

Akshaykumar, Khonds and Chimpanzees: Encounters with the Chthulucene

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Abstract : My paper focuses on two vignettes published in 1845, in the *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, the Brahmo periodical published from Kolkata. Written by Akshaykumar Dutta, the editor of the periodical, the articles reveal the myriad contours of the troubled, tentative definitions of modern selfhoods in colonial Bengal. The textual resonances of the articles enable us to read them not merely as derivative discourses of Eurocentric modernity. Rather, their transgressive potencies are revealed. Such readings do not interpret the articles as being merely limited by Akshay kumar's puritanical convictions about rationalism, anthropocentrism and normative sexuality. Rather, they reveal the subversions embodied in texts as pointing out to the post-human, no modern evocations of the Chthulucene in which the ambivalences of race, sexuality and species are not resolved into ossified categories but are inhabited, performed and incessantly shattered.

IndexTerms - Bengal Renaissance, colonialism, race, anthropocentrism, post-human

My paper focuses on two short vignettes published in 1845, in the *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, the Brahmo periodical published from Kolkata. Kolkata, one of the nerve-centres of the British Empire, had by then become enmeshed in debates about modernity during the heydays of the so called Bengal Renaissance. *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, as the mouthpiece of the reinvigorated *Tattwabodhini Sabha* (founded in 1839 by Debendranath Thakur), was an important vehicle for dispensation of distinct Brahmo ideals [6]. The first issue of the journal was published on 16th August, 1843. Akshaykumar Dutta, a new Brahmo convert and a Baconian deist rationalist, was chosen as the editor of the periodical by Debendranath Thakur. The editorial board included Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Rajendralal Mitra, Anandakrishna Basu and Rajnarayan Basu. The content of the periodical chiefly consisted of religious commentaries, debates, apologetics and translations from the core texts of the Vedanta – *Rgveda* and the *Upanisads*. It is in the twenty-fifth installment of the periodical, in Bhadra 1767 Saka (August-September 1845), that Akshaykumar Dutta published his first vignette on the natural world. The piece, entitled “Narabali”, describes the ritual of human sacrifice prevalent among the Khonds of Odisha. It is interesting to note how the troubled, tentative constructions of modern selfhoods in Bengal can be traced back to this 1845 article.

Akshaykumar states that because humans cannot possibly know the Divine, they indulge in brutal pursuits to please him. He notes the prevalence of such practices not only among the non-normative tribals but also among the normative adherents of Brahminical and Tantric traditions. He contextualizes the tradition as a harvest ritual and notes how this sacrifice to a chthonic divinity also includes apparently accepted practices of mercantile exchange (the procuring of the *meriah*, the victim) and acts of humane courtesy and conviviality. For Akshaykumar (quite unlike utilitarian British historians like James Mill), involvement in such brutal action characterises religion not only in India, but throughout the world. He refers to an array of traditions – some historical, others mythical – to establish this fact. Not only does he mention the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Aztecs and Ethiopians but also the Greeks. Alluding to Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia at the onset of the Trojan War, Akshaykumar notes the practice of human

sacrifice in Athens and Miletus. Akshaykumar concludes by asserting the need of Vedanta in countering such sinister propensities in man [3] (pp.207-8).

It is convenient to read this article as a derivative discourse, especially if one hunts for its sources. Lieutenant Samuel Charters Macpherson, the erstwhile collector of Ganjam district, published an account of the sacrifice in his *Report upon the Khonds of the Districts of Ganjam and Cuttack* in 1842. Macpherson's text elaborates on his survey in the recently colonized parts of Ghumsur and serves as an early anthropological document on the Khonds, detailing their linguistic, social, religious and political traditions. Macpherson's report details the sacrifice to BeraPennoo, the Earth God, as an act of ritual necessity. He states [10]:

"The Earth," say the Khonds, "was originally a crude and unstable mass unfit for cultivation, and for the convenient habitation of man. The Earth God said, 'Let human blood be spilt before me!' and a child was sacrificed. The soil became forthwith firm and productive, and the Deity ordained that man should repeat the rite and live."

