

“Curious Ironies”:  
*Matter and Meaning in Bhabhani  
Bhattacharya’s Novel of the  
1943 Bengal Famine*

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To give a thing a name, a label, a handle; to rescue it from anonymity, to pluck it out of the place of Namelessness, in short to identify it — well, that’s a way of bringing the said thing into being.

SALMAN RUSHDIE, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

There had been no famine in India for forty years and famine control was regarded as one of the triumphs of the Raj. . . . For some months the India office refused to admit the existence of famine, preferring the euphemism, “food shortage.”

WALLACE AYKROYD, *The Conquest of Famine*

**B**HABHANI BHATTACHARYA’S 1954 novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, opens with a reflection on naming:

Fond parents often name their timid shrimp of a boy Warrior King or Brave in Battle. Hefty, pitch dark girls go through life with the label Lightning Streak or Lotus Wreath. But Kalo, Black, was true to his complexion, which had the color quality of ink, and people said that when he sweated, you could collect the oozing fluid for your inkwell. (1)

Kalo is a blacksmith, a low-caste labouring man. His name not only marks his subject position, but also hints at an organic relationship between his body and bodily functions, his labour and his social position. It appears, however, that Kalo lives in a time of transition. Before the birth of his first child, the local Brahmin who comes to get pots soldered by him suggests that Kalo give this child a name like Obhijit or Chandralekha: “We gentefolk give that kind of name to our sons and daughters. Dark-minded folks of your caste

have a fancy for Haba and Gaba, Punt and Munni, *han?*" (2). Believing that this act will have material implications, Kalo refuses payment from the astonished Brahmin: "The names. . . You have paid me with the names" (2). A daughter is born to Kalo, a fair-skinned child whom he names Chandralekha: "the moon-tinted one" or "one inscribed by the light of the moon." It is shortened eventually to Lekha, "writing or "inscriptions." This daughter, who will be taught to read and write, is to be the embodiment of Kalo's dreams of transformation and mobility, visions that are underwritten by the egalitarian narratives of the emergent nation-state: "Our golden one, boy or girl, shall go to the mission school and get all the learning they have there" (5).

These opening reflections on naming announce the novel's interest in the relationship of words to things. Set in the context of the brutal Bengal famine of 1943-44, where over three million people died of starvation and disease, Bhattacharya's novel about survival, revenge, and social transformation is profoundly concerned with acts of language. The fundamental question posed by the novel is one that was also integral to the subcontinent's intended transition from colony to modern, democratic nation-state: how does transformation, both at the level of social structures and individual subjectivities, take place? If identities and social relations are structured by language, can social transformation then be effected through linguistic acts? The Bengal Famine of 1943, a watershed event between colonial rule and independence, was a particularly powerful catalyst for literary and cultural engagements with questions of multidimensional exploitation (not reducible to the colonizer-colonized dyad) and the transformative possibilities of the times.<sup>1</sup> The Famine became emblematic in this literature (much of it generated by writers and artistes associated with the enormously influential Progressive Writers Association [PWA] and Indian People's Theatre Association [IPTA]) of the intersection of imperialist, capitalist, feudal, caste-based and patriarchal violence. While Bhattacharya was himself never directly affiliated with the PWA, much of his early work was produced in this pervasive climate of intense literary concern with social transformation.<sup>2</sup> This work — which has hitherto been assimilated under the generic and isolating rubric of "Commonwealth" writing — might usefully be situated within a more complex literary and sociopolitical history not

reducible to “postcolonial” or “Third World” literature either. *Tiger* is suggestive of a cultural and political moment where the best writing in different Indian languages, including English, intersected with and was inflected by the diverse political exigencies of the times and the radical literary currents that responded to those exigencies. Bhattacharya’s novel both interprets the 1943 Famine and is made lisible by it; as such, it shares with the best work produced by the PWA, a specific kind of critical realist engagement with history where the relationship between fact and language — which were not reducible to each other — had to be taken seriously.<sup>3</sup> *Tiger* is a particularly thought-provoking text (especially read against Bhattacharya’s later, more quiescent and pro-statist work) because of its explicit engagement with the role of language in shaping both oppression and resistance.

Famines, of course, are never natural events, but the Bengal famine was a particularly striking example of how central language can be in the making and unmaking of even such large-scale disasters. Similarly, caste is the one category of identity that has engendered the most debate about its ontological and epistemological status. While an extensive discussion of the nature and operation of caste in South Asia is beyond the scope of this essay, it is useful to note that debates on the concept have also been centrally concerned with its relationship to language. Arguments broadly hinge, for instance, on whether caste is an *expression* of a fundamentally hierarchical society (made infamous by Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus*) or a *construction* that changes historically; on whether to study it as *lived experience* or as *interpellation*; and whether to see caste divisions as emerging out of a fundamental human need to *classify* or whether it is a culture-specific operation of the nexus of *power* and *knowledge*.<sup>4</sup> The terrain gets considerably more complicated when other variables such as gender and class, especially the latter, are brought to bear upon the study of caste — fierce arguments continue to rage around the specific relationship of caste and class (Quigley 32; Beteille 1965 and 1992). The latter debate has resonated in discussions of social change in the subcontinent, with partisan arguments for the primacy of either economy or culture in determining forms of oppression (Chatterjee and Sharma). In taking on both the Bengal Famine and the knotty issue of caste

identity, Bhattacharya's novel provides a productive space for a discussion of how matter and meaning engage, in shaping both human suffering and emancipation from misery.

### History and Naming: Declaring Change

As the young Lekha grows up under her proud father's eyes, the egalitarian narratives that are so important to him are undercut for the young girl herself by the taunting of fellow-pupils, for whom the declaration of a nominal equality means nothing. But for Kalo, the very fact that he is able to send her to school speaks to the transformative magic of the times, despite the fact that it is a mission school that admits her, a "very special favor" granted to him by the old white woman who runs it.<sup>5</sup> While the young Lekha takes it upon herself "to take care to protect him from the truth," her father's belief in the power of language to bring reality into being remains undiminished despite his counter-intuitions (8):

Proudly he spoke to his friends about her remarkable beauty:

"Why it's because of the name I gave her before she was born.

In my family things happen that way. My father named me Kalo when I was yet to come — and look at me! Now, if I had named the child Punti or Munni . . ." He gave a disparaging shrug.

