

Introduction

Uncanny Histories: Ghosts, Fear, and Reason in Colonial Bengal

The Tagore family of Jorasanko remains perhaps the most legendary family of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Calcutta.¹ Almost every member of this vast and uniquely talented household has been repeatedly commemorated and acknowledged in print and history. Dwarkanath Tagore, the nineteenth-century entrepreneur, was recognized and admired not only in Bengal but also by contemporary European royalty. His son, Debendranath Tagore, a leading figure in the reform movements of the nineteenth century, has gone down in history as Maharshi or the saint. Debendranath's youngest son, Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel laureate, reformer, and nationalist, needs no introduction. In addition to these more famous representatives, the Tagore family brimmed with writers, reformers, and iconoclasts. I, however, want to talk about those neglected members of the Tagore household who were duly honored by the Tagores themselves but have been sadly neglected by the present-day critic. This is perhaps because they were not living members of the family. I refer here to the ghosts who resided in the various trees and darkened, unsupervised corners of the Jorasanko house.

Rabindranath Tagore's account of his childhood, *Chelebelā* (1940), begins with the bittersweet story of the Brahmadaitya's flight. This saintly Brahman ghost resided peaceably in a nut tree in the western part of the Jorasanko mansion. He would often stretch his legs between the tree and



FIGURE 1.1 · Brahman ghost: from Parashuram's "Bhushundir Mathe"

the third-floor terrace and observe the everyday life of humanity with appropriate philosophical disdain.² He was not the only nonliving member of the Tagore family, for several other Beings similarly coexisted at Jorasanko alongside the living. There was, for instance, the greedy *shankhchunni* (a variety of female ghost), who could never pass up a good smelly fish. In the dark underground rooms where drinking water was stored lived other Beings famous for their huge ears, oppositely turned ankles, and gaping maws. All these Beings "people" the young Rabindranath's memoirs as concretely and as poignantly as his close relatives. In a city where electricity was yet to arrive, and trams were still pulled by horses, the Brahmadaitya and his comrades were not yet part of an unbelievable "fantastic" but, just like their human counterparts, were very much equal citizens of everyday reality.

Rabindranath's autobiography consequently is not structured in the manner of a supernatural narrative wherein he is leading his readers into the hesitant domain between faith and rationality. It is rather a realist account of the Calcutta of his childhood, still shaded by the greenery of ancient trees and quiet ponds, yet unharmed by the harsh light of the modern. The particular analogy of light and darkness is actually carried to an exquisite conclusion when Rabindranath recounts the circumstances that forced the domestic Brahmadaitya to finally leave. Eventually all the ponds of this older Calcutta,

writes Rabindranath, were filled up, and they carried away with them the green veil of a rural dream. Electric lights blazed away the darkness. “The nut tree,” he continues, “still stands, but even though it is still convenient to spread one’s legs, the Brahmadaitya can no longer be found. There is more light now, both inside and outside.”

Rabinandranath Tagore’s account is an excellent entry point for our discussion of the uncanny in nineteenth-century Bengal, as it highlights some of the major themes that this book seeks to examine. Our starting point is the note of nostalgic regret in Rabindranath’s narrative when he laments the flight of the Brahmadaitya. The ghost here is clearly tied up with a childhood world of safety, stable assurances, and simple beliefs. His disappearance likewise is contrasted with an adult world of rationality, urbanity, and a complex existence. While the implication for this sharp divide between the modern moment and romantic nostalgia for the premodern is consequential for the general argument of this book, let me begin here with something that primarily drew me to this project on the colonial uncanny.

First, a word about the concept itself. I want to retain here the original Freudian formulation of the “uncanny” as Freud famously defined it in his 1919 essay. For Freud, the uncanny, or *unheimlich* (the unhomely) was not the polar opposite of the *heimlich* (home/homely), but “that species of the frightening which leads back to that long known to us, once very familiar.”³ The uncanny returns us to what we tried to obscure, occult, or, to use Freud’s language, repress. This makes the uncanny, as Homi Bhabha has insisted, a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition, where “the uncanny forces of race, sexuality, violence, cultural and even climatic differences . . . emerge in the colonial discourse as the split and mixed texts of hybridity.”⁴ When we meet our premodern and modern ghosts we will note a sharp contrast between them, a contrast that I argue is because this modern sense of uncanny does not exist for our premodern ghostly Beings. Instead, they follow a different trajectory of fear and dread.

Consider the portrayal of the Brahmadaitya in Rabindranath’s narrative and how it is carried out in remarkably realist terms, without resorting to the standard accoutrements of uncertainty and terror, the more common constituents in the portrayal of the fictional supernatural. Not only is the Brahmadaitya regarded without fear, but he is also remembered with feelings bordering on kinship. The reader is not left with an uncertainty about the existence of ghosts, the common emotional precondition of a modern ghost story, but a more fundamental uncertainty. We are left undecided on whether to celebrate the disappearance of the ghost and his verdant world of

secure beliefs. In other words, the reader, along with the Tagores' pet Brahmadaiya, is left uncertain and resentful at the single most important element of nineteenth-century ideology: enlightenment rationality. The flight of the Brahmadaiya thus draws a line in the sand. For the child Rabindranath, he takes away with him an older world of companionable Beings and leaves behind a harshly lit and rootless modern or—to insert such affective modes into established circuits of intellectual debate—the Brahmadaiya abandons the young Rabindranath to a Weberian world of disenchantment. His departure can be regarded as an ideological marker, where the old certainties end and a new era begins.

