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MESSIANIC THEMES IN SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE:
READING BIBHUTIBHUSHAN BANERJI IN THE LIGHT OF AGAMBEN

“What does it mean to live in the Messiah, and what is the messianic life? What is
the structure of messianic time?”
Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains*¹

“Since then I’ve been holed up in the house for two years. Mr. Cakrabarti doesn’t
give me a salary or anything, but I don’t mind. I look after the place, I sell eggplants
and bananas. I watch them dance every night. I live with them. And I never step
foot outside the house.”
Bibhutibhushan Banerji, “A Strange Attachment”²

Different kinds of time permeate Bibhutibhushan Banerji’s stories – stalled, compacted, broken, frozen, refracted time. Time is not the only theme in Bibhutibhushan’s delicately-assembled texts, nor is it even the most important one: the Protean way cruelty can morph from shape to shape in his work, the eerie caprice of human affection, the terrifying dissection reality performs upon hope in so many of his tales. The simple village backgrounds Bibhutibhushan paints for us contrast starkly with the complexity of the emotions he stages against them. In over half a dozen stories, however, the idea of time – of multiple times – is foregrounded as a motif in itself.³ In one of the

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on a Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford University Press, 2005), 18. Many thanks to Chandrahas Choudhury, poetry editor of the journal *The Caravan*, for introducing me to the short fiction of Bibhutibhushan Bandyhopadhyay.

² Bibhutibhushan Bandyhopadhyay, *A Strange Attachment and Other Stories*, trans. Phyllis Granoff (Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1984), 29. All references in English will be to this edition. All references to the Bengali text will be to *Bibhutibhushan Galpasamagra* (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh, 1975), 2 vols.

³ In one of Bibhutibhushan’s letters, he writes: “The essence of my literature lies in the depiction of the vastness of space and the passing of time” – cit. in Sunil Kumar Chattopadhyaya, *Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya*, trans. Ashok Dev Choudhuri (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994), 44.

Upanishads there is a familiar reference to time (*kala*) as that in which all things are cooked⁴; in Bibhutibhushan's stories, it might be said, a number of different times are 'cooked'.

Philology

To even approach an examination of the Messianic in something as perceivably remote as "South Asian Literature", some kind of philological preamble is required. Agamben, in *The Time That Remains*, reveals his impatience with the "feeble opposition that sets the classical world against Judaism"⁵, the neat, easy division which magically separates the Semitic from the Indo-European. Hypothetically, if one were to accept such an opposition, then the task of locating messianic ideas in texts by modern Hindu writers would have to appeal to two kinds of influence in order to justify such cross-cultural ventures. Ruling out a universalism which would see 'messianic impulses' in cultures as diverse as Mayan, West African and Polynesian, two serious options would present themselves to the South Asian scholar trying to explain the presence of messianic and eschatological tropes in modern Indian literature: the first would be the influence of indigenous Christian and Muslim traditions on the subcontinent, Christianity being particularly likely to have impressed some kind of temporality upon generations of Indian writers educated in the missionary school system.⁶ The second option would see a form of secularized messianism and its accompanying eschatologies, mediated through a general and thoroughly non-religious experience of modernity, as playing a central role in whatever messianic ideas might be found in South Asian writing. Anglophone writers, in particular, would be susceptible to this reading: R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the curious figure of the absent but imminent father in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August*, the expectations of the train that never arrives in Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*, the apocalyptic polemics of Nirad Chaudhuri (not messianic, but certainly exhibiting a Spengleresque eschatology), not to mention what one critic has termed the "socio-political messianic novel" that is Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*⁷...all would find one of these two options as a possible provenance or source of influence.

Agamben, however, is quite right to consider the opposition between Judaism and the Indo-European world as "feeble". The similarities between the Judeo-Christian messiah/*mashiah*

⁴ Maitri Upanishad 6:15 – cit. in Harold Coward, "Time in Hinduism," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* vol.12 (1999), 22.

⁵ *Time That Remains*, 14.

⁶ Sheldon Pollock, however, has argued against any Muslim influence on a perceived trend in Hindu historiographic periodization in the seventeenth century – see Sheldon Pollock, "New Intellectuals in Seventeenth Century India" *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 38:1 (2001), 6ff.

⁷ R.K. Narayan, *Waiting for the Mahatma* (University of Chicago Press, 1981); Upamanyu Chatterjee, *English, August* (Penguin: New Delhi, 1988); Arun Kolatkar, *Jejuri* (New York Review Books Classics, 2005); Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Why I Mourn For England* (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh, 1999); Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990). The term "socio-political Messianic novel" belongs to S. C. Harrax – cit. in B. R. Agrawal (ed), *Mulk Raj Anand* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2006), 72.

and the earlier Zoroastrian *saosyant* – the defeat of demons, the resurrection of the dead, the administering of judgment⁸ – have long constituted an argument for a significant Zend-Avestan influence on the Jewish tradition. Although the means, period and exact parameters of this influence are disputed⁹, it seems that a significant body of scholarship now acknowledges some degree of influence took place. When we take into account the proximity of Sanskritic culture to the Zend-Avestan corpus – Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, crudely put, being seen as related religions, in the same way Sanskrit and Avestan are seen as sister languages – then the discovery of messianic ideas or tropes in South Asian texts becomes a little less coincidental, when placed in a larger, Indo-Iranian context.