But he knew in his heart the true reason why Lekha was such a beauty: she had taken after her mother. (10)

The fact that Lekha's fair-skinned beauty is genetic could undermine Kalo's notions about the powers of language as well as (still) popular notions of "caste" as a chromatic racial order. It is widely and erroneously believed that position in the caste order has a determinate relation to skin color; the lower down on the scale, the darker an individual's skin.<sup>6</sup> But if this popular notion is problematic inasmuch as it reinforces the insidious melanin politics of both caste and race, Bhattacharya's equally racialized and gendered investments in fair skin as an index of female beauty are noteworthy. Here her skin, fair "like carved ivory," is an index of Lekha's predetermined class mobility, a mark of worth that the novel chooses to endorse rather than question (10). This fair-skinned loveliness makes her a fit heroine for the fairytale that her childhood appears to be, the fantasy culmination of which is the Ashoka medal

that she is awarded for her entry in a state-wide essay competition. At this point, Lekha is inserted into the national public-sphere: "Her name was printed in the *Hindusthan* for everyone to see and the news was given that well over a thousand essays had been submitted" (13).

For all its egalitarian proclamations, this is, of course, a sphere that is reluctant to acknowledge her or her success: "no one comes to pay compliments to the girl who had put to shame even the great Calcutta city . . . It was as though nothing had happened to Jharna town" (13). The image of Kalo sitting on his veranda is a poignant one: he is "waiting for the great ones of town to visit his house" and dreaming of public felicitations from those votaries of modernization, the town officials who have now graduated from the carriage horses he used to shoe, to motor cars. This is the first indication for Kalo that between the imagination of community — in this case, that of the democratic, secular, modern nation-state — and actual social relations and practices, falls a shadow. The public competition as a modern, national institution (named here, significantly, for the Emperor Ashoka, mythologized as one of the first great unifiers of the Indian nation) may be premised on the declaration of a level playing field, but the practice of egalitarianism is a different matter entirely. As is only too evident even today, though caste as a category was "abolished" in word by the Indian constitution in 1950, "[c]ontemporary reality is another matter" (Joshi 37). In the case of Untouchables, for instance, though overt "touch-me-not-ism has faded in many urban contexts, [it] is replaced by more sophisticated forms of crippling discrimination" (37). Kalo's experience of this form of marginalization not only disrupts the narrative of modernization and mobility (which he fully believes in), but also foreshadows the disaster that is about to take place.

The Famine itself was an event that was to make frighteningly visible, the prevalent and operative schism between modern aspirations and premodern practices. In a gesture which seems to symbolize this violent confrontation of myth and reality, the silver medal with Lekha's name on it — "a befitting name . . . adorned the silver face of the medal" — must soon be sold to stave off starvation. "1943"! (15). A few pages into the novel, the happy interlude

where Kalo's daughter grows up and is educated under her father's loving eyes is brought to an abrupt end by the "plague that took the land in its grip, the plague of hunger in the wake of war" (15). The enemies, the narrator declares right away, are not only the Japanese army who wait outside the borders but also the administrators, the hoarders and the profiteers against whom "no barricades had been put up" (15). As many accounts written during and since the Famine have suggested, the disasters of 1943-44 made clear that exploitation and negligence were not restricted to one party and were, in many instances, the result of collusion, both implicit and explicit. The Bengal Famine, much like the Irish Famine of the 1840s, appeared brought to a polity "on the threshold of modernity . . . all the blind force of the premodern" (Eagleton 11).<sup>7</sup>

The gradual result of this mainly rural depredation was the migration of large numbers of landless and hungry people to the city of Calcutta, a mass migration which Kalo joins after selling his hammer and anvil. Kalo, perched precariously on the footboard of a fast train, foraging for food, now commences a moral and political journey. Soon arrested for trying to steal a bunch of bananas on the Calcutta-bound train, Kalo faces an impassive government magistrate who asks him to give an account of himself:

I was hungry, sir. A madness came upon me. It was because I thought I had to live or I would die. A madness came upon me. I had to live.

The three bananas, were on the table as an exhibit, overripe and rotting.

Why? Asked the man of justice in his sombre English clothes. "*Why did you have to live?*"

There was no mockery in his voice and his smooth round face was cold and impassive. (31; emphasis added)

Kalo's silence in the face of this question is the inaugural moment of a process of reflection that will undergo a complex metamorphosis until it culminates in a final act of self-criticism and political subversion. In all its absurdity, the magistrate's question becomes central to the narrative's own philosophical and ethical project. As Kalo later discusses the implications of the trade in women's bodies with his young cellmate, B-10, two questions — why should you live? and why should a woman die for her honour? — set up the

conflict between matter and meaning which structures the narrative itself. Is survival an ideological question or a biological one? What is the relationship between words and things and what implications does this relationship have for revolutionary practice?

In this regard, the novel is particularly interested in the question of inscription: is meaning written on bodies, thus shaping the latter in its image? Kalo is haunted by a phrase he hears over and over again, first in the taunting of a policeman who interpellates him as a criminal: "I know a man by the look on his face" (30). After his release from jail, Kalo is convinced that stigma and guilt are indelibly marked on his face and features: "The stench of the jailhouse lay heavy on him. He exhaled it from mouth, from nostrils and from limbs smeared with sweat. Would he ever be rid of this stench which had become his body odor?" (44). Thrown out of his corpse-disposal "job" for demanding his rightful fee, he finally turns to pimping, performing a willing suspension of his own revulsion: "How could a man be fussy about right and wrong when the look on his face and the smell of his body betrayed him?" (53). As will happen at least once more in the course of the narrative, it is Lekha who brings Kalo to moral and psychic crisis. Lured to the city by a woman who claims that Kalo is ill and needs her, Lekha winds up in a brothel on her father's beat. Given Kalo's deeply gendered sense of self, so intimately bound up with his daughter's existence, it is not surprising that the problem of stigma(ta) becomes even more urgent in regard to her body: "Can she be shaped for all time in the mold of vice?" Lekha's name takes on a new dimension here, referring it would seem, to what has been written *on* her and how she will now be read.

