinduism. Like Bankim, Dayanada realised that Hinduism's political potential derived both from the way it connected the colonised with a forgotten spiritual greatness[21] and also, more practically, from its wide social base as the majority faith in the subcontinent. (Although his organisational thinking, in common with Bankim, maintained the importance of elite leadership cadres.) On these terms, Hinduism could provide the discursive coherence essential for a truly sub-continental national movement.

In a radical challenge to Brahminical theocracy, the *Samaj* called for a return to the textual foundations of Hindu religious culture and recognition of the revealed monotheistic truth of the Vedas. This was augmented by claims to an ancient 'Aryan' heritage, an orientalist concept-term that, in Dayananda's usage, could shift between a moral or social definition of *arya* as 'nobility' and equally strong territorial, ethnological and racial meanings.[22] In Dayanada's thinking, therefore, the reimagining of Hinduism's primordial beginnings not only relied on a selective exegesis of the Vedas but also drew, as the movement's name suggests, on colonial race-theory and other metropolitan concerns such as social evolutionism and degeneration. To understand how contemporary writers like Ghosh and Mitra exploited this stock of transacted ideas it is necessary to review, briefly, the wider significance of Aryanism, and its centrality in European debates about race.

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The theoretical location of humanity's primeval Aryan origin in central Asia, usually in the Himalayas, had been widely accepted by European philosophers and historians, Kant amongst them, by the early nineteenth century. Following Friedrich Schlegel's use of comparative philology to make claims about Indo-European racial interconnectedness, French race-theorists such as Renan and Gobineau and the German Sanskritist Max Müller all ascribed to a racial anthropology which saw the Aryans as a primal civilising race that had made a pre-historical migration from central Asia to Europe and the subcontinent. These theories were adopted in a more general form by British scholar-administrators such as William Hunter-Wilson who reiterated the idea of a noble Aryan race that had peopled Europe *and* India in his influential *Annals of Rural Bengal* (1868), incidentally, a text that provided the historical plotline of Bankim's *Anandamath* in an account of a Sanyassi rebellion in 1771–1772.[23] In the *Annals* Hunter argued that Bengal was the site of a historical intermixing between 'noble' invaders of Aryan ancestry and 'inferior tribes', a theory that became paradigmatic in ethnological accounts of India and was later used to explain caste-stratification in Hindu society.

The 'Aryan migration/invasion model' was consistent, as Susan Bayly has noted, with contemporary European views that advanced societies 'could survive and flourish only if they found means to protect themselves from the formation of racial "composites" through the merging of people from separate racial "stock" and very unequal degrees of civilisation'.[24] In this model, the once great Aryan race had become gradually weakened in its journey into India as it diluted itself through intermixture with indigenous peoples. Indeed, 'racial theory, with its insistence on the purity and supremacy of Aryan races'[25] seemed, therefore, to supply a racial justification for colonial supremacy as the natural ascendancy of a purer *European* Aryan bloodline. However, as the British empire expanded across the globe, colonial anthropologists and race-theorists had to admit the 'inevitability of [European] decline as different races and cultures mixed and reproduced'.[26] Increasing colonial contact with non-European cultures, and the often genocidal or pathogenic consequences of these encounters, only reinforced late nineteenth-century anxieties about racial degeneration. In these discourses, argues Rod Edmond, 'a complex dialectic was at work [and the] obsession of Western observers with the death of other cultures was, in part, a displaced expression of fear of the extinction of their own'.[27]

We find that by the late 1880s, therefore, the comparatively fraternal model of shared 'Aryan' origins advanced by Sanskritists such as Max Müller, in which Indians had been described as 'our brothers in language and thought'[28] gives way, as Thomas Trautmann notes, to a more aggressively empirical race-science which seeks to sideline Indian Aryanism and reassert the superiority of European 'Aryan races' such as the Celts.[29] Condemning Max Müller's ideas out of hand, the anthropologist Isaac Taylor celebrated the new paradigm in Aryanist thinking by proclaiming in 1889 that the 'tyranny of the Sanskritists is happily overpast...hasty philological deductions [now] require to be systematically checked by the conclusions of

