

Modern subjects: an epilogue

This epilogue turns attention to salient subjects of a modernist provenance on the Indian subcontinent. Now, in South Asia, a certain haziness regarding modernism and modernity derives not only from the manner in which they can be elided with each other, but the fact that they are both frequently filtered through the optics of modernization. At stake is the acute, albeit altering, importance of being modern, as a person, a nation, and a people. This is true not only of quotidian common sense but of scholarly sentiments. Here, as was noted, modernization implicitly entails pervasive projections of material, organizational, and technological – as well as economic, political, and cultural – transformation(s), principally envisioned in the looking glass of Western development. In this scenario, tacitly at least, different, often hierarchically ordered, peoples are seen as succeeding (or failing) to evolve from their traditional circumstances to arrive at a modernized order. Indeed, motifs of modernization, carrying wide implication, readily draw together mappings of modernism, modernity, and (being) modern, such that each shores up the other.

Overture

Why should this be the case? To begin with, as this book has emphasized throughout, a crucial characteristic of dominant descriptions of the modern and modernity has hinged on their positing of the phenomena as marked by a break with the past, a rupture with tradition, a surpassing of the medieval. Here, through ruses of teleological

historical progress, stages of civilization, and social evolutionist schemas, by the second half of the nineteenth century, across much of the world an exclusive West was increasingly presented as the looking glass for the imagining of universal history. As worldly knowledge, borne alike by empire and nation, oriented not merely toward ordering but simultaneously remaking the world, these neat proposals and their formative presumptions variously entered the lives of South Asian subjects. On the Indian subcontinent, across the twentieth century, such principles and presuppositions were first disseminated as ways of approaching social worlds and soon instituted as dimensions of experience and affect within everyday arenas, at the very least middle-class ones. In this scenario, the blueprints of modernization actually distilled the meanings of the modern, articulating an imaginary but palpable distended and aggrandizing West/Europe as modernity – for all those awaiting its second coming in prior places, anachronistic spaces, lagging in time.

In artistic, intellectual, and aesthetic arenas, modernism(s) in South Asia have variously, often critically, engaged with these projections and presuppositions: but they have also been unable to easily escape their long shadow.¹ Now, modernist tendencies on the subcontinent have formed part of diverse expressions across the world of modernism as contentious and contradictory movements, styles, and representations, going back to the mid-nineteenth century and extending into our own times. Here, if modernism has been a principally “qualitative” rather than a merely “chronological” category, it is also the case that on the subcontinent, as elsewhere, the internal endeavors within modernisms to surpass the past, articulate the present, and envision the future have been intrinsically heterogeneous ones.²

On the one hand, such initiatives have severally accessed and exceeded colonial representations and precolonial narratives, nationalist thought and nativist tradition, primitivism and futurity, abstract reason and religious truth, and governmental authority and popular politics. There are parallels here with modernist initiatives elsewhere. On the other hand, South Asian endeavors equally sieved such concerns through distinct expressions of modernism, at once querying the

colonial connection with a (generally bourgeois) modern, articulating the national dynamic with an (often avant-garde) modern, exploring the critical contours of a (contending, “primitivist”) modern, rethinking the content of tradition, and debating the nature of modernity. Imbued with specific spatial densities and tousled temporal energies, this has provided South Asian modernisms with their own twist, with discrete textures.

We have discussed that a key characteristic of modernism at large has been to emphasize the difference of the contemporary present from past epochs. Within South Asian modernisms, this claim of a surpassing of the past, turning on time and space, was variously inflected by the gravity of anticolonial and nationalist imaginaries, the weight of memory and history, the pull of the mythic and the primitive, and the burden of a violent independence and postcolonial politics. This is to say, these endeavors, inhabiting “multiple constellations throughout the twentieth century,” appeared critically shot through by “a dialectical process of invoking, resisting, or negotiating questions of tradition, identity and experience.”³ It followed, too, that ruptures with prior artistic moments within the subcontinental aesthetic landscape – alongside engagements with wider modernist imaginaries – instilled these tendencies with rather particular energies. All of this has meant that the paradoxical, even opposed, trends that have characterized modernisms at large acquired in South Asia a discrete cadence, unfamiliar attributes.

