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Equality and Economic Reason

The English bring the economic and the political together. But in their case the contradiction sometimes becomes apparent. Brahmins, however, perfected a way of bringing together the economic and the spiritual. This they did by valorizing not the commodity but the gift!

—Shibram Chakraborty, *Moscow Banam Pondicherry*

Colonialism subtly transformed the relationship between politics and economics. If earlier, as we have seen in chapter 2, the term *artha* implied a co-constitution of economic and political power, now the company state fashioned its primary technology of rule via a discursive and material separation of political and economic rights among its subjects.[1] As Sudipta Sen shows, the East India Company undertook, in the name of free trade, a rigorous "settling" of markets, so as to turn markets into purely economic sites, indifferent to the political, religious, and cultural networks in which they were earlier embedded.[2] Indigenous rulers were denied their traditional political, military, and commercial powers and, through new revenue arrangements, were "pacified" into being pure economic subjects—that is, rentiers, whose mandate as landlords (rather than kings) was to revert land from being territory to being resource, and peasants and artisans from being subjects to a polity to being tenants and workers. As I have argued elsewhere, colonialism enforced market exchange as the only permissible civil interface between diverse peoples—such as

forest tribes and settled cultivators—on the grounds that unmediated political interaction across social heterogeneity was bound to degenerate into violence.[3]

The argument behind this novel separation of the political and the economic was Kantian—namely, the spirit of commerce converted nations to "perpetual peace," cosmopolitanism, and economic productivity.[4] The implication, however, was recognizably Marxian—namely, modern power was "rule by the economic," an autonomous force that no longer needed the help of political or cultural power (as in feudal or despotic times) in order to extract value. In Marx's telling, the economic became the main operative force in modernity because capitalism dispossessed peasants and artisans of access to the means of production and thus forced them to sell their labor power in the market of their own accord, driven by no other logic except the purely economic logic of survival.[5] Marx did not notice, however, that "primitive accumulation" was not just a process of alienating subjects from their economic means but also a process of instituting an unprecedented separation between economic rights and political rights.

Horace William Clift, the earliest writer of a political economy textbook in India, expressed in 1835 this emergent sensibility of the economic as an autonomous and automatic force (best illustrated by Adam Smith's "invisible hand"). "Every young man will be controlled by its principles," Clift said, "whether he learns them or not."[6] As Iman Mitra shows, political economy texts were now copiously translated into Bengali and David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, and John Stuart Mill frequently invoked, as economics came to be pitched as a foundational imperative, derived from basic livelihood practices common to all peoples, irrespective of their particular cultural and political predilections.

Benoy Kumar Sarkar translated *Sukraniti*, a medieval *arthashastric* text, in 1914 to demonstrate the "economic basis" of state power in precolonial India. He also translated Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and State*, Paul Lafargue's *The Evolution of Property from Savagery to Civilization* in 1928, and Friedrich List's *Das nationale System der politischen Ökonomie* in 1932. He frequently spoke about Marxism, started the first economic periodical in Bengali (*Arthik Unnati*), and set up the Bengal Economic Association. Sarkar saw himself as a kind of economic activist, advising Bengali businessmen, associating with the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, and educating the public in the intricacies of insurance and banking.[7] In his two-volume book *Economic Development*, he argued that economic relations among nations could be represented as statistically measurable parities and inequalities, enabling economic actors to predict and plan for a nation's future by comparing it with the economic trajectories of other nations.[8] Sarkar even believed the Perma-

nent Settlement of Bengal to be equivalent to the English enclosures, both leading to capitalism. To him *zamindars* were India's first capitalists, who operated as bankers to the peasant—an unpopular political view at a time when Bengal landlordism was widely criticized as the primary cause of peasant poverty. But Sarkar insisted that economic thinking must be a nonpolitical and nonparty affair![9]

I mention Sarkar as a typical example of how colonial subjects experienced the new principle of unconditional universality and autonomy of the economic, as it came to ground the political inequality of nations. Unsurprisingly, the earliest anticolonial critique emerged in India in the form of economic nationalism in the hands of liberals and constitutionalists (though peasant revolts could be seen as an earlier form of economic criticism among those not educated in political economy).[10] The first nationalist mobilization against colonial rule in 1905 centrally involved economic activities—boycott and picketing of British goods, *swadeshi* (or self-sufficiency in manufacture, banking, and insurance), and refusal of colonial jobs and education.[11] Even the spiritually oriented Gandhi organized his political activities around familiar economic symbols—the spinning wheel, handloom, and salt. The striking of work was as important to Gandhian *satyagraha* as it was to communist class struggle, and even Ambedkar, who accused communists of narrow economism, considered the "general strike" as the epitome of political action.[12]

The rise of economic reason in India was thus predicated not just on liberal discourses of free trade and colonial technologies of rule but also on an emergent politics of equality. It was not just that equality came to be imagined in modern times primarily as economic equality à la Marxism-Leninism, but that equality, in the course of its constitution as political idea par excellence, helped entrench the modern sensibility that the economic was the most valid mode of reasoning in life and politics. And yet, even as economic reason became crucial to the critique of inequality, it never quite sufficed as the language of equality as a positive idea, that is, as more than the mere absence of inequality. For that purpose, the economic had to be resignified. In Bengal, I argue, sociology and literature overwrote the economic in ways that both echoed and rivaled spiritualist imaginations of equality, bringing me back to the proposition that equality becomes a political idea in modern times through a dialectic between the spiritual and the economic, each claiming to best embody the universal human condition and thus be the ultimate ground of politics.