Scholars such as Dumézil and Hildebeitel have had some measure of success over the years tracing common Indo-European eschatologies – such as the “rigged game” or the end-of-age battle – across a wide range of different mythologies, including Nordic myth, Zoroastrian legends and the Mahabharata.¹⁰ Such approaches are still highly contested and often criticized when they veer from the much more scientifically reliable linguistic commonalities (words for divinity or angel having the same root in Old English, Latin, Ancient Persian and Sanskrit, for example) into the more speculative waters of trans-cultural metaphor-recognition.¹¹ Two of the nearest terms for “messiah” in the Hindu/Buddhist tradition – *cakravartin* and the sister-concept of *maitreya-Buddha* – possess a series of messianic echoes which, when considering the possible non-Semitic origins of the messianic, perhaps constitute something more than mere echoes. The Sanskrit word *cakravartin* (devanagari, in Pali *cakkavatti*), often translated in English as “world-conqueror” or “universal emperor”, literally means ‘wheel-turner’ – one who turns the wheel of dharma (*religion*).¹² The first and oldest reference we have to the word – in the *Maitri Upanishad* (4th-6th century BCE¹³) – is only faintly eschatological, but later references do seem to give the temporal term some kind of messianic meaning.¹⁴ In the *Vishnu Purana*, the idea of the *cakravartin* as a being somehow blessed with supernatural powers is fully embellished, a figure whose appearance turns the

⁸ John. R. Hinnells, “Zoroastrian Saviour Imagery and Its Influence on the New Testament” *Numen* Vol. 16:3 (1969), 185.

⁹ Two texts which have disputed whether there is any influence at all are W. Staerk, *Die Erlösererwartung in den Oestlichen Religionen* (Stuttgart, 1938) 268 and W. Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums*, ed. H. Gressmann (Tubingen, 1966) 513, note 1. See Hinnells, “Zoroastrian Saviour Imagery”, 162-3.

¹⁰ Alf Hildebeitel “The “Mahābhārata” and Hindu Eschatology” *History of Religions*, Vol. 12: 2 (1972), 97.

¹¹ For a good treatment of this approach, see Wendy Doniger, “The Land East of the Asterisk” (review of M.L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*) *London Review of Books* 30:7 (2008), 27-9.

¹² See Margaret and James Stutley (Eds), *Harper’s Dictionary of Hinduism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 58-9. See also Laurie L. Patton, “Rsis Imagined Across Difference: Some Possibilities for the Study of Conceptual Metaphor in Early India” *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 2008:1 56; Whalen Lai, “Political Authority: The Two Wheels of the Dharma” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 30 (2010), 172-6.

¹³ Maitri 1.4 – in S. Radhakrishnan (ed), *The Principal Upanishads* (Harper: New York, 1953), 797.

¹⁴ J. Gonda says it has a “utopian” meaning – J. Gonda, “Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View” *Numen* Vol. 4:2 (April 1957), 148.

wheel (*cakra vartayati*) of world-events, signifying the passage from age (*yuga*) to age, a divinely endorsed individual who is given the task of restoring the kingdom to righteousness, and who can only be recognized through thirty-two individual marks upon his body.

Our reading of Bibhutibhushan's stories – and our attempts to discern moments of messianic time within them – will have these wider philological discussions as a background. The point is not to demonstrate the Sanskritic term *cakravartin* to be a near cousin of the Hebrew *mashiach*, but rather to show how the non-Semitic factors, possibly origins, involved in the genealogy of the term “messiah” make the idea of looking for messianic tropes in an early twentieth-century Bengali text not as far-fetched as it might first appear. Once we understand how modern philology has made the opposition between ‘Semitic’ and ‘Indo-European’ more “feeble” than ever, the thought of reading Bibhutibhushan Banerji alongside Agamben's meditations on Paul no longer presents a comparison of two utterly alien texts.

