

Besides Modern:  
India is a Possibility

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India is a site of overlaps and tensions. Eastern and Western concerns press against one another; their movements produce friction. The memory of colonial violence lingers in living recollection as well as in residue, evidence, and ongoing struggle. Reverberations of ancient and recent philosophical dialogues continue to ripple through the waters of culture. And at the center of this tense entanglement lies Indian modernity. In his often-cited exhibition *Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism*, Raman Siva Kumar named the unique manifestation of modernism emergent throughout Asia and localized at Shantiniketan in 1930s and 1940s: *contextual modernism* is the bilateral formative influence of modern thought on a particular place and, inversely, of the histories and imagination of that particular place on its re-articulation of modern thought. Though early modernist consciousness conceived of the reductionistic violence of colonialism, and India's participation in modernity is complex, Siva Kumar sought to clarify some part of what was entangled and relieve some of the tension at the heart of India. This clarification, though, is haunted by an undeniable and unresolved ulterior: even while India is the site of modern tensions and overlaps, and even while it enters into dialogue with modernism itself, it remains something besides modern; despite all attempts to conceptualize it into the modern epistemological taxonomy, India remains outside. India is the site of an overlap between Heideggerian anti-modern conceptualization and the Shankaran non-conceptual, and an intersection between Heidegger's internal conflict and the internal tension of contextual modernism at Shantiniketan; it is also a site of possibility: the hope not merely of post-modernity, anti-modernity, or even modernity's Cartesian other, but of something that does not orbit modernity at all, something that is simply else, outside, and besides.

## I. Researches

*Heidegger*. Martin Heidegger was an existentialist who thought to the limits of language and conceptualization, whose philosophy materialized at the outermost edge of metaphysics and attempted to look over that edge into the unverbalizable abundance of reality as it exists beyond human thought.<sup>1</sup> In political terms, the core of his work is a critique of modernity: Heidegger seems to gesture toward a reconciliation with our human smallness and fragility in an unstable and unknowable world,<sup>2</sup> and a subsequent rejection of the possessive violences that emerge from our fear of instability, violences like colonialism, patriarchal oppression, religious fanaticism, and all other abuses of power.<sup>3 4</sup>

In his aesthetic writings, Martin Heidegger suggests that art works can make us aware of the nonconceptual, undefined, unmanifest reality out of which all concepts, language, and things in the world manifest themselves. This unmanifest reality Heidegger often refers to as *earth*; manifestations he refers to as *world*.<sup>5</sup> Heidegger is not suggesting, like Plato, that reality consists of two planes.<sup>6</sup> Nor does he mean that the earth is raw, primordial material and that our world is the result of that material taking on form. He is not talking about material in particular; he is talking about epistemology, about comprehensibility. Heidegger is saying that reality in itself is without names, without categories, without definitions, and that the task of naming and categorizing is to make reality graspable, comprehensible, understandable. By differentiating

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<sup>1</sup> *Pathmarks*, 90

<sup>2</sup> This notion of instability and meaninglessness first emerges in a coherent form in Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism, to which Heidegger's own work often responds. See also, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* by Nietzsche and *Thinking*, 51.