The Exemplarity of the Peasant

Even prior to the systematization of economic nationalism, many were writing about the economic abjection of peasants in India. In addition to Bankim's "Samya" and "Bangadesher Krishak," there was Peary Chand Mitra's "The Zemindar and the Ryot" (1846) in the *Calcutta Review*; Dinabandhu Mitra's controversial play *Neel Darpan* (1860), on the exploitation of Bengali peasants by British indigo planters; Sanjibchandra Chattopadhyay's *Bengal Ryots* (1864), on issues of property and tenancy; R. C. Dutt's *The Peasantry of Bengal* (1874), on the history of peasant impoverishment; Lal Behari Dey's *Govinda Samanta* or *Bengal Peasant Life* (1874); Mir Mosharraf Hossain's play *Zamindar Darpan* (Mirror of Landlords, 1873); and the extraordinary reportage of *kangal* (destitute) Harinath Majumdar, in *Grambarta Prakashika* (The publication of rural news).[13]

The peasant's political potential was variously judged.[14] To a liberal such as Nehru, the peasant was a symbol of backwardness and had to be educated into modern nationalism; to Gandhi and the Congress socialists, the peasant was a symbol of national authenticity; to Ambedkar, peasant society was the den of casteism, which untouchables had to escape through education and migration to cities; to communists, peasants were a conservative force except when they were landless and thereby equivalent to the industrial proletariat; and to Maoists, peasants were a strategic force that would surround the city and help take over the state. Academic writing in India remained preoccupied with the peasant until at least the 1980s—economists discussed agrarian modes of production and the intricacies of rural class structure, sociology discussed tradition and change in rural caste and kinship systems, and historians (most recently of the subaltern studies school) wrote of peasant insurgency and everyday resistance. Despite ideological and disciplinary divisions, there was thus a general agreement about the centrality of the peasant in modern Indian politics.

And yet, it was never quite clear who or what the peasant was. Defined as a purely economic subject—as worker of the land—the peasant in Bengal, as recent scholarship shows, always already appeared as either a Muslim or an ex-untouchable Namashudra. The peasant had many names—*krishak*, or plowman; *chasha*, or a rustic; *chhotolok*, or small people (as opposed to *borolok*, the rich, and *bhadralok*, the genteel); *jotedar*, or middle peasant, who rented land from a bigger landlord; *kamia*, or landless, often bonded labor; *bargadar/adhiar*, or sharecropper; and *raiyat*, a term of Arabic origin meaning a herd or populace subject to a leader. As often, the peasant was known as Namashudra, Paundra Kshatriya, and Mahishya (new respectable names assumed by erstwhile low-caste Chandalas, Pods, and Kaivartas) and Hadi, Muchi, Dom, Kamar, Napit,

Tanti, and so forth (artisanal and service castes of fishermen, weavers, smiths, cobblers, leatherworkers, barbers, and scavengers, who often worked land part-time without entirely being peasants). But the name that became the most politically efficacious in Bengal was the ancient term *praja*, meaning subject to a king, later glossed as tenant to a *zamindar*, or landlord.

Clearly, a political overlay animated the term *praja* in ways that exceeded what would have otherwise been a purely economic term for a peasant, even though communists tried hard to popularize the term *krishak* (of the *krishak-mazdoor*, or peasant-worker duo) in place of the term *praja*, which they felt stood for smallholding peasantry rather than true revolutionary subjects, the rural proletariat.[15] And yet, in East Bengal, the peasant came to be so commonly identified as a Muslim that, as Ananya Dasgupta shows, born-Hindu communists felt compelled to assume Muslim names when campaigning there.[16] Even Pakistan came to represent the promise of a peasant utopia.[17] As important, Jogendranath Mandal, leader of the Namashudras, Ambedkar's main ally in Bengal and head of the Bengal Scheduled Castes Federation, called himself *praja-bandhu* (friend of peasants) and negotiated political alliances alternatively with the Muslim-dominated Krishak Praja Party (KPP) and the Muslim League. Even though he insisted that untouchables were a separate political entity, Dwaipayan Sen shows, Mandal believed that untouchables and Muslims had "identical economic interests" and hence were politically equivalent.[18]

Unlike earlier scholarship, which saw Namashudra and Muslim politics as class politics by another name, new scholarship on Bengal has effectively deconstructed the economism of earlier thinking. It shows that economic reason functions not in terms of any abstract universal logic but in terms of culturally specific meanings, subjectivities, and indeed proper names. While I agree with this important corrective, I feel that it is not enough to culturize or localize the economic or simply to collapse the economic into politics. To do so would be to overlook the power of the modern-day separation of the economic and the political and the very real ways in which the economic comes to be operative in our times, under the sign of equality, as both ground and limit of politics.

This becomes clear when we pay attention to the language of political claim making among Muslim and Namashudra leaders in Bengal during the 1930s and 1940s. Mandal, as Sen shows, fought land dispute cases on behalf of poor tenants of Barisal; debated amendments to the Bengal Tenancy Reform Act; demanded the representation of Scheduled Castes in the official positions of cooperative officers and debt settlement officers; used classically communist jargon such as *proletariat*, *class struggle*, and *exploitation*; and advocated

for *zamindari* abolition and land redistribution among landless Dalits.[19] Like Ambedkar, labor minister in the viceroy's executive council and law minister in Nehru's cabinet, Mandal was cooperatives minister in the provincial Bengal government and law and labor minister in the first Pakistan government—demonstrating a preoccupation with the economic on the part of both Dalit leaders. (Ambedkar's PhD thesis was also on economics.)

