

# South Asian Modernity and Global Modernism

आधुनिक (Hindi), আধুনিক (Bengali), ਆਧੁਨਿਕ (Punjabi), આધુનિક (Gujarati),  
ആധുനികമായ (Malaylam), ಆಧುನಿಕ (Kannada),

## Adhunik

Created by Suchismita Sen, Penn State

### General Overview

- *South Asian Modernity and Global Modernism* is designed to serve as a learning module to address how South Asians may have understood the concept of modernity during and after the British raj. This is indeed a very broad topic, and the following readings address it in a selective manner, starting with a brief history of the word “modern” in European discourse of the eighteenth century and then addressing writings of selected South Asian thinkers as they adapted many of the characteristics of modernity in their own writings.
- While scholars of culture refer to a particular historical period in Europe, specifically the late eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries, when they ascribe modernity to pieces of art, literature, or philosophical ideals, the popular discourse today uses the term to mean contemporary. According to this latter understanding, the modern sensibility is not static, but moves with time.
- This dual understanding of the term is particularly problematic in South Asia as the period that introduced the so-called ‘modern’ ideals into Indian cultural discourse from Europe also saw the rise of colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent. Ironically, many of the universalist characteristics of European modernity such as rising awareness of individual rights and dignity, and break with past traditions on the strength of rational thinking, etc., first championed by eighteenth century philosophes were introduced to South Asians by Europeans who represented the exact opposite spirit in their dealings with the people of this region. Despite efforts at a more nuanced interpretations of modernity offered by many thoughtful South Asian intellectuals of the period, for a significant section of the region’s population, modernity and westernization became tainted with politics and the ills of colonialism.
- As the following discussion and readings will show discerning South Asians intellectuals have frequently wrestled with the issue of whether it is possible to become modern without being westernized. It is this topic of modernity in South Asia that will engage us in this module. Is there an universal spirit of modernism that can rise above regional, and cultural differences? Or is the broader message of modernism inevitably lost because of the nature of the messengers who brought ‘modern’ ideas to South Asia. A lively debate still continues on this issue in the Indian subcontinent on social, cultural, and political fronts, and we shall conclude this module by

referring to selected works of historians and writers, who have written extensively on these topics.

- The contents of this module can be taught in a week of class time.

## Module Introduction

**1.1** Words such as “modern,” “modernism”, and “modernity” are often understood differently by the general public than how it is used by students of culture and literature. While the general public may equate the adjective ‘modern’ with the latest, or contemporary, scholars associate the same word with characteristics of literary, cultural, and artistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe and America, and in particular the period between the two world wars, 1914-1945. Pioneers of this movement in Euro-American art, literature, and music will include figures such as Cezanne, Picasso, Matisse (art), Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Stein, Faulkner (literature), and Copeland, Gershwin, Debussy, Faure (music).

While the narrowly defined artistic and literary movements associated with [Modernism](#) rose against the fraught political environment of Europe and America of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the usage of the word modern has a much longer history stretching all the way back to the eighteenth century debates between the proponents of “ancients” and “modern” styles in literature, art, and music, and extending forward to include all social and cultural characteristics that are contemporary. Moreover, because the history of the nineteenth and twentieth century Europe is also marked by advances in unprecedented technological innovation, industrialization, and profound transformation in lifestyles of common people, the impact of this era on societies across the globe remains a topic of great scholarly interest. These social transformations, such as change from a largely agrarian to a more industrial and manufacturing economy, movements of population from rural to urban centers, wider reach of education among the poor, not only affected Europe and America, but swept all across the world, and under the forces of colonialism, affected many non-western cultures in unpredictable ways. Ironically, as modernism increasingly became a global phenomenon, it influenced politics not only at the global level, but also at the regional level. Examples of the global reach of modernism, especially in the 1940s will thus include rise of Communism in China, ideals of non-violent political resistance and democratic awareness in British India, and the emergence of the American civil rights movement as America itself became a world superpower.

The next section examines the history of modernism in brief, and then expands upon the theme of broad social transformation that may have affected South Asia in particular.

**1.2 History of the word “Modern”:** Dictionary definitions of the word modern implies a break with the past. [Debates among many Enlightenment Philosophes](#) on the value of the ancients versus the moderns provides many examples in this regard. When Europeans talked about breaking with the past in these lively debates, one wonders what aspects of the past were they interested in breaking? And why? Example of a debate centered around the issue of *Ancients versus Modern* can be found in the famous literary disputes in France and England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. *Modern* outlooks implied a more forward looking perspective based on continuous improvements in the human condition, or “progress,” in all areas of life inspired by the new scientific understanding based on rational thinking, whereas the *Ancients* viewed past models as ideal. In fact, it is also possible to argue, that European literature has wrestled with this issue for centuries long before the Enlightenment era; Whether antiquity provides

exemplary models and what does it mean to imitate it? At the same time, usage of the word modern by late nineteenth century writers like [Baudelaire](#) clearly anticipated a new literary, social, and political outlook tied to the rise of republican politics in many parts of Europe and a clear break with past political models of monarchy. (Jauss, 330)

Arguments in support of the modernist outlook can be found in the writings of [Charles Perrault](#) and [Bernard de Fontenelle](#). Writings of [Jean de La Fontaine](#) and [Jean de La Bruyère](#) provide examples of the counter argument.