In what follows, I shall elaborate these first formulations by exploring issues of time and space, broadly understood, that informed distinct modernist moments, cutting across different forms of aesthetic production, in South Asia. Here, the temporal-spatial imperatives are culled from within modernist practices themselves, which filtered and reworked distinct influences through a self-directed aesthetic. Indeed, it warrants emphasis that my bid is to follow chronology in order to rethink chronology, and to use taxonomy in order to undo taxonomy, in an effort to foreground the multiple yet overlaying temporal articulations and spatial stipulations of modernisms in South Asia.

Genealogies

By the beginning of the twentieth century, British rule on the Indian subcontinent was 150 years old. This period had seen shifting layered entanglements and conflicts between the colonizer and the colonized: the suppression of dynamic yet contentious processes turning on indigenous authority and political economy; the containment of fluid borders between field and forest; and the subordination of the Indian economy to North Atlantic cycles of trade, profit-making, and consumption. On the one hand, the systematic destruction of forests, the conversion of commons into property, and the emphasis on increasing land revenue had led to the lineaments of an agrarian order consisting of settled agriculture and specialist commodity production, marked by relatively clear groupings of caste and community. This had lasting legacies for the nationalist and imperial imaginaries, including modernist ones: village, agricultural, and caste arrangements that had acquired their distinct terms and textures principally across the nineteenth century were now rendered as ageless, timeless, millennia-old, innate attributes of a spatially singular Indian civilization. On the other hand, this extended epoch had witnessed uneven yet acute articulations of colonial urbanism, entailing debates on the content of tradition and formations of gender on the subcontinent, religious negotiations of evangelical encounters, nationalist contestations of colonial claims, and varied experiments with European traditions in the letters, arts, and politics.

Against the backdrop of these broad-based, twin movements, crucial for formations of aesthetics in South Asia, I recount a vignette from the early twentieth century:

On 7 May 1921 the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore celebrated his sixtieth birthday in Weimar, and used the opportunity to visit the Bauhaus ... [soon], at Tagore's suggestion, a selection of Bauhaus works was shipped to Calcutta to be exhibited, in December 1922, at the fourteenth annual exhibition of the Society of Oriental Art ... Among the exhibits (which mysteriously never returned to Europe)

were two water colours by Wassily Kandinsky and nine by Paul Klee [and a larger number of other pieces by many different artists] ... The exhibition was well received, but ... what was perhaps even more important about it was that a number of Cubist paintings by Rabindranath's nephew Gaganendranath Tagore and folk-primitivist works by his niece Sunayani Devi were also shown on this occasion.⁴

At least three points stand out. First, at stake in the exhibition was a break with the formidable influence of prior nationalist art, especially the Orientalism of the Bengal School. If the Bengal School configured a counter-colonial, "pan-Asian" style of narrative painting as part of Swadeshi nationalism (1905–11), while opposing the academic naturalism of narrative art, now a newer disposition came to the fore.⁵ Thus, one form of counter-colonial sensibility, appealing to bourgeois nationalists, was replaced by a modernist anti-imperial imaginary which would soon draw on the energies of the subcontinental popular, announcing shifts that were aesthetic and political, temporal and spatial.

Second, rather more than the ready influence of the Bauhaus (or of Europe/West at large), it is the experiments of Gaganendranath – and, in a different way, those of Sunayani – that appear as an inaugural moment of the modernist idiom in Indian art. None of this involved a mere imitation of European modernism. Actually, discussed as part of the quest for "artistic autonomy" in the modernist journals of the day, in Gaganendranath's work, "a dynamic, fluid, mysterious play of light and shade and colour" replaced "the relatively static geometry of analytical Cubism," revealing also "an imagination steeped in literature and myth," setting to work and itself construing a time-space that was prior yet present as idea and practice.⁶

Third, while Gaganendranath's work remained something of an exception in terms of its broader impact, the folk imaginary underlying the art of his sister Sunayani had wide implications. It not only affected the primitivist motifs of the artist Jamini Roy, a point usually acknowledged. The imaginary arguably also formed an integral

part of larger expressions of primitivism and ruralism in modernist art in India, bearing acutely spatial-temporal dimensions while being shaped by distinct configurations of anticolonial nationalism on the subcontinent.