"What could he do about it? Was he not helpless against the social idea which branded her for all time?" (71). It is as Kalo mulls over his own moral boundaries and ideological limitations that the narrative also raises the question of complex causality:

The fact remained that he did make part of his earnings out of the shame and tears of trapped victims. . . . How? Who are the ones responsible. They — But who are "they"? The police? The judges? The money people? (76)

With these reflections on causality the narrative implicitly links itself to the concerns of its historical moment. Even the most cursory

analysis of the Bengal Famine of 1943-44 points to the layered nature of social and political accountability. Even as nationalist politicians and colonial administrators blamed each others' incompetence and callousness, it became apparent that an entire complex of causes underwrote the catastrophe. The "us and them" dichotomies set up by both colonizer and colonized were to prove unhelpful in coming to terms with the force of the disaster. While there was massive administrative failure, lack of foresight, and willful neglect on the part of the Provincial Government in Calcutta, the Central Administration in Delhi, and the India Office in London, accountability for the famine could not be imputed to various levels of colonial administration alone. If imperial war efforts intensified the effects of natural disasters (cyclones, harvest shortfalls) and ill-advised government policy led to fluctuations of food supplies on the market, it was also the case that indigent profiteers took advantage of crisis conditions. Feudal systems of benevolence and patronage in rural areas also broke down under these conditions. As panic about future subsistence increased, competition came into play among consumers as well as sellers. Though there may not have been the large-scale hoarding alleged by the government's propaganda as it attempted to deflect blame, rice was kept off the market by "millions of cautious cultivators and landlords" (Greenough 118). When long-delayed and bungled relief efforts were finally mounted in the thick of the famine, notions of entitlement and privilege came into effect.<sup>8</sup> Special efforts were mounted to spare certain communities and castes (like Brahmins) distress; the most elaborate of such efforts "was aimed at the relief of the loosely bounded category of persons who referred to themselves as the 'middle-class'" (Greenough 133-34). Those most hurt by the selectiveness of such relief efforts were, of course, Muslims and the lower castes.<sup>9</sup>

### Hitting Back Where it Hurts: Mimicry as Subversion

One morning, passersby on a street just outside the great city of Calcutta see a Brahmin and his daughter absorbed in a "strange ritual" under a large tree. The Brahmin is big-built and dark, "in a holy man's yellow cloak and skull cap, a rosary on his neck"; he sits on a striped tiger skin and in a sonorous tone, chants the name of Shiva. Close by, sits the girl: "she too was dressed in yellow, her long



rich hair flowing down her back and arms, her fair brow thickly smeared with vermilion. But her voice, as one heard it below the changing chorus, rang hollow; her face was curiously rigid" (78-9). As word spreads around the township that a holy man was about to perform a miracle — nothing short of the Coming of the God Shiva — the crowds gather and join in the chant. On the edges of the crowd stand some hungry rural travelers fleeing the famine, wondering if perhaps "the great god was rising out of the earth to put an end to misery in the land" (81). As the blacksmith-turned-holy man, Kalo, sits beneath the tree, he twists his newly acquired sacred thread to his thumb and nervously wonders what will happen if, in fact, the miracle fails to take place.

It was a thick brand new thread with nine white strands, no simple thread but a Brahmin's holy emblem. Putting it on had involved a moral struggle. The terrible fraud of posing as high of caste, the highest when he was so far down in the scale. No man in Bengal could ever before have dared such rashness. (81)

Even as Kalo ponders his infraction of this sumptuary code, the long-awaited miracle takes place. The brown surface of the earth splits open and the top of a small stone Shiva pushes its way into sight. While believers scream, pray and pour cash and jewelry upon the stone, the new-born trickster, Kalo, feels a surge of hatred for the audience that he has just tricked into believing that a miracle had taken place. Within days, a grand temple is erected on the spot with donations from the city's rich, and Kalo is installed as the officiating priest.

What motivates this particular transformation, an act that is simultaneously one of survival and revenge? At the most literal level, Kalo has simply followed a suggestion made by his former jail-mate, known only as B-10, who suggests that Kalo "make a milch cow of people who have large funds of faith as well as cash" (41). This simultaneously symbolic and material act of feeding will be the appropriate revenge for having suffered enforced hunger. It is B-10 who teaches Kalo the mechanics of the trick which makes the so-called miracle happen. But, of course, the act of passing as a high-caste man in order to turn his life around is also the logical culmination of Kalo's belief that language can produce new realities. It is not only that he has clung to this notion through all his

travails, but that his despair now leaves him with no other belief. "Since they would not let him live honestly, did they actually want him to be a criminal?" The idea takes hold as "... a way not simply to make a living, but a way to settle accounts with them" (77). As he grapples with the enormity of social forces around him, it seems apparent that both survival and revenge can only be effected through speech acts, however difficult they may be to initiate: "[t]he terror of that act was followed by a deep sense of release. He had transcended the station that birth and blood had assigned him" (82).

It is important to stress here that Kalo's performative project is one that the text takes seriously, laying out its subversive energies with great flair. Even as Kalo quails at the sacrilege he is committing, the "voice of the rebel in him was grim with the desperation that came out of the bowels of Bengal. . . . The rebel was reason and justice, and they had transformed Kalo. The Brahmin masquerade was only a step towards a basic reincarnation" (83). "Reincarnation" has more than one valence here: it is an appropriation, not only of a widely-held Hindu metaphysical belief in rebirth, but of the idea that the three higher castes themselves derive their privilege by virtue of being "twice-born," first through physical birth and then by initiation into caste status. In giving a second birth to himself as a Brahmin and transcending the material circumstances of his first birth, it is the power to make meaning that Kalo appropriates. "Reincarnation" is, however, also a physical activity since it involves the participation of the body in meaning-making. Many scholars have pointed out that the appropriation of symbolic resources associated with higher castes is a familiar phenomenon, pointing both to the dynamic, performative nature of caste as well as to the ways in which subalterns refuse interpellation. These include

the construction of false genealogies, . . . name-changing in order to make it appear that one "really" belongs to a higher caste, . . . moving to another locality in order to assume a new identity, . . . and conversion from Hinduism to Christianity and Buddhism. (Quigley 32)

In being performed by Kalo rather than interpellating him, "the look on his face" will undermine the power of caste to determine his existence.<sup>10</sup>

Kalo's triumphs as a mimic-man are exhilarating. It is with great skill and aplomb that he deploys the same resources and languages of power that had once been used to keep him in his place. He even enjoys the pleasure of obeisance from the magistrate who had once asked him why he had to live. The once-feared taunt from policemen and pimps — "I know a man by the look on his face" — now, ironically, becomes a mark of praise for Kalo who has renamed himself "Mangal Adhikari": "Looking at him the visitors knew why the god had favored this Brahmin. . . . This man, big and rough-built, had the rare gift of personality" (101). But it is not long before the irony and pleasure in sacrilegious subversion are gradually transformed into a sense of belonging to the very community that he despises and imagines himself to be taking revenge on. This desire to belong and settle down is certainly inspired by the creature comforts that he now has unprecedented access to. But it is also made possible in the first place by the contradictions that structure his performance of Brahminhood. On the one hand, the subversive edge of this performance relies on an acceptance of the operative assumptions of caste distinctions. By this logic, the Brahmins and their ilk will pay because they are being polluted without their knowledge. On the other hand, the performance itself will show up caste for the fluid, performative thing that it is. As Kalo will assert during his final speech, "Nothing is as true as falseness. . . . Evil is to be faced and fought with its own knives!" (239). Historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyaya's comments on subversive appropriation in his nuanced study of caste protest and identity formation among Namasudras in colonial Bengal are apropos here. He points out that the appropriation of symbols was never *only* a means of upward mobility:

The lower-caste leaders, at least in their overt assertion, were trying to appropriate certain symbols of authority in order to divest them of their symbolic significance, and were protesting against the iniquitous distribution of power and economic opportunities. (2-3)<sup>11</sup>

But inasmuch as the "ideological hegemony of the constituted order . . . had set limits to their imagination," it made cooptation of those who advanced themselves thus, much more likely (2-3).