<sup>3</sup> *Technology*, 135

<sup>4</sup> *Poetry*, 84

<sup>5</sup> *Poetry*, 49

<sup>6</sup> Plato, 208-214

between things and limiting each thing to itself, it is possible to hold that thing in the mind as a concept. And out of concepts, we are able to construct a coherent world, one in which we can feel stable and well-oriented and, in our best moments, at home. In many cases, poems and works of art participate in this world construction, holding together and making comprehensible the experiences of our lived reality.<sup>7</sup> For Heidegger, though, this worlding has, in modernity, crossed a dangerous line. It no longer makes the world merely comprehensible or inhabitable; rather, it makes the world possessable, conquerable. In its turn toward mastery, modern worlding denies the nonconceptual richness of unmanifest being inherent in each manifestation and instead considers each manifest thing as a mere resource to be exploited in the name of absolute dominance and stability.<sup>8</sup> Though the problem begins with conceptualization, this trajectory of thought and being ends in ecological disaster, colonialism, and systematic injustice. Art works, Heidegger believes, can disrupt this dangerous trajectory. They have the capacity to linger in liminal tension, holding together conceptually while also revealing their own fragility. In their conceptual thinness, they do not merely stand in for language: rather, they can act as poetic signifiers, a sign without a signified, a gesture past stable, well-known concepts and toward the unmanifest space behind conceptualization, the earth out of which the world is brought into being.<sup>9</sup> Art works, for Heidegger, may be a way toward Being-in-itself; not more poignantly, but perhaps more urgently, they may likewise be a way toward tenderness, toward non-possession, toward a new relationship with instability. They ask the viewer to remain in tension, aware of both a stable world and also, simultaneously, a fluid and undefined non-world beneath it.

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<sup>7</sup> *Metaphysics*, 140

<sup>8</sup> *Contributions*, 287

<sup>9</sup> See also, Ferdinand de Saussure on linguistics and Jacques Derrida on textual fissures.

Despite its sometimes humanizing leanings, Heidegger's thought is fundamentally conflicted: he was also an early supporter of the Nazi party. Heidegger's Nazi support cannot be reconciled with his rejection of metaphysical violence. It emerges from a rigid adherence to classical Greek philosophy that manifests as a nationalist and racist rejection of non-Western thought and culture.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that this internal conflict makes his central philosophical conclusions untenable; at the very least, large regions of his thought must be approached with caution. The internal conflict in Heidegger's thought is deeply problematic; it is also emblematic of the tension between hopeful ambition and oppressive violence at the heart of modernity itself.

*Shankara.* Adi Shankara was an eighth century philosopher who engaged deeply with the limits of thought and language. His notion of Atman as the fleeting but comprehensible manifestation of the incomprehensible, unconceptualizable unity of Brahman<sup>11</sup> is in dialogue with Heidegger's notion of our stable Worlds emerging from an unmanifest and incomprehensible Earth. Despite these overlaps, Heidegger and Shankara emerge from different worlds. Their concepts can be compared, but their philosophies cannot be equated. They both address thought, conceptualization, and language, but they emerge from different traditions, work in response to different concerns, and each come to unique conclusions. Conflation flattens both; resonance deepens each.

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<sup>10</sup> This adherence, and its nationalist implications, are especially evident throughout Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*. In particular, see page 213.

<sup>11</sup> For an introduction to Shankaran thought, see *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination (Viveka-Chudamani)*.

*Shantiniketan*. While the grounds for his position may have been philosophical rather than antisemitic, and he may not have supported the eventual atrocities of Naziism, Heidegger's allegiance cannot be justified. His affirmation is inexcusable. His support for the Nazi party is a deep contradiction. The social imperative of Heidegger's metaphysical project is a disavowal of the violence of objectification, dominance, and exploitation inherent in modernity; Heidegger's own political position is a fundamental alignment with the most objectifying, totalitarian, destructive national force in history. Heidegger, then, is not merely the name of the existential philosopher of being: it is also a signifier for a common tension in late modernity, a liminal place or moment between tenderness and violence, control and compassion, modernity itself and a truly post-modern future. One foot is in the empire of dominance, the other in the redemptive wilderness of poetic attentiveness; one hand gently cups a fragile history while the other urgently reaches for a stable future. In this way, in India, Heidegger is not only in dialogue with Shankara, but with Shantiniketan.