This book is about the history and consequences of the flight of the Brahmadaiya. It maps, among other things, *how* the premodern ghosts were fundamentally different from their modern counterparts in their portrayal, emotional history, and social context; *why* they were displaced; and *in what ways* their departure was a symptom of a wider ideological calcification of national and religious identities. A warning is perhaps necessary here: I try, in this book, to write a *social history of fear*, thus making it a book about “real” ghosts, not metaphorical or Derridean ones. Race and empire predicated on capitalist development are crucial scaffolds to the story I tell here, for they help explain *why* and *how* the precolonial ghosts were exiled out of the domain of fear (and into humor/children’s literature) and their place usurped by the modern gothic. I look at the rise of occultism and Spiritualism among the Bhadrakok intelligentsia as “accepted” modes of reflecting on the afterlife and how such practices were imbricated in an ambient, but ever present, Hindu revivalism.

Old Ghosts for New

In 1879, Peary Chand Mittra, novelist, reformer, businessman, and leading intellectual, wrote that “for the last sixteen years,” he had been “associated with spirits who are not away from me for a moment” and that he was “talking with them as I talk to those who are in flesh.” Peary Chand first published this and other similar essays on Spiritualism in European journals such as the *London Spiritualist* and eventually compiled them into a book, *Spiritual Stray Leaves*, in 1879. “I am anxious,” he wrote, “that spiritualism be solemnly thought of.”⁵ Peary Chand was a pioneer, but in a burgeoning field. From the mid-nineteenth century, the great and good of Calcutta were heavily involved in a wave of Spiritualism, broadly understood. Planchettes and séance

sessions became a regular part of the social milieu of intellectuals, nationalists, and theologians alike. Societies such as the Calcutta Theosophical Society (1882) and the Calcutta Psychical Society (1904) sought to employ modern empirical methods to understand death and the afterlife. “Belief” and “faith,” which were previously understood to be resolved issues, part of one’s religion, suddenly became unstable categories needing new methods of embedding, namely, scientific proof. Consider this exchange with the older Rabindranath and his protégée, the poet Maitreyi Debi. When asked by Rabindranath to read some essays in Theosophist journals, Maitreyi declined, saying she did not “believe” — *biśbāsa* — in such things. Rabindranath was anything but pleased:

Ah, here’s your problem. Yes, while there is no proof (pramāna) to aid belief, there is no disproof (apramāna) either, is there? That which is equally true or untrue, how can I think of it only as untrue? You have all become great scientists these days. You disbelieve all that cannot be *systematically proved* [English in original]. How many things have proof in this world? There might be things in this world that are yet to be proved, or that can be proved. They may lie beyond human knowledge. They were *meant* [English in original] to be occulted, sometimes they reveal themselves to special individuals, but do not leave behind crude signs of proof.⁶

Gyan Prakash’s history of science, in which he identifies the emergence of science in this period as a new arbiter of forms of knowledge (or science’s transformation into modern Science, if you will), is a critical interlocutor for my argument. Science’s role, Prakash shows, was not to wield “despotic power” but to negotiate between and authorize incommensurable knowledges. Prakash replaces a simplistic model of liberal modernization where Science and its attendant practices are imagined as bulldozing into oblivion what they deemed as un-Science or anti-Science. It is certainly true that the British and Western-educated Bengali elite alike campaigned vigorously against superstition. But what is significant about Prakash’s argument about Science as *arbiter*, rather than despotic, is that it draws attention to processes by which Science emerged as the authorial power to legitimize *all* knowledge worlds. In other words, it became the framing device through which all phenomena were filtered and thereby judged. In his polemic with Maitreyi Debi, Rabindranath does not actually denounce Science but extends its authorial power. For him phenomena that lacked “systematic proof” were not that which could be deemed unscientific but were phenomena merely waiting for Science to develop adequate explanatory tools to understand them. This is precisely the framework that the Bengali Bhadrakol developed about practices involving death and

the afterlife, such as séances and planchettes. Occultism and/or Spiritualism, terms used interchangeably, were always referred to as Science. Questions of the existence of the soul or what happens to the soul after death, were sought to be resettled through the language of Science. Peary Chand Mitra noted occultism and Spiritualism as “two sciences” that both “evolved by the will-force” and “engaged the attention” of ancient Hindu scholars. This will-force was “the subtle body, or *linga sarira* . . . which lives after the natural body dies.” But it was no longer enough to evoke the ancient sages to “prove” the workings of this subtle body, so Peary Chand tells us that the soul was “composed of subtle particles, rudiments, or atoms” perceptible to “beings of a superior order.”⁷

One key project of this book is to explore these new ideas about the afterlife that emerged in contrast to the old ghosts, such as Rabindranath’s Brahma-daitya, and ask how far such ideas reframed new relationships among Science, Superstition/Magic, and Religion. I note these categories in capital letters, for while the borders between them were certainly renegotiated in this period, I aim to show that the categories themselves were coproduced under the sign of the modern.