Until the end of the 1910s, Indian nationalism had remained a principally middle-class (and elite) phenomenon, despite some attempts during the Swadeshi period to draw in popular participation in nationalist agitation. All this was to change from the beginnings of the 1920s as Mahatma Gandhi took decisive steps to transform Indian nationalism, turning the Indian National Congress into a firm grouping with an organizational structure and regular membership (rather than a forum that met at the end of each year). Gandhi's political strategy was to draw in the participation of the Indian "masses," especially the peasants, yet to do so in a rigorously controlled manner, such that the subalterns obeyed and followed the Congress leadership. At the same time, the nationalist endeavor to "discipline and mobilize" was equally accompanied by Gandhian ideology and practice that struck an acutely anti-industrial, anti-urban note. Here were to be found an imaginatively counter-modern cadence, turning on a critique of Western civilization, a valorization of the village and tradition, and an innately moral politics, all arguably grounded in the reinvigoration of an unsullied space-time. The subaltern groups in turn came to articulate their own supplementary anticolonial politics and perceptions of nationalism and nation, founded in everyday practices, which acceded yet exceeded the official Congress understanding.⁷

All of this informed the aesthetic, spatial-temporal, expressions of folk and primitivist imaginaries in modernist Indian art.⁸ There were different trajectories here. Nandalal Bose, who presided over the art school at Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan, conjoined folk styles, bold brushstrokes, and outdoor murals in an eclectic practice. This served to engender an aesthetic discourse rooted in a principally timeless community signifying the space of the nation, including through Bose's association with Gandhi, especially producing wall panels for the Haripura session of the Indian National Congress in 1938. Arguably, this association of nationalism, community, and (the insistence on)

a formal clarity acquired distinct dimensions among Bose's students, even as their experiments bore testimony to the critical autonomy of aesthetic traditions. Thus, if the painter K. G. Subramanyan honed an expressive, imaginative, figurative style, the sculptor Ramkinkar Baij – a remarkable talent from a humble background and with scant formal education – represented the lives of the “adivasi” Santals, creating monumental outdoor sculptures of these subjects in cement, rubble, and concrete to showcase thereby a “subaltern modernism.” Here was a modernism that imbued allegedly anachronistic subjects with formidable aesthetic and existential coequality, a temporal and spatial energy that was at once prior, acutely present, and entirely futural. Indeed, taken together, on offer was a querying of the colonial connection with a bourgeois modern, articulations of the national dynamic with an avant-garde modern, and explorations of the critical contours of a (contending) “primitivist” modern.

At the same time, the density and gravity of artistic interchanges often exceeded the formal influence – intellectual and ideological, aesthetic and political – of anticolonial nationalism in articulations of modernist, folk and primitivist, imaginaries in South Asia. Here, Jamini Roy's primitivism arrived at striking modernist brevity through a simplification of form and an elimination of details. Drawing on folk forms while rooting his work in local artisanal practice, Roy created an art at odds with colonial urban culture precisely through its intrinsic valorization of the communitarian in actual aesthetic practice. In a not unconnected manner, Rabindranath Tagore's own modernist internationalism was not only founded on critical intimations of the “illegitimacy of nationalism” but his forceful, mask-like, virtually totemic images were an acute expression of what Partha Mitter has described as “the dark landscape of the psyche.” Finally, away from Bengal, painting in North India, Amrita Sher-Gill's primitivist art, at once formatively modernist and startlingly cosmopolitan – drawing comparisons with her Mexican contemporary, Frida Kahlo – far exceeded merely “indigenous” influences.⁹ It intimated instead a politics of art that refused to be reduced to prescribed ideology. In each instance, at stake are formative configurations of space and time as parts of the reworking of tradition

and the rethinking of modernity within Indian modernist artistic practice, issues which yet await fuller understanding.