The Muslim-dominated KPP also made *zamindari* abolition its top demand, contra the upper-caste and upper-class-dominated Congress, which prioritized the release of political prisoners from colonial jails.[20] In *praja* discourse, the Islamic injunction against usury was reformulated as a rational economic principle—shared by Gandhians and communists—namely, that real wealth was generated out of the productive labor of peasants and workers and not out of speculation, usury, rent seeking, and inheritance.[21] Mahishya political militancy in southwest Bengal was also based on similar claims by Kaivarta peasants and fishermen to productivity. Not surprisingly, the famous Mahishya leader of Midnapur, Birendranath Sashmal, came to be known as "friend of the Muslims" (unlike other Bengal Congress leaders, who were explicitly upper caste and Hindu) owing to the rhetoric he shared with Muslim and Namashudra leadership, of the poor embodying the productive potential of the nation.[22]

Clearly the language of economic justice had become common currency—such that even as the Bengal peasant remained a deeply caste- and religion-marked figure, her political presence came to be thematized in terms of her economic potential. Even the question of political representation had at its heart economic reasoning. This had to do not just with governmental categories—majority, minority, Depressed Classes, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, labor, and so forth—which mobilized demographics as it came to be thematized, post-Malthus, as an essential part of political economy and in turn inspired subaltern demands for proportionate representation in education and employment as a form of economic justice. This had also to do with the very meaning of the vote. If limited franchise gave the vote to those who earned participatory rights in the state by paying taxes, it was now argued that peasants and workers deserved the vote even more because of their greater contribution to the gross national product. In 1935 politicians debated the issue of separate electorates for both Muslims and the industrious low-caste peasants, who were socially marginalized yet economically central to the nation.[23] Thus while the Bengal peasant never emerged as a class identity, she did emerge as an indisputably economic subject—wielding, in the name of equality, a new mode of reasoning, namely, pure economic reasoning.

Economic Reason and Its Limits

The power of economic reason did not lie in its ability to produce a universal class subject, despite the ongoing romance of working-class internationalism (and socialist pan-Islamism). It lay in its three other functions: the critique of political reason, the measure of social equivalence, and the supreme diagnostic of the age of masses.

We know that equality—a liberal coinage popularized via the global circulation of the French Revolutionary slogan "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"—appeared first as political equality, the equality of the rich and the poor in the eyes of the state. Political reason thus appeared as autonomous of and indifferent to economic reason. If the political was the domain of equality, then the economic was the domain of liberty—of the free pursuit of security and property by individuals, unconstrained by the "reason of the state." Equality had no particular purchase here, except in the minimalist sense of the "equality of opportunity." Marxism inverted this liberal arrangement. By exposing how the liberal ideal of political equality disguised and deferred the question of economic equality, Marxism showed up the limits of political reason. Marxism proposed that political form, including that of the nation, was derivative of existing economic relations. That is, while maintaining the liberal separation between the economic and the political, Marxism inverted their valence—the economic became autonomous of and prior to the political rather than vice versa. By the same logic of inversion, Marxism replaced the liberal rhetoric of equality by a powerful rhetoric of inequality.

Early Indian communists M. N. Roy and Abani Mukherjee criticized the Indian National Congress, at the height of Gandhian mass mobilization, for putting political unity before economic equality: "Non-cooperation cannot unify the nation. . . . It is bound to fail because it does not take economic laws into consideration. . . . [T]he boycott is doomed to failure, because it does not correspond, nay it is positively contrary, to the economic condition of the vast majority of the population."[24] Other Marxism-influenced writers often reiterated this politics/economics binary—stating that political sovereignty was a tired and futile idea, already "tested out in Europe fifty years ago."[25] In other words, economic reason worked by exposing the ruse and limits of pure political reason.

The power of economic reason also lay in its institution of a common measure—money in liberalism, labor time in Marxism, and number in the newly regnant discipline of statistics. Common measure rendered inequalities calculable, comparable, and thereby amenable to compensation and restitution.

The sociologist-economist Radhakamal Mukerjee, with the help of working-class students of his night school, surveyed the economic worth of diverse rural households in Bengal in ways that sought to measure and thereby render economically thinkable all aspects of everyday life. Along with listing conventional economic indices—such as area of landholding, number of plows, and distance to markets—he evaluated women's housework and other informal activities; children's contributions in selling milk, grazing cows, and catching birds; the worth of household items (jewelry, utensils and umbrellas); and even social and ritual costs.[26] Mukerjee meticulously recorded the religion and caste of each household, setting up an equivalence, via economic intermediation, across diverse social identities—a move that founded the promising though temporary Hindu-Muslim alliance in 1930s peasant politics in Bengal, without the collapse of one identity into another in the name of class.

Especially after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, innumerable tracts came to be published in Indian languages describing economic abjection as the common condition of diverse social groups: Muslim and Hindu peasant, untouchable, and Negro; "worker, peasant, fisherfolk, luggage carrier, coolie, boatman, sailor, ship-hand, cobbler, scavenger, cook, valet"; and indeed, women.[27] This proliferation of occupational and caste names thus worked not to disassemble the economic but to stage the economic as a mediatory moment allowing heterogeneous inequalities to be thought together. Achintya Kumar Sengupta (1903–76)—who was influenced by Marx and Freud, began his career by writing under a woman's name, and edited the infamously brash literary periodical *Kallol*—called himself a "poet of the shoe-makers, carpenters and sweepers."[28] And communists, while very much sticking to class rhetoric, organized the famous Calcutta sweepers' strike of 1928 in which, in an obvious case of caste action, women strikers threw polluting substances like human excreta at policemen.[29]

The power of economic reason also lay in its function as the supreme diagnostic of the times. The current historical moment was the epoch of Vaishya-*shakti*, the power of money or capital, wrote Upendranath Bandopadhyay in 1920. Economic criticism was necessary in pointing out that the wealth of the Vaishya derived from the backbreaking labor of workers and peasants.[30] Novelist and satirist Shibram Chakraborty said that inequality, and not Marxism, imposed economic reductionism on life and thought. Under capitalism, people were so preoccupied with economic survival that they had no time left for moral, intellectual, and aesthetic pursuits.[31] It was communism that promised a future beyond the economic. Many writers, including those who were formally academically trained (e.g., the Gandhian sociologist Nirmal Kumar Bose and civil servant and littérateur Annada Shankar Ray), now redeployed the caste

label Shudra for "workers of the world" and pitted global Shudra power as a counter to regnant Vaishya power.[32]

