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Shakespeare, *Macbeth* and the Hindu Nationalism of Nineteenth-Century Bengal

Abstract: The essay examines a Bengali adaptation of *Macbeth*, namely *Rudrapal Natak* (published 1874) by Haralal Ray, juxtaposing it with differently accented commentaries on the play arising from the English-educated elites of 19th Bengal, and relating the play to the complex phenomenon of Hindu nationalism. This play remarkably translocates the *mythos* and *ethos* of Shakespeare's original onto a Hindu field of signifiers, reformulating Shakespeare's Witches as *bhairavis* (female hermits of a Tantric cult) who indulge unchallenged in ghastly rituals. It also tries to associate the gratuitous violence of the play with the fanciful yearning for a martial ideal of nation-building that formed a strand of the Hindu revivalist imaginary. If the depiction of the Witch-figures in *Rudrapal* undercuts the evocation of a monolithic and urbane Hindu sensibility that would be consistent with colonial modernity, the celebration of their violence may be read as an effort to emphasize the inclusivity (as well as autonomy) of the Hindu tradition and to defy the homogenizing expectations of Western enlightenment

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An obscure and undistinguished poet named Girish Chandra Laha wrote an effusive sonnet entitled "Shakespeare" for the June 1899 issue of *Prayas*, a little-known Bengali periodical. The poem may be roughly translated and paraphrased thus:

O immortal poet of this mortal world! Trained in the school of Nature, through your endeavours you attained keen insightfulness, because of which you could show how ambition, worldly pleasure, jealousy, [and] lust secretly attack the human heart;—how they, slowly extinguishing the gentle, eternally manifest light of heaven—destroy the righteous soul's sense of good and evil. Caught in the vortex of delusion, [how] man of his own accord takes to drinking poison that is covered in nectar; deranged by the temptation of apparent pleasure [how man] causes his soul remorse; [and] at the end [how man] is engulfed by the fire

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of self-disgust, in your work [O immortal poet] there is a radiant illustration of it.

In the October 1899 issue of the same magazine, Girish Chandra Laha wrote another sonnet, similarly turgid and thematically continuous with the first one. The latter poem is entitled *Macbeth Pathe* (“On Reading *Macbeth*”), and may be rendered into prose as follows:

Intense evil ambition—wonderfully have you shown, poet! How it tempts weak-eyed man—how in the guise of malicious witches causes the slow germination of a poison-tree; watered by the encouragement of a vile woman that tree grows. Evil desire, by covering the Sun of wisdom like a fog, shows splendid fruits hanging from that tree—splendid, but alas! full of hidden poison, which the man fails to see as he is deluded by the expectation of forthcoming happiness; [he] destroys every obstacle he sees before him, commits one crime after another until the sharp poison reaches the brain piercing the heart—[and] knowledge, intelligence, memory and all are lost at the end.

These two sonnets celebrate Shakespeare as an exponent of universal morality—a kind of emphatically didactic and liberal humanist reading that was recurrent in the reception of Shakespeare in 19th century Bengal. *Macbeth*, which was much familiar to the English-educated Bengalis thanks to the colonial education system instituted by the English, especially generated such readings. Such readings would often be evoked to defend the primal sensationalism of the play’s action and characterization, as is seen in the poems mentioned above. In line with this tendency, the essayist Akshay Chandra Sarkar in an article published in the periodical *Navajivan* serially between 1887 and 1889 accepts the play as a cautionary fable, reading its protagonist as a superlative exemplar of human corruptibility and the atrocity consequent upon it. Comparing *Macbeth* with Hindu mythological characters and equating criminality with sinfulness, Akshay Chandra observes,

We have heard of Lord Rama’s unfair killing of Bali [in the *Ramayana*], the killing of the boy Abhimanyu by seven charioteers [in the *Mahabharata*], the killing of the mournful Drona as a result of Yudhishthira’s falsehood [in the *Mahabharata*], the killing of the sleeping children of the five Pandavas by Ashwatthama [in the *Mahabharata*], but we do not find such an outrageously sinful murderer [as *Macbeth*]. As I have told at the beginning, *Macbeth*’s sin is the greatest of sins. (723; translation mine)¹