### Part 1.3 Modernism in South Asia

It is impossible not to take colonialism's impact into account when talking about the way the term "modern" is understood in the South Asian context. Tracing the way the meaning of the word "modern" has changed since it entered South Asian literary discourse in the writings of [Rammohun Roy](#), [Mahadev Govinda Ranade](#), [Rajnaryan Basu](#), and many others provides current students with an interesting vantage point from which to understand modernism's impact on South Asia. Roy, Ranade, and Basu, all members of the early generation of English educated South Asians, wrestled with the issue of how Indians may adapt western ideals of humanism, equal rights for all breaking traditional caste and gender barriers while at the same time learning to resist western colonialism: in other words, how to disengage the idealist message from its opportunistic messengers. It is against this backdrop that one needs to understand South Asian modernism.

The historian Ramachandra Guha has pointed out in his book, *The Makers of Modern India* (2011), that countries in South Asia are currently experiencing fundamental and profound changes in many different arenas—from social, economic, political, to cultural, all simultaneously, in the decades since the end of the British empire. While some of these changes, such as the process of increasing democratization based on universal suffrage, a rapid transition of the economy from handicrafts and old style manufacturing, to the more current digital and knowledge-based system, etc. are reminiscent of what European societies underwent through the few past centuries, it is happening in South Asia within the course of one's lifetime. Not only is South Asian society changing, it is happening at a much faster pace than how it happened in Europe. So, in order to understand the concept of "modern" in the South Asian context, it might be worthwhile to begin with exploring two deeper issues associated with the concept of modernity. First,

- 1. Notion of Time**—In contrast to the much worn American cliché of time being money, South Asians view time as ephemeral. In fact, the Hindu god Shiva is often described as *Mahakaal*, thereby conferring *Kaal* or time an eternal and cosmic quality beyond easy comprehension. In keeping with the traditional South Asian view that the universe is guided by laws that are cyclical, the concept of time is also cyclical, and eternal, but humans understand it more narrowly and in a more context sensitive manner: It is at once cosmic, and at the same time immediate, and personal. A child eager to grow up may view time differently from an older man reminiscing about the past. Thus, unlike the Western philosophical understanding of time as a pure categorical concept, time simultaneously operates at a grand cosmic as well as a narrowly immediate human scale in the South Asian perspective. Accordingly, it is hard for individuals to break away from the cyclical pull of time and truly break with the past, and the ideal of progress can therefore be quite incongruent from such a perspective. Perhaps the timeless attitude

towards time makes the Western emphasis on timeliness incomprehensible to many South Asians. And indeed, many observers have commented on this characteristic: [An article in the Harvard Business Review](#) by Bhaskar Pant in 2016 provides a recent example. While Pant's essay advises how to avoid cultural misunderstandings when conducting business with South Asians, it prompts us to question the deeper relevance of the idea of linear progress for a society that views time differently, and therefore may understand modernity differently.

In my reading, a snippet of a dialogue between a busy crow and a curious boy from a famous Bengali children's story, *Ha Ja Ba Ra La, A Topsy Turvy Tale* by Sukumar Ray (Tr. Sukanta Chudhuri. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1987) astutely captures the South Asian view of time. In this fantastic tale told by the child protagonist in the first person, our hero encounters a calculating crow, sitting on a tree branch busy keeping accounts. When the surprised child attempts to engage the crow in a conversation, we learn that, "The Crow looked shocked and said, 'Don't you count the cost of time in your country?' 'What do you mean, the cost of time?' I asked. 'You'd know if you lived here a few days,' he replied. Time's terribly expensive here, we daren't waste one little bit. Here had I scraped and scrounged a bit of time together and now I've lost half of it talking to you.' And he set to work again on his sums, while I sat by feeling rather guilty." (Ray, 49). The child's description of the crow's seemingly unreasonable behavior perfectly illustrates what A.K. Ramanujan, has accurately described in his essay on the Indian way of thinking, "[that] even space and time, the universal contexts, the Kantian imperatives, are in India, not uniform, and neutral, have properties . . . that affect those who dwell in them" (11). That is why, the child in Ray's story is flabbergasted when the crow berates him about his demands on the crow's time, and waits guiltily for the crow to finish his job before he felt confident to launch into his next conversation. It is the crow that makes him aware that someone else's view of time may be different from his own, and thus the dialogue falls in line with the context sensitive view of time in India as described by Ramanujan. Just as one makes allowances for another person's taste, the child in Ray's story acknowledges the crow's view of time without sharing that view and decides to wait for the crow to finish his calculations. This mutual incomprehension of time as a categorical concept can be a useful indicator of how South Asian understanding of modernity may differ from the European perspective in a profound way.