This widespread use of the economic as diagnostic of the times signaled the rise of the masses—an immeasurable entity made conceivable by precisely the economic concept of measure. Derived from the ontology of number—an infinite series without cessation or closure—it was the unbounded mass that henceforth became the bearer of equality in the popular imagination, as opposed to the strictly defined class, the enumerated but closed community of caste/religion, and the individuated domain of national civil society. Already in the late nineteenth century, Jyotiba Phule had invented the term *bahujan* (the many) as counterpoint to the power of the *bhatji-shetji* (the Brahmin and the moneylender).[33] And in "Sanhati" (Solidarity), Rabindranath Tagore, himself a critic of cultural nationalism, accounted for the uncountable masses, the "teeming millions" of the world, in terms of their economic indispensability and power.[34]

Yet despite the indisputable power of the economic—as language of political criticism, framework of mutual recognition, and index of mass politics—a purely economic rendering of the idea of equality seemed impossible. This becomes apparent when we look at early Bengali translations of terms associated with Marxism and Leninism. The first Bengali translation of *The Communist Manifesto* (by Soumendranath Tagore, 1929) translated *communism* as *sadharan svattvabad*, or "the ideal of generalized property ownership"; the *bourgeoisie* as *parasrambhogi*, or "the consumer of others' labor"; and the *proletariat* as *atmotpanna banchita sampraday*, or "those deprived of their own produce"—clumsy neologisms all.[35] We saw earlier how Bankim translated the utopian socialist ideal of the commune as *sampatti sadharanikaran*, or property "generalization." Other contemporary translations of *communism* were *samuhavad* (collectivism), *samanadhikarbad* (equal rights), *svadhin sattvadhikarbad* (free property holding), *sarvasattvabad* (property for all), *samabayabad* (cooperativism), and *samaj samyabad* (social egalitarianism).[36]

A 1932 translation by Krishna Goswami rendered *The Communist Manifesto* as *Samyabadir Fatwa* (Egalitarian's declaration), as did a 1938 translation by Brajabihari Barman. *Class* was initially translated as *sampraday*, a term earlier used to denote religious communities or sects such as Vaishnav and Saiva, and then later became *sreni*, a term used to denote commercial and occupational guilds.[37] Rajarshi Dasgupta tells the story of how Subhas Mukhopadhyay's translation of the term *labor power* as *gatar* created great controversy in communist circles, because in Bengali the term had an intensely sensuous connotation, used colloquially for a woman's body in the context of domestic and sexual chores and

was thus seen as not abstract or economic enough![38] These moments of intranslability showed up the inadequacy of the purely economic as a language of political equality.

A Spiritual Detour

Economic reason, to become adequate to the thinking of equality, thus needed to be resignified, and at times this involved a cross-referencing of the economic and the spiritual. Consider the example of two early communists. Shibram Chakraborty did not deny the spiritual antecedents of the modern idea of equality. In his polemic *Moscow Banam Pondicherry*, he invoked Buddhism and Islam against those who called communism a foreign and irreligious ideal.[39] He saw the epic battlefield of Kurukshetra and the modern battlefield of class struggle, the Bhagavad Gita and *Das Kapital* as analogous. He even called class struggle *mahati vinashti*—the "profound destruction"—that, according to the Upanishads, preceded cosmic creative action.[40] But he was also fully committed to economic reason.

Chakraborty said that spiritual discourses valorize ascetic, elite, and exemplary political selves, of the nature of the Nietzschean Übermensch.[41] Such selves can never be the subject of equality because by definition the exemplary presumes the average and the ordinary. Economic reason, on the other hand, works with quotidian selves of the poor and the uncultivated, selves that are outward-looking and expressive. Because the economic is an inherently shared condition, needing no labor of interpretation, the ordinary economic man always already recognizes himself in others and consequently pulls others into his own ambit. His political efficacy lies in this outward projection of the self rather than in any refined interiority. After all, "It is sunlight, and not the sun itself, which makes life possible on earth"![42]

The spiritual virtuoso is the one who renders others zero. The common economic self, however, is the (non)number infinity.[43] (Note the play on number and measure here.) This infinity, however, is not a metaphysical principle. It is the infinity that we experience in our immersion in the materiality of the world.[44] Spiritualists, who say that the Bolshevik mass man has only materiality and no "personality," forget that unlike in the market, in nature no two entities are ever the same.[45] Spiritualists see wealth as a function of desire and possession. They are guilty of this misconception because they believe that politics necessarily entails the sacrifice of self and property—a cruel joke on the poor who have hardly anything to sacrifice in the first place. The communist, however, knows that wealth becomes generative not in possession and

accumulation but in circulation, distribution, and socialization. It is a modern economic insight that like "economic capital," "capital I-s" too must "flow unobstructed through society," Chakraborty said, playing with the double entendre of *capital* as a term, denoting productive wealth, on the one hand, and the first-person pronoun, on the other![46]

Equality thus is neither sacrifice nor exchange, as spiritualists and bourgeois liberals, respectively, would have us believe. Equality is a kiss, for in the kiss, one takes as one gives. The way to future equality, then, is not just the externality of touch, as Gandhi implied in his criticism of untouchability, but the intimacy of sexual encounters and the intermixing of blood, especially regarding the Shudra and the Muslim.[47] A highly unorthodox interpretation of economic reason, if any! Chakraborty then turned to the literary.[48] For literature, or *sahitya*, literally meaning "to be with," inspires *sahridayata* or "one-heartedness." Clearly, to Chakraborty, the mode of coming together in the face of sublime art, like coming together in erotic pleasure, was proper to the experience of equality.[49] Harking back to India's literary traditions, he said that while Brahmins wrote legal treatises, non-Brahmins like Valmiki and Vyasa (the authors of Ramayana and Mahabharata, respectively) wrote epic poetry. He exclaimed, "The creator of India is the Shudra, its natives are Shudra, this is a Shudra civilization."[50]