¹ Purna Chandra Basu, another commentator, is perturbed by the amoral, corrupting force of the play when he declares: “Murder is everywhere in *Macbeth*; it has murder at its beginning, it has murder at its middle, it has murder at its end. At first it’s Duncan’s, at the middle it’s Banquo’s, and the play ends with *Macbeth*’s

Given this recorded evidence of a moralizing and apologetic approach towards the violence staged in *Macbeth*, it is curious that a 19th Bengali adaptation of the play should pile on the horror rather than attenuating it. Haralal Ray's *Rudrapal Natak* (published 1874) strikingly suggests the Witch-equivalents as practitioners of *Tantra*, and shows them indulging in atrocious rituals. Even if we try to relate the portrayal of the Witches in this Bengali play to the rise of Hindu nationalism in colonial Bengal, the violence unleashed by them in the play flies in the face of conventional morality and sits uneasy with any programmatic rehearsal of cultural revivalism. In its configuration of the Witch-equivalents, *Rudrapal Natak* seems to decouple religion from morality, hence problematizing its gestures towards a religion-based national identity. The present article will examine the ambiguous religio-cultural motivation of the play and try to gauge the possible implications inaugurated by its peculiar adaptation of the Shakespearean *mythos* and *ethos*. The article will also explore how the thematic of violence inherent in this adaptation of *Macbeth* maps onto the cultural aspirations of the Bengali Hindu community about its self-representation in a particular point of colonial history.² This issue of the Witch-equivalents will be taken up shortly after considering the political context for the Bengali adaptation.

Rudrapal, like the subsequent *Macbeth* adaptation entitled *Karnabir*, seeks to adapt and relocate the cultural signifiers of the Shakespearean original to a Hindu milieu. It renames the *dramatis personae*, imparting to the play a suitably medieval and Hindu register and befitting the historical romance that was a

murder,—almost the entire play is a slaughterhouse. In the meantime, when Lady *Macbeth* appears to announce that her hands cannot be cleansed, the slaughterhouse becomes all the more illuminated” (42-43). Though his reaction to the play was far from the norm among the English-educated Bengalis, he argues for the play's attractiveness and ability to emotionally move the reader/audience, and therefore, he is in the same league Akshay Chandra Sarkar or Girish Chandra Laha. All these three commentators, incidentally, belonged to the Bengali Hindu community, which received an early benefit of the colonial education. By adapting the resources of self-representation made available by the colonial contact, the (upper-caste, upper-class) Bengali Hindu community sought to define its cultural aspirations and identity first against those of the Indian Muslim community and subsequently against those of the British colonizers.

² There are records of six Bengali translations or adaptations of *Macbeth* that were composed in the 19th century: Harinath Ghosh's literal translation of 1850 which is no longer available; Haralal Ray's *Rudrapal Natak* (published 1874); Taraknath Mukhopadhyay's *Macbeth* (published 1875); Nagendranath Basu's *Karnabir* (published 1885); Girish Chandra Ghose's *Macbeth* (produced 1893, published 1899); and, Ashutosh Ghosh's *Macbeth* (published 1894). Out of these, *Rudrapal* was performed at the Great National Theatre, Kolkata and motivated Girish Chandra Ghosh's own famous translation of *Macbeth* for the commercial stage. The striking portrayal of the Witches as Hindu ascetics performing violent rituals is exclusive to *Rudrapal*, considering all Bengali translations or adaptations of *Macbeth* till date.