The literary corollary to what I call Scientific Spirituality was the appearance of unique ghost stories in the Bengali press loosely modeled on the Victorian Gothic form. Both these developments, those in the literary world and in the practical world of spiritual explorations, marked a sharp contrast from older, precolonial forms of thought about ghosts and the spirit world. The older ghosts were denizens of a multifield, heterodox world where fear of them was a realist one, as real as the fear of wild animals. Like the natural world of wild beasts, there were several typologies of ghosts; some lived in the Sheora tree, some liked the wild marshes, while still others liked to possess newborn infants. The stories featuring such Beings, always oral, were never about the death that birthed them but rather about their lives. In these tales, ghosts married other ghosts, held elaborate feasts, gave birth to babies, and even died. In the vivid descriptions of their lives, these ghosts were stunningly different from the gothic specter whose entry into fiction was anchored in modern morality, in textual rigidity, and in a clear set of gendered expectations.

Here I want to signpost another key feature of my argument: I make a critical distinction between modern and premodern ghosts. Scholars of ghosts and the gothic most often operate with the discursive frames of “revival” or “remanent” when it comes to ghosts, historians favoring the former frame, anthropologists the latter. For instance, in his history of memory-making about the First World War, Jay Winter sees the growth of European

Spiritualism following the war as an “avalanche of the ‘unmodern.’”⁸ Ghost sightings by returning soldiers, and their participation in séances and related activities, are understood by Winter as “traditional, even archaic” forms arising from the deadly conflict.⁹ In contrast, Heonik Kwon, in his powerful anthropological study of ghosts that appeared to the Vietnamese following the American war, similarly does not distinguish between the old folk ghosts and the new war ghosts, but sees the latter as the continued legacy of the former in a new, tragic context of imperialism and injustice.¹⁰ Both these disciplinary traditions take “ghosts” as a category to be stable across time. This book departs radically from both traditions and makes a case to treat both fear and the expressions of fear as deeply historical categories. Going even further, I challenge the notion that the term ghost (*bhut*, *pret*) can be applied to both modern and premodern Beings. I use the term “Being” in a manner similar to the way Marshall Sahlins employs the terms “metapersons” or “metahumans.” In his final scholarly work, Sahlins leads us through a rich survey of the scholarship on immanentist and transcendentalist cultures, underscoring that for most of human history we lived in an immanentist universe where the “familiar distinction between the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘material’ . . . [was] not pertinent.” In such a society a “cosmic host of beings and forces comprise an all-round substrate” of all human endeavor, including but not limited to, work, political authority, and social reproduction. Sahlins reminds us, pace Levy-Bruhl, that here “nothing is undertaken without having recourse to enchantment.”¹¹ Transcendentalist societies, in sharp contrast, transported all divinity to a “transcendental ‘other world’ of its own reality, leaving the earth alone to humans.”¹² The presence of enchantment in modernity is the survival, according to Sahlins, of the immanent in our transcendental world. While not agreeing with the “survival” trope for modern enchantment, in this book I understand the premodern ghosts to be Beings in this “metahuman” sense, and in chapter 1, I make a case for why they must be seen as distinct in their species-being from modern ghosts.

Relatedly, for reasons that we later examine in detail, the coming of capitalist modernity to the ghost world meant a new *incorporation* of Beings. Stripped of their individual particularities, each Being was classified under the general rubric of a ghost or *bhut*. Vastly different genealogies containing historically specific origin stories were clubbed together in classic Linnaean fashion. The powerful *Hudum Deo*¹³ who could summon rains in North Bengal, the headless *Kandha Kata*¹⁴ who was immune to the exorcist’s spells, the beautiful and formidable *shankhchunni* who longed for a family life with children (and would take yours)—creatures who had their specific histories

as separate Beings—began to be cataloged by the colonial administrator and Bhadrakok ethnologist alike as part of a single genus: bhut. Once captured in this manner, concrete attributes were abstracted and generalized. “The “ordinary bhūt,” the civil servant turned amateur folklorist William Crooke wrote, belonged to “the Kshatriya, warrior, Vaisya, trader, or sūdra, menial classes,” but the “Brahman Bhūt known as Brahm or Brahmadaitya [was] a different variety.” Even though Crooke “cataloged” creatures that varied widely in their manners, ferocity, and utility, he was unhesitant in giving them common features:

Ordinary bhūts are as tall as palmyra trees, generally thin and very black. They usually abide in trees, except those which the Brahm frequents. At night and especially at midnight they wander about the fields and frighten travellers. Like the Jinn, they prefer dirty places to those which are clean, so when a man attempts to get a Bhut into his power he makes the experiment in some dirty, retired place, and offers only half-cooked food, so that the creature may not have time to gobble it up and perchance rend the adventurer. They do not enter the temples of the great gods, but lurk in the vicinity in the hope of getting a share of the offerings. . . . They are usually stark naked and are fond of women, whom they occasionally abduct.¹⁵

These multiple Beings were soon evacuated from the realm of fear into the realm of ethnography or children’s literature, with the immaturity of women, children, and the lower classes offering the common thread. Their rehabilitation in children’s literature deserves a separate analysis of its own, which I do not attempt in this book. What I discuss instead is why the presence of these Beings in this literary genre did not signify fear, but its opposite: that fear had been drained from them and that they were now sufficiently sanitized to meet Bhadrakok children. How and why did these Beings get disarmed? In 1842, seventeen-year-old Michael Madhusudan Dutta won a gold medal at Hindu College for his essay on female education in which, with due severity, he chastised women for being “unable to give up their belief in the existence of ghosts, notwithstanding the strong remonstrances of Reason, and the evidence of Science because the impressions left on the mind by the idle tales heard or recited in the nursery could not be effaced.”¹⁶ Belief in premodern ghosts became the marker for unreason, and by the end of the nineteenth century you could catch a *petni* or a *mamdo* only in an ethnographer’s notebook, or they would lurk, powerless, in children’s tales, thoroughly defanged by Bhadrakok derision. As S. Mukerji noted in the preface to his popular collection *Indian Ghost Stories* (1914), he had heard

such stories primarily from two kinds of sources, from “my nurse . . . my father’s coachman, Abdullah, who used to be my constant companion . . . [and] from my friends who are Judges and Magistrates and other responsible servants of Government, and in two cases from Judges of Indian High Courts.” But Mukerji was clear that a “story told by a nurse or a coachman should certainly not be reproduced in this book. In this book, there are a few of those stories only which are true to the best of the author’s knowledge and belief.”¹⁷

I develop my argument about the old and new ghosts in three connected ways.