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prehistoric archaeology, craniology, anthropology, geology and common sense'.[30] However, even as a new 'scientific' anthropology, with its paraphernalia of anthropometric measurement and craniology, reasserted European racial superiority, the distant Indo-European racial connections plotted by the Sanskritists still left the option of a renewed race-fitness open to both coloniser and colonised. Hence, in a reversal of the degenerative trope of 'going native' (something that colonial fictions often dwelt on), colonial commentators found themselves facing the disagreeable possibility that Indians might reverse their evolutionary trajectory, and were 'dangerously ready to recover the vigour and competitive greatness that was implanted in their [Aryan] racial heritage'.[31]

These ideas were of particular interest to contemporary Indian reformers and intellectuals who, as we have seen, grafted Aryanist ideas onto discourses of primordialist nationalism, but they also had an enduring impact on the political shape of the early Indian novel in English. In these fictions we encounter an intriguing co-option of metropolitan race-theory which accepts the idea of racial degeneration and regeneration, but is equally attuned to cross-national allegiances and hidden cross-racial commonalities. Among literary works published at the turn of the century, KK Sinha's historical romance *Sanjogita or the Princess of Aryavarta* exemplifies Indian hopes about the reactivation of an 'Aryan' ancestry as the prelude to national rejuvenation. Basing his novel on the popular legend of the twelfth century princess Sanjogita, Sinha signals his didactic intention in his preface by 'remind[ing] his countrymen of the glory and greatness of their ancestors and [...drawing] attention to the direct causes of their fall'.[32] His use of a xenological *Arya Samaj* term for India, *Aryavarta*, confirms the contemporary dependence, noted earlier, of Indian nationalist thought on forms of Vedic primordialism. Indeed, Sinha goes on to make an impassioned plea for national-racial reawakening:

> Heroes of Aryavarta, have you passed away forever? Is there nothing to infuse life into the dead ashes? Mighty sons of Ind, where are you gone?...Will you not be reincarnated for the advancement of our race?...Our is a fallen condition. We have [sic] a degraded age when the glories of our ancestors are almost forgotten and we are drawn away from the path they had struck out; when the dictates of duty are not carefully obeyed and the spiritual greatness of a Janak or a Vashista seems wholly beyond our mental horizon.[33]

As this passage shows, the 'shared' Indo-European Aryanism plotted by European Sanskritists and downgraded in scientific ethnology could always be replaced, in Indian–English fiction, by a selective, regional claim to Aryan 'nobility' that excluded *European* entitlement to an 'Aryan' heritage (such as those made by spiritualist groups like the Theosophists with their invocations to the 'Himalayan masters') and, instead, privileged the inhabitants of *Aryavarta*, as true Aryans.[34]

In the late nineteenth-century setting of *The Prince of Destiny* a fantasy of Aryan regeneration is presented in a number of ways. In particular, a reformed Hinduism, manifest as a primordial Vedic Aryanism or (as we saw

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in the previous section) a radical form of *bhakti* devotion, acts as a vehicle for political change and potential proto-national liberation. Like Sinha, Ghosh uses a conceptual vocabulary of primordial Hinduism, most obviously in the naming of his protagonist, Bharat, the legendary primal Aryan whose name constitutes the descriptive term, *Bharatiya*, used to designate India in Sanskrit and Hindi texts.[35] As Christophe Jaffrelot confirms, 'these usages hark back to the conviction that Hindu culture contains within it the essence of Indian identity'.[36] Rather more circuitously, Ghosh's novel allegorises this merging of the historical and the mythical in its own topography, as the narrator dwells on the palimpsest-foundations of Delhi and calls for a symbolic rebuilding of the legendary city of Indraprastha: 'the prize for which the sons of the gods of Meru fought and died'.[37]

If the princely state becomes the primary imaginative site for a diachronic investigation into India's religio-mythical and 'racial' origins in *The Prince of Destiny*, it also dramatises the transcultural synchronic aspects of a collective bid to reclaim a national history. In a way that recalls Chatterjee's definition of departure-phase nationalism as a difficult political *rapprochement* between ('eternal') Eastern spirituality and ('progressive') Western modernity, *The Prince of Destiny* incorporates a setting that is really a stage for continual searching comparisons and translations between India and the wider imperial world. Using imperial transport networks to gather political and technological know-how from Japan, Germany and America, Bharat's ambassadors come and go in a busy itinerary of departures and arrivals that make the novel's feudal setting seem more like an international transit-zone than a culturally-unified homeland.[38] In contrast to the renewed interest in iconic 'Indian' settings such as the rural village in later nationalist fictions, the hybrid energies of departure-phase fiction seem to generate this self-conscious political meditation on travel and cross-cultural comparison as a requisite stage in the development of a more rooted national identity.