popular means among the educated Bengali Hindu for fantasizing about a pristine, illustrious Hindu past. In the play, for example, Macbeth is rechristened as the eponymous Rudrapal (the word *rudra* in Sanskrit denoting “the ferocious/irate one” and is one of the names for Lord Shiva in the Hindu pantheon), while Lady Macbeth becomes Chaturika (meaning in Sanskrit, “the clever woman”). Scotland in the play is renamed as *Panchanad* (literally “the land of the five rivers,” i.e., the Punjab) and its capital is identified as Lahore (25), whereas Delhi in the Bengali play replaces the England of the original (49). More fascinating still, both *Rudrapal* and *Karnabir* identify the Norwegian invaders using the Sanskrit appellation *yavana*, which was a catch-all term (at least among the educated Bengali in the 19th century) for all ritually impure, non-Hindu people endangering the Hindu way of life, and used repeatedly by 19th century Bengali Hindu authors such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94) to designate especially the Muslims. It has been remarked that *Rudrapal* was written and produced under the influence of the Hindu Mela, which was an annual festival organized in Kolkata from 1867 onwards (Bhattacharya xxxii). The clearly designated objective of the Hindu Mela was to remind the Bengali Hindus about their glorious heritage (supposedly obfuscated by centuries of political persecution and cultural marginalization under the Muslims and subsequently the British) and prepare them for a nationalist revival (Raychaudhuri 7). *Rudrapal* does actually mention the word *Musalman* once while referring to the prisoners taken during the war with the invaders, the equivalents of the Norwegians in Shakespeare’s play (Ray 3). The use of the term *yavana* implicitly but efficiently taps the nostalgic myth already mentioned above, that of a glorious Hindu past corrupted by the inroads of the Muslim and the British colonizers.

Chaudhury and Sengupta have tried to emphasize the political implications of *Karnabir*, situating it in a picture of pro-nationalist ambition in India. According to them,

The morally satisfying ending [of *Macbeth*] would be apposite in the depressing aftermath of the Great Uprising (1857). Accursed time finally redeemed through the restoration of the legitimate line of Duncan holds out an optimistic hope for a defeated populace who had recently attempted a similar restitution by resurrecting the Mughal heir, Bahadur Shah of Delhi, as the emperor of “free India.” *Macbeth* also exemplifies the solitary alienation of a frustrated overreacher consumed by his megalomania and the spiritual crisis between desire and conscience, which could be read as a providential indicator of the inevitable self-destruction of the encroacher: a wishful but predictable fantasy of the colonised psyche...*Macbeth* proves a fertile ground for experimenting with depictions of a despotic regime and its disastrous consequences. (10)

Chaudhury and Sengupta also remind that the aftermath of the Great Uprising (also alternatively called the “Sepoy Mutiny” in British colonial annals and the

“Rebellion” or the “First War of Indian Independence” by Indian nationalist historians) saw the rise of nationalist organizations among the educated middle and upper classes, and that, as a result, “To curb anti-colonial activities in the cultural sphere, the British introduced repressive measures like the *Theatre Censorship Act* (1876) and the *Vernacular Press Act* (1878)” (1). This is a percipient and resourceful reading, but it tends to sidestep the fact that sentiments against the colonizing regime were hardly homogenized, and that records of pro-British sympathy among the Bengali during the Uprising are legion.³ Consequently, the aftermath of the Uprising would not be uniformly “depressing” and “accursed,” even for the elite minority of Bengali Hindu intellectuals who pioneered nationalist aspirations in Bengal or India. In any case, the gestures towards nationalism that may be located in *Rudrapal* are of a reductive and exclusivist brand, based on the celebration of elite Hindu concerns—something close to what Chaudhury and Sengupta remark about the cultural policy deployed by *Karnabir*. Even if we accept that *Rudrapal* is an anti-colonizer play in disguise (with its protagonist supplying an Indian surrogate for foreign tyrants preying on the country), the claim that “mainstream orthodox readings that would be dismissed as conventional today were radicalised by the late 19th century colonial context” (Chaudhury and Sengupta 10) is rendered less effective by the fact that *Macbeth* has been a staple of the English literature syllabi introduced by the colonial regime. It is possible to argue that *Rudrapal* goes for a more complex agenda, trying to resuscitate the cultural prestige of the Hindu community and instil national pride within it while (at least provisionally) accepting the overarching colonial ascendancy of the British. It also needs to be recalled that Hindu nationalism in Bengal was not necessarily predicated upon an aversion to everything British or European. According to historian Tapan Raychaudhuri,

