

*Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies.* By Dipesh Chakrabarty (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002) 173 pp.

Review by Vinay Lal

*Habitations of Modernity* serves, in some respects, as a companion volume to Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2000), and is animated by the same brilliance, mastery of European and Bengali sources, theoretical sophistication, and nuance of thought and feeling which characterize the earlier volume. In the wake of subaltern studies, as Chakrabarty puts it, a number of questions have crystallized around the study of Indian history, and he takes it as his charge to offer thoughtful considerations on the encroachments of modernity in India. Just what has it meant to be modern in colonial and postcolonial India? What alternative conceptions of modernity were forged in the public sphere, and what are the various ways in which modernity has come to be embedded in debates over sanitation, the khadi-clad politician, secularism, and much else?

The three essays of Part One allow Chakrabarty to situate himself in contemporary debates and offer a resounding but sensitive defense of the enterprise known as "Subaltern Studies". Chakrabarty signifies his dissent from those inclined to view Subaltern Studies as merely another manifestation of history from below, in the mode of E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and others, and forcefully argues that subaltern historiography entailed a "relative separation of the history of power from any universalist histories of capital", marking its own terrain by its interrogation of the idea of the "political", its critique of the "nation form", and a thoroughgoing analysis of the relationship of knowledge to power (8). Chakrabarty's spirited and appreciative reading of Guha is conjoined to a polite but firm critique of those historians, such as his former colleague in the Subaltern collective, Sumit Sarkar, whose investment in a kind of Enlightenment hyperrationalism has not only made them incapable of understanding the place of religion in Indian public and political life, but also condemns them to viewing the history of India as forever incomplete. At the other end of the spectrum from Sarkar stands Ashis Nandy: though Chakrabarty finds his idea of "critical traditionalism" extraordinarily fecund, he also takes the view that Nandy's critique of modernity is "decisionist" in spirit (39). Nandy's presumption that there are "concrete, value-laden choices or decisions" to be made with respect to both the past and future insufficiently acknowledges the opacity of the world (39, 47).

In Part Two, Chakrabarty focuses on the practices of modernity, and the essay on the male politician clad in *khadi* (homespun cotton) is illustrative of his style of thinking. At one time, owing to Gandhi's unswerving promotion of *khadi*, it became associated

with purity, simplicity, and self-reliance; but, as Chakrabarty contends, today everyone is aware of khadi as nearly synonymous with “corruption” and “thievery” (53). So why do politicians persist with this “transparently hypocritical gesture”? (53) Chakrabarty argues that khadi can be read as the site of an “alternative modernity” (64); its disappearance, were that to happen, would signal India’s complete absorption into the global market. *Khadi* is the remainder, so to speak, but not merely something left behind; it operates on a semiotic register that is not entirely assimilable to modern knowledge systems.

Chakrabarty’s readings of Gandhi and Nandy are remarkably similar, and he is insistent, rather too insistent, in advancing the claim that both speak from within the framework of modernity. Critiques of modernity, it is commonly argued, can only emanate from within the space of modernity. Nandy’s notion of “choice” and his construction of the “future” are, Chakrabarty maintains, aspects of a “heroic self-invention” that are characteristic of the modern in Europe (41); as for Gandhi, his enduring interest in “public health and civic consciousness”, not to mention his embrace of the autobiographical confession, a preeminent vehicle of the modern subject, mark him out as “quintessentially modern” (59). Gandhi had little if any use for discourses of history, and Nandy has written passionately, and at length, about the oppressiveness of history as a mode of knowledge. But though Chakrabarty is genuinely disturbed by the surveillant power of history and the modern social sciences, he cannot resist a rejoinder to Nandy: as he says, negotiations with “modern bureaucracies”, and access to the benefits available through civic and political institutions, is not possible without the mobilization of one’s “own identity, personal or collective” (33). Whatever epistemological arguments one might have against history, the historical sensibility is an indispensable tool of citizenship. It is not given to a modern subject to disown history. In the last analysis, Chakrabarty’s own choices are clear. Whether the notion of “alternative modernity” will have any more salience than “alternative development” remains to be seen.

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