This fictional cross-border traffic finds an interesting analogue in Benedict Anderson's most recent work, *The Spectre of Comparisons*, in which his earlier reading of nationalism as a form of inward-looking, textually-augmented 'imagining'[39] is complemented by an awareness of the *global* circulation of universal political ideas and theories that make up nationalism's conceptual economy. As Anderson argues, a form of 'unbound [conceptual] seriality'[40] stretching *across* and *between* national boundaries, developed out of new information and transport systems in the late nineteenth century, and was facilitated by the increasing speed and coverage of imperial news networks that provided the colonised with images of their own concerns in other, far-flung conflicts and national struggles. As my discussion of the early Indian–English novel suggests, along with 'people' and 'nation', 'race' seems to have been a unit in this transacted, 'replicable' currency of political terms, and could be used as part of the international self-positioning and self-validation of a new Indian intelligentsia, especially where European colonialism seemed to be failing as a global political force.

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The way Indian nationalism discretely remodels prevailing imperialist ideas about race in a strategic synthesis of nation, ethnicity and religion is most apparent in a close thematic engagement with the idea of racial fitness in novels such as *The Prince of Destiny* and *Sanjogita,* and in the way these texts seem to monitor and play on colonial racial anxieties. In Britain, concerns about national-racial degeneration were an increasing feature of late Victorian public discourses, and the poor physical condition of army recruits during the Boer war exacerbated these fears, prompting government interest in public health and 'efficiency', and catalysing various schemes to ensure a 'condition of national fitness equal to the demands of...Empire'.[41] Because they were based in London, writers such as Ghosh were well-placed to wonder at the degradation of sections of metropolitan society,[42] and to draw their own conclusions about Britain's national 'efficiency' compared with other nations. Thus, for Ghosh's hero in *The Prince of Destiny*, an awareness of German economic and military growth becomes a way of confirming more general Darwinian ideas of race-fitness:

> Bharat paced up and down in rising agitation. 'Germany has already a vaster population, growing more rapidly that that of Britain—and she has the economic efficiency, which will mean in rapid sequence more money. Build what battleships Britain will, in a few years Germany could build more. It is the eternal law of the survival of the fittest, which is another name for efficiency'.[43]

The belief that previously 'strong' races might fall behind in the global competition of nations, or that European culture might be experiencing a decline has other important implications for the way contemporary South-Asian novelists fashioned a sense of proto-national identity. As noted above, the global 'time–space compression'[44] of the modern period also made the spectacle of imperial defeat available to the colonised. While colonial officials worried about levels of physical fitness at home, they were troubled by the visibility of European military failure on the world stage. Between 1890 and 1910, remarked the diplomat Alfred Lyall, 'came events which materially altered the attitude of Asiatic nations towards European predominance'.[45] These included the routing of the Italian army by Abyssinian forces at Adowah in 1896, and the Russian defeat in the 1905 Russo-Japanese war, a failure that Lyall took as 'a significant and striking warning that the era of facile victories in Asia had ended'.[46] For other colonial administrators like the Africanist Harry Johnstone the Russian defeat was, simply, 'the first setback of the Caucasian since the neolithic period'.[47]

The racial significance given to these events by British officials accounts for their resonance in contemporary Indian–English novels, in which the potential national-racial 'efficiency' of South-Asians balances the incipient degeneration of the West. It also informs the interesting cross-national alliances and power-blocs (almost always involving the Japanese) imagined by both Ghosh and Mitra. For these authors, Hinduism, because it is a religion that pre-dates and therefore claims Buddhism as a historical offshoot, offers the possibility of a linked counter-imperialist Asiatic empire encompassing India, China and Japan. At the same time, the great antiquity

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and the territorial and cultural claims of Hinduism ensure that, within an Orientalist historical framework of South-Asian religions, India, or *Aryavarta*, can be seen as a distinctive, originary space compared with its neighbours.