If Chakraborty invoked the Shudra as his preferred figure of equality, M. N. Roy invoked the Muslim. And if Chakraborty invoked the literary as metaphor of the economic, Roy invoked sociology. To Roy, Islam was the "ideology of a new social relation."[51] Equality was unknown before Islam. The great civilizations of Greece, Rome, Persia, India, and China oppressed servile classes with impunity until the first caliph, in a primitive formulation of economic reason, declared that surplus in the hands of producers inspired trade and prosperity. It was the mobile and minimalist life of the Arabs—and the attendant social virtues of hard work and piety—that made this economic insight possible at a time when only worship and war were recognized as glorious vocations. In early Islam, labor for the first time became a source of freedom.[52] Islamic equality was subsequently reforged in the equality of the battlefield. War is intimately connected to trade, Roy argued, for if commerce is about competition, then annihilation of the competitor in war is its primordial or elemental form. So, Roy claimed, warrior-like characteristics and commercial acumen were native to Arabs.[53]

In their encounter with distant lands, strange peoples, and unfamiliar customs, traders develop tolerance and sympathy, keen powers of observation, and an empirical orientation. They also acquire the power of abstraction, for "profit

is an idea abstracted from concrete commodities."[54] Roy then devoted an entire chapter to Islamic rationalist philosophy, discussing Al Farabi, Al Gazzali, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sina, and others, to demonstrate how the European Enlightenment would have been impossible without mediation by Arab theoretical acumen. He also dwelled at length on the cosmopolitan nature of Islamic empires, which gave political asylum to heretics from Christian Europe and Zoroastrian Persia. Islam permitted freedom of worship within the empire, on condition of political fidelity and economic tribute, encompassing difference within the capacious idea of one abstract God. For the same reason, Shudras and untouchables in India converted en masse to Islam in order to escape caste oppression.[55]

Roy argued that Islam produced the only true monotheism of the world and that monotheism was the ideal best suited for equality. Whereas Christianity, with its Trinitarian doctrine, turned idolatrous, Islam perfected the most abstract and absolute concept of God—singular, underived, and inscrutable. Muhammad's, unlike Voltaire's, however, was not a "civil religion" in service of economic exchange and political unity. He invented the very idea of God in the most foundational sense, in that he proposed the fundamentally unthinkable principle of *creatio ab nihilo*, or creation out of nothingness. Rationalist religions—such as paganism in Greece, Hinduism in India, and eventually Christianity in Europe—could never imagine God in such perfect alterity. They remained anthropomorphic or animistic and ultimately fell back into some sort of pantheism. Pantheism saw God as pervasive of the world and therefore gave a theological overlay to "natural laws." Islam, on the other hand, being committed to the absolute otherness of God, placed him so far above the world that it opened up the "possibility of doing without him entirely."[56] Herein lay the "subversive" paradox of Islam. While being the "highest form of religion," Islamic monotheism inaugurated an age of materialism, Roy said, quoting the neo-Kantian socialist Friedrich Albert Lange. Hence Islam as a religion was not much more than a set of ordinary rules for everyday life (the parallel is obvious with Ambedkar's account of Buddhism in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*). It enjoined political sense, community sensibility, and personal virtues like cleanliness, sobriety, fasting, prayer, charity, and almsgiving. Its imagination of paradise was purely worldly, being a place of affluence and pleasure denied to most in this world. This is what makes Islam the most attractive religion for the poor and the unequal, Roy argued.[57] If only Hindus understood this, they would overcome their animosity toward Muslims.

Evidently, the positing of economic reason as proper to a politics of equality required, in early twentieth-century India, unusual retellings of the relationship between the spiritual and the economic. Neither Chakraborty nor Roy

posited a clear-cut dichotomy between the two. On the contrary, in their writings the economic appears to come into its own via a detour through religion—a necessary detour that makes the economic, like the spiritual, signal the universal creaturely condition that was human life. (The Gandhian economist J. C. Kumarappa was not such an exception after all, when he proposed an economics shot through with spiritual commitment to truth and nonviolence.)[58]

Economic Reason and Sociology

Radhakamal Mukerjee, founder and member of the Lucknow school of economics and sociology, recalled that his interest in economics arose from his daily contact with poverty and squalor in the Calcutta slums. Around the time of the Swadeshi movement, long before the rise of Marxism and Leninism in India, Mukerjee and his friends embarked on a "declassing" enterprise, calling themselves "ministers of the poor" and "giving up shirts, coats and shoes."[59] Mukerjee's intellectual project was to reinvent economics, a "static science" with no sense of either "energy kinesis" or social dynamics, on an "etho-sociological plane."[60] He proposed a double movement of thought—of descent into the physiognomic, biological, and environmental and of ascent into the psychological, sociological, and spiritual.[61] Accordingly, he proposed a revision of economic concepts, including well-established ones such as demand, supply, price, value, and utility. For example, disputing the theory that price was a universal measure of equivalence, Mukerjee argued that market price was but a social convention, temporarily agreed on by people for the convenience of economic exchange. Classical economics suffered from category confusion when it mistook such a popular and contingent "rule of thumb" measure as an eternal scientific principle.[62]

Mukerjee argued that economic value was determined by neither price (classical economics) nor labor (Marxist economics) but by the net result of energy expended and energy recouped in any economic activity. Progress and efficiency therefore had to do with not just productivity but also the net measure of energy use, loss, and waste. There was thus an element of justice, a calculus of repair and restoration, involved in every economic formation. Classical economics recognized only the "irreducible minimum" of human life—subsistence and need—and was blind to the question of "physiological justice," which was synonymous to "the principle of work."[63] "Arithmetical and mechanical" measures of utility, even the so-called Benthamite qualitative turn toward "pleasure and pain," failed to grasp this basic fact of economic justice.[64]