Some reflections on caste protest in the period Bhattacharya is writing on are in order here. Although Bhattacharya makes no

explicit allusions to specific movements, it is significant that the first half of the twentieth century marked the emergence of distinct forms of caste protest and community mobilization in colonial Bengal. Such protest and mobilization against disenfranchisement or exploitation were not undertaken by already coherent communal orders; rather, as in the case of the highly active Bengal Namasudra caste, they formed the occasion for community formation, self-naming and political solidarity around caste identity (Bandyopadhyay 4). Of particular relevance to reading *Tiger* is the extremely complex and dynamic relationship of such protest to religious ideologies and practices. On the one hand, protest could involve a conspicuous rejection of dominant Hinduism and the hierarchies it endorsed, as in the case of the Namasudras's Matua sect which appropriated for itself, the derisive term "moto" (Bandyopadhyay 37). In their repudiation of rituals and caste hierarchies, especially the dominance of Brahmins, such formations were anti-hegemonic and subversive even as they drew on Hindu symbolic resources. Yet, as Bandyopadhyay has pointed out, these valences could shift radically along with changing configurations of class and power relations. Even as challenges were thrown to the dominant order, a parallel imperative to move upward socially and economically entailed accommodative manoeuvres. In the case of the Namasudras, these included the creation of myths of Brahminical origins; like Kalo, followers of the Matua sect who started to wear the sacred thread of Brahmins, "were thus simultaneously trying to negate the caste ideology of hierarchy and seeking accommodation within the same ritual structure" (48). Moreover, fissures began to appear within the movement when the interests and motives of its leadership started to tend toward the accommodating rather than the revolutionary. Kalo's performance of Brahminhood makes such accommodations starkly visible.

Whether or not Bhattacharya was actually drawing on the instance of the Namasudras, *Tiger* clearly thematizes the challenges of appropriating the symbolic and economic resources associated with dominant elements in a hierarchical society. The text's concerns resonate strikingly with issues thrown up by caste protest movements during the period, especially the problematic of performance. If caste is indeed a dynamic and constructed category, then it stands to reason that it can be both subversive and reflective

of power relations within society. As caste identities and status change, along with the uneven appropriation of new resources, there develop fissures and cracks that undermine the community's fragile coherence. Kalo's changing relationship with his daughter indicates one such fissure. Lekha, it becomes increasingly clear, "could in no way share the hard-eyed excitement of her father, who thought he was avenging himself and her" (107). As the narrative has already made evident, her experiences as a young girl have given her less reason than Kalo to place her faith in the coherence of emancipatory narratives. But more significantly, some of her resistance to Kalo's triumphal attitude is a response to his own reinforced patriarchal authority: "He demanded that she await his bidding and follow him like an automaton. There was a new hardness in him toward his daughter" (112). For Lekha, who has been used to a more reciprocal relationship with her father, the linkages between caste, patriarchy and class status now become a painful part of her own experience. These linkages culminate in Kalo's decision that she must now marry a Brahmin herself and train herself for the role of a chaste high-caste wife.<sup>12</sup> As Kalo tells Lekha to "not be seen too often with menfolk who are practically strangers" (181) and to prepare herself to become a good Brahmin wife by adhering to the priestly class's "own special code of conduct," her insights into the contradictions of the situation sharpen (180). Her father's increasingly sincere investment in authority and power belies his subversive intentions: "He played the Brahminic role with the art of a true Twice-born. The myth of caste superiority lay snapped in his hand. Yet he was upholding that same myth, making it his strength" (112).

Wavering between subversion of and entrenchment in the very system that he sees himself "hitting back," Kalo also becomes the embodiment of the "curious contradictions" he sees in the world around him: "while men died of hunger, wealth grew; and while kindness dried up, religion was more in demand. It was only the outward form of religion, the shell of ritual, empty within. That suited Kalo's purpose" (116). The temple is, in Kalo's mind, a way of literally constructing a new reality without entrenching himself in it. But congealed in the building materials for the structure intended to cleanse souls is the complete ethical breakdown that

marks the times: "Quick pledges followed, handsome figures. Wealth was pouring on the temple, wealth from the black market, untaxed profits, gains out of big rice deals made because of the famine" (103). As the lines between reality and performance start to blur for Kalo, it is his alter ego, the new low-caste gardener, Viswanath, who puts pressure on the growing complacency of the new Brahmin. In several ways, the relationship between Viswanath and his newly-minted Brahmin master speaks to fissures within caste protest movements where there was increasing alienation between the leadership and the mass of peasantry as the former became more involved in integrative constitutional politics.<sup>13</sup> Bandyopadhyay goes so far as to call these rifts between leadership and masses, a process of "de-imagining community" (242). In several instances, the former would actively aid the attempts of Hindu religious organizations to bring the peasant masses into the fold. Viswanath, who "had nothing but irreverence for the temple and all it stood for, and . . . did not trouble to hide his feeling," asks the same questions that had once inspired Kalo's own rebellion and in doing so, stirs "the secret embers of conflict in his listener" (119-21). If for Kalo, the daily ritual of bathing the deity in milk, donated by rich men who vie with each other for the honor, is just another act of language from which he derives power, for Viswanath, the milk has a simpler, more profound use. Caught stealing bucketfuls from the small reservoir where it collects after the deity's bath, the old kamar is unrepentant about his own subversive act of feeding destitute children with this wasted milk.

### National Romance and the Politics of Protest

But it is not until the return of B-10, released from prison, that Kalo must at last, come to decisive terms with his contradictions. The reunion of the old jail-mates allows the text to stage an encounter between two theories of struggle: Kalo's pride in his silent sacrilege and B-10's claim that the "true way is one of struggle, struggle against fear" (162). When Kalo offers Lekha's hand in marriage to B-10 after discovering that the two are attracted to each other, the latter refuses Kalo's condition that he too perform the part of the Brahmin. At the heart of this face-off between the two self-styled subversives is, once again, the body and soul of a woman: for Kalo, "Chandra Lekha has made herself a Brahmin

girl, in every way" while for B-10, she "remains untouched in her heart." (192). What of Lekha herself, as father and lover quarrel over her fate and her inclinations? If her increasing interest in Biten marks a transfer of allegiance (and "adoration") from father to lover, it is also a return to the narratives of national liberation, specifically through a kind of "national romance" (to use Dorothy Sommers' term):

"The womenfolk?" she asked, breathless again. "They too joined the hunger strike?"