“A Strange Attachment” (“Maya”¹⁵)

There is almost a ‘failed messianic’ sub-genre of the short story in Western literature (Joyce's “Araby”, Chekhov's “The Kiss”, Faulkner's “An Odor of Verbena”), one in which an announced moment of promised happiness cruelly fails to appear. A number of Bibhutibhushan's stories would also qualify for this genre – “Fennel Flower”, most notably – but these are not the stories we will be dealing with. Although texts such as “The Festival of Palm Fruits” offer skilful case-studies in the fertilization, cultivation and sudden annihilation of hope, our attention will be focused on stories which do not merely use messianic themes and structures, but also play with them, invoking the construction of new or parallel temporalities. The cleverest of Bibhutibhushan's stories do precisely this – they twist and invert structures of waiting and anticipation in fresh, innovative ways; not merely depicting what happens when a hoped-for invitation to a village feast fails to appear, or when an unhappy housewife begins to long for an upper-class Calcutta girl she briefly met on a boat trip, Bibhutibhushan's best stories employ unexpected strategies to ask different questions: in what kind of time does the recollection of anticipation take place? How is time experienced from the viewpoint of the waited upon? Exactly how does time stop when we wait? Is it paralysis – or do we move into a different time?

The ghost story “A Strange Attachment” is a good example of such innovation. It tells of a young vagrant who accepts an old man's offer to live alone in his country mansion, looking after it and the gardens around it. The young man is happy to have a roof over his head, even though he begins to hear strange voices, have even stranger dreams, and starts to see apparitions during the night and soon in the day. As time goes on, he feels thinner and lighter. The narrative genius of the story lies in a brief conversation he has with a local from

¹⁵ *Bibhutibhushan Galpasamagra* 2: 676.

the village, who warns him against living in the house, as everyone who stays there becomes strangely attached to the place – they never leave, but just waste away and die. Briefly let outside the bubble of the protagonist’s perspective to learn the ‘truth’ of his situation, we are absorbed once more inside, as the story ends with the young man dismissing the talk as nonsense and going back into the house.

What appears to be a Bengali ghost story about a man trapped in a haunted house, I’d like to argue, conceals within it a subtle political allegory on the messianic. The most obvious clue lies in the name of the old man who owns the house, Mr. Cakrabarti. Despite the commonness of the name, there is enough evidence both in Bibhutibhushan’s devotion to classical Indian aesthetic traditions¹⁶, as well as an equally evident preoccupation with the theme of time in his other stories, to show this naming of the absentee landlord with a Sanskritic term such as *cakravartin* is no mere coincidence; for all of Bibhutibhushan’s alleged aversion to the political¹⁷, “A Strange Attachment” offers an allegory of what it means to wait for the Messiah – and of what kind of fatal paralysis one risks when one decides to live in the time of the *cakravartin*. The two years the protagonist spends looking after the house of Mr. Chakrabarty, as we shall see, creates a strange space within the story, a space which provides its own dark comment on the political messianic.

One reason to read “A Strange Attachment” in this way lies in the servant hood of the story’s protagonist. In *The Time That Remains*, Agamben begins with some reflections on the servant hood of Paul – emphasizing the way *Letter to the Romans* starts with this mention of *doulos* (slave), and discussing the possible etymology which might lead us from “calling” (*klesis*) to “class” (29-33). Agamben carefully folds the idea of servant hood (class) into the messianic calling (*klesis*), with “Benjamin’s thesis that the Marxian concept of a classless society is a secularization of the idea of messianic time” (30) working as a background to one of the notions he proposes – that “messianic *klesis* signif[ies] the hollowing out and nullification of all judicial-factual conditions...” (31). The possibility that, in the performance of servitude, all previous identity is dissolved finds an echo in Bibhutibhushan’s story, where the nameless protagonist begins his stay in the house as a servant to the old man – the protagonist’s priestly caste (brahmin) is forgotten as he works for Mr. Chakrabarty, chopping wood and cooking food for him. And yet, if the protagonist’s upper caste identity is dissolved in this new calling, an economic interpretation of the story certainly sees a poor

¹⁶ Dusan Zbavitel, *A History of Indian Literature: Bengali Literature* (Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 1976), 281.

¹⁷ The picture of Bibhutibhushan as an essentially Romantic writer incapable of any degree of political comment is widespread. The great critic Buddhadeva Bose sees in Bibhutibhushan “a lover of Nature...at once innocent and intelligent”, whilst Sukumar Sen describes a writer “romantic and lyrical by temperament... with a rare sincerity and fullness of heart”. The writer Amit Chaudhuri, more perceptively, has noted a “subtly exploratory speaking voice” which shuns neither “the facts of rural poverty” nor “the matter of colonial subjugation”. Buddhadeva Bose, *An Acre of Green Grass* (Calcutta: Orient Longmans, 1948) 89; Sukumar Sen, *History of Bengali Literature* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1971) 329; Amit Chaudhuri (ed), *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (London: Picador, 2002), 67.

vagrant who unexpectedly becomes a landowner – or rather, it is as if (*als ob*) he owned the house:

For no obvious reason Mr. Cakrabarti lowered his voice. “People will try to convince you that you shouldn’t stay here for me. But don’t you listen to a thing they say. Stay here and look after the house; live here, do what you want and don’t listen to anyone. Enjoy the fruits and vegetables. I’ve left two rooms open for your use.”