- 2. Role of the Individual-** Readings from selected South Asian authors, especially from the nineteenth century onwards, as western style education was becoming common, show that just like the child in Sukumar Ray's story, English educated South Asians were learning to adeptly negotiate between modern and traditional worldviews by making allowances for the dynamic role of the individual in an ancient society in transition: In the spirit of what Ramanujan describes as the traditional context-sensitive system built upon a network of interconnected hierarchy of age gender, occupation, and family status, to a more context-free and modern one built upon individual dignity, equal rights, and perhaps most importantly freedom of choice.

Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge has argued in a similar vein in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World* (pgs. 1-10) that it is the freedom of choice in a global market that is creating new understandings of what it means to be modern in our contemporary globalized world. Thus, in keeping with the spirit of inherent plurality of South Asian societies, there can be many ways of being modern, and it is the freedom of choosing the way of

modernity from many available options is what makes the South Asian understanding of the term distinctive. [This is why a South Asian physicist and the head of India's space research organization can comfortably make an offering at a temple before the launch of a Mars mission.](#) According to the Appadurai and Breckenridge, the freedom of citizens as consumers of commodities in an increasingly global marketplace is creating new communities of consumption that are organized around their choices of media, entertainment, culture, travel, etc., unmoored from traditional views of geography. This is the reason behind the emergence of contemporary social networks that come together on the basis of the shared views of individual members, some progressive, others deeply traditional, and forcing scholars to re-examine what it means to be modern. But that freedom to break with the past can be wrenching when the time and space can pull one in opposite directions, as is the case with members of post-colonial societies. The narrator of the short story, *The Courter*, by Salman Rushdie, one of the greatest writers of our era, captures the sentiment of many post-colonial South Asians best when he says, "And the passport did in many ways, set me free. It allowed me to come and go, to make choices that were not the ones my father would have wished. But I too, have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose. (211) Rushdie's narrator, an South Asian boy growing up in London after India's independence and bloody partition refuses to choose, illustrating the multifaceted nature of what it may mean to be modern in South Asia today.

#### **Part 1.4 Colonialism and Modernity**

When South Asians talk about "Modern", it is arguable whether modern necessarily implies a rupture with the past as was the case in Europe. The most meaningful break with the past in the south Asian context was ushered in with European colonialism. As a result, the way nineteenth and twentieth century south Asian thinkers, English educated intellectuals confronting new ideals of human progress fueled by individual effort and dignity, wrestled with the idea of breaking with the ancient Indian models shows the inherent ambiguity implicit in the idea of modernization under foreign rule. While the benefits of modern progress were appealing, the fact that it was associated with a ruling power that worked contrary to those same ideals made the experience equally distasteful. The writings of the first generation of Indian progressives, such as Rammohun Roy, and Mahadev Govinda Ranade and the next generation of so called "revivalists" like Bankim Chatterjee, Balgangadhar Tilak indicate that the issue of breaking with the past became complicated because of the evolution of Indian response to the colonial experience. Ironically, the Indian response to colonialism was in many ways deeply influenced by the universalist ideas of individual dignity, freedom of choice, and equal rights for all, irrespective of class, gender or caste. The tension between the pull of universalist ideals championed by European philosophers and an equally strong response against its violation in India by members of the colonial government became especially acute in the wake of the rebellion of Indian soldiers against the policies of the British East India Company in 1757, as the administrative culture shifted from East India Company rule to the formal inclusion of India within the British Empire. The following excerpts from the writings of Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), Mahadev Govinda Ranade (1842-1901), are illustrative of the ambiguity and unease.

In a letter written in 1823, Rammohun Roy, the first Hindu Brahmin feminist, and a tireless champion of modern western style education expressed his disappointment upon learning the East India Company's interest in establishing a school promoting Sanskrit learning:

"South Asian Modernity and Global Modernism" created by Suchismita Sen on October 27, 2021. Last updated by Redesigning Modernities staff on April 21, 2022. License: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 5

“When this Seminary of learning was proposed, we understood that the Government in England had ordered a considerable sum of money to be devoted to the instruction of its Indian Subjects. We were filled with sanguine hopes that this sum would be laid out in employing European Gentlemen of talent and education to instruct the Natives of India in Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy, and other useful Sciences . . . [However] We find that the Government are establishing a Sangsrit school under Hindoo pandits to impart such knowledge as is already current in India. . . The pupils will there acquire what was known two thousand years ago, with the addition of vain and empty subtleties since then produced by speculative men, such as is commonly taught in all parts of India. . . . But as the improvement of the native population is the object of the Government, it will consequently promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry, and anatomy, with other useful sciences, which may be accomplished with the sums proposed by employing a few gentlemen of talent and learning educated in Europe, and providing a college furnished with necessary books, instruments, and other apparatus.” (Hay, 31-33)