"They as all the others. Could there ever be a mass struggle which did not include the womenfolk? For every man's voice that cries, 'Quit India,' there is a woman's voice also. That is the great sign of our day. . . . We march together in a common cause." His voice dropped to a low murmur, "You and I." (176-77)

The return of Biten is also the point at which the narrative of resistance to exploitation starts to merge with the narrative of national liberation, a move discussed at greater length below. It is on Lekha that this new integrative narrative has the most palpable and libidinally charged effect. Her "strange longing to press her head to [Biten's] feet, a longing that hurt her and yet made her happy," marks a tentative transition from a patriarchal domestic order premised on the rule of the father to another based on the conjugal ideal. In contrast to Kalo, B-10 refuses to transcend his condition and his experiences by speaking a new life into being: "this strange man insisted on keeping his jailhouse name. He would have no name save the number" (173).

The subtle transformation of B-10, the mobilizer of hungry famine refugees, into Biten, the nationalist ideologue, is a problematic one and speaks to the text's conflicted relationship to nationalism and the struggle for national liberation. When B-10 is first introduced into the narrative, it is as a prisoner in a jail that is symbolically separate from the big Central jail where the "Quit India" men (nationalist agitators) were housed. Upon his return, he is working with these men who, he says, are "imprisoned for no crime save the one of loving their country and asking for a better way of life for it, a life free from hunger and indignity" (174). Critics like Margaret Kelleher have argued, with some justification, that Bhattacharya's work in novels like *Tiger* and *So Many Hungers!* attempt to resolve

“the potential tension between famine, as a story of victimization, and the story of national liberation” (185). While it is clear that this tension poses something of a problem for the text in its desire to give the narrative closure, it is unclear that this closure is actually achieved. In fact, *Tiger* asks to be read against the more explicit nationalism and nostalgia of Bhattacharya’s earlier novel, *So Many Hungers!* The former would seem to function as self-critique and rethinking on Bhattacharya’s part rather than a continuance of the nationalist project elaborated in *So Many Hungers!*

Where Kalo’s investments in his performance only increase with time to the point of total identification and the obliteration of any ironic distance, for Lekha, who traps herself in performing as a reincarnation of “the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss,” the initial sense of release quickly turns into claustrophobia: “Lekha had read in the history books about a form of punishment prevalent in the olden days: the victim was sown up in raw ox-hide, and slowly suffocated as the ox-hide shrank” (225). Lekha’s experience of deification and sense of alienation from her public self serve to mark the limits of performance-as-subversion: “She was astride the tiger’s back with her father, but she could not ride with his determined ease [ . . . ]. Where was she going, how far, what next . . . ?” (221). In marking the gendered limits of such subversion, however, the text rehearses the very blind spots it seeks to expose and makes visible, its own patriarchal constraints. For at the very moment that Lekha begins to think about her own agency, it is Biten who is figured as the agent of action, awakening the woman in Lekha to a sexualized awareness of self. Kalo too is brought to critical awareness of his own contradictions by Biten. After their final confrontation, the former blacksmith finds out that his young friend is a Brahmin by birth:

Kalo tried to understand the facts. Biten, a Brahmin, had refused to wear the sacred thread which was his by birthright, even at the cost of losing the girl he loved.

And here was a blacksmith with his Brahmin posturing who would not let his daughter marry the man of her choice lest their “caste” be desecrated and the posturing ended. (218)

But in the final instance, the unmasking that Kalo undertakes in front of a first disbelieving and then increasingly shocked crowd at



the consecration ceremony for the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss bears witness to the clarity and depth of his accumulated insights: "Do not dare judge me or call me a swindler. I have been as Brahminic as any of you" (237, 240). Kalo's actions in this cliffhanger conclusion of the novel are Caliban-like, those of a man who has learned a language that he might curse with it:

The holy words have been taboo to folks of my caste for thousands and thousands of years, ever since they were invented, ever since our way of life was started. And I who stand before you. . . . I who made this temple was not born a Brahmin. (237)

For the assembled crowd, still approving, his words at first portend a deeper meaning, "the humility of a fulfilled spirit at peace with the world" (237). But the Kalo's deeper meaning is, of course, something else entirely. The charade has indeed been a successful one and, at this moment of exposure, it even achieves its subversive potential in two contradictory ways: first, by literally desecrating the social order to the horror of the upper-caste persons present and, secondly, by suggesting that Brahminhood itself is always already performance. But Kalo's conviction now that "there was no way but to kill the tiger" on which he has been riding all along is a different kind of insight. Unlike the decision to transcend his condition by speech act, an action conditioned by fear and despair, the decision to "plunge a dagger into the tiger's heart" is born of a cognitive realization that is "worked into the texture of his being" (238). After his long journey through "jailhouse, harlot house and temple" and his experience of "[a]nguish and shame and exultation," Kalo comes to the understanding that there is a difference between agency and voluntarism (238). The latter, paradoxically, because it relies so heavily on interpellation, negates the possibility of engaging with one's circumstances rather than being determined by them: "He was riding a tiger and could not dismount. He sat astraddle, half-resigned and helpless, while the beast prowled or raced at will" (238).

Thrilling as the ending of the novel is, there is much about these last pages that smacks of a formulaic resolution of Kalo's "crisis of mind," a crisis that Biten predicts will take place. As Kalo stands on the dais with bricks thrown at him by the irate Brahmins in the audience, he hears the roar of a crowd in the distance. Though

both he and the Brahmins assume at first that the mob's fury will be directed at him, it turns out that their shouting presence indicates support for his subversion: "Victory to our Brother!" As the Brahmins then turn heel and flee, Kalo and Lekha leave the scene accompanied by Biten and Viswanath who have come to witness this final grand moment. The neatness of this closure is rendered all the more problematic by an irony that the novel remains unaware of even as it lays out the ironies of Kalo's situation. At one point after his return from jail, Biten muses: "What curious irony that he, shorn of his Brahminism, had been instrumental in creating a new Brahmin!" (170). But what an even more curious irony that in a novel which questions so profoundly the authority of the dominant castes and classes, the overseer of radical action should be the Brahmin himself, albeit a "shorn" one:

Biten's response came in a low, impassioned murmur.