In the 1860s, the early literary works of Rabindranath Tagore emerged and, with them, Indian modernism.<sup>12</sup> His contemporaries, collaborators, students, and successors joined him in a visual, musical, and literary conversation. This dialogue was not only about language, form, and image, nor was it merely political in its concerns. Though it had ramifications for the world of politics and the world of aesthetics, its most resonant questions were ones of place, time, and personhood. In a moment of political instability, Rabindranath Tagore, along with Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose,<sup>13</sup> transformed Indian art and literature by reaching back into their

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<sup>12</sup> For an introduction to the work of Rabindranath Tagore, see *The Essential Tagore*, edited by Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty.

<sup>13</sup> For an introduction to the work of Nandalal Bose, see the monograph *Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose*, by Sonya Rhie Quintanilla.

own history and out into a diverse range of global aesthetic practices to construct new meaning. In the spirit of modernism, they began a renaissance of classical Indian art while simultaneously dissolving visual and literary categories based on time and geography. Their work inverts the Heideggerian contradiction. It hangs suspended across the gap between colonial modernity and post-colonial, post-modern future possibilities. Kala Bhavana, their art school at Shantiniketan, has been a bridge over which generations of artists have passed, looking toward a world-possibility they hope to shepherd into being.

The Shantiniketan School stretches across more than one gap. It is positioned not only between two moments of Indian history, but also between two aesthetic engagements with modernity. The works of the Tagores and of Bose refuse both international modernism and historicist indigenism. They put aside the reduced, placeless qualities of Mondrian and the shamefully appropriative imagery of Picasso on the one hand, and reject provincial traditionalism on the other. Instead, they walk a middle path. Their contextual modernism responds to new forms made available and inevitable through globalization; at the same time, it remains deeply rooted in the concerns of their moment and their place, visually, conceptually, politically, and personally. This particular liminal position, with its attentiveness to the past and the future, to loss and possibility, to limits and capacities, to memory and aspiration, is not significant merely for its historical relevance to Indian art: it is a model of attentiveness that can inform choices in other times, including this time, in the arts and otherwise. Heidegger could have learned from the interdependence of considered restraint and vast ambition at Shantiniketan.

## II. Phenomenologies

India, as a site of overlaps and tensions, is not merely a productive investigative resource; it is abundant with its own unqualified and unqualifiable content, poetic manifestations and happenings that cannot be adequately analyzed, systematized, or taxonomized, reduced to language or comprehensively modeled. These omnipresent instances of the poetic stand beside, undergird, and transcend research in the same way that India stands outside and beside modernity. Unconcluded in themselves, unable to be brought to resolution, they haunt all qualitative research analyses and conclusions.<sup>14 15</sup>

*Delhi.* It is a city within a city: Old Delhi within New Delhi. Already there is an exterior and an interior—Delhi within the world—and an even deeper interior. This inwardness is in dialogue with time: as you go in, time deepens. The layers of time in Delhi are evidenced not only by the texts of recorded history, but visually. The road divides around Delhi Gate and when it reconverges, the city has changed. Streets narrow into alleys. You follow an alley past banana sellers to a cha stall ten feet wide and seven feet deep. This cha seller's father was a cha seller and this nameless stall has been active in the family for more than fifty years. He heats cha over a burner and hands it to you in styrofoam. It is too hot to drink.

The streets of Delhi are dense with sound. The car horn is its own language and it is spoken incessantly. Men selling rugs, saris, cell phones. Rickshaw drivers offering you the best price for a ride, for a tour of Chandi Chowk, to be your driver for the day or the week. Ten

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<sup>14</sup> Phenomenology is an important element in the thought of Heidegger and his predecessor Edmund Husserl. It is also an emphasis in Shankaran and South Asian philosophy, according to Professor Sarukkai, founder of the Manipal Center for the Humanities.

<sup>15</sup> This notion of *haunting* comes from the work of Jacques Derrida, whose work is strongly informed by Heideggerian thought.

thousand bodies pressing past one another, the soft ruffle of clothing and the sharp scuff of sandals on concrete. Sound fills every sidewalk crack and gap between the bricks, thickens around abandoned road construction, hangs from every awning, every minaret.

