

## MIDNIGHT'S VICTIMS: ADIVASIS ON THE CULTURAL MAP OF INDIA

In Mahasweta Devi's novella "Douloti the Bountiful", an Adivasi<sup>1</sup> bond slave's daughter gets effectively bought off her parents at the price of 300 Rupees and is enslaved as a prostitute. The bitter story culminates in the death of Douloti at 27, riddled with infection and venereal disease. In this grim ending, however, the story attains the quality of a national allegory that seriously disturbs the myth of national cohesion. For the super-exploited Adivasi slave, Douloti, dies on the night of August 15, India's Independence Day. Herewith, Devi inverts the celebrated, miraculously timely birth of Rushdie's narrator, Saleem Sinai, in *Midnight's Children* and profiles her tribal protagonist not as one of midnight's children but of midnight's victims. If this temporal dimension of Douloti's death already points quite clearly to the disruption of a national pedagogy that attempts to enact the imagined community's cohesion through secular ceremonies, then this disruptive gesture gets grounded spatially as well: The tribal woman's body is found spread all over the map of India that adorns the festival grounds prepared for the ritualistic flag-hoisting ceremony:

Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today, on August 15th, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan [the village teacher] for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India (Devi, 1993, 94).

Devi's move here is painstakingly simple: Since two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time, the outline of the national territory leaves room only for either of the two — the Adivasi corpse or the Indian flag. In this agonistic conjuncture, Douloti's

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\* We would like to thank Madhumeeta Sinha, Sandra Meyer, Satish Poduval and Kuttu who accompanied us through all the galleries and case studies. — All pictures taken by the authors in March 2008.

<sup>1</sup> The term 'Adivasi' (literally translated as 'the first-here') has in contemporary India been agreed on as the non-discriminatory appellation of indigenous, 'tribal' communities.

body is suddenly where it should not be: It has usurped the place that, according to mainstream hegemony, is the place of the nation itself: “all over India”. Already dead, the tribal body can (and probably will) be easily removed in order to give room to the standard of independence, unity and modernity. However, this act of planting and hoisting the flag will from now on be marked as an invasive colonisation: As long as the tribal body is there, there will be no room for the flag; in order to inscribe the Indian map with the nation-form, that body has to be disposed of so that India be constructed, in time-worn traditions of conquest, as *terra nullius*. The sudden visibility of Douloti’s abject tribal body questions this assumption of an empty land onto which the banner of the State could be superimposed without violence, and which could be imagined as evenly populated by one homogeneous national people.

Devi’s story is a narrative that points to the violence involved in putting the Adivasi on the imaginary cultural map of India. In our paper we would like to argue that “Douloti the Bountiful”, in its stark ending, polemicalises (amongst other discursive asymmetries) against a convention of institutionalised modes of using the map — both visual and imagined — in order to symbolically integrate and simultaneously marginalize India’s tribal communities within the fold of the nation. A crucial site in this endeavour, we argue, is “the particularly powerful educational discourse of the museum” (Bal, 2006, 203) as a key element of a national pedagogy (see Bhabha, 1990, esp. 295-97). What place, we ask, does the public museum as a “space of education” (Miller, 2002, 314) assign to the Adivasi? In what ways and to what effects are tribal people and tribal artefacts represented within the framework of specific museums’ exhibitionary dramaturgies? By analysing the arrangement of exhibitions in the National Museum (New Delhi) and the Indian Museum (Kolkata) — arguably the two most prominent museums in the country — we hope to be able to retrieve the foil against which Mahasweta Devi’s anti-national allegory unravels as a polemic interrogation.

## SHOWPIECES IN THE ATTIC: THE NATIONAL MUSEUM (NEW DELHI)

It should not come as a surprise that Indian museums offer specific narratives<sup>2</sup> of the colonial, precolonial and postcolonial periods; what is noteworthy, though, is to what extent these museal narratives tend to rely on “the classification of the tribal as ‘primitive’” (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1999, 412). As analyses of their exhibitory strategies will show, the two museums in question in our paper — the National Museum in New Delhi and the Indian Museum in Kolkata — articulate this classification in different ways. Yet however different their modes of staging the tribal may be, they can in both institutions be traced back to their emergence from complex interactions between two distinct historical trajectories: on the one hand, 19th -century colonial pedagogy whose aim it was “to educate the ‘natives’” (Guha-Thakurta, 2004, 80), on the other hand, the post-Independence politics of establishing museums “as shrines to the *national* culture” (Singh, 2003, 177).