First, I outline the conceptual framework that sustained narratives of the “supernatural” before the advent of modernity. I argue that premodern ghosts force us to critically examine the very notion of the supernatural and reveal its very modern genesis. Robert Segal has observed something similar in Edward Tylor’s argument about “primitive” spiritualism, whereby, for the indigenous tribes under study, spiritual ideas were intensely material, as society lacked any sense of immateriality.¹⁸ Lucien Febvre has gone even further, arguing that there existed no vocabulary for “unbelief” in sixteenth-century France.¹⁹ Ghosts and similar Beings of premodernity gesture toward a fluid and commodious notion of the *natural*—where the natural and the human world do not have sharp conceptual divisions, and consequently the boundaries of the natural world are capacious enough to contain both the living and the dead.

Second, I locate the historical tensions that perforated this earlier framework from the nineteenth century onward, particularly with the spread and generalization of English education. I note that the older ghosts do not simply disappear with the coming of more enlightened times but acquire specific locations within a new cartography of beliefs. I argue that this mapping was a process by which a heterogeneous mental world of belief—teeming with Beings from multiple faith-worlds—was striated into two strictly separate classificatory categories of Religion and Superstition/Magic. This harsh striation of belief was, I contend, necessary for processes of class formation, and ultimately, for one particular class to craft its own view of the future nation.

Third, and finally, I try to situate the discourse of the modern uncanny within contemporary colonial society, where the dividing line between reason and un-reason was anything but simple or stable. Following from scholars such as E. J. Clery, I look at the development of the modern uncanny as being anchored to the development of capitalism as a specific ensemble of social relations. I propose that the fundamental inscrutability of capitalism as a system dictates certain specific forms for the spectral world and, simultaneously,

that the nesting of capital in the colonial world created important fractures in the previous understanding of the natural world and transposed new categorization of the nature/culture divide onto this society. Consequently, the “new” spirits that emerged from this process were not only different from their premodern counterparts but, unlike their premodern brethren, were also endowed with a higher mission regarding class and nation formation.

Accordingly, chapters 1 and 2 trace the differences between the old ghosts and the new spirits. Since the phenomenon of haunting presumes spatiality—there can be no ghosts without a space for them to haunt—chapter 3 tries to understand why changes in notions of space actually ran parallel to and influenced changed perceptions of haunting. If the first three chapters involve a range of literary sources, chapters 4 and 5 are more the “history” chapters. In them I try to write a history of practices, in the original *histoire des mentalités* sense. As all good folktales will tell you, it is hard to capture specters, and even harder to capture them through archival sources. I therefore do not so much “capture” them as sense their presence in changing funeral rites, laws, and the steady encroachment of machinery in everyday life.

In chapter 4 I develop a more granular analysis of the relationship between practices of spirituality and capitalism’s insistence on certain modes of being, but here I want to say a few words about the system’s own occult potential. Even though Marx employed multiple images of monstrosity and demonic powers to describe the system, most theorists have noted such imagery as rhetorical flourishes. David McNally is a rare exception who has given us a stirring account of why such images befit capitalism as a system, as capitalism was “both a modern horror-story and a mystery tale, each inexplicable outside the language of monstrosity.”²⁰ McNally’s argument draws on Marx’s concept of abstract labor, the form of labor that is the motor of capital accumulation. The conceptual parameters of this process are important to the overall argument of this book, so let me introduce here a few key themes.

Marx shows us how capitalism homogenizes all forms of concrete labor, such that all uniquely varied acts of labor are converted to their quantitative form alone, thus making all labors exchangeable with each other because of their undifferentiated state. McNally’s work adds a crucial commentary to this process of abstraction. He argues that to become abstract labor, the concrete labor of human beings goes through a “process of *real abstraction*,” wherein unique labor is “effectively *disembodied*, detached” from the worker performing it. As “identical and interchangeable units of homogenous labor power,” the skills and bodies of workers are then “dissected, fragmented, cut up into separable pieces subjected to the direction of an alien force, repre-

sented by a legion of supervisors, and embedded in rhythms and processes of work that are increasingly dictated by automatic programmes and systems of machinery.”²¹ Thus, when Marx writes how capitalism “mutilates the worker” or rails against capital’s “demonic powers,” he is describing a real process of monstrosity that the system encodes. Based on this understanding, McNally, like Michael Taussig before him, offers a powerful analysis of modern witchcraft tales, zombie attacks — especially from the global south — and shows how, against capital’s “occult process” of exploitation, these stories ought to be read as the resistance chronicles of ordinary human beings.²² The stories *make visible* the violence inherent in accumulation, a violence that capital hides — occults — behind ideologies of “equal exchange” and “honest day’s work.” In this light, we can see why the occult and certain forms of magic, far from being carryovers from the past, actually *belong* to modernity.²³ Scholarship on the place of magic in modernity, however, varies greatly, and it is important to pick out some of the threads of scholarly dispute and agreement.