The old man left. It was as if he’d catapulted me into heaven. Why, two rooms of this huge house were open just for my use! ... The whole thing was like some miraculous gift from heaven that God had sent down into my hands!¹⁸

“Stay here...do what you want,” the old man says, “Enjoy the fruit and vegetables”. The divine benevolence in this gift of servant hood allows use without ownership (recollecting Agamben’s comments on Paul). This implicit deification of Mr. Chakrabarty (and his ensuing absence) gives the story a sense of melancholy and (risking a Western term) *deus absconditus*, just as the ruined temple in the opening page of the story already suggests an abandoned landscape of lack. The protagonist, whose name we never learn, has spent two years looking after Mr. Chakrabarty’s house by the time we reach the end of the story. We know very little about him, as he seems to know very little about himself (“I’ve long forgotten most of what happened” *Shob bhul hoy gaye*¹⁹) a paucity of information – names, places, dates – which lends the short tale a dream-like quality, turning the young man’s stay in the cursed house into a pocket of different time, and a square of different space. Servant’s time, we might almost say, following Ernst Bloch’s memorable observation that different times belong to different classes.²⁰ If Agamben, in his politically positive re-appropriation of the Pauline messianic, joins Badiou and Zizek here in seeing the *doulos* of *Romans* as the promising site of a radically-new identity-without-identity, Bibhutibhushan’s nameless caretaker seems to succumb to a darker fate. The young man’s sojourn in the ghostly house is not promising but opiate; not radicalizing, but the very essence of passivity itself.

This leads us to another commonality between Bibhutibhushan’s tale and Agamben’s text – that of immobility. Although Agamben describes the calling of the Messianic as an “immobile dialectic” and a “movement *sur place*”²¹, he is careful to point out that this stasis is not the conventional one usually attributed to deferral (he refuses Scholem’s definition of “a life lived in deferrment”²²). If Agamben sees immobility at the heart of the messianic movement, it is because it “does not tend towards an elsewhere”, but rather sees itself “in

¹⁸ *A Strange Attachment*, 24.

¹⁹ *A Strange Attachment*, 21; *Bibhutibhushan Galpasamagra*, 2: 676.

²⁰ Keya Ganguly, “Temporality and Postcolonial Critique” in Neil Lazarus (ed), *Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 174.

²¹ *Time That Remains*, 23.

²² *Ibid*, 69.

relation to itself".²³ The activities that take place within it – the Pauline weeping, rejoicing, purchasing – are performed in the shade of their negative repetition, they constitute self-referential or “anaphoric” gestures, rather than outward actions towards another being or place. This motionless auto-dialectic, one might almost call it a self-haunting, perfectly describes the “strange attachment” of Bibhutibhushan’s housebound narrator. Far from fixating on Mr. Chakrabarty’s return or keeping the house clean for his unexpected arrival, the narrator adopts a quasi-existentialist routine; bereft of any goal or overarching project, he simply acts as if the house were his own, leaving it reluctantly only to buy necessities from the local shop:

I hadn’t had it so good in a long time. And I never had such a golden opportunity to earn my living without a stitch of work. ... I was lord over this big house ...

All I did was sleep and eat. I had no particular work to do and a kind of lassitude had settled over me. Normally I would have considered myself a hard-working type; sitting around doing nothing wasn’t my style. But for a while now I’d felt lazy, maybe from all those years of overwork. Anyway, all I wanted to do now was sit around and relax.²⁴

We do not see Mr. Chakrabarty again. The narrator neither waits for the old man nor forgets him. There is no magical Elsewhere the protagonist yearns for, anymore than there is a magical Someone to wait for. Mr. Chakrabarty’s withdrawal from the story augments the mysterious atmosphere of the text, even though he is named again in its closing paragraph. And yet, read alongside Agamben’s reflections on the Messianic, what strikes a reader about the story is the open-endedness of the text – both of the story itself and of the narrator’s time. We leave the *chronos* of the tale’s beginning – the narrator’s initial wandering, his encounter with the old man, the strange events in the house – for the *kairos* of the protagonist’s stay in the house, as it begins to extend into weeks, then months, then years. Agamben famously defines messianic time as “the time that time takes to come to an end” (67). The absence of an elsewhere, and dearth of any eschatological tension, suggest that, to some degree, the same can be said of Bibhutibhushan’s story. The time in the latter half of the story really is the time the story takes to come to an end, once the *cakravartin* has come and gone, bequeathing his house/kingdom to the unfortunate narrator.