Formations

From the 1920s onwards, anticolonial nationalism, drawing in popular participation, appeared accompanied by connected yet contending tendencies, socialism and communism, which could now form compelling friendships and now forge intimate enmities. These intellectual-political impulses had a profound impact on the arts – from painting to literature to theater to cinema – in the 1940s. The tumultuous times of famine and suffering, an antifascist war and subaltern struggles, the end of empire and intimations of independence saw the formations of progressive organizations such as the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and various artist groups. This left cultural movement sought to create in art a distinct “popular” – “national in form, socialist in content” – and in its wake, it brought together artists, writers, and performers on a common platform to fashion the idiom of a progressive art.¹⁰

Even as these initiatives were being expressed, the subcontinent gained independence from British imperial rule, itself accompanied by the Partition of its territories and subjects, each innately socio-spatial, into two nations, India and Pakistan (West and East). The hopes and desires of the new citizens, the times-spaces of their habitation and imagination, were fragmented, even split, by the violence that marked their Partition. While estimates vary, between 200,000 and 1.5 million Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs were killed in the violence, including reciprocal genocide; around 75,000 women were raped and/or abducted in the drawing and redrawing of the boundaries of these communities; and a little less than 15 million people were displaced, losing homes and belonging across new borders, as concrete as they were imaginary. Some of the split nature of these processes, which fabricated and jumbled terrible temporalities and shadowy spaces, was captured by Nehru, the formidable

statesman-architect as well as ideologue-rhetorician of a modernist nationalism, in his “tryst with destiny” speech, delivered at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947.¹¹

Yet much of this failed to convince modernist artists and authors. While the communist slogan “Yah azadi jhooti hai [this freedom is a lie]” did not prove persuasive, the recognition of a truncated freedom, a compromised independence, and Partition’s violence, calling into question the space-time of the new nations, haunted the modernist imagination at large. Nor were these specters laid to rest as India embarked on a vigorous program of nation-building, based on a governmentally planned economy, state presence in heavy industry, and the building of large dams and other monumental public works. Indeed, what came to the fore was a nation and society lacking in soul and spirit. Against this were variously pitted issues of artistic autonomy, aesthetic independence, individual alienation, and social commitment in the quest for a modern that was avant-garde in expression yet Indian in essence – imagination and practice in which epic, legend, and myth, signifying uncommon spatial-temporal matrices, often played a critical role. Here, I provide a series of juxtapositions from different art forms.

In the wake of independence and Partition, modernisms in South Asia saw an acute overlaying of artistic technique and the force of the past, an incessant interchange between the density of aesthetic traditions and the urgency of the present, an acute interplay between claims on tradition and the construal of space-time. This past and present, technique and aesthetic, and time and space had to be made modern for the people, for the nation in the making with its flaws and fractures. Some of this is clarified by the terms of theater in the mid-twentieth century. The activities of the IPTA turned on progressive performances, realist drama, and social critique aimed toward a “cultural awakening” among the people of the subcontinent. At the same time, rather than being subsumed by a limited aesthetic-politics of agitation and propaganda, here were to be found innovations that drew upon the resources of realism in order to reveal rather other glimmers of modernist theater. Thus, in the terrain of theater in South Asia, the social impact drama of the 1940s was followed by cutting-edge developments which critically

and imaginatively articulated the epic and the avant-garde, the myth and the contemporary, the legend and the present, the temporal and the spatial in expressions of modernism, developments that yet remain insufficiently conceptualized.