Modally, the emerging nationalist consciousness adopted the heritage of Hindu culture as the focus of its identity and gloried in the Hindu past. Yet well into the 1870s, it also rejoiced that India was part of a glorious worldwide empire [that of the British] and nurtured hopes of a steady progress under Britain’s providential guidance. The contradiction between pride in the Hindu identity and faith in a regime seen to be identified with the most vicious critics of the cherished [Hindu] culture was apparently not obvious in the early phases of nationalism. (3)

³ Summing up historian Rajat Kanta Ray’s nuanced theorization of the Rebellion, Biswamoy Pati accepts the lack of uniformity about the modality and impact of the Rebellion of 1857 among the Indians as he comments that “[i]deologically, it reflected a fetal national community that was *opposed to civil society, which had outposts in the enclaves of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras*” (10). Pati also observes that “In areas such as Bengal and the Punjab, they failed to ignite the country, and the Great Rebellion did not go beyond the cantonments [in these regions]” (9).

A similar stance may be seen eminently in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath* (1882), which proved to be a defining text of Indian nationalism and was hugely influential in installing in the Indian imaginary the icon of the motherland as a Hindu mother goddess. Historian Tanika Sarkar observes that the novel, which is "set in the transitional historical moment of the late 18th century, against the backdrop of the famine of 1770, armed combat by marauding ascetics of Naga Dasnami orders against the puppet Muslim nawab, and the indirect control of the British in Bengal," does not state clearly whom the ascetic order of soldiers named *santandal* ["the band of the motherland's children"] battles against (173-74). She further points out that,

Even though they [the holy fighters] do accomplish the ouster of the puppet nawab [i.e., the Muslim ruler of Bengal], they also are instrumental in ushering in direct and complete British dominion. A divine voice tells the supreme leader that this is providential, since Hindus need apprenticeship in modern forms of power. The leader, however, remains disconsolate and unreconciled and considers the historical mission of *santans*, the ascetic leaders, to be aborted, since one foreign ruler is exchanged for another. Nationalists took this bitterness as a call for struggle against the colonial power ... (174)

The play *Rudrapal*, on the other hand, conflates the invaders with Muslims only incipiently and that too in passing. In the plot of crime/sin and punishment/perdition inherent in the play the transgressor [namely, the eponymous protagonist] is not an ethnic or cultural other but a member of the Hindu patrician class and a martial hero of Northern or Western India to boot, the type central to nostalgic Hindu mythopoeia in the 19th century. If we have already agreed that the play's commitment to anti-colonial nationalism is at best highly camouflaged and rarefied, its evocation of Hindu revivalism too, as we shall see, is hardly unqualified and straightforward.

In a striking departure from Shakespeare's original, the Witches are refashioned in *Rudrapal* as *bhairavi* (female ascetics in the *Tantric* tradition) rather than being identified with the more predictable appellations of *dakini* (the Sanskrit term for a witch that Girish Chandra Ghosh later opts for in his faithful translation of *Macbeth*) or its Bengali equivalent, *daini*. Probably taking a cue from this play, *Karnabir* also identifies the witches as *bhairavi* although their characterization is true to Shakespeare's weird sisters. *Rudrapal* is remarkable for making several scenic and narrative additions that heighten the importance of the Witches and enhance the duration of their on-stage presence. For example, in the opening scene the three *bhairavis* do not chant unnervingly cryptic and puerile rhymes as in Shakespeare's text, but they are seen entering each with a *trishul* (a trident that belongs to the paraphernalia of *Tantric* ascetics), which they plant on the ground before they speak in a grave, sonorous prose heavily laden with Sanskrit words (Ray 1). Incidentally, Rabindranath Tagore as a 14-year old boy

had translated *Macbeth* into Bengali, three scenes from which (all of them featuring the Witches) were published much later in the magazine *Bharati* in 1880. Prashanta Kumar Pal records in the first volume of *Rabijibani* that Rabindranath as a boy was instructed by Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay, scholar and essayist, to render the witches' lines distinct in terms of rhythm and diction (226). The published excerpts of the otherwise lost translation bear out this tendency. Similarly, the Witch-figures in *Karnabir* and Girish's *Macbeth* are rendered quasi-comic by their speeches. As opposed to this, *Rudrapal* shows the *bhairavis* to be grave and authoritative beings throughout.