“The Peddler” (“Firiwalla” 1941²⁵)

Two more ideas in Agamben’s text can help us grasp an unexpected parable within another of Bibhutibhushan’s stories, “The Peddler”. The brief text spans several decades, and is the narrative of a man who recalls a popular street vendor from his student days – a lower-caste sweet seller whom he subsequently re-encounters twice over a period of twenty-two years.

²³ Ibid, 24.

²⁴ A *Strange Attachment*, 25, 27.

²⁵ *Bibhutibhushan Galpasamagra* ,1: 356 .

On all three occasions the poor peddler requests something from the narrator – the attendance of his son’s wedding, a newspaper announcement for his missing son, and finally the attendance of his son’s funeral – but only on the third and final occasion does the narrator successfully fulfill what is asked. Half-guilt pervades the narrative as the protagonist is dimly aware he has completely forgotten about the sweet vendor for long stretches of his busy, professional life, even though the peddler himself has cherished the memory of the narrator and his student-friends (“you are all my little lords and masters!” *aapnara shobay amar manib* ²⁶). If “A Strange Attachment” tells the story of those who wait, “The Peddler” is the narrative of those who are waited upon – it provides us, so to speak, with an analysis of time from the unusual viewpoint of the Messiah.

In *The Time That Remains*, Agamben stresses the centrality of repetition and, in particular, recapitulation in his notion of the messianic (“Messianic time is a summary recapitulation of the past” 76). Drawing on Benjamin’s notion of the revolutionary moment as a radical re-appropriation and re-actualization of the past, Agamben’s messianic sees recapitulation and fulfillment as working hand-in-hand – indeed, the fulfillment of *kairos* is “the relation of each instant to the Messiah” (76 – if Schlegel defined the historian as a backwards-looking prophet, Agamben almost defines the prophet as a future-oriented historian).²⁷ One of the most interesting passages in *The Time That Remains* is when Agamben suggests, through a twelfth-century poem, the intimately inward rhyming scheme of the *sestina* (with its intricate, self-echoing mechanisms of staggered repetition) to be a linguistic “codification of messianic time” (85). “The Peddler” certainly has no such metrical harmony, even if the narrator’s three encounters with the poor street vendor are each separated by eleven years: the son’s wedding, his disappearance and ultimate funeral (a similar recurring mechanism can be found in “Uncle Handful’s House”). A sense of symmetry in the story is also provided by the recapitulation of the past which takes place at each of the narrator’s subsequent re-encounter with the peddler:

The peddler busied him waiting on me. It was clear that my visit was an important event for him. ...I could tell too that twenty years earlier when my friends had come to the house had also been a memorable day in his life. Everytime he came to check on me he mentioned it. ...

“You remember that much about something that happened twenty years ago?”

“And why shouldn’t I, sir? You people do not leave the dust of your feet at my doorstep every day, you know. Such a propitious event happens only once in a man’s lifetime. How could I not remember all about it?” (173)

²⁶ *A Strange Attachment*, 169; *Bibhutibhushan Galpasamagra* ,1: 357.

²⁷ Friedrich von Schlegel, Aphorism 80 in “Selected Aphorisms from the *Athenaeum*” in *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968). For more on Agamben’s use of Benjamin, see Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), 120-2.

"The Peddler" is not simply a story about the ways in which people poorer than ourselves drop out of our time, even though the text performs this function admirably. The deeper parable within it shows a further irony: that whilst we torture ourselves with messianic time, the messiah we are waiting for is as finite and forgetful as we are. We are awaiting, in effect, a lesser version of ourselves. The pathos inherent in this observation is enabled by the viewpoint of the narrative, and also by the episodic, fragmentary re-iteration of the peddler's earlier happiness – producing a story in which the past is never allowed to leave the present for the reader, although the guilty narrator unsuccessfully tries to keep the two apart. The story of "The Peddler", as a consequence, is told from the viewpoint of an uncomfortable, inadequate Messiah.

Like the previous story, "The Peddler" also suggests a darker emptiness in the Messianic through its emphasis on the missing son. In Agamben, Messianic recapitulation is a constant re-connecting of the network of the past with the present, a continuous re-illumination of the totality of past moments through the present; in "The Peddler", however, the destitute street vendor repeatedly tries to resurrect his memory. His recapitulation is nothing more than an attempt to retain the intangible, and invoke the irrevocable. The dinner at the end of the story, where the narrator finally visits the peddler's slum dwelling, twenty years later, to eat a humble meal, is pathetic because the peddler has nothing to re-capitulate, other than the loss of a son and a wedding the narrator had forgotten to attend.