Again, the most revealing point of this national-communal historiography is the way Hinduism is accorded an exclusive historical monopoly on Indian identity, to the extent that other major religions of the subcontinent are either ignored, as is the case with Islam, Zoroastrianism and Christianity, or incorporated as minor variants of Hinduism such as Buddhism—a strategy that anticipates later Hindu nationalist practices of communal 'reconversion' to the 'original' Hindu faith of India. As a Japanese character in Mitra's *Hindupore* suggests, close historical links between Vedic Hinduism and Buddhism might provide the basis for a massive shift in global power, as the balance of racial efficiency swings away from West to East: "'Japan loves India for the sake of the future, as well as the past"... said the pilgrim with a confident air..."Without the Hindu, Japan cannot attempt the unification of a grand Asiatic empire. India, China, and Japan in one empire would be beyond the dreams of any Western Power. And such a day will come"'.[48]

These politically-charged discourses of racial de/regeneration, Hindu primordialism and 'Asiatic' anti-colonial alliance converge, in the novels discussed here, in a concern with the body and collective physical 'efficiency'. In *The Prince of Destiny* Barath instigates a regime of physical exercise, modelled on Japanese military training, as part of his reform of Barathpore. Reporting on the plan, the commanding officer of his army states decisively: 'at first my main duty will be to teach our men gymnastics...I shall begin with jiu-jitsu'.[49] The fact that Bharatpore's citizens are being taught a *Japanese* martial art reasserts Japan's exemplary conceptual place in early Indian nationalism,[50] but the emphasis on physical training in Ghosh's novel also anticipates the regimes of ideological and paramilitary 'man-moulding' characteristic of later parent organisations of the Hindu Right such as the RSS or *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (National Volunteer Corps).

Founded by KB Hedgewar in 1925, the RSS rejected earlier models of civic nationalism in favour of a concept of nationhood that elided race, culture and religious affiliation. Although the political philosophy of the RSS proposed a gradual (and in their words 'non-political') transformation to a *Hindu Rashtra*, it shared a great deal with contemporary Italian and German fascism and drew on German race-theorists such as Johann Kaspar Bluntschli. Integral to these discourses was a functionalist view of Indian society, and a reworking of the Vedic creation concept of the primal man in which 'separatist' Muslim minorities were seen as harmful growths threatening the healthy Hindu national body. In a form of political metonymy, the programme of mass national-communal regeneration embarked upon by the RSS involved (and still involves) a 'man-moulding' focus on physical fitness, *lathi* drill and the disciplines of the Hindu *akhara* or temple-gymnasium tradition.

Clearly, Ghosh's interest in physical training predates the more sinister corporeal symbolism of the RSS, but both are part of a political framework

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structured on narratives of redemptive 'racial' self-fashioning, and a view of Muslim communities as marginal, if not actively detrimental, to the (Hindu-) nationalist project. This said, in *The Prince of Destiny* it is not so much the body as its clothed public presence that conveys the complex semiotics of anti-colonial nationalism. As Emma Tarlo has shown[51], clothes became a vital index of identity for later national leaders such as Gandhi, and it is apt, therefore, that in Ghosh's writing types of sartorial disguise betray the conflicting demands of primordial identification and industrial, military advancement. In the novel's *denouement* a revolutionary army, mobilised in secret by Barath's chief minister, confronts the Prince demanding that he leads a national uprising against the British. Disguised as wandering Hindu holy men, Bharatpore's revolutionary fighters signal their insurrectionary plans by throwing off their saffron robes to reveal military uniforms at the crucial moment:

> Then Chandra cried out passionately, 'Heaven-born, I implore thee to say but the word, and I shall call up a hundred and twenty thousand men to proclaim thee!' He flung off his saffron robe, and revealed a military uniform beneath— of Japanese pattern. His companions did likewise.[52]

Here, in *The Prince of Destiny*, the signifier of a spiritual link with India's primordial Hindu past literally cloaks and stabilises a potentially alienating transaction with European/Japanese militarism, a transaction which is also naturalised, as we have seen, through claims to 'pan-Asiatic' racial and spiritual commonality.

While early twentieth-century Indian–English novelists rely on a functionalist terminology of racial 'vitalism, evolution, telos, palingenesis, survival and degeneration'[53] in their writing, and return, repeatedly, to ancient Hindu civilisation as the basis of their political aesthetics, their work is still distinctively 'pre-national' in its unwillingness to engage with the cultures of the Indian masses. Recalling the passage from Nehru's autobiography quoted in the introduction, we realise that this may be another reason why India's future premier is so vehement in his self-affirming dismissal of revolutionaries like Krishnavarma. In Nehru's memoir, older nationalists are censured not just because of the redundancy of their political models, but because they are out of touch, 'too deaf to hear',[54] and strangely textual instead of social beings. For Nehru, they belong to an earlier culture of elite discursive negotiation that has little in common with the more clearly mass-orientated, agrarian objectives of the Congress during the 1920s and 1930s.