Unsurprisingly, in “progressive” endeavors in the plastic arts, questions of a practice that was adequate to an emergent era, an inviting internationalism, and a modern art came to be of critical import. In such a scenario, what was the precise place of a new nation, its space-time, within a novel aesthetic? Did the nation implicitly uphold the aesthetic, providing also the context and support for key emergences? Or, did the nation-state hinder aesthetic autonomy? It followed that these artistic efforts could follow different directions, but none could escape the demands of avant-garde autonomy, ever on the edge of social space and transient time. Thus, the most influential of these artists’ organizations, whose prominence came to virtually eclipse that of the others, was the Progressive Artists’ Group (of Bombay), founded at the end of 1947 as a response to Partition, which spoke not only of a radical break from the past, but of the autonomy of the work of art itself: “Absolute freedom for content and technique, almost anarchic.”¹²

At the same time, the articulations of such autonomy were deeply entangled with the density of myth and memory, intimations of palpable pasts and receding presents, sown into the landscape and adrift in the air. Indeed, these temporal-spatial resources could be a means of unraveling the pain of Partition, the puzzle of the nation, the ambiguity of identity, and the force of exile. Two salient examples, both emerging from the Progressive Artists’ Group and each extending from the 1940s into our present, should suffice. In the work of M. F. Hussain, who came from a disadvantaged Muslim background, altered cubist configurations entered into conversations with prior traditions of Indian sculpture and miniature paintings, while he sieved the resources of epics and legends, gods and goddesses to create a distinctive modernist practice, construing novel idioms of space and time.¹³ Similarly, the art of F. N. Souza, a Catholic, who fiercely guarded his autonomy in exile, conjures a formidable expressionism that is ever tied to the figures and forms of a haunting past and a spectral present, which signify space

and create time. Here are to be found crucifixes and the (black) Christ, Last Suppers and erotic nudes, the mother and child, each drawing in the textures and tangles of a vernacular Christianity and an everyday aesthetic from Goa in western India. At the same time, all this is done and undone, spatially and temporally, by the conjuring of “a God, who is not a God of gentleness and love, but rather of suffering, vengeance and terrible anger.”¹⁴

Consider now that literary modernisms in the mid-twentieth century engaged at once with related genres in the rest of the world while seeking also to express a specific modern on the subcontinent. This could reveal formative tensions and critical creativity, discrete insinuations of time, space, and their enmeshments, as suggested by the two most significant figures, Ajneya (S. H. Vatsyayan) and G. M. Muktibodh, of Hindi modernism. On the one hand, Ajneya stressed a “formalist universalism,” concentrating on “poetic structure, rather than on social or historical problems,” while emphasizing the immense isolation of the modern individual, a subject stalking an alienated temporality and a spatial indeterminacy.¹⁵ On the other, Muktibodh’s “intensely self-conscious, anguished poetic voice abandoned the high modernism of Europe and America for experimental, radical, sometimes surreal sequences that draw equally upon the Bhakti tradition of late medieval [early modern] India as upon other literatures of Asia, Africa, and Latin America,” construing new configurations of the mythic and the epic, space and time.¹⁶

Finally, mid-twentieth-century cinema in the subcontinent straddled realist representations and innovative aesthetics that reached far beyond a mere “national allegory” and adroitly drew together the aural and the visual, sensibility and technique, dance and drama, the “old” and “new,” and the temporal and spatial. Thereby, it cast alienated individuals at the center yet set them adrift, showed the finger to promises of progress, sieved the contradictions of imagined worlds, held up a mirror to the lies of nation, and looked into the eye of a living ghost, India’s Partition and its intimate violence. Now the auteur and the actor, new *flâneurs* both, could grimly move through the restless scuttle of quotidian creatures – scattered spatially, temporally, and everywhere

one looked – facing up to the immanent possibility of an unclimatic end. Here was cinema – of Ritwik Ghatak and Satyajit Ray, but also of Guru Dutt and Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, among many others – that recast mythology, rethought history, and reworked the contemporary in probing and unraveling the innocence and idea, the space and time, of India.¹⁷