A more positive sense in Bibhutibhushan's stories, however, arises in the depiction of this failure. Here we can glimpse what Agamben calls (drawing on Benjamin) "exigency", the imperative of the forgotten thing to retain its status of unforgettability. For Agamben, this has little to do with the familiar gesture of retrieving lost or 'subaltern' voices, but rather concerns a recognition of permanently lost possibility: "exigency...entails remaining in us and with us as forgotten, and in this way and only in this way, remaining unforgettable" (40). In texts such as "The Task of the Translator" and "The Life of Students"²⁸, Benjamin reveals his interest in this freezing of potentiality in an unglimped, inaccessible past – the status of a book which no-one has read, or of a life which no-one remembers; in *The Time That Remains*, Agamben develops this in the moral exigency the unremembered exerts upon us – such an exigency, he argues, is the exigency for the Messianic (41). Bibhutibhushan's stories offer no redemption, but in their refusal to redeem they come close to such moments of "exigency". In "The Peddler", the fortunes of the street-vendor in the story are only really remembered as being forgotten ("I know I should have gone there and visited him" ends the story, "but I just never seem to have the time"¹⁷⁴) – the whole, brief text is a series of failed recollections as an entire life moves in and out of the narrator's time like a comet, briefly becoming visible every ten years. Only the text is there to register the failure, acknowledging the outward shell of the peddler's life as the narrator occasionally bumps into it, only to see it sink back into the background of his everyday. Bereft otherwise of any kind of

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in Hannah Arendt (ed), *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (New York: Schocken, 2007), 69-82.

transcendental frame (for all of Bibhutibhushan's frequently-commented on esotericism, his time-themed stories are as brutal and hopeless as Tagore's) the pattern of the text itself provides the "exigency" nobody else seems to recognize.

"Uncle Bhandul's House" ("Bhandul mamar bari" 1934²⁹)

When I think about how Uncle Bhandul's house became so full of meaning for me I really am astonished. I guess the main point of my story is this: how could such an ordinary object take hold of my mind that way when so many more important events have slipped from my mind without a trace? Particularly on winter evenings like tonight I remember it vividly, for it was on just such an evening that I first saw it, all those many years ago, when I was five years old.

-*"Uncle Bhandul's House"* (110)

Up to now, we have examined the narrated experience of the messianic structure of time from the view point of the waiting and the waited-upon; in our third story, "Uncle Bhandul's House", we finally move away from both perspectives to a third viewpoint - that of an outside observer. "Uncle Bhandul's House", like most of Bibhutibhushan's stories, can be recounted in a single sentence: a nephew remembers, over a period of years, the attempted construction of a house (glimpsed at various stages) by an eccentric uncle in the middle of a jungle. The house is never finished. There are echoes of the first story "A Strange Attachment" here - a semi-abandoned house, surrounded by forest, occupied persistently by an old man, whose relatives are unwilling to move there - as well as "The Peddler", with its structure of recollected re-encounters. Part of the power of the tale lies in the way the nephew (Abinash) metonymically displaces the sense of his own life's significance onto the doomed project of his uncle's house; as he moves into his forties, the reader (though not the nephew) becomes aware the unfinished house offers an uncomfortable metaphor for Abinash's own plans and hopes. The brief mention of his youthful involvement with India's Independence movement (106) even suggests (as with "A Strange Attachment") a political dimension to this image of the, so to speak, terminally incomplete house.

Two points in Agamben's text help us to illuminate certain aspects of the story. The first is Agamben's emphasis on the link between memory and the messianic. We have already seen how, for Agamben, the reiteration of the past is a crucial Messianic moment - if the "widespread view of messianic time as oriented solely toward the future is fallacious" it is because, for Paul, the moment of messianic salvation "is a contraction of past and present, that we will have to settle our debts, at the decisive moment, first and foremost with the past" (77-8). This notion of the messianic as an event interfacing past and future is reflected in "Uncle Bhandul's House" - a tale which, in effect, revolves around the recollection of anticipation - the memory of apprehension, the past tense of imminence. Bibhutibhushan's story is staged significantly as a series of recollections, one might almost say (echoing

²⁹ *Bibhutibhushan Galpasamagra*, 1:109

Agamben) a relation of several moments of remembering to a messianic event (the construction of Uncle Bhandul's house) – or, more accurately, a messianic non-event.

The observer of Uncle Bhandul's messianic project finds himself in a situation which is the very antithesis of hope and expectation (“The poor man led an unenviable life, boring and monotonous... his potential energy... was useless in the dull, unchallenging existence he had chosen” (102)). And yet, throughout his life, he has kept in memory the promise of Uncle Bhandul's house as if it were a magical sign – even as an eight year old:

I don't know why, I never could explain it, but from that very moment Uncle Bhandul and his half-finished house took hold of my mind. To me Uncle Bhandul was as unreal, as magical a creature as some prince in a fairy tale; he occupied a special place in an imaginary kingdom to which only I had access, he, the place where he worked, his whole family in fact. I cannot tell you why, but I began to feel a deep personal empathy for this man who could not send money regularly enough to finish his house. There were so many times when lying on the roof terrace of my uncle's house listening to my grandmother tell me fairy tales my mind would wander and I would ask myself, when will Uncle Bhandul send money from Lalmanirhat to finish his house? (103)