Enchantment, Disenchantment, Reenchantment

If we take Rabinandanath Tagore’s lament about the departing Brahmadaitya literally, then the world of nineteenth-century Bengal might appear to us as the world did to early anthropologists like James Frazer and Edward Tylor, among the first to present reason as a propulsive tool of social evolution driving human progress through the grid of



It is certainly true that both the colonial administrator and the Western-educated Bengali elite subscribed to such an epistemic grid.²⁴ If, for the former, all Indians were mired in, or at least susceptible to, magic and superstition, for the latter, such a view was inflected by caste, class, and gender, making the lower classes, Muslims, Dalits, and women the repositories of such harmful ideas.²⁵ Comments by Rashbihari Bose on the legends and ballads of Bhagalpur for the journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal exemplifies the contemporary Bhadrakol approach to such matters. Bose found no evidence of “demon worship” in Bengal or in most of Bihar, but where such backward practices existed, it was undoubtedly “owing to the close vicinity of the Kols,” an indigenous group.²⁶ Premodern ghosts, then, fared badly. Children’s textbooks were

sanitized of “superstition” by editing out all supernatural content, even stories about speaking animals. Ramananda Chatterji, cofounder with Brahmo reformer Shibnath Shastri of the first children’s journal *Mukul*, campaigned explicitly against ghosts in children’s literature. Writing with some ferocity in *Probasi*, Ramananda urged authors to exclude tales, and even illustrations, of fearful ghosts from “all books and journals.”²⁷

The question for us is not whether this framework existed—it did—but what to make of it. For example, it is obvious that ghosts did not belong to Science, but did they belong to Superstition/Magic, or Religion? How were the boundaries for each drawn in a colonial society? Were such boundaries stable? Most importantly, who drew the boundaries?

There is an abundance of scholarly literature on the relationship between these three, always heavily contested, categories. Tylor’s *Religion in Primitive Culture* (1871) and Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890) are some early reflections on their distinctions, intimacies, and outright oppositions. While Tylor and Frazer followed the rigid modernization shown in the grid above, later anthropologists introduced a more generous reading. Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Magic, Science and Religion* (1925) remapped Science as belonging to the “profane” domain and “Magic and Religion” as belonging to the “sacred.” In one fell swoop, the three categories were thus moved from an evolutionary schema to a coeval one, a move that both enriched and complicated their relationship. Both Emile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) and his close associate Marcel Mauss, in *A General Theory of Magic* (1902), further blurred the boundaries by proposing Magic as an early iteration of Science, thereby establishing a historical continuity between the domains/categories. The Bhadrakok occultists we will meet in this book could almost be called Durkheimian in their approach, for all believed that what passed as “occult” in their time would be proven to be hard “Science” by a later age. What is of critical interest to us here is *why* these explanatory models coexisted. How did the Bhadrakok intellectual subscribe to the Frazerian model when it came to women and lower castes, all the while blurring the domains of science, religion, and superstition when it came to certain kinds of occult knowledge and practice? Our task then is to understand not just which rules and tools of inquiry were employed by the Bengali occultist but how that inquiry was organized to generate new norms of inclusion and exclusion.

Let us go back to Rabindranath’s regret at the rapid disenchantment of his world and situate that regret considering these multiple explanatory models that coexisted for his contemporaries. Rabindranath was reflecting on the Brahmadaitya in 1940, but we can trace a similar note of nostalgia

in European writers as they confronted their own modern moment. Consider the Scot Robert Fergusson's comments as he traveled through northern Scotland in the 1880s. He found "civilization" to have "crept in upon all fairy strongholds and disenchanting the many fair scenes in which they were wont to hold their court." In a near echo of Rabinandranath Tagore, Fergusson concluded that "the light of science has shone upon every green mound and dispossessed it of its fairy inhabitants."²⁸ John Aubrey is even closer to Rabinandranath when, as far back as the 1680s, he observed that the "divine art of Printing and Gunpowder have frightened away Robin-good-fellow and the Fayries."²⁹ Two critical questions confront us as we untangle these echoed sentiments across space and time. Does the modern moment, no matter when and where it is perceived to have arrived, always come equipped with a decline in magic? And relatedly, if the first proposition holds, then can we craft a definition of the modern through its exile of ghosts and spirits?

Max Weber's central thesis about modernity is predicated on answering the first question in the affirmative, but with an added twist. In his classic work on Protestantism, Weber postulated that the Protestant Reformation was shaped, even engendered, by the values and impulses of a new economic order that would go on to mark a profound transformation in human history—namely, capitalism. Capitalism required new modes of behavior for acting on the world, and Protestantism created the religious motivation for such behavior. Protestant emphasis on good works in the here and now as a way of glorifying god was combined with delayed gratification as a sign of piety in personal conduct. Such values legitimated the new order's accumulation drive and its corollary requirements such as investment of profits rather than their direct, immediate consumption, as was the norm in precapitalist economies. It is not a coincidence that Science emerged in the same period as a distinct discipline with clear boundaries and new institutions, such as the Royal Society (established in London in 1645), to promote it. Robert Merton supplemented Weber's original argument in his remarkably astute account of the relationships among Science, capitalism, and the Reformation:

The positive estimation by Protestants of a hardly disguised utilitarianism, of intramundane interests, of a thoroughgoing empiricism, of the right and even duty of *libre examen*, and of the explicit individual questioning of authority were congenial to the very same values found in modern science. And perhaps above all in the significance of the active ascetic drive which necessitated the study of Nature that it might be controlled. Hence, these two fields [Protestantism and Science] were well integrated

and, in essentials, mutually supporting, not only in seventeenth-century England but also in other times and places.³⁰

“In other times and places” is an important part of Merton’s argument, and it allows us to place Rabindranath and John Aubrey within the same frame despite their belonging to different time lines and histories, so let us pause here for a moment to reflect on it.