The elitism of early Indian nationalism can be linked very clearly to the Aryanist discourses already sketched out here and is, in some ways, their natural correlative. Thus, nineteenth-century anthropological 'invasion' theories of a racial encounter between light-skinned Aryans and dark-skinned *Dasyus* in India's prehistory map easily onto Orientalist models of *varna* or caste polarised between light-skinned 'twice-born' Aryans and darker 'untouchable' indigenous peoples, a discursive manoeuvre that Trautmann calls 'a fantastic back-projection of systems of [colonial]

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segregation onto early Indian history'.[55] The elitism intrinsic in much early nationalist thought is also evident in Bankim's call for an intellectual and moral vanguard that would supervise the nation's rebirth. As Chatterjee relates, this was not necessarily an 'elitism of caste of birth or privilege or wealth, but of excellence. The leaders were leaders because through *anushilan* (practice) they attained an exemplary unity of knowledge and duty'.[56] Similarly, while defending *varna* as a Vedic social formation, reformers like Dayanda Saraswati were deeply suspicious of the fixity of Brahminical versions of the caste system, and argued that caste referred, ideally, 'to the *non-hereditary* (my italics) social classification of individuals based on their merits and actions, qualities and propensities'.[57] Given these political concerns, it is unsurprising that the authors discussed here focus more closely on the nature of political leadership than the means by which this leadership might communicate with the wider, more diverse national community.

The character of this intellectual elite is further complicated by advances in technology in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, in contrast to the stress on national-physical regeneration that so pervades contemporary political thinking, we find some revolutionary nationalist groups challenging or at least attempting to circumvent the physiological claims of race-theory. Describing the tellingly-named *Anushilan Samiti* (the society of practice), a secret terrorist cell set up in Calcutta in 1902 by Aurobindo Ghose and his brother Barindrakumar, Peter Heehs points out that the brothers 'first tried...paramilitary training [with] the recruits. But [they]...had no interest in martial discipline or long-term planning. Why bother to learn drill or lathi-play when you could blow up a train or a magistrate with a well-made bomb?'[58] With the invention of dynamite in 1863 and the example of its terrorist uses by European anarchist groups in the 1880s, the programme of the national-racial regeneration through physical and spiritual discipline seemed less urgent to some nationalist leaders.

This explains the more equivocal political aspects of *The Prince of Destiny*, particularly Ghosh's eccentric interest in Japanese martial arts which, as I have argued, answers a perceived need for Indian 'racial' regeneration but simultaneously makes a high level of 'race-fitness' unnecessary because, conveniently, 'jiu-jitsu makes a man of the lowest wreck of humanity'.[59] Similarly, during a discussion about German economic growth Barath and his advisors talk appreciatively of the way the fear of military service (as a penalty for failed examinations) works as a spur to greater educational achievement and 'makes every German [student] put forth the maximum efficiency he can attain'.[60] There is a sense here, reiterated in contemporary English fiction, that national 'efficiency' requires the forging of a technocratic as much as a physically 'efficient' elite.

As with the primordialist themes and the subtle inter-discursive transaction of concepts such as degeneration that inform both *The Prince of Destiny* and *Hindupore,* the striking feature of the elitism established by these writers is the way their concerns bind them closely to *avant garde* non-conformist and socialist groups in the colonial centre. We find, for instance, Ghosh's literary-

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political elitism reflected in the contemporary 'novel of ideas' such as HG Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905) which features an elite 'voluntary nobility' styled, intriguingly, as 'the Samurai'. Like the Knights Templar, Wells's 'samurai' had 'a purpose in common in maintaining the state and the order and the progress of the world'. While the idea was welcomed by prominent Fabians like Sidney Olivier and Beatrice Webb, the elitism of the Samurai, and their opposition to 'anything in the nature of class spirit' as William Greenslade has argued, 'denoted the somewhat ambiguous relationship of Wells and the Fabians to organised labour'.[61]

More significantly, in relation to Ghosh's uncertainty about the *kind* of elite Indian nationalism might require, we find in Wells's writing an endorsement of the engineer as the 'coming man'. In a prophetic short story written by Wells in 1903, the victorious soldiers of a future European war are not perfect physical specimens, but military technicians—'alert, intelligent, quiet'. Here, 'technology privileges mind over body, intelligence over "effort", and places the townsman at the acme of man's evolution'.[62] However, while Indian authors working in English touched on similar issues in their writing, none proposed the 'negative eugenics' that make some of Wells's fictions so disturbing. Ideas of this kind were not explored by Hindu nationalists until the advent of Savarkar's xenological manifesto *Hindutva* in 1923, and there is no equivalent in the early Indian novel in English of Wells's degenerate, racially expendable 'people of the abyss'.