The backbone of the permanent exhibition of the National Museum, New Delhi (formally inaugurated in 1949) is based on a selection of all-Indian artefacts that were originally assembled for a Royal Academy exhibition held in 1947-48 at Burlington House, London. The recent edition of the *Guide to the National Museum* emphasises accordingly that the composition of the 1947 Royal Academy Exhibition of Indian Art forms “the nucleus of the collection of the National Museum” (Chauhan, 1997, n.p.). Hence the core collection of the National Museum was factually determined not by Indian experts but by a British “committee of curators of an exhibition in London” (Singh, 2003, 193). As the committee had been working on the layout of their comprehensive and representative showcasing of Indian Art from the mid-1920s, it can be inferred that the Burlington House exhibition was first of all designed for a *British* public that was to be ideologically prepared for the imminent decolonisation of the subcontinent. In order to achieve that pedagogic aim, the London exhibition emphasised “the deep level of civilisation, and indeed the nation-worthiness” (ibid. 192) of India by endowing the artefacts on display with the status of High Art. From the corpus of eligible Indian masterpieces, of course,

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<sup>2</sup> On the narrativity of museum space, see Mieke Bal, “Telling, Showing, Showing Off”; and “Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting”, in John Eisner & Roger Cardinal (eds.), *The Cultures of Collecting*, London (Reaktion) 1994, 97-114.

all tribal art was completely excluded and has remained so ever since the transfer of the London exhibition to the National Museum in 1949. All of which does not mean that there were no place for Adivasi exhibits in the National Museum; that place, however, is not only outside the canon of national art but also outside history. This holds true also for the new home to which National Museum was shifted in 1960: For in that building, “designed fully in keeping with the domed [imperial] architecture of Lutyens’ Kingsway and Queensway” (Guha-Thakurta, 1998, 120), the tribal is relegated to the attic.

The effect of this curatorial decision is strikingly similar to the representational economy that Mieke Bal delineates in her analysis of the American Museum of Natural History, New York, which she reads in tandem with its counterpart across Central Park, the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art: While the latter equips its exhibits — representative specimens of Western art — with proper names (both authors’ names and individual titles of artefacts) and concrete dates, the former stages its displays — including works of art by African and Asian people — as timeless and anonymously typical specimens. “The representation outside of history goes hand in hand with the construction of typicality. And typicality ignores the very individualism that is the basis of the concept of high art on which the Met is grounded”. The exhibiting of non-European artefacts as elements of ‘natural history’ thus deprives non-European civilisations of their history and places them in permanent stasis; nevertheless, as Bal observes, arrangements like this unfold a kind of narrative which is, however, “not the story of the people represented, nor of nature, but of knowledge, power and colonization — of power/knowledge” (Bal, 2006, 201)<sup>3</sup>. The opposition between the ‘historical/individual’ and the ‘natural/typical’ that Bal detects between the Met and the AMNH, is echoed in the exhibitory dramaturgy at work in the National Museum with its clear demarcation between the realm of national (art) history on the ground floor, and the upper floor galleries with their ‘industrial’ exhibitions.

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<sup>3</sup> While this narratological and Foucauldian reading of museums may appear, to some at least, as hopelessly fixated on modern formations of knowledge and power relations, it may be called for to complement Bal’s analysis with Kwame Appiah’s classical critique of the postmodern insertion of ‘African art’ into the global commodity circuit as folklore and ornamental handicraft rather than art; see Appiah, 1997, 420-444.

For it is the museum's ground floor that houses "the only set of galleries that is linked to form a coherent, chronological sequence" (Singh, 2003, 178): Taken together, the Ground Floor Galleries prescribe a walking narrative as a foundational story of the nation's origins and developments from the Harappan Indus Valley civilisation (ca. 5000 BCE) to the height of Mughal culture before the predominance of the British in the subcontinent. Following the course laid out as a "splendid chronological display of selected art objects" (Chauhan, 1997, n.p.), the visitor virtually proceeds from prehistoric times to late 18th-century miniature painting. A strong effort has obviously been made to integrate as many elements and influences as possible (in narratological terms: as many story elements as possible) into the overarching plot of continuity, whose protagonist is Indian civilisation as such. Even if this incorporative tendency of the master narrative aims at accommodating Buddhist and Islamic influences, the dominant idiom of the Ground Floor narrative is Hindu: Hence, the prehistoric Indus Valley civilisation as displayed in the Harappan section (room 4) gets subtly profiled as a Hindu civilisation on the precarious evidence of its iconographic usage of phallic objects. While it is true that these can easily be associated with the Shivite icon of the *lingam*, phallic forms are by no means restricted to the Hinduistic Shiva cult. Given the versatility of the icon it cannot go unnoticed that the exhibition fails to produce any evidence that the Harappan phalluses were tokens of a cult of Shiva.