Twenty feet down the alley from the cha seller there is a sakan, a house in a traditional Islamic architectural style. The building itself is an arcade exterior surrounding an interior courtyard or sahn. You go inside. A man passes and hushes you. An old woman owns this sakan and she hates loud noises. He removes a chain from the door silently, delicately, and takes cha up the darkened stairwell to her room. The sounds of horns stretch so thin here they are almost gentle, almost musical. Sound unspools into silence. The gardens of the Sri Laxmi temple are the same. Sacred spaces: the temple and the home. The sacred and the everyday are interdependent in every way in Delhi, but when you enter the temple you remove your shoes. There is no scuff of sandals. In the courtyard you sip your cha slowly, still hot. Time isn't just deeper in these places; as the sound thins into silence, time widens.

The people who live and work in Delhi feel the city's tempo in their bodies. The average pace of the pedestrian is neither rushed nor slothful. Those in a hurry navigate the crowd as dancers navigate a crowded floor. Everyone has something to offer and something to ask for. Everyone knows where they are woven into the social fabric, what they have to give and what they have to receive. Local dogs, cats, cows, pigeons, and monkeys are treated as part of this same fabric, woven in amongst the dense fiber of Delhi.

The austerity of Jama Masjid, Lal Qila, the remnants of Mughal rule, hails from the sands of the Middle East. But the saturated oranges, yellows, and blues of Sri Laxmi emerge from the forest. Delhi is ancient, deep with time and overflowing with lives, narratives, memory, effort. It

is an interior within an interior. It is silence pressed under an endless horizon of sound. But in all its complexity, all its movement, all its effort, it is far from exhausted. As the forest, it is youthful, earnest, ever-flowering, ever-becoming.

Across the old city from the cha seller and the old woman's sakan there is another sakan. The wholesale spice market at Chandi Chowk. You climb four narrow flights of stairs to the roof. Breathing fennel, cumin, and turmeric, you look out over the city. Lal Qila to the east beside the Yamuna River. The minarets of Jama Masjid on the hill to the west. Homes and stores stacked, rising, reaching up and pressing down, an accumulation of time. The sound of the street reverberating into an empty sky. Surely there is an abundance of grief here. There is much that has been discarded and lost that has not yet been gathered up. There is, also, just abundance.

*Detritus.* It is part of the earth and it is part of our worlds. Everything you do leaves something behind. Your existence is remembered in material.

The defunct penitentiary in Mansfield, Ohio has been turned into a local tourist destination. It is where they filmed *Shawshank Redemption*. Now, you can wander the cells of former inmates, encounter Morgan Freeman's ghost in the mess hall, linger in the cavernous chapel. The pillars are three stories high and corroding to a Statue-of-Liberty green. Pigeons have made homes there, unaware of the human significance of the place. Their feathers gather in corners, pile up, accumulate. Time and slow loss and what is too abundant to be held, too costly to be swept up.

The trash that gathers in the gutters, on the rooftops, in every available corner of India. The trash dragged along by monsoon wind, sorted by weight. Lingering long enough to lose

form, to lose a name, its utility dissolved by acid rain, crushed out under the wheel of a rickshaw, chewed loose by a bone-thin mutt or a pack of four. The leaf from the tree, the weakened branch, the tired hand. What accumulates is the overabundance of lived lives, too numerous to count, to entangled to trace.