The influence of Edwardian social utopianism in novels such as *The Prince of Destiny* is another example of the underlying continuities, proposed earlier, between these works and the new, secular, historicised vision of India forged by Nehru in his writings. As Nehru stated in his prison correspondence with Indira: 'I have always been interested in utopias and books peeping into the future. William Morris's *New from Nowhere* was an early favourite of mine. Then there is...a fairly recent book by HG Wells: *Men Like Gods*'.[63] Nehru's political affinities with Fabian socialism are also well-documented and, like the generation of intellectuals, writers and radicals that preceded him, his imaginative projections of India's ancient past were intimately bound up with the country's national destiny. As Khilnani points out, 'The crucial point about [Nehru's]...historical writing was that it was not driven primarily by a curiosity about the past, but was impelled by anxieties about the present and the future'.[64]

As he tries to overhaul and 'secularise' India's narrative of national identity, Nehru's historiography rehearses and improvises many of the discursive manoeuvres of earlier Indian nationalism. Thus, in *The Discovery of India*, mythical spaces such as *Indraprastha* and *Aryavarta*, which form such a durable feature of the primordialist thesis, are replaced by actual archaeological evidence in the sites of Indus Valley civilisations at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. These sites become Nehru's way of making a prior historical claim for his own new anti-communal narrative of Indian identity. For Nehru, 'the Indus Valley civilisation, as we find it...was, surprisingly enough, a predominantly secular civilisation, and the religious element, though present, did not dominate the scene'.[65] Moreover, in their self-

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mythologizing connection between personal life and the public duty, both Gandhi's and Nehru's life-writings answer a political need for new messianic 'grand narratives' of Indian identity which are already anticipated in the novels discussed here. Throughout his memoirs Nehru hoped to show, as he said to Gandhi, that 'our prozaic existence has developed something of an epic greatness in it',[66] and these 'prozaic epics', built on themes of quest, destiny and redemption, carry echoes of the Indian–English political romances written in the first years of the twentieth century.

Thus, in the process of formulating and popularizing his syncretic model of India's national spirit, Nehru was bound by a political and cultural inheritance that he sought, in many ways, to disavow. In an account of his work during the election campaign of 1936–1937, Nehru employs a surprisingly primordialist vocabulary in his public speeches as a kind of concession to the rural, uneducated audience, staging his own political aspiration in Sanskrit terms: 'I spoke...of this India of ours, of Hindustan and *Bharata*, the old sanskrit name for the mythical founder of *our race*'.[67] Like Gandhi's golden-age concept of *Ram Rajya*, Nehru's account of his speech hints at the messier political realities of 'secular' Congress-nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s. Far from achieving a linear political evolution or development beyond the 'natural growth' of religious nationalism, the cultural background of the freedom struggle meant that Nehru's new 'secular' vision of India grew alongside and became interwoven with other nationalist narratives that sustained themselves through primordialist and national-communal roots.

Notes

1 S Khilnani, 'Gandhi and Nehru: the uses of English', in AK Mehrotra (ed), *A History of Indian Literature in English*, London: Hurst, 2003, p 148.
2 J Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, London: Meridian, 1960, p 240.
3 G Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, p 9.
4 J Nehru, *An Autobiography*, London: The Bodley Head, 1989, p 149.
5 *Ibid*, p 151.
6 J Nehru, letter in S Gandhi (ed), *Freedom's Daughter: Letters between Indira Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, 1922–39*, London: Hodder & Staughton, 1989, pp 145–146.
7 J Nehru, 1989, p 374.
8 C Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, Oxford: Berg, 2001, p 9.
9 Khilnani, in *A History of Indian Literature in English*, p 152.
10 A Nandy, *Time Warps*, London: Hurst, 2002, p 69.
11 A Tickell, 'Terrorism and the informative romance: two early Indian novels in English', *Kunapipi*, 25 (1), 2003, pp 73–83.
12 S K Ghosh, *The Prince of Destiny: The New Krishna*, London: Rebman, 1909.
13 See M Mukherjee, *The Perishable Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p 63.
14 P Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* London: Zed, 1986, p 73.
15 See B C Chatterji, *Anandamath*, Basanta Koomar Roy Trans., New Dehli: Orient Paperbacks, 1992.
16 *Ibid*, p 73.
17 See SM Mitra, *Hindupore*, London: Luzac, 1909, p 142.
18 This text is not available in translation. Readers can refer to the original work in Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Bankim Rachanābalī, Jogesh Chandra Bagal ed., Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1965.
19 Bhatt, 2001, p 31.
20 Ghosh, p 495.
21 See Chatterjee, 1986, p 75.