When the three *bhairavis* meet again after the inaugural scene, they are not hankering after chestnuts or planning vengeance against a sailor's wife like the folkloric troublemakers of Shakespeare's original. The second *bhairavi* reports that she was helping a Brahman named Pinak in his necromantic labours, as he was trying to perform esoteric penance sitting on a human corpse. In order to remove all impediments, the *bhairavi* drew an icon of Goddess Kali on the corpse's forehead using the blood of a buffalo sacrificed before *Chamunda*, a fierce goddess, which enabled Pinak gain his objective (Ray 4). Such exploits align the Witch-equivalents with *Tantra*. The occult powers of the *bhairavis* depicted in the play are comparable with the ancient concept of the eight *siddhis* or miraculous powers whose achievement traditionally forms the goal of the Tantric practitioner (Bhattacharyya 148). To sum up, what the *bhairavis* exemplify is the amalgamation of holy terror and awe that is associated with *Tantra* in the popular Indian imagination.

The Brahman Pinak actually takes the role of Hecate in *Rudrapal*. But he is much obliged to the *bhairavis* and not superior to them as Hecate is to the Witches in *Macbeth*. He features in a scene corresponding to the masque-like manoeuvres of Hecate in *Macbeth*, but the scene in the Bengali play is downright lurid and revolting—to the point of inadvertent self-parody. Pinak enters the stage with a severed human head (Ray 37). The three women ascetics request the Brahman to secure them some singularly rare substances. The first calls for three strands of Lord Shiva's hair from a cave filled with snow below a distant mountain (Ray 37). The second *bhairavi* has a more elaborately-phrased and recondite demand—she calls for the blood of a buffalo that has fed on the leaves of an *ashoka* tree growing at the spot where the goddess killed the demon Raktavija, and that has been sacrificed before Goddess Chhinnamasta on the Vindhya mountain on the same day (Ray 37). The third *bhairavi* calls for the clay under the demon-king Ravana's funeral pyre that is eternally burning in Sri Lanka (Ray 37). The first item, they add, has the property of producing frightful hallucinations, the second can bring back life, and the third can generate fire out of nothing. At the Brahman's instance, three demons fetch the desired substances before a hibiscus flower thrown by him towards the backstage can touch the ground (Ray 38). Having accomplished this inhuman feat, the three demons dance

in a circle around their master Pinak (Ray 39). When Rudrapal meets them for the second time, the *bhairavis* use the substances gathered with the aid of Pinak to terrify him and mislead him in response to his queries. There are two gratuitous horrors in Act 4, scene 1 of *Rudrapal* (corresponding to the scene of Macbeth's second encounter with the Witches): first, an ugly and enormous monster materializes from the strand of Lord Shiva's hair and rushes to decapitate Rudrapal without any warning; second, a blood-drenched man with a sword stuck in his heart attacks Rudrapal straightaway (Ray 40-41). The cumulative effect of such sensationalism threatens to strip the Bengali play of the cautionary zeal and exalted moral worth that the likes of Girish Chandra Laha and Akshay Chandra Sarkar (quoted at the beginning of the article) appreciate in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

The play *Macbeth*, one may observe, tries to condemn and alienate the Witches as abominable beings whose presence cannot however ignored. On the other hand, *Rudrapal* seems to incorporate the *bhairavis* quite brazenly within the fold of Hindu imaginary. The play projects them as objects of awe and reverence rather than downright detestation. Choudhury and Sengupta, commenting on the *bhairavis* of *Karnabir*, observe that the use of the Hindu religious appellation distances them from their Shakespearean counterparts. In their opinion,