You have chosen, my friend. You have triumphed over those others — and over yourself. What you have done just now will steel the spirit of hundreds and thousands of us. Your story will be a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awaken." (245)

Ending as it does on this triumphal note, where might this troubling text be placed in an evaluation of the literature of social transformation generated by a subcontinent in transition? Certainly the programmatic ending suggests that the story's ideological agenda mirrors that of nationalists who, anxious about lower-caste and class dissent in the years leading up to the Quit India agitation of 1942, tried to defuse those movements and bring them under larger umbrella of mainstream nationalism. Even the novel's critical project of marking the limits of performance and mimicry has an edge of reaction to it, if read against the historical context of caste subversion through the appropriation of symbols. The temple-entry agitations — which find fictional resonance in Kalo's infiltration of the sanctum sanctorum of the temple — were, for instance, received with misgivings by nationalist leaders like Gandhi who asserted: "Those temples you are excluded from have no gods in them and those who try to enter them forcibly have no godliness within them" (138). For many in the Indian National Congress, the dangers of "independent initiative and militant self-consciousness

of lower-castes" was that it might generate far greater awareness of the pitfalls of national consciousness than was desirable at the time (146). Hence, campaigns against Untouchability and casteism were initiated as the responsibility of the higher-castes who needed to take the initiative in creating change from above. The character of Biten could be read in this context as that of the ideal Congress worker: an upper-caste youth who willingly shrugs off his caste-identity and works from within the nationalist fold for social change and "upliftment" of the depressed classes.

Yet it is important to avoid reducing the text to one that simply endorses a "vague, monolithic national movement" (Hubel 197). Its many blind spots notwithstanding, *Tiger* is a text that actively engages the contradictions and complexities engendered by its historical moment. For one thing, despite the dominance of certain elite class and caste groups, it was never the case that nationalism itself was a unified project such that national liberation, class struggle, or caste protest were *necessarily and at all times*, opposed projects. The assumption of such a binary is central to the work of critics like Margaret Kelleher and Teresa Hubel who note only the obvious "pitfalls of national consciousness" in Bhattacharya's work ignore that even (or rather, especially) for dissenters from mainstream nationalism in India — as for Fanon — the times demanded the construction of a wider nationalism rather than the abandonment of national consciousness: "The living expression of the nation is the moving consciousness of the whole of the people; it is the coherent, enlightened action of men and women . . . the assumption of responsibility on the historical scale" (Fanon 204). In some ways, *Tiger's* goal is less to abandon nationalism per se, than to suggest that "a rapid step must be taken from national consciousness to political and social consciousness" (Fanon 203). To read *Tiger*, then, is to come to understand how the Famine itself enjoined upon those who would narrate it responsibly, a complex engagement with history, reality and language. Kelleher's assertion, for instance, that in the course of the novel, the "famine experience is quickly dispatched and serves more as a prelude to the narrative's chief concern, one man's vengeance," ignores the extent to which *Tiger* makes *lisible* and is made *lisible* by the complicated narrative of the Famine itself. (184). If the Famine was a

struggle for resources, this struggle was inseparable from a war waged over meaning and (of) morality. Neither battle was to be lisible without the other.

### “Reading” the Famine

Bearing in mind the novel’s own interest in the giving of names, it is instructive here to move to a different scene of naming. The following comments are taken from the memoirs of Wallace Ruddell Aykroyd, a member of the Famine Inquiry Commission, instituted in July 1944:

Actually our terms of reference enjoined us to “investigate and report to the central government upon the causes of the food shortage and subsequent epidemics in India.” Famine was a bad word, and officially famine had been vanquished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the Irish famine, one hundred years earlier, the word famine was not used in official correspondence from Whitehall, “distress” being preferred. (70)

Aykroyd goes on to describe how famine control was “regarded as one of the triumphs of the Raj” and how the euphemism “food shortage” was used to deny the existence of the Famine. (In fact, as Amartya Sen’s work suggests, food shortage and famine are not commensurate. Famines often take place even in the midst of plenty, since they have to do with access to rather than availability of food). Having noted that the discourse of colonial mastery over all contingencies disallowed a declaration of famine conditions, Aykroyd also points to administrative failures as well as a widespread “moral breakdown” (79).

Other accounts of the famine are also replete with references to acts of false naming or rather, non-naming. In his account of his years as editor of the *Statesman*, a British-owned paper that was, in fact, the first media organ to break the story of the Famine, Ian Stephens writes in detail about “the authorities’ shameful, deliberate efforts to conceal or underplay the facts” (187). Working against censorship and press restrictions that had been imposed in the name of the war effort, Stephens wrote several editorials calling the British administration to account for its “elementary responsibility” to ensure that people are fed: “There are reasons for believing that the words starvation and corpse have not yet appeared in the British Press except through bureaucratic oversight;

famine is not officially recognized to exist" (189). Stephens points out that in the speeches of the Britain's Secretary of State for India, L.S. Amery, euphemistic references are made to the "Indian food situation," with "no admission of misjudgement or error. . . . Nasty words such as famine, starvation, corpse or cholera were avoided" (191). The *Statesman's* campaign was instrumental in raising public consciousness about the situation both in India and in Britain. This, in turn, led to the belated, but essential, acknowledgment from the British India Office that a "grievous" famine is in fact holding Bengal in its sway, with people "dying of hunger in the Empire's second city" (193).

In refusing to declare a famine in 1943 under the Indian Famine Code which had been developed during previous famines with the intention of aiding provincial administrations in recognizing, in preventing, and in intervening in conditions of widespread starvation, the British colonial government seemed to have relied on a crude constructivism which attempted to retain control of material conditions through the control of language. This becomes all the more apparent when reading communiqués between government officials at the highest level where *privately*, the existence of dire scarcity and suffering is acknowledged. The same Secretary of State for India given to euphemism, L.S. Amery, writes in a very early memorandum (31 July 1943), for instance, that famine "conditions, which have indeed already begun to appear, may well spread" and the measures will have to be taken "before long . . . in order to prevent sheer starvation" (140). Viceroy Linlithgow writes to Amery shortly thereafter about "becoming seriously uneasy about the Bengal situation. . . . Food continues to be my chief preoccupation" (152-54). Reading these memoranda, it becomes apparent that in many instances, British administrators attempted to willfully shape reality according to their own template. As late as July 1944, Amery complains about a perceived lack of publicity given to the British government's efforts to import grain (after multiple neglected requests from the Viceroy, who pointed out that it was "too little and too late"): "I still hope that at your end you will be able to make as good a picture as you can of what has been done, and is in prospect, considering that *the whole problem is very largely one of psychology*" (107; emphasis added).