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22 Bhatt, 2001, p 16.
23 See P Joshi, *In Another Country,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, p 162.
24 S Bayly, 'Race in Britain and India', in P Van der Veer & H Lehmann (eds), *Nation and Religion,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, p 78.
25 R Edmond, 'Home and away: degeneration in imperialist and modernist discourse', in H Booth & N Rigby (eds), *Modernism and Empire,* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, p 40.
26 R Edmond, 'Home and away: degeneration in imperialist and modernist discourse', in *Modernism and Empire,* p 40.
27 *Ibid,* p 42.
28 FM Müller, in TR Trautmann, *Aryans and British India,* Berkeley: University of California, 1997, p 178.
29 *Ibid.*
30 *Ibid,* p 186
31 Bayly, 1999, p 82.
32 KK Sinha, *Sanjogita, or the Princess of Aryavarta,* Dinapore: Watling Printing Works, 1903, p iii.
33 *Ibid,* pp 266–267.
34 Bhatt points out that 'Whereas most Theosophists considered Americans, Europeans and Indians as "Aryans", Dayananda rejected this for his view that only the inhabitants of *Aryavarta* ("India") could be so designated': 2001, p 19.
35 C Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990s,* London: Hurst, 1996, p 57.
36 *Ibid.*
37 Ghosh, p 12.
38 For a more detailed investigation of the 'cross-border' affiliations of early anti-colonial nationalism, see E Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial 1890–1920,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
39 See B Anderson, *Imagined Communites,* London: Verso, 1987.
40 B Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons,* London: Verso, 1998.
41 W Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880–1940,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p 184.
42 Ghosh, pp 244–245.
43 *Ibid,* p 493.
44 This term comes from David Harvey's work on the way modernity has been characterised by a radical redefinition of global space and time. Harvey states 'I use the word "compression" because a strong case can be made that the history of capitalism has been characterised by [a] speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us': *The Condition of Postmodernity,* Oxford: Blackwell 1993, p 240.
45 A Lyall, in V Chirol, *Indian Unrest,* London: Macmillan, 1910, p ix.
46 *Ibid.*
47 H Johnstone, in P Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society,* London: Routledge, 1992, p 183.
48 Mitra, 1909, p 291.
49 Ghosh, p 390.
50 The importance of Japan as an 'alternative' model for Indian nationalist aspirations also anticipates the later political sympathies and alliances of Bengali nationalist leaders such as Subas Chandra Bose. In 1943, after the fall of Singapore to the Japanese, Bose created the provisional government of 'Azad' (free) India, and with Tojo's consent took command of the 'Indian National Army' made up of Indian POWs in Singapore. Declaring war on Britain and America, the INA marched for Delhi, but was defeated at Imphal in the summer of 1944. See S Wolpert, *A New History of India,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
51 E Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in Modern India,* London: Hurst, 1996.
52 Ghosh, p 588.
53 Bhatt, 2001, p 10.
54 Nehru, 1989, p 151
55 Trautmann, 1997, p 211.
56 Chatterjee, 1986, p 79.
57 See Bhatt, 2001, p 18.
58 P Heehs, *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism,* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p 4.
59 Ghosh, p 471.
60 *Ibid,* p 493.
61 Greenslade, 1994, p 192.
62 *Ibid.*

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63 Nehru, 1989, p 146.
64 Khilnani, in *A History of Indian Literature in English*, p 148.
65 p 58.
66 Nehru in Khilnani, 'Gandhi and Nehru: the uses of English', in *A History of Indian Literature in English*, p 153.
67 Nehru, 1960, p 47, my italics.

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