Modernity at home

A Genealogy of the Indian Drawing Room

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Nayak and Nayika (A pair of ideal lovers) sitting beside a table. Black and white woodcut. From Ashit Paul ed. *Woodcut Prints of Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983) p. 39.

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Although social scientists have engaged in an exploration of how modern men and women may become subjects as well as objects of modernization, how they might 'get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it' (Berman 1993: 13), one aspect of modern living has consistently eluded investigation. In the context of India's multiple modernities, alongside the boulevard and the monument, the city space and its architecture, the spaces *within* homes too were being redefined and rearranged to accommodate the arrival of modernity. Changing spaces within the home and representations of that change in literary terms can be seen to have functioned as primary markers of modernity in the colonial world. That the material manifestations of the home underwent a transformation in India through colonial contact is undisputed common sense, but very little work has focussed on the manner in which these changes occurred. Mapping the political, social and cultural changes in the evolving history of modernity in the Indian context, what follows is a history of a social space, the colonial drawing room. (Figure 1) Changes in the form and substance of this room, uniquely a confluence of the public and the private within the space of the home, were mediated by the development outside it of certain practices, institutions and spaces characteristic of modernity everywhere. Trams, bookshops, teashops, gaslights, electric lights, trains, the theatre, the museum and the public library are only some of the spaces in the 19th and early 20th century that characterized modernity in Calcutta, but one of the most crucial, although the most tangentially discussed, was the space of the modern drawing room.

It is my contention that in Bengal, the bourgeois drawing room came into its own at about the same time as the *adda* (which is a Bengali word for extended sessions of conversation with friends), which, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has attested, attained respectability by its association with literary and political groups in Calcutta in the 1920s and 1930s (Chakrabarty 2001: 180–214).[1] This was also the time when the drawing room transformed itself into its current hybridized Indian form, attaining, in some circles, an aesthetic style and a cultural ambience that was created as a deliberate attempt at Indianization. Here, I shall attempt a narrative history of the cultural space of the modern Indian drawing room as it evolved in Bengal over the course of a century, showing how this meeting of the public and the private within the space of the home metamorphosed from an exercise in colonial mimicry to an attempt at self-definition and national identity. One of the most interesting manifestations of the intrusion of

Figure 1 : A colonial-style drawing room at the Falaknuma Palace, Hyderabad. From the Taj Magazine, Autumn 2010 (volume 38: No. 2) 241

Figure 2 : This photograph of the Pathuriaghata Mallickbari manages to convey some sense of Bankimchandra's drawing room, with the *phorash bichhana* spread out on the floor, surrounded by couches and chairs and paintings on the wall. The clutter of marble busts and figures, as well as the enormous chandelier, make this a different sort of drawing room, with greater pretensions to wealth, but the essential arrangement remains similar to what Nabin Sen saw in Bankim's home. From Debashis Bandyopadhyay and Alok Mitra, *Bonedi Kolkatar Gharbari* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2008).

modernity into the traditional space of the home was to be found in the territorial confluence of the drawing room, the transformation of which tells its own story of identity formation and cultural definition in terms of the evolving individuality of the nation-state.

The sitting-rooms of Young Bengal

In one of the most enlivening autobiographies to be written in colonial India, *Amaar Jiban* (My Life), Nabinchandra Sen, a well-known Bengali poet of his time, describes the room in which the famous novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay received him in his house in Naihati in 1877:

"He [Sanjibchandra, Bankimchandra's older brother] put his left hand affectionately around me and, taking me to a room, seated me on a thick rug [*phorash bichhana*] and sent word to Bankimbabu. I heard that this was Bankimbabu's drawing room [*baithak khana*]. It was a *hall* adjacent to a small Shiva temple room, and on the far side, there were two rooms. All around the *hall*, near the walls, there were two or three *couches* and *cushioned chairs*. The walls had a few paintings hanging on them, and in one corner, there was a harmonium. I was looking at the way in which the room was decorated and talking to Sanjib-babu". (Sen 1366 BE : vol.1, 456[2]. My translation. All following translations from the Bengali are mine.) (Figure 2)