If “Uncle Bhandul's House” has a lesson to offer about the nature of time, it is not simply that the true meaning of the messianic can only be understood through recollection – even though this point is amply illustrated in the story – but also that the structure of messianic time acquires a different quality when observed from the outside. A necessary moment of self-alienation and extrapolation – which is what the nephew essentially performs – infuses the messianic with a sense of pathos, as the nephew-protagonist almost takes on the role of a Greek chorus, commenting on but not participating in the uncle's futile perseverance. The decision to *recollect* the failed messianic (the story is framed as an evening tale told by the nephew to an unnamed narrator) performs three functions: it allows the full span of Uncle Bhandul's project to play out, infusing the old man's dogged desire to complete his kingdom with almost epic proportions. Secondly, it allows the nephew-protagonist to age while he watches this playing out of messianic time, giving a sense of parallel destinies whose contiguous irony only really emerges at the end of the story. Finally, the passage of time reifies and ‘others’ the nephew's thoughts about Uncle Bhandul's house, as they mutate from magical wonderment to indifference to re-awakened curiosity and, in the end, a puzzled mixture of nostalgia and reflection. The text ends abruptly with the nephew unsure why the uncle's house held an almost cathectic fixation for him – one of the story's pleasures is to witness this variation of the nephew's feelings about the house as they change with each stage of his life. To watch messianic expectation in process – to witness its gestation, bond with it, chart its development, re-encounter it in the aftermath of failure and finally, watch it linger and die – is the central and structuring trope of the story. If Bibhutibhushan's other stories inquired into the nature of waiting and being awaited, “Uncle Bhandul's House” indulges in the melancholy observation of those who wait.

A second point from Agamben illustrates a related idea. In the middle of *The Time That Remains*, he remarks that every attempt to represent time always produces another time – “It is as though man, insofar as he is a thinking and speaking being, produced an additional time with regard to chronological time...” (67). The human desire to represent time releases, in its very act, new times, as though different times lay coiled and concealed within each *chronos*. The result is that the “representation of chronological time, as the time *in which* we are, separates us from ourselves and transforms us into impotent spectators of ourselves” (68). To a limited extent, this act of self-alienation and alternative-time-production can be seen in “Uncle Bhandul’s House”. It should be stated at the outset that couched within Agamben’s observations is one of the key concepts in his text – that of Guillaume’s notion of “operational time” (*temps opératif* 65), the time the human mind requires to register a time-image; in Agamben’s understanding of what kind of time takes place once the Messiah has appeared, Guillaume’s “operational time” plays a crucial role. Whilst there is no explicit counterpart to *temps opératif* in Bibhutibhushan’s stories (although the repeated return of memories does offer some version of constantly-reframed time), “Uncle Bhandul’s House” offers an excellent example of a text whose narrative time unfolds to produce and refract several others. The time of the uncle, orchestrated around the goal of the unfinished house, certainly offers an alternative *kairos* to the *chronos* of the nephew’s account (in “The Peddler”, we will recall, the different time of the street vendor is almost supernaturally underlined by the fact that he hardly ages at all in the twenty years the narrator knows him). Moreover, the nephew’s own recollections of his childish wonder at the house split and fracture his own time (“Particularly on winter evenings like tonight I remember it vividly” 110), so much so that the memory of his own childish anticipation has bubbled up into the provincial surface of his bored, middle-aged present, producing a rival, parallel time that almost turns the nephew, to use Agamben’s phrase, into an impotent spectator of himself.

To read Bibhutibhushan’s stories in the light of Agamben – and, inevitably, to re-read Agamben in a South Asian context – produces consequences which flutter up and away in both directions. For the Bengali, what emerges as most striking in his stories is how negative and empty the structure of messianic time is. In all of the stories concerned with time, a very modernist sense of loss seems to be operating; an emptiness, a futility, a feeling of impotence seems to pervade any structure of expectation or fulfillment. It is a commonplace in criticism on Bibhutibhushan to observe the disparity between his own immense erudition and wide reading of scientific texts – his love not just of Gibbon and Balzac but also Hubble and other astronomers³⁰ – and the comparatively (deceptively) unsophisticated backgrounds of his village stories. The dark, empty timescapes of Bibhutibhushan’s “Messianic” stories, in this respect, illustrate not merely a very modernist sense of loss, but also an example of how South Asian writers adopted and modified their own sense of modernity and Weberesque

³⁰ See Phyllis Granoff, “Introduction” in *A Strange Attachment*, p16; Chattopadhyaya, *Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya*, 44; Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch! India: 1921-1952* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1988), 88ff.

disenchantment. Dipesh Chakrabarty has already reminded us how “the history of secularization of thought in Bengal was not the same as in Europe”³¹; Bibhutibhushan’s free use of the Messianic to examine certain pessimisms and false optimisms within Bengali village life show how different influences collided with one another in texts such as “A Strange Attachment” and “The Peddler”.