Both Aubrey and Rabindranath are commenting on the moment of their own confrontation with the modern. The uncanny similarity of their comments should urge us to evaluate their encounters experientially rather than calendrically, as the former allows us to assess the two moments as coeval while the latter puts Europe “ahead” of its “backward” colonies. This is a bold claim and deserves disaggregation into its three main component parts. First, following scholars such as Reinhart Koselleck and Johannes Fabian, I understand the modern temporality to be singularly unique. Second, I believe focusing on the calendrical moment when a society confronts modernity sanitizes the processes of its arrival. Third, unless we anchor the modern moment (for any society) into a conception of capitalism as an *uneven and combined* political-economic form, we fall back on racist tropes of modernization theory.

To begin with temporality: in his classic study, Reinhart Koselleck assesses modernity as different from all previous forms of historical periodization and time-reckoning. Unlike previous epochal measures (such as religious or dynastic), modernity was characterized by a form of periodization that was entirely temporal. The newness of the “new time” was predicated on a double understanding of the future: a simultaneous emptying out and an extension. Freedom from Christianity’s eschatological fear of an imminent end of the world coupled with new discoveries in science allowed Europe, for the first time, to imagine a future that did not end. Limitlessness, in turn, made the future abstract and empty, drained as it was of all spatio-historical specificity. It was during the period of the European Enlightenment, propelled by the social forces of the Industrial and French Revolutions, that time acquired its final qualitative attributes, qualities that could embed themselves only because time had by then shed all its specificity and had been abstracted into a generalized emptiness. Koselleck urges us to bear in mind that it is also during this period that the concepts of “progress,” “development,” “crisis,” and “Zeitgeist” all gained temporal determinations that they never had before. Modernity, then, from its inception, was a very specific sort of time-consciousness, one that emptied time of its historic specificity (time of gods, time of kings) and that, once drained, this new time could be loaded

with qualitative categories and become the vehicle of History.³¹ Johannes Fabian's work on the relationship between temporality and colonialism remains the most thoroughgoing investigation of this new spatio-temporal epistemology. Fabian both follows and adds to Koselleck's argument of stripping time of specificity in order to create the time of an immanent History. In a close study of evolutionary science, Fabian shows how the new time had to be first "naturalized" in order for it to become a "variable independent of the events it marked." This in turn allowed Cartesian Science "to plot a multitude of *uneventful* data over neutral time . . . separated from events meaningful to mankind."³² But Fabian also takes Koselleck's argument a step further with his discussion of two conceptual developments of the nineteenth century that inserted a new sense of spatiality to time: "1. Time [was conceptualized as] immanent to, hence coextensive with, the world . . . or nature . . . ; 2. Relationships between parts of the world . . . in the widest sense of both natural and sociocultural entities . . . [could now] be understood as temporal relations."³³

Fabian is suggesting that, since the Enlightenment, time was used in European bourgeois discourse as a tool for "distancing and separat[ing]" different part of the world, giving the European colonizer a place "ahead" of everyone else on a linear timeline. Further, this "aheadness" itself was invested with specific qualitative and historical characteristics—all of which, lo and behold, could be found in Europe alone. What made "the savage significant to the evolutionist's Time" was that "he [lived] in another Time."³⁴

The postcolonialist scholar shares (and in some cases predates) Fabian's disquiet about modern temporality. Thanks to this work, we can no longer think about broad claims, such as those of "universalism" or "modernization" attending European intellectual projects from the sixteenth century, without also thinking about these projects' imbrications with colonial violence.³⁵ Demonstrating that modern institutions and modern practices in the non-Western world have evolved in ways that are radically different from recognized Western equivalents, this scholarship has argued that, since the forms of non-Western modernity were so crucially different from the Western models, they ought to be recognized not as affiliates or derivatives of the Western model but that we consider the possibility of alternative or multiple modernities, such that the modern form as articulated in Europe does not serve as our only template of diagnosing modernity.³⁶ Attractive and empowering as this argument maybe, it leaves us wanting in two analytical respects: (1) Without a substantive definition of modernity, how are we to recognize its alternative? In other words, if the alternative form is different in every respect from its European counterpart, then what about it makes it "modern"? And,

relatedly, (2) If we are to nominate a particular social institution or practice of the colonial world as “modern” in an alternative sense, then what ultimately are our registers for doing so?

It is clear from their writing that the colonial intelligentsia in Bengal understood there to be a modular modern; the point for them was to then mix, alter, and amend that modern to fit their own context. The Bengali occultist could thus on the one hand condemn older, folk ghosts as “superstition,” while writing scholarly essays on the scientificity of séances. We should probe this assemblage model of colonial modernity, as it leaves important questions unanswered: Why are only certain elements “borrowed” from the categorical “West” and mixed with the equally categorical “East” and not others? What is the *logic* of “mixing” of the various heterogeneous elements? Most important, what elements constituted the assumed modular modern?