This account of Bankimchandra's drawing room, in which the words 'hall', 'couches' and 'cushioned chairs' are in English, has an interesting counterpoint in Bankimchandra's own satirical description of the sitting room of a Europeanized babu. In 'The Confession of a Young Bengal' (1872) -- which referred to the radical students of Derozio at the Hindu College between 1826 and 1831 (or to those who were like them) -- Bankimchandra had parodied the borrowed tastes of an English-educated Anglophile:

"Chairs, tables, punkahs (fans)—seldom meant to be pulled, American clocks, glassware of variegated hues, pictures for which the *Illustrated London News* is liberally laid under contribution, kerosene lamps, book-shelves filled with Reynolds' *Mysteries*, Tom Paine's *Age of Reason* and the *Complete Poetical Works* of Lord Byron, English musical-boxes, compose the fashionable furniture of the sitting-rooms of Young Bengal." (Chatterjee 1998: 137)

The comparative bareness of Bankimchandra's own drawing room may now perhaps be read as deliberately arranged in contrast to the European clutter that he finds so distasteful in the imitative drawing rooms of Young Bengal, keeping in mind all the while, however, his own not inconsiderable investment in the high cultural appurtenances of European civilization. Exhibitionism and pretension were obviously often the dominant characteristics of the early elite drawing room in Calcutta, and satire the most common weapon against them. Ten years earlier, Kaliprasanna Singha, in the celebrated *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha* [Night Owl's Sketches] had given Bengalis the most trenchant description of the profligacy and licentiousness of those members of society who had preceded Young Bengal, the depravity of whose character seemed only to be matched by the abject imitativeness of their Western-style drawing rooms:

"These days the city's English-style babus belong to two factions, the first group, 'Cow dung busts of superior model sahibs'; the second 'Vile reflections of the foreigner'. All those who belong to the first lot follow the English fashion, gathering at tables and chairs, tea in tea cups, *cheroots*, water in *jugs*, *brandy* in *decanters*, covers of cork wrapped in red cotton cloth for *glass* tumblers—the *Harkara*, *Englishman*, and the *Phoenix* in front of them, *Politics* and the *Best News*

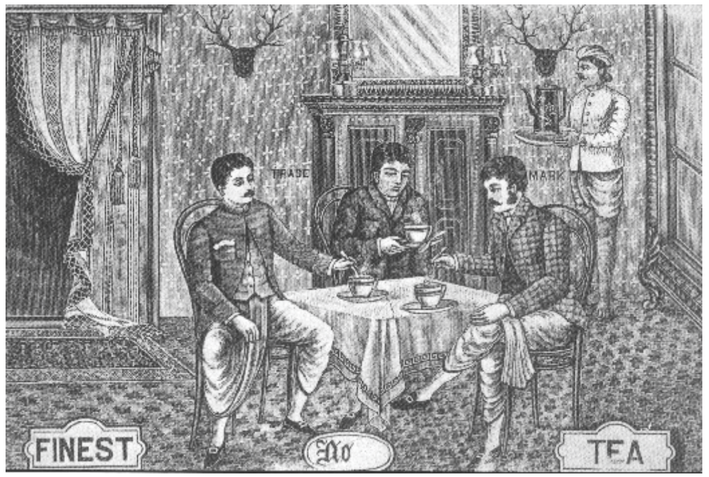

Figure 3 : 'They eat at tables…' Kaliprasanna said, in the 'English fashion, gathering at tables and chairs, tea in tea cups…' This early advertisement for Lipton Tea gives some sense of the imitative aspect of the Bengali babu and his drawing room in the nineteenth century. Note the wall paper and carpet, ornate mirror and book case, as well as, of course, the bearer with the turban and the teapot. Babu's Drawing Room, Wood engraving, Preo Gopal Das, c. 1920. From the collection of Christel Das and Arup Sen Gupta, CSSSC Archive.