In several other instances, however, even when cognition prevails and conditions are recognized for what they are, actions are dominated by the belief that the situation can be transformed through acts of language. In a memorandum to Linlithgow marked "Personal and Secret," Amery writes of trying to persuade the British Cabinet "about the dangers of the present situation" in India, only to find that the latter see the situation as demanding discursive rather than material intervention. Minutes of the same meeting confirm Amery's assertions:

In the view of the War Cabinet, the shortage of grain in India was not the result of physical deficiency but of hoarding, due to inflationary conditions. . . . Adequate steps must be taken, by good propaganda in India, and by effective advertizing of whatever supplies we could manage to send, to induce hoarders to release grain. (156)

Other measures include boosting confidence in the economy with prize loans, relying "on the natural gambling instinct of humanity" with the help of "press propaganda" and "oral rumor" (159). Hoarding is to be countered by "forceful propaganda, including effective advertising of whatever supplies may become assured (though without mention of quantities)" (163). In addition, timely "editorial support" from leading newspapers is to be solicited for policy decisions. Criticism, such as the *Statesman's* pioneering pictorial exposés is blamed on "a serious failure of [the] propaganda and publicity machine"; effective propaganda is needed "to counteract unhelpful tales of horror in the Press which manifests itself largely in photographs which may have been taken anytime in Calcutta any time during the last 10 years" (188). While blaming inflation rather than war measures for the approaching emergency, there are debates about whether inflation itself is "economic or political, i.e., due to depression about the war as well as due to active Congress mischief." Interestingly, it is Amery himself who points out to the War Cabinet that "it was impossible to disentangle the two factors, but that obviously if the economic factor were not there and potent the other factors wouldn't produce much effect" (177).

Having said that a certain investment in discursive control accounts for colonial governmental actions during the Famine, it is

necessary to stress that this very investment was bound up with the material exigencies of imperial rule and the war effort underway during the forties. Fairly late into the Famine, Governor Rutherford explains in a private memo that “[t]he Famine Code has *not been applied as we simply have not the food to give the prescribed ration*” (363, my emphasis). Secretary of State Amery himself acknowledges in a private letter to Viceroy Wavell, that the failure to relieve the situation derives at least partly from the “military preoccupations of the War Cabinet and the difficulty of diverting shipping from the first duty of winning the war” (401). Even when the discourse around the Famine changes to one of acknowledgement and intervention, it is clear that the war effort governs these reactions as well. Warning Governors of States that they are “acting on a world stage,” Viceroy Wavell reminds them that “[u]nless the food situation in Bengal and other distressed areas can be restored, [ . . . ] we may, and probably shall, prolong the war in the East.” Unlike many of his colleagues, however, Wavell was to stress repeatedly, the importance of cognition and action: accurate information, active and appropriate intervention, and moral responsibility. While underscoring the need for propaganda to raise confidence in the government, Wavell comments that “[n]o doubt, the best propaganda is an acute increase in supplies and a real control of prices” (422). Not surprisingly, Wavell’s administration was crucial to the turnaround that finally took place in 1944, though the effects of the famine were to linger for several years afterwards.

Given this context, it seems likely that *Tiger’s* exploration of the limits of linguistic construction and performativity is, in fact, shaped by its engagement with this historical situation of language use and abuse. As such, the novel both allegorizes and draws on the historical context of the Famine in far more profound ways than simply making the famine either a muted “prelude,” as Kellerher suggests, or a foregrounded “theme” (184). In playing out a drama of divided allegiances with multiple characters, rather than a binary agon between colonizer and colonized, the novel attempts to map the ways in which different ideological and political systems did collude, intersect, and compete in bringing about the Famine of 1943. Colonial mechanisms of food distribution and resource management, indigenous capitalist maneuvers with food

reserves and market dynamics, pre-capitalist/feudal ideologies of entitlement and right, patriarchal understandings of the female body and sexuality — all of these intersect within the framework of a generally simple narrative. Moreover, as we know, even from anti-colonial tracts such as *Cry of Distress* and *Famines in Bengal*, as well as Stephen's editorials, the failure to construct a wider nationalism was equally responsible for the continued depredations of the famine: nationalist leaders like S. P. Mukherjee did little to work against the cleavages of Hindu-Muslim, rural-urban and even those between lower and upper castes.<sup>14</sup> In not simply focusing on the Famine but on other historical vectors of exploitation as well, the novel makes the point that historians of the Famine have since made: that the events of 1943-44 need to be read against a larger history of social and economic relations, including, but not restricted to, the encounter of colonial and precolonial, and capitalist and feudal structures.<sup>15</sup>

Historian Paul Greenough has pointed out that "a famine is not only starvation but concerns the meaning of starvation and how a society chooses to distribute the social costs" (275). Understanding the famine's causes and consequences requires a coming to terms with complex intersections of the empirical and the semiotic. If there are crop failures and actual shortages, these intersect with prevalent ideologies of prosperity and scarcity. The failure of food distribution mechanisms collide and collude with systems of entitlement. Physiological nutrition requirements encounter culturally specific notions of diet and differential need. Literal starvation goes hand in hand with the construal of that starvation while quiescence engendered by physical debilitation co-exists with ideologies of fatalism or passive resistance. This intimate and dynamic relationship between (biological) substance and (social) semantics, or as suggested earlier, matter and meaning, is at the heart of *Tiger*. The text's overriding concern with acts of language — naming, performance, mimicry and so on — enables it to acknowledge the fundamental importance of language in determining social relations and identities, and at the same time, to mark the boundaries between these. This investment, as I suggested above, was not the result of authorial idiosyncrasy, but one insisted upon precisely by the exigencies of history and reality, terms which only



the colonial government might have put in scare quotes at the time. Statistics — which often entered language games of their own — were crucial to establishing truth during the famine, and could not be replaced by imagination, despite Winston Churchill's best efforts in a remarkable send-off speech for Viceroy Wavell, delivered on 6 October, 1943, at the height of Famine misery. As the death toll rises to almost 2 million, by conservative estimates, Churchill proceeds: "Famines have passed away — until the horrors of war [ . . . ] have given us a taste of them again . . . with the incredible result that in ten years, the population of India under the blighting rule of Britain (Laughter) has increased by 50 million — 50 million" (375-6).<sup>16</sup>

In the face of such cynical manipulation of both reality and discourse, it becomes necessary to develop frameworks for understanding how it is that bodies and ideas do interact to shape realities. *He Who Rides a Tiger* attempts just such a project. It is not that the body in *Tiger* "stands for an *incontestible* reality in a wilderness of signs" but that it is integral to a *contest* over meaning (Ellman 4; emphasis added). Hunger undoubtedly originates for different reasons, but far from "exemplifying" the cultural determination of bodies, it shows us that the relationship between bodies and cultures is a dialectical one. What we see in *Tiger* is the way in which bodily matter is acted upon by various ideologies, but also how such matter, in turn, determines those very ideologies. If the novel enacts one of the fundamental conflicts in the history of the famine, that between matter and meaning, it is also true that the lessons of the Famine inform the novel's own conclusions. Sign-systems cannot be closed off from the world of substance, whose existence we shall not only have to concede, but rely on to make sense of and adjudicate between the narratives that surround and inform us.