These questions should allow us to circle back to capitalism as an immensely transformative but historically specific socioeconomic order, which I see as the staging ground, the determining context, for the modern. But here, rather than ask the more popular question, “Which modern?” we should ask the question, “Which capitalism?” For while modernity, as an ontological category, has been given permission by many postcolonial scholars to be *infinitely variable*, capitalism in this scholarship is often seen as *prohibitively singular*. Capitalism is too often associated with a very limited number of identifiers, most of which, ironically, sound similar to standard modernization rhetoric.

There is of course some truth to the singularity of capitalism that manifests with an inexorable logic, irrespective of geography. Some necessary conditions of the system remain stable across space and time—the violent separation of humans from their means of subsistence; the domination of abstract labor over the concrete; and the generalization of commodity exchange through a world market where all products, no matter their use, origin, and method of production, are exchanged against their abstract equivalent—that is, money. But rather than simply see these as features, they are best seen as *outcomes* of capitalist implantation. Seeing them as outcomes or results allows us to, first, appreciate the stunningly diverse and intensely adaptable means employed by capital to get to these outcomes in different societies and, second, explain why all capitalist societies will display certain commonalities but such core features will be layered with multiple histories and practices attentive to the specific historical development of each society. As the economist Anwar Shaikh recently put it, “Capitalism’s sheath mutates constantly but its core remains the same.”³⁷

This processual understanding of capitalism thus allows us to both hold on to its “iron laws,” as the universal, and simultaneously acknowledge the infinite variations on the application and consequences of those laws to different societies, or the particular. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s evocative concept of History 1 and 2 is one highly stimulating method of conceiving this relationship between the two categories. In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty seeks to demonstrate how universal concepts of modernity, History 1, despite their accidental origin in Europe and their being imposed on the colonial world through imperial violence, encounter in these worlds History 2, or “pre-existing concepts, categories, institutions and practices through which they [such concepts] get translated and configured differently.”³⁸ Partha Chatterjee is even more explicit in outlining capitalism’s procedure of establishing a universal grammar for multiple, particular societies and their interactions within and without: “If there is one great moment that turns the provincial thought of Europe to universal philosophy, the parochial history of Europe to universal history, it is the moment of capital—capital that is global in its territorial reach and universal in its conceptual domain. It is the narrative of capital that can turn the violence of mercantile trade, war, genocide, conquest and colonialism into a story of universal progress, development, modernization, and freedom.”³⁹

Throughout this book we will see this shadow play between the universal and the particular. We will see why certain forms of spectrality become “universal” and acceptable across multiple colonial societies by their Western-educated elites, while other kinds become disreputable or are banished outright.

This entanglement of the universal and the particular, mediated as it is through the logic of capital accumulation, is absent from what can be called the theory of the “secular decline of magic.” Keith Thomas’s classic study, for example, firmly dating the “distinction between religion and magic” to the sixteenth century, declares the triumph of the former over the latter. Like Weber and Merton before him, Thomas tells an absolutist story of the secular decline of “magic” caused by the amalgamative effects of Protestantism, the scientific revolution, and the rise of capitalism. Like Weber and Merton, Thomas is not wrong. But he is also not right. Scholars have pointed to three distinct ways in which his assessment fails to satisfy. First, as Hildred Geertz has identified, Thomas makes a category error, for “it is not the ‘decline’ of . . . magic that cries out for explanation, but the emergence and rise of the label ‘magic.’”⁴⁰ Second, E. P. Thompson rightly takes Thomas to task for visibilizing the views of a minority, that of intellectuals and scientists, and ignoring popular instance of

magic, or “movement[s] of counter enlightenment.”⁴¹ Third, there are scholars who disprove the “decline” thesis by cataloguing the various ways in which “magic” survived the sixteenth-century moment of rupture and continues to flourish in the present day: my personal favorites are Spanish iPhone apps for exorcism,⁴² Vietnamese ghost-gods who accept offerings of Coke and Pepsi,⁴³ and stories of demonic underwear from Ghana.⁴⁴

While useful, these evaluations of the decline thesis do not consider the ways in which the decline thesis is also correct, not least in the sense that it forms the hegemonic common sense of modernity, in all its spatiotemporal expressions. Criticism of the decline thesis sometimes sees it as a case of scholarly misrecognition, one that fails to account for all the multiple examples of coexistence of magic, reason, and religion. But what the decline thesis notes is a *tendency* in modernity to police the borders between Science, Magic, and Religion according to a new set of norms and to attempt to redefine the remit of each. This tendency is the defining score of modernity and is indifferent to geographical location.

But it is not the validation or refutation of the decline thesis that ought to be our critical lens for analyzing modernity’s approach to ghosts, but a conception of capitalism as structurally *uneven and combined*.⁴⁵ Such a lens makes it possible to explain why instantiations of the modern vary according to geographical location—as capital enters different societies at different moments and with different intensities—but nonetheless carry certain traces of commonality.⁴⁶ John Aubrey and Rabindranath can mourn their common loss, but separately, across the wilderness of the modern.