Roy’s comments illustrate the mismatch between the political interests of the East India Company, and the optimistic but misplaced expectation of some Indians about the colonial enterprise. Clearly the Company’s goal was not to improve the educational standards of the Indian population; the Sanskrit College was established to make the employees of the Company conversant in the ways of the new market that has opened for them in the country. While Roy’s vision of education lines up with the modern viewpoint, emphasizing what we may call STEM education today, it consciously breaks with the traditional Indian mode of knowledge, and he argues for a clear break with the past. It also opened up two distinct problems in the eyes of some of Roy’s critics: first, it allowed the colonial authorities to negatively characterize all Indian epistemology with a broad brush, and second, it provided an opportunity for the champions of Hindu orthodoxy to attack Roy’s efforts as politically motivated to curry favors with the new colonial administrators: both were ultimately detrimental to the promotion of educational opportunity across caste, class, and gender lines.

A generational divide soon emerged among the English educated South Asians of the generation after Roy. Some of the English educated upper class South Asians, such as Bankim Chatterjee in Bengal, and Balgangadhar Tilak in Maharashtra, early graduates of Western style universities established in India in the 1850s, reacted against colonial influence in the cultural and educational arena, suggesting that Roy’s generation had gone too far in accommodating to colonial rule and its cultural influence, whereas other more moderates, like Mahadev Govinda Ranade (1842-1901), wanted to make a break with the past more slowly and judiciously. Ranade expresses his dilemma as a man in the middle quite eloquently when he wrote,

“While the new religious sects condemn us for being too orthodox, the extreme orthodox denounce us for being too revolutionary in our methods. . . I have many friends in this camp of extreme orthodoxy . . . [who] advocate a return to the old ways and appeal to the old authorities, and old sanctions . . . . When we are asked to revive our old institutions and customs, people seem to be very much at sea as to what it is they seem to revive? What particular period of history is to be taken as the old? Whether the period of the Vedas, of the Smritis, of the Puranas, of the Mahomedan or modern Hindu times? Our usages have been changed from time to time by a slow process of growth, and in some cases of decay and corruption, and we cannot stop at a particular period without breaking the continuity of the whole. “ (Hays 14-105)

Ranade’s view of the past is in many ways an accurate reflection of the mixed feelings of many upper class Hindus to the changes brought forth by colonialism. While aware of the needs of the changing times, colonialism’s dual impact presented a very serious dilemma for South Asia’s Hindu thinking class with regard to their own identity and their relationship to the colonial authority. One of the most glaring example of how the reality of colonial politics marred social reform is reflected in the controversy surrounding the [Age of Consent Bill of 1891](#). It was introduced by the colonial government to protect infant girls from being married off to older men but became a lightning rod of debate between the “South Asian Modernity and Global Modernism” created by Suchismita Sen on October 27, 2021. Last updated by Redesigning Modernities staff on April 21, 2022. License: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Indian orthodoxy and the reformers, and took political dimensions far beyond its intended scope. As Meera Kosambi writes: The opponents of reform appealed to patriotic sentiments for [mobilizing] resistance on grounds of foreign interference in religion, while the reformers [like Ranade] delinked the two issues and advised their 'educated countrymen' not to be swayed by such misleading appeal (1866).

While the debate between the reformers and the revivalists on the issue of progress and modernity started in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it still rages in Indian society under changed political guises as in demands for equal rights and treatment of women and oppressed classes, and equal and fair access to education and opportunity for all Indian citizens, irrespective of caste, religion, and gender in a secular society. It is this debate that informs all discussion of modernity in south Asia since independence especially in the wake of the trauma of partition and the raging controversy on the issue of Hindu identity. See a more detailed discussion of this topic at “On Hindu, Hindustān, Hinduism and Hindutva” Arvind Sharma. *Numen*, 2002, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2002), pp. 1-36.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3270470>

### **Part 1.5: Tradition, Identity, and Politics in Independent India**

As many foundational principles of modernity run against the grain of the traditional South Asian understanding of an individual's predestined place in society, the hierarchical view becomes untenable when transformations in livelihood, occupation, and gender roles, and politics require equal access to education for all its members. This process still remains largely a work in progress in contemporary South Asia. While the traditional Indian hierarchy of caste, and gender-based idea of educational privilege has continued to face a serious challenge from nineteenth century to present day reformers, Indian society still struggles with the issue of access to and quality of education across the board. The unequal access to education for the poor and the women follows the traditional playbook of educational privilege, where the upper moneyed classes, the Brahmins and the nobility, had a claim to education that poorer sections of the society were deemed unworthy. Today, admittedly the access to education is tied more to economic rather caste status, although caste hierarchy has not lost its full grip. In fact, educational policies of the Indian government in many ways continues to reflect the older viewpoint despite significant yet limited strides.