Emergences

These mid-twentieth-century modernists had arguably anticipated the unraveling of the South Asian nations from the 1960s onwards. If in Pakistan such undoing entailed the central place of authoritarian governments and military regimes, in India the idealism of the past was replaced by a manipulative politics, cynical invocations of socialism, and attacks on democratic norms all in the name of the nation, unity, and progress. Unsurprisingly, the birth of Bangladesh, aided by India, was among the last gasps of Bandung-era third-world nationalism. What came to the fore were not only the governmental registers of a politics of violence, exemplified by the state of emergency (1975–77) in India, the execution of Z. A. Bhutto in Pakistan, and escalating ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka, but increasingly newer openings/orientations toward corporate capital, the political-religious Right, and neoliberal common sense, all claiming and conjuring time and space in their own image. These developments have been accompanied by lower-caste assertions, subaltern struggles, armed Left militancy, popular democratic endeavors, and feminist (as well as alternative sexuality) interventions, signifying often rather different spatial and temporal assumption and imagination.

In front of these developments, salient tendencies have redefined issues of art and literature, aesthetics and politics, and time and space in modernisms in South Asia. Here are two examples. The first concerns the narrative moment (and “movement”) from the 1970s onwards, which has posed critical questions of what constitutes properly modernist artistic practice in an independent India, a nation that had betrayed its

dispossessed, both people and art, the one bound to the other. At stake are revisitations – by women and men artists – of epic and legend, myth and history, the past and the present in acutely temporally figurative and explicitly spatially narrative ways within the visual arts, including cinema. Needless to say, these procedures and representations have foregrounded critical questions of the majority and the minority, the body and pain, gender and sexuality, authority and alterity, and the entitled and the popular – in their diverse socio-spatial and hetero-temporal dimensions.¹⁸ The second key development, which began in the 1950s but acquired formidable force a decade later, involves Dalit (“broken”) literature and art, expressing the anguish, anger, and aesthetic of India’s ex-untouchables. Here is a break not just from prior artistic traditions, but a rupture from the singular civilizational claims of the dominant majority and the overweening nation, spelling an exclusive yet hierarchical spatial and temporal core. On offer are endeavors that have brought into being a new language and idioms, a novel iconography and imaginaries, other intimations of the time-space of the everyday, including distinct emphases on issues of gender foregrounding also a Dalit feminist practice.¹⁹

Coda

At the close, I turn to a single modern subject whose work and life not only articulate the two tendencies outlined above, but clarify some of the wider claims of *Subjects of Modernity*. This subject is Savindra “Savi” Sawarkar, an expressionist and Dalit artist of extraordinary imagination and prowess, whose representations track the interplay between meaning and power within hierarchical regimes of religion, caste, gender, and politics, while drawing upon distinctive artistic and ideological influences (see [Figures 1–6](#) in the middle of this book). Elsewhere, I have explored three overlapping themes in Savi’s work: first, the creation of a set of unsettling aesthetic/political agendas in the realm of a critical and contemporary Dalit art; second, the elaboration of such agendas through an entwinement of Ambedkarite

ideology, existential attributes of being Dalit, and diverse representational resources, including varieties of expressionism ranging across its early twentieth-century developments in Germany through to its 1960s manifestations in North America and Europe; and finally, the challenges posed to established procedures of art criticism by these distinct modalities of Dalit and expressionist artistic production.²⁰ Here, I turn to what such considerations can suggest about Savi as a modernist creator, a modern subject, and a subject of modernity, but first a brief introduction to our protagonist is in order.

Savindra Sawarkar was born in 1961 into a family of the Mahar caste in Nagpur, central India. As part of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's wider initiative, in 1956 his family converted to Buddhism. Savi first studied art at the University of Nagpur. Here, the constraining premises of an institution that continued to cherish the ideals of Victorian art and colonial aesthetics meant that it was in the ceaseless sketching of peoples and places, subjects and objects that Savi honed his own artistic abilities. These capacities were later developed through his other formal and informal studies and apprenticeships in a range of institutions and places. Indeed, Savi's paintings, graphics, and drawings combine influences that range across expressionist art, the poet Rabindranath Tagore's critical drawings of the 1920s and 1930s, the "narrative movement" of the 1970s and the 1980s, the delicate brushwork of Zen masters, and a wider disposition toward Buddhist aesthetics. Yet, far from being derivative, Savi's art conjoins acute apprehensions of an unjust murky world with a vibrant use of color, conjuring figures and forms that are at once intense and haunting, forceful and haunted. The result is a radical expressionist imagination and a critical Dalit iconography.