The fundamental error of classical economics lay in its imagination of the economic subject as an interest-maximizing rational individual—"chronically conscious," with only "external relations" to social life.[65] Such asocial, ceaselessly calculative beings existed nowhere in reality. Humans were driven not only by social customs but also by their unconscious as well as by the "multiplicatory and intensifying" logic of numbers, "multitude, mass, crowd and folk" being animated by the "resonance and reverberatory effects" of "sympathy, imitation, suggestion, play."[66] In any case, there was no universal human interest (or will) that was indifferent to time and place.[67] Worse still, classical economics failed to do justice even to its own fiction of the individual. Economics produced a "hypostasis of functions," disassembling the individual into "mutually exclusive and repellent fragments" via the popular concept of "factors of production"—such as "landlord-man, laborer-man, capitalist-man"—as if "the differential productivity of each factor" (land, capital, and labor à la Ricardo) could be neatly separated and precisely measured, without any reference to each other. In real life, however, humans always functioned as "mixed" economic subjects, such as "artisan-cultivator or landlord-capitalist."[68]

Mukerjee proposed an alternative wage theory. Fair wage was determined by five factors, he said: one, the energy use, waste, and recovery involved in the transformation of matter (contra the "productivity theory of wages"); two, the optimal recoupment of labor power (contra the "subsistence theory of wages"); three, socially mediated demand and supply of labor, involving "custom, interest, need, expectation, desire" and not just abstract market mechanisms; four, "social and regional values" that ascribe differential worth to different kinds of labor (an obvious reference to caste); and five, a measure of "cooperative productivity." Classical economics denied the basic fact that wage, rent, and profit contained "apart from the share due to specific productivity of individual agents and factors, certain elements which they claim in virtue of being partners in a joint concern." Wages therefore must index not only individual need and productivity but also the "scale and structure" of cooperation, in which each member is taken as "equal and interchangeable" with others. In other words, the "restoration of land, labor and capital as a whole" cannot be founded on "the classical version of individual justice" but on "a new scheme of socialistic justice."[69]

Mukerjee declared that "communalism" was the universal economic form of the future.[70] The resonance with communism is obvious. Mukerjee drew "lessons from nature"—from examples of "accumulation" of water and food by desert species and of "interspecies cooperation."[71] Humanity, too, was evolving

toward this universal end. In early stages, communalism was mechanical and instinctive, as among herds and swarms. In the second stage, that of slavery and serfdom, communalism took the form of "polymorphism," such as among bees and ants, demonstrating elaborate specialization, zero competition, a thwarting of class struggle, and complete suppression of individuality. In the third stage, a medieval "particulate system" came into existence, involving semi-independent guilds and corporations, loosely owing allegiance to a sovereign. The fourth stage was of absolutism and centralism, resulting in a dialectic between statism and militant-competitive individualism, causing "anarchism, class struggle, sex strife and incessant strikes." Contemporary capitalism, with its monopolies and cartels, and state socialism both exemplified this current moment. The future and final stage would be "communalism," when central command would become redundant and humans would work on the principle of immanent and voluntary social cooperation. Contemporary socialism and communism, despite their current state-centricity, intimated this imminent future.[72]

As must be obvious, Mukerjee's critique of classical economics was not of universalism as such but of its antisocial assumptions. He believed that economics was indeed universally grounded in "energetics" and "vitalities," but he insisted that vital life processes acquired distinct "value patterns" in different regions of the world. A meticulous comparison of "regional" economic formations was therefore essential, which would show up homologies, but not homogeneity, of global life-forms.[73] An unthinking imposition of foreign economic principles on a society was therefore both economically unsound and politically unjust. Even the seemingly universal socialist principle—of the eight-hour workday—did not apply to humid, tropical contexts such as India, where longer work hours, with intermittent rest periods, and a steady rather than intense pace of work was more worker friendly.[74] Similarly, private property rights on land, as introduced in Bengal by the Permanent Settlement, were a foreign principle derived from Roman demesne law and led to grave distortions in Indian economy, causing ceaseless state intervention in rural life via the litigation work of civil courts.[75]

Dhurjati Prasad Mukerjee—a younger member of the Lucknow school and a maverick thinker who called himself a "Marxologist" (rather than an ideologically committed Marxist)[76]—wrote a short outline of the history of value.[77] In political economy, he began, value was initially imagined as both use value and exchange value. But the concept of use, in the absence of any sensitivity toward concrete life-forms, soon became unthinkable. It became mere "datum" and was "politely dismissed" from the academy. Only exchange value remained

conceivable as an economic fact because it could be measured numerically as price. Price, an unstable and free-floating abstraction, was subsequently rationalized by tying it to the concept of utility. Economists then invented a "psychological law" to accompany the abstract concept of utility, by forging the "marvelous" tool of the "margin" and of utility's diminishing returns. But the old problem returned. Margin—the limit beyond which value addition slowed down or turned negative—could be measured no better than could the earlier concepts of need or use. And yet, the concept of marginality was not discarded. Economists merely replaced cardinal analysis by ordinal analysis, as relative ranking of commodity values with respect to each other began to substitute all imaginations of value as a quality inherent in things and people. The result: a "general equilibrium theory," a self-referential framework in which markets interacted with each other via pricing mechanisms, without any reference whatsoever to people and their lives. Economic thinking now took to hypermathematization and "cold conceptualization" and produced a division between economy and society that became impossible to breach, either conceptually or practically.[78]

Dhurjati Prasad Mukerjee's stake lay in a sociological rendering of economic categories. Class, he said, was a sociological category, which included "the economic concept of surplus value"; the political aspect of "movement through conflict"; the philosophical aspect of dialectical thinking; and the interpersonal aspect of "social distance," the affective and psychological way in which social division, be it class or caste, was articulated in real life.[79] His remarkable Bengali essay "Amra o Tahara" (Us and them) set up a conversation between a bookish middle-class intellectual and a group of nine-to-five clerks (Mukerjee stated that pretending to dialogue with the working classes was an unforgivable conceit). The purpose was to try to imagine the everyday ways in which economic division, between thinkers and workers, came to be expressed in society. A fascinating exercise, showing up moments of utter transparency as well as funny misrecognitions, this dialogue dwelled on a range of topics—from music and literature to conflict and revolution. Responding to petty clerks who claimed that the "masses" were inherently revolutionary, Mukherjee said that revolution was a middle-class obsession. Peasants wanted bigger land; workers wanted better wages, better working hours, and dignity in the workplace. In other words, economic reason was a mass sensibility, while politics was an intellectual orientation![80] No wonder the communist leader P. C. Joshi took the work of the Mukerjees seriously, even though neither could strictly be called a Marxist.[81]