More surprisingly still, the paintings section overcodes its exhibits — mostly Mughal miniatures — with a myth of origin that relates how painting itself was brought into the world by the Hindu god Vishnu:

The art of painting, a branch of *chitra*, is acclaimed to have a divine origin and Lord Vishnu as its progenitor. It evolved as a spontaneous act. Lord Vishnu, fascinated by the ravishing beauty of Urvashi, unconsciously sketched her likeness on his thigh and created the first ever portrait. He taught *chitra* to Vishvakarma and wished its knowledge were imparted to mankind.

By implication, then, the Afghan invaders did not bring a new cultural technique to the subcontinent but rather returned it to its authentic point of origin. In any case, once equipped with its secure Hindu pedigree painting as such gets easily inserted into the storyline of Indian cultural progress, now blown up to universal, 'human' dimensions. What this storyline highlights is, on the one hand, the ingestive and indeed 'digestive'

capability of a culture of accommodation that, on the other hand, remains fundamentally unaltered by all the conquests and invasions that “have once gate-crashed into India” (Nandy, 1988, 75-76). Given the immense heterogeneity and discrepancy of the artefacts gathered in the Ground Floor Galleries, the suggestion of a cohesive and homogeneous national past as an unbroken and continuous line of development is of course as counterfactual and counterintuitive as in any other comparable national museum. It is therefore not particular but all the same remarkable that the self-set task of the exhibition consists, as Tapati Guha-Thakurta asserts, in “stringing together a history and a canon of Indian art through a set of fragmentary pieces” (Guha-Thakurta, 2004, 192).

Importantly, Guha-Thakurta emphasises the status ascribed to the exhibits in the Ground Floor Galleries ever since the opening of the National Museum in 1949: Right from the start, they have been displayed *as works of art*. ‘Art’ in this context is of course not necessarily consonant with the ‘art’ displayed by the Met according to Mieke Bal. More than indexing individual genius and strong authorship, ‘art’ in the post-Independence context of the New Delhi exhibition is conceived as “a reflection of national history”. Inserted into the thick plot of the nation’s grand narrative, the individual work of art serves primarily as testimony to the nation’s persistence. ‘Art’, in other words, is functionalised to evidence the uninterrupted dominance of a powerful mainstream Hindu culture in the subcontinent that apparently has informed all artistic expression. In that manner a synergetic circuit is established in which two themes buttress one another: “that of art as a receptacle of religious and spiritual thought and that of art as a repository of the spirit of the people” (ibid. 184). In that sense, the museum is itself a site to be decoded and historicised, as Kavita Singh suggests: “In the early fervour of Independence, the formulation of a national culture was undoubtedly powered by a desire to recover India’s indigenous traditions, untainted by ‘external’ influences... In today’s context, however, the National Museum’s omissions are startling and its narrative, partisan” (Singh, 2003, 186). While Singh and Guha-Thakurta focus on the narrative construction of an ‘indigenous’ Indian high cultural *longue durée* in the Ground Floor Galleries, we would like to shift attention to the probably most ‘startling omission’ of that grand narrative, namely the absence of the truly ‘indigenous’ element, the Adivasi.

In order to reach the tribal art section, the visitor is obliged to step out of the historical parcours and climb up to the attic. Here, in rooms 6, 7 and 9 of the Second

Floor Galleries, contemporary Adivasi artefacts are displayed as anthropological exhibits but definitely not as art:

The collection, classified and documented, includes headgears, footwear, dresses, ornaments, musical instruments, terracottas, scroll paintings, Santhal paintings, Madhubani paintings, wood carvings, masks, weapons, metal images, leather puppets and a variety of other objects used in daily life (Chauhan, 1997, 105).

The display of objects in glass cases clearly abandons the evolutionary matrix of the downstairs sections and implements instead a taxonomic logic: Narrative linearity thus gives way to a spatiality that does not prescribe any particular directedness and hence implements no teleology. As the exhibits themselves are not ordered according to a chronological pattern, the visitor may move freely from case to case and thus engage in a process of accumulative decoding. For what these glass-case studies reveal is the serial repetition with a difference of the same all over again: shoes and headgears, weapons and earthenware in various regional styles — in short, the very typicality that, as Mieke Bal delineates, corresponds to the notion of the ‘primitive’. What is thus constructed is the notion of a spatial instead of a temporal arrangement that spells out the alleged timelessness and stasis of a non-developing, organic civilisation. Tribal India, represented by exhibits marked as ‘objects used in daily life’, is therefore not only *not art*, it is also *not history*: As the museum guide makes sure, “[t]hese items manifest the rituals and customs related to life-cycles and economic pursuits of the tribals and highlight their magico-religious practices and world-view” (*ibid*).