If you could trace it. Choose any bottle, any filthy styrofoam scrap from the dust. Carry it from the roadside, find the spigot sticking from the side of the lowest step of the sari seller's shop. Turn the valve clockwise. Keep turning. Four times, five times, ten times, much farther than you should need until saffron water the color of an indigenous pottery display at The Met sputters and flows and rinse the cup clean, nearly clean until a name appears, the logo of the manufacturer. The dirt that lingers is the scar of a thumbnail, of pressure from a knuckle. You identify other markings, the sandal print, the dog tooth dent. You have to follow back months and years of history, follow it like a thread, cut around the periphery, cutting a shape from the foam—and even as you cut little flakes are lost to rain that will wash them to the aquifer or to the sea, that your great-grandchildren will eat in the tail of a salmon or the claw of a blue crab. You keep the thumbnail scar, feel along it, around the edge of the knuckle mark, until you feel a thread emerge, distinct, and you follow that thread down Chandni Chowk Road, past the spice sellers, under the big peepal tree growing through the tangle of power lines, around the tight corner against a wall past a reckless rickshaw, narrower and narrower, pushing aside orange dyed linens drying on a power line. Past the door to the sahn, past fifty years to the father of the cha seller, to a memory of spice and warm milk, a shadow of a time, faceless and nameless, pressed between sandstone bricks, gathering in the silence of where what was meets now, where the alley meets Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Marg. You take the seller's hand, feel the end of the thumbnail,

identify its shape, identify the knuckle. The cup let from the hand, crushed under time, tangled in a billion threads, saffron and India green, left but not lost, piled and accumulated, evidence waiting for a name or oblivion, or already whole in namelessness. Remembered by the earth, if the earth can remember.

I mean the styrofoam cup, and the life it falls from, already so much. Cleaning out the gutters is not the only kind of redemption, and not every kind of redemption saves.

### III. Conversations

Manipal is a locus of the overlaps between Heidegger and Shankara, and the tensions between ancient memory and modern violences, between an ancient violence and the violence of modern reform. Shantiniketan, likewise, is the site of internal tension between assimilative participation in violent modernity and subversion of modern violence, between a modern anti-imperialist ideology and something else, outside, beside.

*Bangalore.* Here, I meet with Professor Sundar Sarukkai. The humanities have been undervalued in contemporary Indian education, sidelined in favor of science and engineering. Professor Sarukkai opened the Manipal Center for the Humanities to remedy this imbalance.

Over tea and buttermilk, Professor Sarukkai describes the hopes and challenges of his project. Philosophy is not provincial; ideas have no national allegiance. A problematic notion from the start, Indian philosophy dissolves as a category in Sarukkai's thought. To be sure, the minds that developed original ideas should be named and recognized, Indian and otherwise. But the project of Shankara is in dialogue with Plato and Husserl as much as Abhinavagupta. Phenomenology has been at the center of South Asian critical thought for centuries. The well-documented German existentialist dismissal of this thought—both Husserl and Heidegger refused to acknowledge Indian philosophy as philosophy at all—is intellectual laziness at best and nationalistic violence at worst. Now, Professor Sarukkai is working to see South Asian philosophy migrate out of the Sanskrit and religion departments to which it had been relegated and into its proper place in philosophy programs worldwide. And this transition is in full effect at institutions internationally. Unfortunately, it faces some of its greatest opposition at home in India.

In the lands of their origin, philosophical projects like those of Shankara are deeply associated with the violence of the caste system. As the Indian government works to dismantle caste-based discrimination in state run institutions of higher education through a program similar to affirmative action, public universities reduce their humanities departments to the classics of Western literature and a few of the big names of Western philosophy: Locke, Hume, Foucault. Hardly a robust curriculum, and one often entirely devoid of original, South Asian thought.

The Manipal Center for the Humanities is a successful model of a full fledged humanities program, one Professor Sarukkai hopes to replicate elsewhere in India. But this model is not without problems of its own. Because it is part of a private institution, the center mostly attracts upper-caste Brahmins from wealthier families. Though the philosophies first articulated in India will continue to be developed in Manipal, the work of overcoming caste division in the world of India's private philosophy programs is ongoing.

Professor Sarukkai no longer works in Manipal, having passed his efforts there into the faculty he hired.

*Manipal.* At the Center for Humanities, I meet with Dr. Mrinal Kaul. A brilliant master of aesthetics and ontology with a rich knowledge of South Asian thought, Dr. Kaul is also a sharp conversationalist. He anticipates important questions and finds amusement in the clumsiness of the everyday. He characterizes his own stream-of-consciousness philosophizing as meandering and unclear; it is anything but.