## NOTES

- 1 The term famine is capitalized when referring to the Bengal Famine and in lower case when the reference is more general.
- 2 "My chief purpose is to deal with the problems of social change. . . . I see fiction as a means to this end" (qtd. in Shimer 18).
- 3 Hilary Wainwright's definition of critical realism is appropriate here: it is based "on a realist ontology without assuming that language is a mere expression of that

- reality. . . . [It] assumes that truth must always be open to revision as a result of experiment, but allows that in the meantime truth provides a basis for action, including collective action to transform institutions" (10).
- 4 See Chatterjee and Sharma, especially "Introduction," for a concise account of these debates. Declan Quigley's article in the same collection is another helpful overview of different theories of caste.
  - 5 See Chapters 3 and 4 in Bandyopadhyay for a detailed account of how education came to be a bone of contention between nationalists, lower-caste movements and the colonial government. Bandyopadhyay suggests that Congress nationalist opposition to the Primary (Rural) Education Bill in 1929-30 "finally destroyed the credibility of these Hindu nationalists in the eyes of the depressed classes" (139).
  - 6 Though there is a long tradition of anthropometry in caste analysis along the lines of racial anthropometry (most famously evident in Herbert Risley's 1901 census), there has never been conclusive evidence that either skin colour or physiognomy serve as markers of caste difference. Indeed, as even anthropologist André Beteille, who accepts the skin color argument to some extent, points out, the exceptions to the correlation are numerous "and when interregional comparisons are made, they seem to break down altogether" (42).
  - 7 Though the historiography of the Famine is varied and not agreed upon the sequence and nature of causation, the above account alludes to the 'rice denial' policy, one form of colonial mismanagement that was a undoubted factor in exacerbating the situation. This military scheme authorized agents to purchase rice from cultivators for export to troops on the WWII front (at a time when signs of scarcity were already on the horizon). In the absence of regulation, far greater amounts of rice were purchased by middlemen for private profiteering than requisitioned by the government (Greenough 95). This extra rice was immediately secreted away. The result was a precipitous increase in prices which put this staple food out of the reach of the poor and eventually the middle-classes as well.
  - 8 See *Poverty and Famines* where Sen expounds his famous theory of "entitlements" as the cause of hunger. Sen works against Malthusian theories of over-population and under-availability to suggest that "Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough food to eat. While the latter can be a cause of the former, it is but one of many possible causes." It is important to note that the entitlement approach is seen to have its limitations, several of which Sen himself marks. See Devereux's *Theories of Famine* for a cogent summary of these.
  - 9 Although these results are not undisputed, an extensive survey undertaken by Calcutta University's Department of Anthropology suggest that over half (51.89%) of destitute deaths in Calcutta occurred among the Scheduled Castes (as several Untouchable and low castes were deemed by the constitution). In rural areas about 53.38% of the deaths came from this group.
  - 10 Bandyopadhyaya sees theories of incarnation (gods taking human form) as part of the process of accommodation and assimilation. The founding guru of the Matua sect came eventually to be seen as the incarnation of Hari or Krishna: "As legends would have it, he wished to entrust to the Lord Siva his unfinished task of bringing salvation to the lower-caste people. The latter listened to the people, and so Siva was born into his family as his son" (212).
  - 11 Bandyopadhyaya's detailed analysis of the journey of a particular caste group "from fusion to fission, from protest to accommodation, from alienation to integration" is extremely useful to a historized reading of Bhattacharya's text. His work is set in relation to two dominant modes of analysis which he both draws on and problematizes: readings of political movements among subaltern groups which focus purely on economic and social mobility and opposite readings which see "only deprivation and protest" in these movements. Bandyopadhyaya argues, rightly I think, that caste

- movements must be read for moments of both conflict and “the less dramatic moments of accommodation and/or disintegration of the bonds of community” (2-4).
- 12 This too is a historically familiar dynamic. Processes of mobility are invariably gendered and often involve an intensification of patriarchal authority. Certainly, as sects like the Matuas became increasingly invested in social mobility along the lines of the dominant Hindu order, the change of status was most visibly reflected “in ideas governing family organisation and the status of women, [ . . . ] quite in contrast to the early liberalism of the sect which initially allowed women equal rights to participate in its congregational religious life” (211). Along with the intensified authority of male heads of families came restrictions on where women could go and with whom they could associate.
  - 13 “As the leadership became more and more involved in constitutional debates, they became divided among themselves and lost interest in the protest movements of the masses, which then began to move into parallel and autonomous domains of action. The leaders now needed the masses much less, as the Act of 1935, had already provided for reserved seats in the legislature for the Scheduled Castes . . .” (Bandyopadhyay 242).
  - 14 “It is a tragic irony of fate that both Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Mr Suhrawardy hold the same views regarding the measures needed to fight the famine and yet should be unable to join together in the task. . . . Both know that no policy has the slightest chance of success unless it is enthusiastically supported by the Hindus and the Muslims and their accredited leaders” (Santhanam 27). Furthermore, “Urban rationing has been adopted as a general policy but its implications on rural people have not been realized” (81). Aykroyd points out that “the contrast between starvation in the villages and sufficiency of food in the city was a striking feature of the famine” (76).
  - 15 See Greenough for a fascinating account of the longer history of scarcity and starvation in Bengal, as well as the ways in which the Famine emerges at the intersection of different economies.
  - 16 It was the ever moderate Wavell who pointed out, however, that the “[c]auses of trouble are extremely complex” and “recriminations are worse than useless and that all effort must be towards finding a remedy”; anti-Indian comment needed to be toned down (416). Both colonial accusation and nationalist panic over divisions, take on more defined contours when we recall that this was also the period when the question of India’s self-rule was on the table. If Nehru was railing against colonial incompetence and claiming that the Famine would never have occurred if Indians ruled themselves, Linlithgow writes that Indians were now “showing themselves incapable of grappling with a major problem, or even maintaining modern standards of administration” (209).

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