Economists have repeatedly pointed out how the stark contrast in the quality of primary education in rural versus urban communities in today's India indicates the continuing disparity in educational opportunity between the moneyed and the poorer populations. While sections of South Asia's upper classes have consistently benefitted and contributed to world class higher education ever since the establishment of western style universities in the mid nineteenth century, vast sections of the rural and poorer population continues to remain illiterate (Dreze and Loh, 2871). According to the authors, “a serious aspect of India's failure in the field of basic education is the highly uneven distribution of educational achievements. Illiteracy, in particular, tends to be concentrated among disadvantaged social groups. Literacy rates tend to be much lower among women than among men, in rural than in urban areas, and among scheduled castes and tribes (communities historically discriminated against by the Hindu orthodoxy) than in the population as a whole.” The problem of low literacy is exacerbated by a persistent neglect of primary education by the Indian government coupled with enormous public investment in higher education. As a result, a very large section of India's population that cannot reap the benefit of India's world-class higher education, sees access to technology, rather than one's conscious break with traditional ways of thinking as the mark of modernity. Possession of modern

“South Asian Modernity and Global Modernism” created by Suchismita Sen on October 27, 2021. Last updated by Redesigning Modernities staff on April 21, 2022. License: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

devices such as cell phones, TVs, etc. become talismans of “modern” lifestyle for many even when the life style itself may be quite traditional. It is this kind of misunderstanding between effects of modern technology and the thought process that leads to innovative thinking that led the current Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, a populist politician to cite the Hindu god [Ganesha’s elephant head as an evidence of ancient India’s advanced medical technology](#).

### **Part 1.6 Women’s Role in Modern India**

Not surprisingly, the educational disparities between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural has had its own history in influencing the women’s rights movement in India. Rochona Majumdar has suggested that:

Indian women's self-fashioning bears plural and contradictory relations to liberal conceptions of personhood and rights. Towards the close of the nineteenth century, and even in the early decades of the twentieth century, a very influential ethic among both men and women was that of self-sacrifice. While a certain Hindu "tradition" was invented and invoked to justify this imagination, what made the figure of the "new woman fundamentally democratic was the insistence-utopian to be sure, but heard in all reformist literature that all acts of sacrifice be absolutely voluntary. This is why nineteenth century reformism could be critical of domestic violence--because such violence extracted sacrifice and submission only by force-and yet fail to find any solutions to woman’s problems through their participation in public life.

With the rise and spread of women's education, the entry of increasing numbers of women from all social classes into the labor force, the increasing visibility of the plight of innumerable child widows in the twentieth century, and educated middle-class women became more aware and impatient of the limitations of a literary, humanist critique. The feeling that other kinds of guarantees, such as those provided by legal safeguards, were needed was strengthened as the era of mass politics began and women became a political category (and later an electoral one as well). These feelings also gave birth to various women's associations and what eventually became the organized women's movement in India. This, however, does not mean that the humanist criticisms of the family immediately declined yielding to a more self-consciously political critique. The ethical figure lived on alongside the political critique--producing plural "sources of the self" for women-and found elaboration in novels, films, biographies, and women's own writings about themselves. And it is at the point of intersection of these two critiques-the ethical critique of self-interest and the legal-political defense of the same idea of interest - that we may locate the birth of a notion of women's rights in India. (21)

The debate between universal humanism and local tradition rages in the realm of woman’s rights in contemporary Indian society and seems not too far from the debates surrounding the Age of Consent Bill of 1891. In fact, [the May 2015 TED talk](#), where Justice Leila Seth, the first woman judge at the Delhi High Court appeals to her Indian sisters to become aware of her legal inheritance rights and not remain bound by the traditional model of self-sacrifice in the interest of family harmony. Seth has illustrated how the tension between tradition and modern identity is still playing out in the lives of Indian women to this day from her experience as a judge at the Delhi high court. Radhika Coomaraswamy, a noted human rights advocate and lawyer from Sri Lanka articulates this tension clearly when she writes:

Some third world thinkers believe that their societies offer a different version of “woman” than that of so called Western societies. These so-called traditional women, reinscribed in the annals of the nation, are usually chaste, self-sacrificing, and long suffering. We are told ad nauseum that they have no concern for rights, only for duties and these duties involve taking care of a husband and children. . . [However] Tradition, like all memories of the

“South Asian Modernity and Global Modernism” created by Suchismita Sen on October 27, 2021. Last updated by Redesigning Modernities staff on April 21, 2022. License: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 8



past, are full of contradictions and alternatives. What we choose to highlight from the past often reveals more about our judgment than about our ancestors. . . . The modern Indian nationalist . . . highlights the role of Sita, the dutiful wife of Ram, who must be one of the most wronged women in world civilization. Self-sacrificing, doting, impeccably chaste, and prone to tragedy, she is the model wife. However, peripheral societies of India worship goddesses including the goddess Kali, who in contrast to Sita, must be one of the most empowered deities of the world civilization. . . . The choice of Sita over Kali [by Hindu nationalists] is a modern one, made for what they think a proper wife should be in a modern nation. There is no essential traditions, only essential memories, that pick and choose from the anthology of the past. (6-7)

Coomaraswamy's discussion reminds us of the double-edged nature of Appadurai and Breckenridge's characterization of modernity in South Asia as one emphasizing one's freedom of choice and calls for a more nuanced and sometimes skeptical analysis of what being modern may mean in the South Asian political as well as social discourse today.