Central to this iconography and imagination are specific representations of the past and the present, particular productions of time and space. The sources are overlapping and distinct: moving recitals of untouchable pasts by Savi's unlettered paternal grandmother, whom he describes as his "first teacher"; liturgical lists drawn up within the political movement led by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar concerning the disempowerment faced by untouchables; and Savi's own experiences as an artist, an activist, and a *Dalit* in distinct locales, from statist spaces in New

Delhi to remote places of gender and caste oppression in village India. Unlike those tacit projections of the modernist artist fabricating forms through the creative force of a pure imagination, Savi seizes upon these discursive and experiential resources, filtering them through while construing an expressionist art.

Here, the past is not separated from the present to temporally and spatially split apart prior caste hierarchies from contemporary intimations of equality. Rather, in Savi's art, the untouchable figures and upper-caste forms, each inescapably gendered, are at once densely palpable and formidably spectral, stalking the past and the present, construing times and spaces of longing and loss, which beget each other. Now the silence and sigh of the androgynous untouchables bursts forth into a scream, "We were there, then, we are here, now," and now the gaze and grasp of the sexually predatory Brahman is unraveled through the terms of its own haunting.

Far exceeding a mere documentation of history through images of oppression, Savi's art "articulate[s] the past [and the present] ... [by seizing] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."²¹ Here the unsettling realism of subterranean imaginings restlessly labors with the haunting terms of a forceful expressionism: the sun is eclipsed, the light is dark, the world is in shadows, giving the lie to the phantasms of progress that haunt modern regimes of an exclusive temporality and its spatial segregations. Yet, the critical querying is accompanied by careful affirmation. For in this mode of artistic production, the past and the present bring each other to crisis, compelling other intimations, remappings as it were, of space and time.

There is more to the picture. Behind these portrayals are particular modes of reasoning and a distinct order of subjectivity, which spell a rather specific modern subject. Careful, critical conversations and meandering, joyful exchanges with Savi – as well as revising and rewriting his MA dissertation (for submission to Academia San Carlos in Mexico City) – have clarified that, in both speech and writing, Savi reasons by analogy. This analogical reasoning is imbued with a surplus of faith, a productive literalism, regarding Dr. Ambedkar's life and words, read and heard, and neo-Buddhist verities and veracities, rehearsed and

performed. Militating against logics and analyses of a modern provenance, Savi's embodied, expressionist reason sets the analogical and the literal to seize upon and sift through textual traces, oral liturgies, experiential entanglements, and graphic imaginaries. On offer is a visual hermeneutics that renders details with a twist. Here, haunting images resonate with oracular expression, prior certainties echo limiting doubts, and the force of the past sounds out the fleeting, the fragmentary, and the transitory.

All this is shored up by a vulnerable subjectivity. As a modern subject, Savi's presentation of the avant-garde artistic self, consumed by cutting-edge creativity and unconstrained by conventional norms, has to yet bear the immense burden of injuries of caste, hidden and obvious, which haunt his verve and vocation. We are in the face of a self-fashioning subject whose despair and vulnerability, loss and longing – alongside his reasoning and literalism, expression and imagination – register that there are different ways of being modern. Ahead of us is a subject of modernity whose existence calls attention to the inflection of alterity by authority; whose creativity points to the shaping of power by difference; and whose work attests to the presence of hetero-temporal terrains and socio-spatial subjects as probing and producing each other.²²

Notes

- 1 This is also true of scholarship on modernism in South Asia, which appears intimately tied to modernist practices on the subcontinent. See, for example, how modernization and modernity are uneasily folded into understandings of modernism in Kapur, *When was Modernism*; and Supriya Chaudhuri, "Modernisms in India," in Peter Brooker et al. (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 942–60. See also Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922–1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007). Needless to say, these works have all been crucial to my understandings of modernisms in India.
- 2 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 208.