In his second floor office, while a ceiling fan and two windows struggle to reduce monsoon humidity, Dr. Kaul handily dismantles popular notions of Shankaran thought. That

reality is an illusion is precisely what Shankara is not saying. Rather, he recognizes that whatever can be spoken about is not Brahman, the absolute. He names everything that is not Brahman as a way to identify the absolute in the negative. This reasoning is indeed in dialogue with Heidegger. Dr. Kaul, however, is not deeply interested in Shankara. To him, Shankara's thought, while potent, has been misinterpreted and perhaps overemphasized by popular religious movements. When it comes to the nonconceptual and aesthetic theory in South Asian thinkers, Abhinavagupta is the name to look for.

Picking up where Shankara left off, Abhinavagupta goes on to synthesize and further develop *rasa*, an aesthetic theory of total contextual immersion, of sensory elevation and transcendence.<sup>16</sup> While *rasa* has dominated Indian aesthetics for centuries, other theories find more in common with existential notions of nonconceptual poesis. One such theory identifies three layers of meaning in language: the literal, the metaphorical, and the suggestive. Poetry works in this third layer, using mundane language to feature toward what-cannot-be-named. This may be in relationship to a Derridian gesture of poetic signification.

In our dialogues, Professor Sarukkai and Dr. Kaul work with both ostensibly Western and ostensibly Indian philosophical notions, moving freely between them. Professor Sarukkai articulates it most clearly: the great risk is misunderstanding a word in translation. To think Shankara's *Brahman* and Heidegger's *Earth* correspond simply because they can each be translated into English as "absolute," for example, would be a mistake. But to understand each of these concepts, the ideas upon which each term attempts to stand, allows for rich, deep comparison without risk of reduction or appropriation.

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<sup>16</sup> For an introduction to *Rasa*, see *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics* by Sheldon Pollock.

*Evening in Shantiniketan.* It is raining as Professor Siva Kumar walks me to his home. We sit on hardwood furniture in a clean, airy room and he shares his ideas about contextual modernism. Siva Kumar, a professor at Shantiniketan and a preeminent scholar of Indian modernism, developed the term “contextual modernism” for *Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism*, an exhibition of Shantiniketan works in the 1990s. His exhibition brought the works of Nadalal Bose, Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, and others of the Bengali and Shantiniketan Schools back into Indian consciousness and back to the attention of the world. In his study of these figures, Professor Siva Kumar has concluded that a particular variety of modernism influenced Indian culture in the first half of the 20th century. It is not merely the modernism of Europe and the United States transplanted in South Asia. For Siva Kumar, contextual modernism means a movement in the humanities that is influenced by contact with other cultures but that remains deeply rooted in the particular histories of a people and a place. The work of Bose and Tagore was this way.

Tagore’s work was never merely formal. It always emerged from a political concern. Early in his career as a writer, he leaned toward Indian nationalism. In the arts of his time, this nationalism meant a return to indigenous and historical themes and modes of working. After several years, he concluded that nationalism could not solve India’s problems. He turned his attention toward education. The school he founded at Shantiniketan, and the art department he recruited Bose to facilitate, was not a conventional university. It did not teach students how to make paintings for profit: it suggested a total way of being. Influenced by his travels in Japan, Tagore hoped to develop a total aesthetic culture in India. Over time, this came to include

agriculture and care for the earth as an essential element. He dreamed that, at Shantiniketan, students could learn to re-present their understanding of their national identity and, ultimately, their human identity, and this re-presentation could take the form of a sustainable and sustaining community.

Tagore was in regular correspondence with Gandhi during his years at Shantiniketan. Though the two critiqued each other's projects, it was in the spirit of friendship and service to one another. When he passed away, Tagore left the Kala Bhavana at Shantiniketan under Gandhi's care. There was no one else to whom he felt he could entrust it.