### **Part 1.7: Examples of Modernity in Literature and Cinema**

While South Asian politics and social reform has been roiled by issues of class, caste, gender, and privilege, a completely different strain of modernity can be detected in the Indian, and particularly Bengali literary discourse dating back to the 1940s. It is worth noting here that late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengali literature has been the beneficiary of the genius of Rabindranath Tagore whose writing profoundly transformed not only Bengali, but Indian literature in the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, Tagore still casts a larger than life shadow on current Bengali literature, a solid eight decades after his death and contemporary writers are often measured against Tagore's genius and are found wanting by many readers.

Tagore, while showing great diversity in style and technique, and deep sensitivity to the lived Indian experience, was a philosopher at heart, not someone interested in making a rapture with the past a hallmark of his creative style. Accordingly, many of the gifted writers from the 1950s and 60s, actively wanted to break a path away from Tagore's in their efforts to stand apart. In the preface of an edited collection of *Modern Bengali Poetry*, Buddhadev Bose, one of the most eminent Bengali poets of the 1960s and 70s captured the essence of modernity in Bengali literature of his time when he said, "modern poetry is not a thing that can be neatly identified by its telltale signature. One could characterize modern poetry as the poetry of rebellions, protests, doubts, weariness, and tireless search. At the same time, modern poetry has also delighted in the wonders of life, the sheer and amazing pleasures of experiencing the immediacy of life, and a creative confidence reliant upon the faith in the regular progression of life." (Introduction to *Adhunik Bangla Kavita*). In a separate interview, Bose, when asked about the difference between Indian classical literature and *adhunik* or contemporary literature, said, "The belief that the world is good, and there is a divine purpose operating in our lives is bound to decline in these modern times. It would be very difficult, if not impossible for an intelligent person living in the twentieth century to hold on to such a belief, in the way that Tagore and Kalidasa did." Note that Bose here characterizes a 4<sup>th</sup> century Sanskrit playwright Kalidasa, and an internationally renowned twentieth century Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore sharing similar worldviews. Moreover, in describing some of his own contemporaries, the poet Amiya Chakravarty, for example, Bose says, "[Chakravarty's] style and technique are very modernist. He has written very successfully in the prose-poem form and has even used free verse with great skill. But his thought- content is not essentially different from Tagore's. Chakravarty is acutely aware of the contemporary situation; there are many direct references to world events in his poems. Yet, he injects a note of optimism into all this, a note of

hope that through human effort, and through the essential good sense of man, harmony will finally prevail. For him it is no longer a question of harmony between man and nature, which is a deeper problem, but of harmony between different individuals, different ways of life, and different nations.”

(See <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23030779>)

Bose’s description of Amiya Chakravarty’s style and content appears to encapsulate one version of South Asian modernity which while influenced by the conventional ideal of rebellion against hopelessness of a contemporary life in style and content also manages to tie it to a more hopeful ideal of universal humanism.

Before proceeding to a discussion of selected examples of modern Indian writing, it may be worthwhile to note that the word “*Adhunik*” (आधुनिक) as used in the title of Bose’s edited collection veers closer to the popular meaning of modern as contemporary rather than referring to any particular period. However, Bose’s own description of *Adhunik* indicates a spirit of rebelliousness in the spirit of what he understood as modern, thereby tying what it means to be *Adhunik* with the more scholarly understanding of modernism in Anglo-American literature. The fact that the word *Adhunik* may sound more hopeful in the ears of educated South Asians can perhaps also be a function of post-colonial idealism borne out of fresh memory of colonial experience and India’s subsequent independence from it.

A similar spirit of resilience and hope in face of frustration and disappointment is voiced by the protagonist of the Bengali auteur Satyajit Ray’s hero Apu in the film *Apur Sansar*, often considered a [classic of modern cinema](#). In one telling scene from Ray’s movie, young Apu, a perfect example of a struggling and starving writer, engages in the following conversation with his college friend Pulu. Describing his plan for his great novel, Apu says,

*“Listen to this: ‘A young boy. A village boy. Poor, but sensitive. His father’s a priest. The father dies. The boy comes to the city. He does not want to be a priest. He’ll study. He has ambition—he studies—Through his education, and struggles, we watch as he sheds his old superstitions and fixed views—He questions everything and takes nothing on trust. And yet, he has imagination and sensitivity—little things move him and bring him joy—Perhaps, he has greatness in him—the ability to create—but—He doesn’t make it—That’s right! But it doesn’t end there—It’s not a tragedy.. He does nothing great. He remains poor and in want—But he never turns away from life—He doesn’t run away—He wants to live—He says living itself brings fulfilment and joy.”*