A second context is provided by the times in which the three stories were written (1941, 1934), with India’s independence struggle operating as a background. The effeminization of the Bengali male in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century has already been analyzed enough.³² Bibhutibhushan’s three depictions of static or failed projects – one of them (“Uncle Bhandul’s House”) explicitly referring to “India’s burgeoning Independence struggle” (106) – seem to contribute to a political skepticism of Indian/Bengali nationalistic credibility. “A Strange Attachment” in particular, with its original title of *Maya* (illusion/delusion) and its portrayal of a figure frozen in magical paralysis, seems to nestle itself in this tradition of cynical suspicion with regards to the political project of Indian nationalism. Although Bibhutibhushan allegedly had little interest in the political, these tales of caretakers trapped in the houses of their landlords, of old men unable to finish improbably plans in the middle of nowhere, of busy professionals who completely forget their socio-economic subordinates, all seem to throw the project of nationalism itself into a very dubious light.

In turn, using Agamben to understand messianic structures of time in South Asian fiction does make us realize two things about *The Time That Remains*: first of all, how profoundly intertwined with the Pauline commentary tradition (Taubes, Scholem, Benjamin) Agamben’s book is, as well as the mini-genealogies of various ideas such as sovereignty and the state within German thought (Luther, Hegel, Schmitt). In dealing with a subject as truly cosmic as time, Agamben’s short, densely-written text concerns itself primarily with the tracing of echoes and the establishment of family links – sprinkled with a variety of meditations on the New Testament Greek, it aims to establish Benjamin, in particular, as a thinker belonging to the Pauline tradition (the *Letter to the Romans* and Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” being the “two fundamental messianic texts of our tradition” 145). Although Agamben’s historical attentiveness to the parameters of such traditions has been criticized elsewhere³³, the persistent treatment of the biblical tradition as a self-enclosed entity in itself (*pace* Agamben’s own token frustration at the “feeble” nature of such Semitic/non-Semitic divides) is a striking feature in Agamben’s study of apocalyptic time (more so even than a book such as Frank Kermode’s *Sense of an Ending*). The absence, furthermore, of any

³¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 236.

³²See Niharika Dinkar “Masculine Regeneration and the Attenuated Body in the Early Works of Nandalal Bose” *Oxford Art Journal* 33:2 (2010), 173-6.

³³ Brian Britt “The Schmittian Messiah in Agamben’s *The Time That Remains*” *Critical Inquiry* 36 (Winter 2010), 262-87.

reference to debt or law in Bibhutibhushan's three stories does make us appreciate, reading Agamben alongside them, how central the idea of the law and sacrifice are to the Judeo-Christian notion of the Messianic.

More impressionistically, what also becomes visible on a second reading of Agamben after Bibhutibhushan's stories is the positivity of the text. Its distancing from deconstruction as a "thwarted messianism" (103), its understanding of repetition – of "recapitulation" – as being crucial to the fulfillment of the messianic (76), its Benjaminesque insistence on the revolutionary potential of memory, its use of Marx to politically invigorate the notion of "calling" (29)...all stands in stark contrast to the gloomy sequence of futile, collapsed projects we encounter in Bibhutibhushan. Fiction, for Agamben, stands in the proximity of the messianic; or, perhaps more accurately, some elements within the movement of the messianic draw on a fictive dimension. The necessarily hypothetical attitude of the *als ob* of the religious life (to behave as if the Messiah were to come tomorrow), and the crucial role the *mashal* (Hebrew for 'parable') has to play within a messianic hermeneutics (42), contributes to a sense in Agamben of the proximity of messianism to the "fictive activity of thought" (35). We even have speculation on a common etymology for the words *mashiah* and *mashal* (42). Fiction writers such as Bibhutibhushan, however, seem to see the structure of the messianic as nothing more than a sequence of deferred emptiness. Whilst theorists over the past decade (Badiou, Zizek, Agamben) have been politically re-vitalized by the messianic³⁴, fiction itself appears to have supplied a series of less enthusiastic precedents. If Bibhutibhushan's "A Strange Attachment" turns out to be a parable on the paralysis of all messianisms, it is a very dark parable indeed.

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Almond, Ian. "Messianic Themes in South Asian Literature: Reading Bibhutibhushan Banerji in the Light of Agamben," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 12 no. 3 (Spring 2013): 111-124.

³⁴ See A. Bradley and P. Fletcher, *The Politics to Come: Power, Modernity and the Messianic* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 4.