Economic Reason and the Literary

Most of Dhurjati Prasad Mukerjee's Bengali writings were on art, literature, and music, while his English writings were more discipline-based. He ended his Bengali essay "The Sorry State of Economics" with an appeal—that the essay never be translated into English.[82] Clearly, he saw his native tongue as a language of candor, allowing a certain literary affordance to his critique (he in fact believed that societies had "personalities," thus ascribing a literary aspect to a social scientific category).[83] Mukerjee also wrote a trilogy—*Antashila* (The flow within), *Abarta* (Whirlpool), and *Mohana* (Delta), novels referencing the journeying of rivers—in which the hero, an introspective and intellectualized middle-class man, moves from failed domesticity to spirituality and eventually, in a moment of final resolution, to working-class politics in Kanpur.[84] Radhakamal Mukerjee also saw it fit to write of poverty and inequality in the genres of novels and plays. His novel *Sasvata Bhikhari* (The eternal beggar) echoed Tolstoy's "back to the people" slogan, *Nidrita Narayan* (The sleeping god) provided an account of slum children, and *Manimekhala* depicted the goddess Parvati impersonating a temple dancer and taking on her poverty and disease.[85]

At one place in "Amra o Tahara," Dhurjati Prasad Mukerjee asks, whether women can be considered part of the "masses." He continues: "Women's work does not cease even at home—cooking, looking after children. . . . The condition of today's women is worse than that of medieval slave women."[86] This off-the-cuff statement gives us a clue to the literary resignification of the economic in Bengal in the early through middle twentieth century. It seems to me that women's lives and labor were critical to the overwriting of economics in ways that exceeded politics and signified the problem of life as such, as is apparent in the work of the most well-known communist writer of the times, Manik Bandopadhyay (1908–56). Dhurjati Prasad Mukerjee, incidentally, was one of the first to review this upcoming novelist. Curiously, he found Bandopadhyay's writing somewhat "feminine," a counterintuitive reading, if any, of self-consciously male, revolutionary, "realist" prose.[87]

Most relevant for our purposes is Bandopadhyay's novel *Janani* (Mother; 1935). Like all communists of his time, Manik had read and been inspired by the novel *Mother* by Maxim Gorky.[88] And yet nothing could be as different from *Mother* as *Janani*. Gorky's novel presents the story of a woman, with an alcoholic husband, who brings up her son to be a revolutionary and joins him in his political work. Bandopadhyay's Shyama, too, has a failure of a husband who, when he cannot provide for his family, runs away for days at a time and begs, borrows, and steals, dragging his family down with him. Shyama brings up her

children on her own, with ad hoc help from relatives and neighbors. She is obsessed with money and breathless with household chores, care work, and renovating her house over and over again. She saves and scrounges, keeps a close watch on property and inheritance, jealously eyes the wealth of relatives and friends, rents out rooms, and engages in incessant petty politics around debts and charities, all for the future of her children. At one point, ironically, her husband, now ill and at home, accuses her of being petty, miserly, and money-minded. Despite all her efforts, however, Shyama ends up losing her house and living on the charity of, first, a relative and then her own son, who eventually has to leave his studies to take up a petty clerk's job, breaking Shyama's heart.[89]

Bandopadhyay's *Janani* is the story of a woman driven by a highly personalized economic logic and embodying its ultimate collapse. An overly rational, calculative, managerial woman, Shyama ends up on the verge of madness when all her schemes fail. She eventually lapses into a tragic muteness in a final failure of motherhood. The narrative unfolds as a series of domestic situations, in a way not quite expected from a revolutionary author. Yet even as the story is indisputably a woman's story, wherein tedious domestic details seem to tire out readers as much as the characters, the real protagonist here is the economy as such, as it unfolds in everyday, intimate life.

Bandopadhyay makes explicit the impossible economy of women's lives and labor in an eerie short story titled "The Hand." The story's main character, Mahamaya, has beautiful, strong hands, even though her body has shriveled from a childhood mishap. Her hands, however, have taken on a life of their own—they work ceaselessly. When they don't find work, they destroy—tearing up saris, uprooting saplings, even hurting others. Mahamaya worries that some night her hands might even strangle her sleeping husband. Mahamaya finally cuts off her hands on a paper-cutting machine—screaming that she wants to live but without her hands.[90] Incidentally, both Shyama and Mahamaya are other names for Kali. One wonders if Bandopadhyay makes a deliberate ironic move in his choice of names for these hyperactive, industrious, yet lost economic subjects. He might have, given that in his most famous novel, *Boatman of the River Padma*, he calls his impoverished fisherman hero Kuber, after the god of wealth!