As we drink an evening cha, Professor Siva Kumar explains that Shantiniketan is no longer what it once was. The school was taken over by the state after Gandhi's death and India's independence. Now it is an ordinary university. The outdoor classes and a few informalities in the art department are the last academic vestiges of Tagore's presence at the Kala Bhavana.

*Morning in Shantiniketan.* Professor Dutta and I sit in his front room talking about Shantiniketan. He does not allow me to take notes. Dutta was born there, in the small village. When he was ten years old, he met Nandalal Bose. And he worked at the university for several years, teaching printmaking. But he left. He confirmed what Siva Kumar said the night before: the Kala Bhavana is not what it once was.

Though they agree about the condition of the school at Shantiniketan, Siva Kumar and Dutta have very different ideas about modernism. Professor Dutta rejects any application of the term to India. The academy today, he says, cannot imagine any meaningful art or literature existing outside their paradigm of premodern, modern, and postmodern. But India, and Indian

art, do not belong in any of these categories. Indian art is not even anti-modern, not modern, or other than modern. It is something else entirely: besides modern. He does not believe the academy makes room for this other category or non-category. When I ask for further reading, he suggests Dipesh Chakravarty's *Provincializing Europe* and Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*.

#### IV. Conclusions

I thought I was going to Manipal to deepen my knowledge of Shankara and to engage in dialogue about comparisons between Eastern and Western philosophy. What I found instead was a group of professors deeply concerned about the state of the humanities in Indian higher education. If Heidegger openly linked himself to the Nazi party, Shankara has been unwillingly connected to India's caste system. In conversation with Professor Sarukkai, I learned that public universities in India have largely reduced their philosophy programs to modern western thinkers. Indian thinkers are conceived of as religious figures, not philosophers, and are mostly rejected as remnants of caste-based exclusion and oppression. While this social transition is ultimately humanizing and absolutely necessary, it is also relegating conversation about figures like Shankara to expensive private universities only attended by the upper class of society, effectively deepening caste divisions around the humanities. Public education is propelling India toward international economic preeminence but distancing the newly educated from their deep histories.

I thought I was going to Shantiniketan to find visual evidence of a philosophy that openly recognizes the reality of the nonconceptual. What I found instead was a discontinued dream of a new aesthetic culture. At Shantiniketan, I learned from Siva Kumar that Rabindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose hoped to provide India with poetic, sensory evidence of a coherent, meaningful world. They wanted to make the artifacts of a new culture, a culture not shaped by the pressures of caste and colonialism but by attentiveness to the land, to their ancient history, to their place in modernity. This dream took shape in murals, sculptures, and festivals; music was written, costumes were designed, and new meaning was planted in this rich soil. The dream included both culture and agriculture, a way of laboring and a way of being. When Tagore passed away, he passed Shantiniketan on to Gandhi, the only person alive whose dream of India as a new nation

offering meaning to the world rivaled his own. But when India became independent, the university system claimed Kala Bhavana and what was a dream of a nourishing future community became a rural art school.

At both Manipal and Shantiniketan it was evident that India's emergence into independence as a modern nation is as internally conflicted as modernity itself: new ways toward prosperity are opened while deep histories of thought and dreams of sustainable, attentive community are erased.

And in his living room in the morning Professor Dutta repeats that modernity is the wrong word. The wooden chair creaks as I shifted forward again. In the academic world, anything that does not orbit modernity is dismissed. Premodern, postmodern, anti modern, contextually modern—as long as it is about how it is connected to modernity. But, he reiterates, India is something besides modern. It is not premodern, postmodern, anti-modern, contextually modern. It is not even not modern. It is just something else. Embrace and erasure are not the only two options. The earth is still rich enough to include worlds not yet articulated in any text or discussed in any classroom. There is still a way to dream about what may yet be. And the morning light hung in the window and the wind passed gently through the room.

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