The play [*Macbeth*] is firmly embedded within a Christian matrix that denounces witches and black magic as unequivocal manifestations of evil. The Hindu religion in contrast, *accommodates* Goddess Kali and the associated *tantric* cult within its seamless bounds thereby legitimising the obscure yet potent occult practices closely paralleling black magic. Although few actively embrace the *tantric* cult because of the rigours and dangers involved, the average Hindu is not compelled to castigate it as unmitigated evil. So the element of demonic horror and aversion suggested in the original is missing. (12-13; emphasis original)⁴

However, the *bhairavis* of *Karnabir* are predominantly folkloric miscreants, singing and dancing malicious hags modally similar to Shakespeare's Witches (if not semantically identical to them thanks to the cultural divide). By contrast, the *bhairavis* in *Rudrapal* are invested with a solemn religious aura and are treated reverentially despite their grotesque practices. Given the nature of the rituals they perform, it becomes difficult to agree with them notwithstanding the deference they are consistently subjected to within the fictional/dramaturgic economy of the

⁴ It also needs to be remembered that *Tantra* did not enjoy total and unanimous support from Hindus of all variety. *Tantra* as a body of arcane cultic beliefs and practices became increasingly suspect in the 19th century and charges of iniquity and criminality were raised against it both within and outside the fold of colonial Orientalist learning. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, a leading Hindu revivalist commentator and Rajendra Lal Mitra, an eminent Bengali scholar of Buddhism, both detested Tantra (Bhattacharyya 41-42).

play. The inclusivity of the Hindu traditions cannot adequately explain away this ambiguous and heterodox treatment. Despite the lurid and stomach-turning horror that these female ascetics unleash in the play, they embody the most noticeable links of the play with the Hindu ethos that it seeks to celebrate as part of a cultural agenda. In *Rudrapal* there is no mention of the healing powers of the figure corresponding to the English king Edward the Confessor of the original, which makes the ascetics the only representatives of the Hindu religion as well as supernatural prowess in the play.

As has been already suggested, the play consistently works towards magnifying and ameliorating the eschatological standing of the Witch-equivalents. For example, Banquo in the original identifies the weird sisters unhesitatingly as “instruments of darkness” who “tell us truths; / Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s / In deepest consequence” (1.3.123-25). But Vinaypal, the Banquo figure in the Bengali play under review, refers to the female ascetics only as “strange women” and does not use such strong words to describe their potentials of misleading the credulous (Ray 7). Besides, *Rudrapal* contains no reference to the Witches’ beards, which would help show the female ascetics as grotesque, liminal creatures. There is also no equivalent in the Bengali play of Shakespeare’s eerie term for the Witches, the “weird sisters” (1.5.7). Moreover, Macbeth in the Shakespeare play addresses the Witches with strong words of disapprobation as he meets them for the second time, “How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags!” (4.1.47) *Rudrapal* in the Bengali adaptation steers clear of such abusive language, but he accuses the female ascetics of dragging him into criminality. The ascetics protest, asserting that they should not be blamed and that they never do any good or ill to human beings (Ray 40).

Moreover, the play translates “fair is foul, and foul is fair” as the second *bhairavi*’s solemn affirmation in prose, “Good omens and bad are all the same to us. What do we care for the pleasure and pain of human beings?” (Ray 4) The three then declare that they know everything that will happen: “At first evil will triumph”; “Then evil will have a fall” (Ray 5). They utter in unison in the same scene, “We know the future but we don’t help or harm anyone” (Ray 5). This makes possible an explanation of the Bengali Macbeth’s fate in terms of the time-honoured Hindu principles of *karma* and predestination. The Tantric text *Prapanchasara* states after enumerating the special powers of the Tantric practitioner that one who is endowed with the eight *siddhis* or supernatural powers is a liberated soul, and as a corollary would not exploit these powers for base material gains (Bhattacharyya 148). This is probably the eschatological status that the *bhairavis* seem to enjoy in *Rudrapal*. It is difficult to accept their self-professed disinterestedness at its face value, but the play seems to provide them with an alibi to pose as impartial (but not inactive) witnesses of human fortune. The play seems to mute or render irrelevant the issues regarding the ethical or legal acceptability of *Tantra*. Rather, the question of ethicality or

legality is elided in this particular case for the dual purpose of evoking a Hindu frame of reference and incorporating (albeit in an extravagantly lurid fashion) the Shakespearean influence into the picture.