- 3 Sanjukta Sunderason, "Making art modern: re-visiting artistic modernism in South Asia," in Dube (ed.), *Modern Makeovers*, p. 246.
- 4 Chaudhuri, "Modernisms in India," pp. 943–4.
- 5 See Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New "Indian" Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c.1850–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- 6 Chaudhuri, "Modernism in India," pp. 944–5; Mitter, *Triumph of Modernism*, pp. 18–27.
- 7 See Ishita Banerjee-Dube, *A History of Modern India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- 8 The two paragraphs that follow draw upon Mitter, *Triumph of Modernism*; and Chaudhuri, "Indian modernisms."
- 9 See also Kapur, *When was Modernism*, pp. 3–13.
- 10 Sunderason, "Modernism in India," p. 252.
- 11 Quoted in Banerjee-Dube, *Modern India*, p. 437. The place and presence of Nehru's writings, politics, and persona in expressions of modernism on the subcontinent require greater understanding.
- 12 Cited in Sunderason, "Making art modern," p. 254.
- 13 There could be frontal artistic engagements with the Partition, too, as in the writings of Sadaat Hasan Manto (in Urdu) and of Khushwant Singh (in English).
- 14 Edwin Mullins, *Souza* (London: Anthony Blond, 1962), p. 40.
- 15 Chaudhuri, "Modernism in India," p. 956.
- 16 Nor was Muktibodh an exception. In the sphere of Marathi literary modernisms, for instance, the simultaneous articulations of indigenous idioms and other, often Western, traditions are evident. The self-reflexive poetics of B. S. Mardhekar were acutely influenced at once by Western modernism and by the early modern saint poets of the Maharashtra region. Similarly Dilip Chitre, who wrote in both Marathi and English, began "to create a remarkable new modernist oeuvre, densely allusive, rooted in the experiences of urban loneliness, the body, and sexuality," yet simultaneously translated the early modern devotional poets Tukaram and Jnanadeva into English (as he did Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé into Marathi), his work profoundly shaped by such conjoint endeavors. *Ibid.*, pp. 956, 957.
- 17 The mainly monumental designs of architectural modernism in India – in the wake of Lutyen's New Delhi and the presence of Le

Corbusier's city of Chandigarh, the latter built with the blessings of Nehru – tell a rather different story, for which there is little space here.

- 18 See Kapur, *When was Modernism*; and Sheikh, *Contemporary Art in Baroda*.
- 19 See, for example, Toral Jathin Garawala, *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); and Gary Michael Tartakov (ed.), *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery* (New Delhi: Indian Institute for Dalit Studies and Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 20 Saurabh Dube, "A Dalit iconography of an expressionist imagination," in Tartakov, *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, pp. 251–67; and Saurabh Dube, "Unsettling art: caste, gender, and Dalit expression," openDemocracy, August 1, 2013, www.opendemocracy.net/saurabh-dube/unsettling-art-caste-gender-and-dalit-expression (accessed on 11 July 2016).
- 21 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the philosophy of history," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 253.
- 22 To be sure, the force of Savi's art rests on the opposition between religious (and statist) power and the untouchable (and gendered) subaltern. At the same time, precisely this opposition makes possible decentered portrayals of power and difference. For, rather than occupying a singular locus or constituting an exclusive terrain, power appears here as decisively plural, forged within authoritative grids – of caste and gender, nation and state, and modernity and history – that interlock and yet remain out of joint, the one extending and exceeding the other. This is to say that Savi's art traces the expressions and modalities of power as coordinated portraits yet fractured profiles, effects and affects bearing the burden of the spectral subaltern and palpable difference. It follows that these representations do not announce the romance of resistant identities and the seductions of the autonomous subject, split apart from power. Rather, figures of critical difference and subaltern community appear here as inhabiting the interstices of power, intimating its terms and insinuating its limits – already inherent, always emergent – as the spanner of discrepancy inside the work of domination.