Macpherson describes in graphic detail how the priest strikes the victim with an axe and then the rest of the participants 'strip the flesh from the bones'. Akshaykumar incorporates this in his description. Macpherson's report is discussed in *The Calcutta Review* 5(Jan-June 1846), published a few months after Akshaykumar's piece. Probably written by Rev. Alexander Duff, the anonymous article in *The Calcutta Review* not only discusses earlier colonial reports on Ghumsur but details the extent of colonial domination that was wreaked on the inhabitants. The military expedition to annex the zamindary of Ghumsur in 1835-6 and the subsequent encounter with the Khonds bring out the close connection between rationalist anthropology and colonial dominance[14]:

It was now determined to pursue the rebel fugitives, who betook themselves to the jungles and the hills. In furtherance of this object, it was found necessary for the British troops, for the first time, to ascend the Ghats. And, in doing so, they came in contact, for the first time, with their wild Highland inhabitants, the Khonds.

Akshaykumar's inscription of the Other has thus been witnessed through the prism of empire and its construction of selfhood. Such a seamless construction of modern selfhood would however disregard an important element of Akshaykumar's piece. While discussing about the widespread prevalence of human sacrifice in various cultures round the world, Akshaykumar quips [3] (p.208):

However, all this violence seem negligible when we are reminded of the religious traditions of the ancestors of the contemporary English people. When at war, when plagued by a disease or while encountering an administrative crisis, their Druid priests appeased the gods by performing cruel human sacrifices. One shudders to think of the extraordinary brutality with which they performed this act. They used to construct a huge human-shaped cage out of dry leaves and imprisoned criminals within it. If the terrible gut of the colossus was not full, then even innocent people were stuffed in to fill it up, and they then lit [it] with a torch to murder hundreds at once.

It is interesting to note how Akshaykumar turns an imperialist construction on its head in order to develop a subversive reading of Macpherson's text. The allusion to the construction of Wicker Man effigy by the Celtic priests can be traced to a sentence in Caesar's *Commentary on the Gallic War*. Recent archeological research views these descriptions skeptically as they are often linked with deliberate misconstructions of Celtic culture by Roman imperialism [15].

To use this to inscribe British identity destabilizes the seamless discourse of European superiority and English/ British authority. Further, it is doubly ironic as the English had developed similar constructions of the Ireland and Wales as they endeavoured to defend their colonization of these territories. The illustration in Akshaykumar's piece is based on an etching published in *Tours in Scotland* (1781) by Thomas Pennant. Pennant, a Welsh naturalist and an antiquarian, is known for his detailed description of natural and cultural topographies of Ireland. Pennant's travelogue was influential in inscribing Wales as the exotic Other in English imagination, hence justifying the discourses of colonial control. The present illustration, titled "The Wicker Man of the Druids", was most probably etched by Moses Griffith. This is a nightmarish inversion of 1651 Frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, etched by Abraham Bosse. If we look closely, the *Tattwabodhini* etching disregards many of the details present in Pennant's book. The Druids in Catholic paraphernalia, the idyllic countryside in the background and the men wearing animal skin were typical components of English depictions of Celtic primitivism. As Amy E. Martin states, the representation of the Irish and Welsh as sub-humans was an important ingredient of Victorian racist typologies [11]. Akshaykumar inverts this to suggest that the ancestors of English colonialists were after all comparable to the unappropriated Others – the Khonds of Ghumsur.

The presentation of the exotic Other is often tinged with notes of subliminal fears about the sub-human. This was imbued with notions of anthropocentrism and a conviction that European modernity has resulted in the revelation of a perfect human prototype – the modern European man – whose superiority justifies his control over the Others – women, homosexuals, Irish, Jews, the colonized in Asia, Africa and Europe as well as animals. Charles Kingsley's 1860 letter to his wife, brings out the ambivalences of English attitude towards the Irish [7]:

I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country...[T]o see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not see it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours.

The chimpanzee was described and studied in several works on anatomy from late eighteenth century. However, a tacit association was made between the primate and the human residents of Africa, thereby suggesting a notion of inter species miscegenation. The framing of modernity was deeply associated with the assertion of these overlapping ideations of Otherness. As Anne McClintock argues succinctly [12]:

Monkeys, in particular, were deployed to legitimize social boundaries as edicts of nature. Fetishes straddling nature and culture, monkeys were seen as allied with the dangerous classes : the "apelike" wandering poor, the hungry Irish, Jews, prostitutes, impoverished black people, the ragged working class, criminals, the insane and female miners and servants, who were collectively seen to inhabit the threshold of racial degeneration.