In a remarkable series of short stories on the topic of wives, Bandopadhyay creates a strange mirroring of men's and women's work, with women's work acting as a mode of exposure of men's professional and economic reason. The wife in "The Shopkeeper's Wife" amplifies her husband's commercial instinct to such an impossible extent that she ends up hoarding her husband's hard-earned capital, leading to a collapse of his business.[91] The wife in "The Clerk's

Wife" takes on her husband's disempowerment at his workplace and becomes a pathologically obedient and disciplined subject—fearing even to step out onto the terrace of their home without permission.[92] And the wife in "The Littérateur's Wife" tries to literally enact the lives of her husband's women protagonists, demanding from the writer such perfect fidelity to his own fiction that he eventually stops writing![93]

I am not suggesting that Bandopadhyay deliberately intends to use women's work as a strategy to overwrite conventional economic logic. But there is no denying that women's lives become, in his writing, a crucial site for staging the dramatic aporia of pure economic reason. Bandopadhyay's reflections on his own vocation are critical in this regard. Like many other communists of his time, Bandopadhyay imagined an equivalence across factory labor, intellectual and artistic labor, agrarian labor, untouchable degraded labor, and women's work—in effect denaturalizing the "division of labor" and "comparative advantage" arguments that undergirded classical economics, on the one hand, and shored up modern justifications of caste and gender inequalities, on the other. Writing literature is not an act of genius, Bandopadhyay said; it is labor, like any other form of labor.[94] Those who say that writers should never write for money and that art should be for art's sake are bluffing. It is like saying that wageworkers are complicit in capitalist profiteering simply because they accept wages. Littérateurs selling their labor in the market do not necessarily compromise their art—for what is the market, after all, if not the reading public? The masses, it is true, are used to sentimental literature. But isn't it the communist writer's calling to revolutionize popular taste, a political task no different from the economic task of creating a new market for new commodities?[95]

In the context of modern Britain, Mary Poovey argues that the rise of political economy as a genre of writing, independent of and different from fiction, rested on a conceptual distinction between economic value, which could be priced, and aesthetic value, which was priceless, invaluable, and eternal.[96] Bandopadhyay argues precisely against this division of values when he pitches artistic labor as just another kind of labor, with its inherent economic logic bolstering, rather than undercutting, its political and aesthetic logics. In the powerful short story "Shilpi" (Artist), Bandopadhyay depicts weavers striking work because cloth traders are supplying cheap thread for the mass manufacture of low-cost *gamchhas* (towels). Madan leads the strike, because he is an artist, who would never weave anything less than elegant saris. Weavers are starving; looms are silent; Madan's famished, pregnant wife is on the verge of collapse; and his mother pleads and prays for him to resume work. But Madan is a proud artist. Despite being a low-caste Tanti, he would not weave low-quality

textiles. Nor would he touch the feet of the Brahmin middleman, even when the latter tries to cajole him into resuming work, massaging Madan's aching feet in an embarrassing reversal of caste roles. At the end, Madan is heard running his loom deep in the night. Neighbors fear that he has broken the strike. But Madan has taken to running an empty loom. His body aches without work, he says. Everyone feels vindicated. After all, "the day Madan weaves a *gamchha*, the sun will rise in the west."[97]

And yet Bandopadhyay does make a slip, inadvertently calling the activity of writing *sadhana* (and not merely *sram* or labor). *Sadhana*, a classical Indian term, has the double connotation of disciplined work and spiritual self-cultivation.[98] Women's household work has a similar double valence, denoting both disciplined industry and committed service and care—which is perhaps why Bandopadhyay repeatedly falls back into a depiction of women's household labor so as to stage the economic as a kind of "artfulness," involving sentiment, affection, contingency, failure, and above all, human relationships, a far cry from the economic as an abstract measure of equivalence.

Sabitri Roy's 1950s novel on the Tebhaga movement—*Paka Dhaner Gan* (The song of the ripened paddy), translated into English as *Harvest Song*—does the same.[99] A communist dissident whose novel *Swaralipi* was censored by the Communist Party, Roy chooses in this narrative to move around economic issues: agriculture, landlordism, forced labor, the grain market, speculation, black marketing, famine, war finance, industrial wages, strikes, prices, and unemployment; the vagaries of diverse professions such as spinning, weaving, basket-making, nursing, schoolteaching, singing, performing, and begging; and, most important, household work. Yet these issues pan out via women's lives, casting global and national economic forces into personal and intimate ones. When the low-caste, college-educated peasant leader Partha Das presents a copy of Gorky's *Mother* to Debaki, an overworked, abandoned young wife in the village, he thinks to himself:

> She was the one to whom he wanted to reach out, *because she was the world.* Her sorrows, her poverty, her privations were what the great world suffered too. He saw her everywhere.
>
> The ground seemed to turn to stone with cold. A Muslim household was frying *dal* nearby—the strong smell wafted through the air.[100]

The communist leader experiences the economic subject as embodied in the common, domesticated woman and as materialized through kitchen smells. Partha feels that ringing through the world is "a great choral harmony of suffering, sung only in women's voices."[101]

At the end of the novel a conversation is staged around the kitchen stove. The men urge the women to give up household chores. Women are meant for revolutionary tasks, they say. The women insist that there is something both necessary and ethical involved in domestic work, so widely denigrated in radical circles because no value or price is put on it in the formal discourse of economics.[102] But domestic work is a way of owning up to the wider world, owning up to apparently impersonal global forces. Women's lives thus end up becoming a restatement of public economic reason.

Conclusion

We often believe that the economic and the spiritual are antagonistic imperatives, the former attending to number and measure, the latter to the incalculable and immeasurable aspects of life. With respect to equality as a political idea, however, the economic and the spiritual, I have tried to show, always already appear locked in a dialectic without resolution. The economic and the spiritual both seek to index the shared, if not universal, creaturely predicament of humans in the world. Both dwell on presocial aspects of human life in its animality, mortality, desire, and intimacy, wherein humans reappear as a species being rather than divided by names and identities. Or, as in the case of literary overwriting of economics, humans appear as women. Most important, the spiritual and the economic both claim to continue their transformative work before the institution and after the abeyance of politics, in personal, domestic, intimate, and inner spaces. In other words, both claim to be extrapolitical forces that simultaneously drive and delimit the political—catapulting the very idea of equality itself to a register beyond politics, even as politics necessarily carries on in its name. Perhaps one can then say that equality never really becomes a political idea, let alone a norm and ideology, even though it operates as a frame of reference within which politics becomes legible and cognizable in the first place.