*His friend Pulu says, “Hmm”*

*Apu: “What’s that [supposed] to mean?”*

*Pulu: “This is an autobiography! Not a novel!!”*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N89TWYYsmqU&t=1498>; from 21:37-24:58)

Ray’s depiction of modern life in the person of the naively idealistic Apu, the hero of *Apur Sansar*, provides us with a glimpse of yet another possible vision of modernity in South Asia. Along with the cynical, frustrated, rebellious, and angry spirit of modernism, South Asian literature and film gives us a glimpse of a more charming, and hopeful vision of modernity which refuses to be broken by the daily sufferings and indignities. It is this hope of universal humanism, influenced by what the best that the western culture had to offer in the eyes of Indians, that distinguished the worldview of many South Asian intellectuals of the 1950s and 1960s, freshly free from the fetters of colonialism that enriched the culture of this era.

## **Part 1.8 Rising awareness of individual legal rights in Independent India**

“South Asian Modernity and Global Modernism” created by Suchismita Sen on October 27, 2021. Last updated by Redesigning Modernities staff on April 21, 2022. License: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

While there is a great diversity in the way the word ‘modern’ is understood in contemporary South Asia, there is also a remarkable coherence with the dictionary definition of modernity emphasizing an outlook that breaks with the past. According to Rohit De, a historian of the Indian constitution, this process is clearly visible in ways ordinary citizens of India are learning to engage with the powers of the state using independent India’s constitutional guarantees of individual rights as a blue print. In *A People’s Constitution: The Everyday Life of Law in the Indian Republic* De argues, “the Constitution of India came alive in the popular imagination almost immediately after its promulgation, so that ordinary people took meaning from its existence, took recourse to it, and argued with it. . . despite being a document largely written by political elites in a language that was spoken by a miniscule percentage of citizens, . . . [it] came to structure everyday life. [Furthermore] large numbers of ordinary Indians, often belonging to minorities and marginalized groups, actively engaged in this process, and that a significant number of these constitutional encounters were produced through the new state’s attempts to regulate networks of production and consumption. Given South Asia’s long view of history, the slowly emerging awareness among India’s ordinary citizens of their own power to exert their own rights and dignity illustrates the universal appeal of ideas that are embodied in the discourse on what it means to be modern in South Asia.

**Conclusion:** Our module began with a discussion of the history of the word ‘modern’ and how it may have acquired different connotations and meanings in the South Asian context throughout its history. It may be worthwhile to end this module with a discussion of the debate between two contemporary Indian historians, Partha Chatterjee and Sugata Bose on the question of what it means to be modern in societies that were exposed to modern thought via colonialism, and the question: Is it possible to be modern without being westernized.

The first position described here is from Partha Chatterjee’s essay, titled, *Our Modernity* (Published by the South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS) and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). Rotterdam/Dakar, 1997) <https://catsubaltern.wordpress.com/2016/05/12/partha-chatterjee-our-modernity/>

Partha Chatterjee’s View on Indian Modernity:

Ours is the modernity of the once-colonized. The same historical process that has taught us the value of modernity has also made us the victims of modernity. Our attitude to modernity, therefore, cannot but deeply be ambiguous. . . . But this ambiguity does not stem from any uncertainty about whether to be for or against modernity. Rather, the uncertainty is because we know that to fashion the forms of our modernity, we need to have the courage at times to reject the modernities established by others. In the age of nationalism, there were many such efforts which reflected both courage and inventiveness. Not all were, of course, equally successful. Today, in the age of globalization, perhaps the time has come once more to mobilize that courage. Maybe we need to think about ‘those days’ and these days’ of our modernity.

Sugata Bose in response to Chatterjee’s characterization of different modernities alerts to the dangers of overlooking the universalist aspects of the ideal. In his view,

South Asians urgently need to recover and re-imagine the more generous ways of acknowledging and accommodating the wide array of cultural differences, religious or otherwise, that are internal and intrinsic to the subcontinent. At the same time, in their zeal to assert the subcontinent’s difference vis-à-vis the West as part of the resistance to the more pernicious aspects of

globalization, they need to be careful not to slam the door shut on the creative channels of dialogues across cultures that had been pioneered by their forbears even as they resisted colonial power.

And thus, the debate continues. Whereas Chatterjee emphasizes the post-colonial context of South Asia and its attendant outlook, Bose reminds us not to lose sight of the broader universals of human experience that globalization may also make possible.