The fetishization of violence and cruelty achieved through the *bhairavis* seems to be capable of a distinctive but muted cultural resonance when we try to juxtapose and liken it to Bankim Chandra's own romancing of violent resistance in his novels as a masculine ideal for nation-building. Tanika Sarkar is of the opinion that Bankim's disillusionment with the pseudo-democratic public sphere instituted by colonial modernity in India led him to idealize a heroic violence that was incompatible with contemporary political contingency. According to her,

Bankim . . . was relentlessly critical of reformist aspirations and methods of work. He saw reformist dependence on colonial legislation for initiating improved family laws as a basic moral flaw, since this neither generated a will for change within wider society, without which reform would be doomed, nor did it make "men" of modern Hindus by vesting them with independence of effort and hegemonistic capabilities. Any dependence on foreign rulers perpetuated and exemplified for him the lack of a will to freedom and nationhood that had kept Hindus subjected for centuries. Bankim spared no effort at mocking this dependence on alien legislation as well as the *emasculat*ion it produced. . . . *Neither a radical nor a liberal form of democracy was compatible with the heroic agenda that held his imagination.* (166-67; emphasis added)

The overindulgent depiction of violence in *Rudrapal*, which incidentally surrounds Hindu religious figures and ritual practices, may be seen as a similarly fantastic attempt at conjuring up a spirit of daring and nerve—whose absence in the history of Bengali Hindus was being increasingly rued at that time. Although this picture of violence had no immediate counterpart in political reality and the play does not call for prompt anti-colonial activism, it could be instructive (at least in terms of symbolism) for the internal re-organization and cultural re-orientation of the Bengali Hindu temperament. Besides, the fact that the horrific depiction of the *bhairavis* is embedded in the patently imaginative construct of a pseudo-medieval romance precludes the possibility of its reception as a model for material emulation in the present.

Commenting on the nexus between colonial modernity and the Hindu revivalism of late 19th century Bengal, Anustup Basu summarizes an influential account of the origin of Hindu identity under the aegis of the Empire as he recalls:

A multi-veined project of Hindu nationalism started roughly in the latter part of the nineteenth century, drawing from an Indological invention of a Hindu "tradition" and past. A statist Indology of the colonial administration had, by that time, already made certain sovereign selections . . . It was with the publication of Charles Wilkins's English translation in 1785 that the *Bhadwad Gita* began

entering a modern realm of power/knowledge as the book of the Hindus. Similarly, the Warren Hastings administration identified the Laws of Manu as the singular compendium of Hindu law in the final quarter of the eighteenth century, over and above a dozen and a half *Dharmasastras* [treatises on Hindu religious law] and *Smritis* [compendia of religious regulations] like those of Gautama, Baudhayana, or Yajnavalkya. (241)

Basu further points out the reductive and homogenizing tendency central to this process of identity-formation:

The emergence of a “Hindu” people under the auspices of the colonial population state . . . entailed a discursive consolidation of identity under the complimentary monothemes of the subject, unity, and law. In the dazzling light of a new reason, in the opened-out disciplinary spheres of art, literature, culture, history, religion, the physical sciences, or philosophy, one could increasingly begin to talk about a core, pan-Indian Hindu inheritance absolved of the influences of eight centuries of Islamic culture. (241)

In keeping with this modality, the play *Rudrapal* tries to plant within the basic structure of the Shakespeare play markers associated with a Hindu point of view. In the process, it betrays some of the fissures and infelicities within the totalizing project of Hindu nationalism. The play chooses the *bhairavis* as the potent spokespersons of a rarefied and fantastic philosophy identifiable as Hindu, but the representation of the *bhairavis* is hardly equal to the onerous project of cultural revivalism. In other words, the *bhairavis* are not adequate as embodiments of the allegedly “core, pan-Indian Hindu inheritance” that would be central to the imagination of Hindu self-identity in the 19th century.