Four months after publishing his vignette on human sacrifice, Akshaykumar publishes his piece on the chimpanzee in *Tattwabodhini Patrika* 29 (December-January 1845-6)[4]:

Amongst all animals, the chimpanzees resemble man the most. They live in the continent of Africa. Their body stretches for two to three *hasta*-s[the traditional unit of *hasta* equals 18 inches; two *hasta*-s would be one yard], and are immensely strong. They are so undaunted that they effortlessly attack even powerful humans, and even hurt them by hurling stones from a distance. Just like their physical dimensions, their behaviour resembles that of humans. They walk on their legs like humans, like humans they sleep, and they utter sounds like humans do. .. They are so mischievous that they indulge in sodomy with women. It has been reported that they repeatedly attack women of the African tribes.

This piece, which was later published in a revised and enlarged form in the first volume of Akshaykumar's *Charupath* (1853), perpetuates various apprehensions which shaped the contours of modern selfhoods. The limits of Akshaykumar's rationality, his puritanical emphasis on normative sexual relationship and his criticism of transgressive bodies have been noted by Sibaji Bandyopadhyay [1]. What often eludes us is the materiality of the text in print and the inevitable heteroglossia that it enmeshes itself in. For example, the vignette on the chimpanzee was published within a year of Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, an overtly pro-Darwinian account of speciation which presaged Darwin's 1859 magnum opus. The margins of the two vignettes provide us with the most potent clue. The vignette on Chimpanzee is preceded by an address given in the meeting of Brahma Samaj as well as translations from the *Kāthopaniṣad*. Yama and Nachiketa might go on conversing about the transcendent nature of human spirit in the Second Valli of *Kāthopaniṣad* (in Debendranath's translation preceding Akshaykumar's article); Akshaykumar's vignette is about mundane, ever-present human fears about the ambiguities of sexual passion, transgression and the dread of being maligned and abused. The vignette on human sacrifice is followed by a significant verse from the First Valli of the *Kāthopaniṣad* (1.20) in which the Nachiketa brings into focus the debates about the persistence of human spirit after death. Debendranath had noted with evident displeasure the agnostic/atheistic tendencies in Akshaykumar as well as his engagement with transgressive antinomians like the Bauls [2]. This will eventually result in Akshaykumar's publication of a series of articles in *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, from August 1848 onwards, describing the various religious practices of South Asia. These articles will be later rearranged in two volumes as *Bharatvarshiya Upasak Sampraday* (first volume: 1870, second volume: 1883). The growing rift between Debendranath and Akshaykumar would lead to his resignation as editor of *Tattwabodhini Patrika* in 1855 [8]. Debendranath's remarked with wistfulness in his *Atmajibani* [13]:

Where am I, and where is he! My quest is for my personal relationship with the Deity; and he was searching for the relationship of the external world with human nature – it's a world of difference!

Bruno Latour's words may help frame our responses to Akshaykumar's ambivalences. Latour elaborates [9] (pp.10-11):

...the word 'modern' designates two sets of entirely different practices which must remain distinct if they are to remain effective, but have recently begun to be confused. The first set of practices, by 'translation', creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture. The second, by 'purification', creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other... So long as we consider these two practices of translation and purification separately, we are truly modern... As soon as we direct our attention simultaneously to the work of purification and the work of hybridization, we immediately stop being wholly modern, and our future begins to change.

I propose that this epiphanic and often retrospective realizations of our nonmodernity are embodied in the bodies of text(s). The hermeneutical resonances embedded in Akshaykumar's vignettes can never be fully resolved, nor should they ever be. It is in their performative ambivalence that the post-human Chthulucene (to borrow Donna Haraway's phrase) [5] will unravel itself. The Khonds of Niyamgiri have engaged with the transcendent tyrant of Vedanta in the twenty-first century much like Akshaykumar's chimp in the nineteenth. As Latour suggests [9] (p.47):

I am not saying that we are entering a new era; on the contrary we no longer have to continue the headlong flight of the post-post-postmodernists...instead we discover that we have never begun to enter the modern era .

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