### **Bibliography:**

1. Age of Consent Act 1891. *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation. June 9, 2021. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age\\_of\\_Consent\\_Act,\\_1891](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Consent_Act,_1891)
2. Appadurai, Arjun and Carol Breckenridge. *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1998
3. Bose, Buddhadev. Ed. Introduction to *Adhunik Bangla Kavita*. Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar and Sons. 1940
4. Bose, Buddhadev. Perspective on Bengali Poetry: An Interview with Buddhadeva Bose *Mahfil*, 1966, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1966), pp. 43-48. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23030779>
5. Bose, Sugata. Modernity, Nation, Religion: The Making of a Subcontinental Predicament. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Summer/Fall 1997, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Summer/Fall 1997), pp. 151-162  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24590024>
6. Brody, Richard. The Miraculous Apu Trilogy. *The New Yorker*. May 6, 2015  
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-miraculous-apu-trilogy>
7. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Ancients and Moderns". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 29 Jan. 2015, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Ancients-and-Moderns>. Accessed Dec 13, 2021
8. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Ram Mohan Roy". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 23 Sep. 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ram-Mohan-Roy>. Accessed Dec 13, 2021
9. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Charles Perrault". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 25 May. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Perrault>. Accessed 1 December 2021.

10. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Bernard Le Bovier, sieur de Fontenelle". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 Mar. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bernard-Le-Bovier-sieur-de-Fontenelle>. Accessed 1 December 2021.
11. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Jean de La Bruyère". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 28 Jul. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-de-La-Bruyere> Accessed 1 December 2021.
12. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Mahadev Govind Ranade". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14 Jan. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mahadev-Govind-Ranade>. Accessed Dec 13, 2021
13. Burton, Richard D.E.. "Charles Baudelaire". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 27 Aug. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Baudelaire>. Accessed December 1, 2021
14. Coomaraswamy, Radhika. "Are Women's Rights Universal? Re-engaging the Local." *Meridians*. Vol. 3, No. 1. 2002 Duke University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40338539>
15. Chatterjee, Partha. *Our Modernity* (Published by the South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS) and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). Rotterdam/Dakar, 1997) <https://catsubaltern.wordpress.com/2016/05/12/partha-chatterjee-our-modernity/>
16. De, Rohit. *A People's Constitution: The Everyday Life of Law in the Indian Republic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2018 <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9780691185132/html>
17. Dreze, Jean and Jackie Loh. "Literacy in India and China" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Nov. 11, 1995, Vol. 30, No. 45 (Nov. 11, 1995), pp. 2868-2878 Published by: Economic and Political Weekly Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4403423>
18. Hay, Stephen. Ed. *Sources of Indian Tradition*. Vol. 2. New York: Columbia University Press. 1988.
19. Jauss, Hans Robert. *Modernity and Literary Tradition*. *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Winter 2005). English translation 2005 by Christian Thorne. The University of Chicago. <https://doi.org/10.1086/430964>
20. Kosambi, Meera. "Girl Brides and Socio-Legal Change: Age of Consent Bill Controversy." *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 3-10, 1991, Vol. 26, No. 31/32 (August 3- 10, 1991), pp. 1857-1868. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41498538>
21. Majumdar, Rochona. "Self- Sacrifice versus Self Interest": A Non-Historicist Reading of the History of Women's Rights in India. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. Volume 22, Numbers 1&2, 2002, pp. 20-35

22. Pant, Bhaskar. Different Cultures see Deadlines Differently. *Harvard Business Review*. May 23, 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/05/different-cultures-see-deadlines-differently>
23. "Rajnarayan Basu" *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation. June 1, 2021. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rajnarayan\\_Basu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rajnarayan_Basu)
24. Rahman, Maseeh. "Indian prime minister claims genetic science existed in ancient times." *The Guardian*. Oct 28, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/28/indian-prime-minister-genetic-science-existed-ancient-times>
25. Ramanujan, A.K. "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.) 23:1. 1989. New Delhi: Sage Publications. <https://profcohen.net/reli113/uploads/texts/ramanujan.pdf>
26. Satyajit Ray. *Pather Panchali*. Youtube uploaded by Grand Canian. Dec 5, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N89TWYysmqU&t=1498>; from 21:37-24:58
27. Ray, Sukumar. *Ha Ja Ba Ra La, A Topsy Turvy Tale* by Sukumar Ray (Tr. Sukanta Chudhuri) Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1987.
28. Rushdie, Salman. "The Courter" *East, West: Stories*. New York: Random House. 1995.
29. Seth, Leila. Why I Defend Women's Inheritance Rights. TEDx Gateway Women. [https://www.ted.com/talks/leila\\_seth\\_why\\_i\\_defend\\_women\\_s\\_inheritance\\_rights?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/leila_seth_why_i_defend_women_s_inheritance_rights?language=en)
30. Sharma, Arvind. "On Hindu, Hindustān, Hinduism and Hindutva" Arvind Sharma. *Numen*, 2002, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2002), pp. 1-36. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3270470>
31. Sykes, Leslie Clifford. "Jean de La Fontaine". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 25 Jun. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-de-La-Fontaine>. Accessed December 1, 2021.

**Further Reading:**

[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rmsa/hd\\_rmsa.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rmsa/hd_rmsa.htm)

[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/emit/hd\\_emit.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/emit/hd_emit.htm)