



Introduction

Barnita Bagchi

This special half-issue is inspired by a passage by Indian writer, educator, and utopian experimenter Rabindranath Tagore in his *The Religion of Man* (1931), which Tagore first delivered in 1930 as the Hibbert Lectures at the University of Oxford:

Man, in his mission to create himself, tries to develop in his mind an image of his truth according to an idea which he believes to be universal, and is sure that any expression given to it will persist through all time . . . This ideal life dwells in the prospective memory of the future. (Tagore 1931, 55)

The set of four articles in this issue is particularly focused on transcultural utopian imagination with nodal point in South Asia, with the transnational space of Bengal (spanning the present-day sovereign nations of India and Bangladesh) as a further major focus, irradiating out to the past and future, and to many utopian places, both rural and urban, extending, notably, to the United Kingdom, South Africa, Indonesia, and the United States.

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Recent scholarship has made substantive analysis of modern South Asian utopian and dystopian imagination, alerting us, notably, to the importance of analyzing women's utopian writing and practice from South Asia (Bagchi 2016, 2020), to the insights afforded by including *bhasha* or vernacular Indian literature and film in our canon of utopia and dystopia (Bagchi 2019, 2020; Banerjee 2019; Chatterjee 2019; Chaudhuri 2019; Mohan 2012), to the importance of religion in utopianism (Bagchi 2016), and to the recurring imagination of the rural and the urban as sites of social dreaming and nightmare (Mohan 2012; Banerjee 2019). This collection expands the current scholarly debates on these subjects.

The present collection continues the line of argument begun by Bagchi (2016) in the context of South Asian and transcultural utopian imagination: religion plays a far more important role than is usually recognized in utopian writing and practice. The articles in this collection further explore the fruitful paradox expressed in the phrase "prospective memories of the future" as a means of crystallizing the social dreaming upon which utopia depends. How can memory be prospective, or anticipatory? How does one view such a paradoxical vision of temporality? A prospect is both a mental picture and an anticipated event. From what place, imagined how, does the social dreaming occur? How is the memory of the past deployed in utopian imagination? What processes of transcultural innovation occur in such imaginings?

Bagchi examines transcultural utopian imagination of social futures in early twentieth-century India and Britain, with Rabindranath Tagore and his friend M. K. Gandhi at the center. The article looks at Tagore's and Gandhi's stays at and fellowship with Woodbrooke, a Quaker residential educational institution in England. Woodbrooke was also dear to Tagore and Gandhi's British friend, the Christian anticolonial and social activist C. F. Andrews, a key influence on Gandhi's 1931 visit to Lancashire, a visit that the article also examines. The article argues that Tagore's and Gandhi's visits to England (specifically the Midlands and/ or the north of that country) in 1930 and 1931 illuminate Indo-British entanglements in utopianism, manifesting ideals of social futures in which values were shared with Christian, mainly Quaker utopians. One of the early British influences on Indian utopians was John Ruskin (1819–1900), whose thought valorizing social fellowship and religion and speaking against wage capitalism influenced Gandhi; Ruskin also influenced the settlement movement contributing to the foundation of the Quaker institution at Woodbrooke.

Zooming in on Gandhi's 1931 visit to Lancashire in northern England, the article argues that British and Indian utopians cooperated with and mutually influenced each other under difficult political conditions. The article excavates, with regard to Gandhi's Lancashire visit, the work of the Quaker social dreamer Corder Catchpool (1883–1952) and his utopian experiments in Spring Vale Garden Village, where Gandhi stayed in 1931. The Indian and British utopian figures active in the 1930s examined here envisaged the future in ways that were often animated by aspects of the past, usually a renovated and reimagined past, in which religion is important.

Sangeeta Datta explores Tagore's vision of the future, in relation to Datta's own creative practice, especially as theatre and film director, a practice that engages with the resonances of Tagorean utopia and his future-making that continuously reinvent the past. Written at a time of pandemic crises exposing humankind's vulnerability, Datta's piece examines Tagore's utopian vision that, when revalued and renewed, remains enormously fruitful for furthering social justice and creativity today.

Datta examines the afterlives of Tagore's utopia through three case studies. First, she examines the Dartington project where Tagore's friend and associate Leonard Elmhirst was inspired to create an English utopian experiment on the model of Tagore's utopian community in Santiniketan and Sriniketan. Second, she analyzes Tagore's musical *Tasher Desh* (Land of Cards) in its original context and Datta's recent stage production presented by the arts company Baithak UK in London in 2019. Finally, Datta examines the feature film *Life Goes On*, which she directed, analyzing it as a familial dystopia and a Tagorean vision revisited through lenses of family, race and gender.

Samadrita Kuiti examines Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 'Sultana's Dream' (1905), a short work originally written in English, offering a dream vision of a futuristic utopian society, with elements of science fiction, and *Padmarag* (1924), a short novel originally written in Bengali, which can be seen as complementary parts of a feminist utopian vision. These works show a desire for an egalitarian, decolonized nation, cutting through barriers of religion, gender, race, and class. Kuiti's article shows how both fictions offer a vision of interreligious sisterhood, particularly by proposing Hindu-Muslim communal unity, against a backdrop of growing tensions between the Hindu and Muslim communities in fin-de-siècle British India. The article also shows how the Indigo Rebellion of 1859 in colonial Bengal is represented in *Padmarag* to create critiques of predatory colonial masculinity. Hossain's utopian

narratives play a major role in decolonizing utopian studies, the article argues overall.

Banerjee examines the utopianism of the film *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1969), directed by Satyajit Ray. The article interrogates the various ways in which Ray's film signals the utopian, through an examination of the trope of wish-fulfillment, through an analysis of the way utopianism is articulated through irrealist aesthetics, particularly its figuration of ghosts, and through its violation of the narrative structure of the real. With the film in its utopianism making acute critiques of issues around class, caste, abusive power, and war, Banerjee sees some intransigent social contradictions playing out in the film, signaling the limits of textual utopianism. The three faces of utopianism that Sargent so foundationally explicated—literary utopia, utopian practice, and utopian social theory (Sargent 2010, 5–9)—play out in the analysis offered in the articles in this special issue, showing how utopian literature and practice fruitfully dialogued, and offering major insights into cultural and social crossings and hybridities in utopianism from cultures extending beyond Europe, extending the lines of enquiry that Dutton and Sargent (2013) so boldly articulated.

BARNITA BAGCHI is a feminist translator, literary and cultural critic, and cultural historian. She is associate professor and BA Coordinator in Comparative Literature at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. Educated at Jadavpur University, India, and the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, she has published widely on utopia, histories of transnational and women's education, and women's writing in western Europe and south Asia. Her publications include a part-translation with introduction, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias*, by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (Penguin Classics, 2005); an edited volume, *The Politics of the (Im)possible: Utopia and Dystopia Reconsidered* (SAGE, 2012); an edited collection on *Utopian Art and Literature from Modern India in Open Library of Humanities* (2019); and an edited volume, *Urban Utopias: Memory, Rights, and Speculation* (Open Access, Jadavpur University Press, 2020). Her articles have appeared in journals such as *Women's History Review*, *Mobilities*, *Paedagogica Historica*, and *New Cinemas*.

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