If the infelicity in the depiction of the *bhairavis* in *Rudrapal* ruptures the evocation of a seamless and urbane Hindu sensibility that would be attuned to colonial modernity, the celebration of their violent ways, on the other hand, may be interpreted as an attempt to bring out the inclusivity of the Hindu tradition and defy the expectations of Western enlightenment. The anomalous representation of the *bhairavis* would block the Orientalist attempt of fitting Hinduism to a template offered by Christianity and the Age of Reason in Europe. To illustrate this process of noetic imperialism, one may cite the case of William Jones (1746-1794), the British administrator, jurist, Biblicist, philologist, Indologist and poet who was greatly responsible for popularizing Hindu mythology and philosophy in Europe. It has been noted that Jones saw Hinduism as a primitive religion urgently calling for the paternal guidance of the enlightened colonial master:

Jones constructs a Hinduism that is still locked in its infancy, needing the help of the progressive European culture. To state it boldly, my contention is that Jones’ “empathy” is that of a benevolent parent towards a child who has yet to grow into

maturity. His approach to Hinduism reflects his romantic and theological presuppositions as well as his concerns as a colonial administrator. As with other orientalists, Jones invents a magnificent Hindu past and a degenerate present, and sets about recovering for Hindus their pristine past. ... Associating the East with “imagination” and the West with “reason,” Jones feels free to delve into the world of Hindu mythology and make it accessible to the West. (Sugirtharajah xiv)

Similarly, the German Indologist Max Müller (1823-1900) “takes on the task of discovering for Hindus, the “real” or “true” Hinduism which he locates in the Veda” and “seeks to construct a purified form of Hinduism modelled on Protestant Christianity, and takes upon himself the role of reforming or rather Protestantizing Hindus who are seen to be in a state of infancy, stuck in their idolatrous practices” (Sugirtharajah xv). The horrific depiction of the *bhairavis* in *Rudrapal* would second and reinforce the Orientalist apprehension about the degenerate state of Hinduism, but it also shows Hinduism in a shape that clearly resists co-optation by European sensibilities.

The *bhairavis* within the symbolic construct of the play may be seen as embodying the cultural autonomy of Hinduism, as envisaged by the author in a strategic attempt towards communal self-expression. The Shakespearean genealogy of these female ascetics and their affiliations with their loathsome European counterparts need not compromise their status as autochthonic signifiers of power and prestige, for there is ample evidence of Shakespearean appropriation elsewhere that is designed to reinforce nationalist or traditionalist pride in India. For example, the essay by Akshay Chandra Sarkar mentioned above ends by citing Shakespeare’s staging of ghosts and the supernatural in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and posits it as a corrective to the overweening materialism and positivism of the Western civilization. Calling Shakespeare a “great philosopher,” Akshay Chandra concludes,

The reader has perhaps understood by now that using Shakespeare’s plays as a platform we have been trying so far [in the essay] to save ourselves from a British witch [meaning, the Western civilization with its reductive, rationalist approach to the world] with the help of a British exorcist [i.e., Shakespeare with his varied and open outlook]. If the effort is good, we trust, it will bear fruit sooner or later. (745; translation mine)

By the same token, the Bengali play *Rudrapal*’s substitution of the almost universally despised witchcraft of Shakespeare’s England with a celebratory version of *Tantra* serves to show that Shakespeare did not operate solely within a paradigm of reverential and straitlaced didacticism (as suggested by the excerpts at the beginning of the article), but also invited creative engagement and served as a platform for cultural re-formulation.

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