Sacred Spirits

Undoubtedly the reevaluation of death and the afterlife in colonial Bengal was itself a cultural response to a wider set of changes whereby new social processes such as rural to urban migration and generalized Western education were altering the fabric of everyday life. The new “scientific” understanding of ghosts and spirits, however, was not simply different from older orally transmitted ghost stories. The new ghosts embodied a highly particularized notion of the afterlife, one that sought to combine a version of high Brahmanic Hinduism with modern science. From the 1850s onward, older “traditional” ghosts and demons were considered to be the products of feminine and/or peasant superstition and hence argued into nonexistence by a Western-educated middle class that was deeply invested in more “modern”

forms of spirituality such as séances and spirit photography. The marginalization of older ghosts and demons becomes particularly significant when we find that these scientific investigations of the middle class into the realm of the supernatural were conducted within an exclusivist framework of Brahmanic Hinduism.

A series of journals published from the mid-nineteenth century onward provide unique insight into this discursive connection between hierarchical Hinduism and the new science of spirituality. The mission statement of *Aloukik Rahasya* (1908) for example stated that the journal was founded to reinvigorate interest and belief in “traditional” high Hindu thought (*sanātana dharma*) through the medium of “scientific Occult.” The editor of *Aloukik Rahasya*, Kshirod Prasad Bidyabinod, a renowned chemistry professor at the University of Calcutta, was one of several Western-educated and “scientifically” trained individuals of the period who sought to use the new sciences of Europe to reanimate the old hierarchies of Hinduism. These journals, while celebrating Hindu Science, simultaneously led a vigorous campaign against indigenous ghosts and older supernatural practices that the authors argued were the product of female and lower class “superstition.”

The new and indigenously developed “Science” of spirituality merits critical attention, as it constituted a new convergence of rationality and faith. Existing literature on the Indian spiritualist movement focuses almost exclusively on its institutional aspect by considering groups such as the Theosophical Society as a site for the development of radical anticolonial nationalism.⁴⁷ There is, however, a salient lacuna in historical research when it comes to discerning the *appeal* of Spiritualism as a new characterization of “science” and faith in the Indian colonial context.

Scholars of Bengal have expressed surprise at the remarkable revival of a hardened and restrictive Hinduism from the 1850s in the region.⁴⁸ An older oral world of supernatural practices embodied in a repertoire of spells, spirit-posessions, charms, and local deities was replaced by a textual and orthodox version of Hinduism, which eventually recast itself as the consciousness of the fledgling nation. This book expands on this existent scholarship on religious revivalism but departs from it in one significant way. My main contention is that, in order to understand the habitation of religion under modernity, we need to approach the problem not through the highway of religious orthodoxies but the backroads of the more diffuse category of the supernatural—through public rituals and acts of “faith” and “superstition.”

The ghost worlds of the nineteenth century suggest that the relationship between older and newer supernatural practice is of consequence because

this relationship brings together discourses that have been insufficiently considered in the same frame of reference. In the context of the colonial world, more thought needs to be given to the construction of the modern “public sphere,” which, even while claiming irreligiosity in its juridical scaffolding, can display a surfeit of religiosity in its civic practices. The nation-states’ preoccupation with past-ness and modern disciplinary history has been the focus of much recent scholarship.⁴⁹ But what this scholarship lacks is an adequate understanding of the more insidious process by which previous conceptions of “religion,” due to its perceived location in modernity’s past, enter the modern public sphere through the more dangerous categories of cultural memory and civic rituals. The emergent discourse on “Scientific Spiritualism” cannot simply be seen as proof of the resilience of Hinduism. Instead, this book indicates the complex interaction among categories of faith, nation formation, and historical consciousness whereby the very outlines of what is perceived to be “religion” can be altered under modernity.

The substitution of vernacular heterodoxies of faith by elitist Hindu homogeneity cannot be adequately understood if we approach such a process from the elite perspective. Instead of this top-down methodology, my project examines the problem from “below,” that is, through a study of older Indigenous magic and supernatural practices. This methodology demonstrates how the exorcism of older ghosts from the modern public sphere was intended to have a series of complex consequences ranging from the gendering of belief to the anchoring of a specific version of Hinduism as the voice of the new nation.

The constitutive sources for this project can be indexed along similar methodological lines. On the one hand, I look at vernacular ghost stories, personal accounts, and various manuals on magic such as texts describing Indic and Islamic practices of catarchic astrology and astral magic. These texts are then balanced and contrasted with more official ones, such as government records outlining official mortuary policies, proceedings of the several spiritual societies, and the journals that sought to harden popular opinion on “superstition.”

While Science remained for the Bengali elite a marker of modernity and nationhood, my project examines how the same elite redrew the borders of what was deemed to be scientific in order to suit their specific historic needs. This book is thus an intervention in larger disciplinary concerns about the relationships among religious studies, the history of science, and social history. The invocation of modern Science to marginalize older ghosts into the realm of the “feminine” and “superstition” outlines for us several congruent historical processes that are impossible to understand through the lens of a

single discipline. The Bengali elite was trying to construct a new Science of spirituality that was commensurate with both continuous forms of thought, such as Hinduism, and discontinuous historical phenomena, such as the increasing elaborations of modern state forms and modern institutional grids.

Recent world events indicate that religious identity has clearly moved from being the cultural unconscious of modernity to one of its more violent markers. In other words, the location of religion in the public sphere is now so entrenched that policymakers tend to use “modern” categories to acknowledge its stability, such as “political” Islam and Hindu “fundamentalism.” This book, while tracing this process of imbrication between faith and modernity, shows that the ability to anticipate and analyze faith does not necessarily depend on a study of textual orthodoxies but, rather, on popular civic practices that arrogate the right to speak for “religion.” The ghosts in this book show us that history “has many cunning passages, contrived corridors” through which dominant ideas take shape. And once we grasp this, “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?”⁵⁰