If these attic rooms have a story to tell, it is “[t]he story of everyday life of the Monpa, Sherdukpen, Khowa, Apatani, Mishmi, Adi, Nocte, Wancho, Singpho and Khamti of Arunachal Pradesh; the Karbi and Bodo of Assam; the Thankul and Kuki of

Manipur; the Mizo of Mizoram; the Ao, Angami, Sema, Lotha and Konyak of Nagaland and the Riang of Tripuri” (ibid. 107). Certainly this “story of everyday life” is not a progressive narrative but a catalogue of ethnographic knowledge. The visitor is thus posited as complicit shareholder of this knowledge and by implication of the power it substantiates: Looking at Adivasi artefacts as knowable, classifiable objects, the viewer is interpellated “to know rather than be known, to become the subject rather than the object of knowledge” and thereby “to identify with power” (Bennett, 1995, 63). If this, as Tony Bennett has argued, is the historical agenda of the emergent exhibitionary complex (as a complement to the panoptical principle of population control and surveillance) in the nation-forging decades of mid-19th-century Europe, then the National Museum’s tribal sections are surely deeply enmeshed in a comparable dynamics: While the ground floor’s grand narrative “renders the forces and principles of order visible to the populace — transformed here into a people, a citizenry” (ibid. 67), the attic sections invite the visitor, interpellated as Indian national subject, “to explore the worlds and things of the ‘other’” (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1998, 412). Posited as subject of knowledge, the Indian visitor is thus confronting that which s/he is not. According to Bennett, this exhibitionary confrontation of the subject of knowledge with its object has historically entrenched and buttressed nationhood as such since the distinction between subject of object was located “not within the national body but... between that body and other, ‘non-civilized’ peoples” (339). However, this scopical pedagogy of national citizens looking at their others and thereby internalising their own nationhood gets complicated in the Indian context. Even if the tribal sections are clearly excluded from the grand narrative of national continuity, their referents remain ultimately within the nation’s folds. The museum guide’s incantation, quoted above, of proper names of tribes is complemented with place names that apparently inform the visitor about those tribes’ habitats. However, the information given here is less geographical but primarily *political*: Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Tripuri, Assam and Nagaland are the official names of federal states within the Indian Union so that — despite all rhetoric of difference — the whole display is overcoded with the assertion that the tribals represented here are all on the map of the nation-state and hence an integral part of the all-Indian palimpsest. They are inside the nation-state but not admitted to the massive mainstream narrative that unfolds



downstairs. In the attic, at the radical margins of the nation, the Adivasi functions as a signifier of alterity *within* the unified body.

Yet even while irremovably inserted into the map of the national territory, the Adivasis in the National Museum remain presented from outside. ‘Everyday’ items alone cannot fully stand in for tribal civilisations as it seems: How else could it be explained that the attic sections combine their showcase exhibitions with the display of ethnographic photographic material that reconfirms the entire collection’s reliance on the paradigms of disciplinary anthropological knowledge production?



There is something strikingly ambivalent about these photographs: Do they function as authoritative commentary on the material exhibits, or are they themselves on display? The museum guide does not mention the photographs at all, nor do the explanatory panels that accompany them give any information as to their authorship or date of production; nor was anybody in the Anthropological Department of the National Museum competent to reveal more than the source of the material: the private collection of Verrier Elwin<sup>4</sup>. Elwin was a British anthropologist who, from the 1930s through the late 50s, pioneered Adivasi ethnography in the North Eastern states, Orissa and Bihar. Interestingly, in his writings on field work in India’s Adivasi areas, Elwin himself constantly emphasises that photography is “a very important aspect of research” but also a potential impediment to uninhibited interaction as “[t]he camera to many tribal people is an object not only of embarrassment, but of fear” (Elwin, 1989, 69). Elwin reports that, after having persuaded his interlocutors to have their pictures taken, he was often “unable to recapture the same happy, natural atmosphere that we had had before” (ibid. 71). None of these reflections come into the museum’s exhibition. Instead, in the absence of any information about their own origin and

<sup>4</sup> Information in personal interview on March 13, 2008.

historical context, the pictures taken sometime between 1930 and 1960 are not made available to a historicising reading that could decode them as documents of a specific and bygone era of ethnographic knowledge production. As a result they can only be accepted as authoritative texts that, from a 'neutral' position, produce some truth about their referents („Young Naga Girls”, “A Tagin Priest of Northern Subansiri”). In Mieke Bal's terms, they seem to speak with the voice of the museum itself. In order to achieve this effect, however, they paradoxically have to undergo the same process that pertains to the material objects in the tribal sections: they have to be dehistoricised and made author-less. Yet while this anonymity and lack of history (dis)qualifies the Adivasi objects as 'primitive', the same lack of history and individual authorship endows the ethnographic photograph with the authority of science's timeless truths.

#### **MORE CASE STUDIES: THE INDIAN MUSEUM, KOLKATA**

If the National Museum in New Delhi unfolds around a nucleus that indelibly bears the marks of its origins in British colonialism, then the Indian Museum in Kolkata has been handed down *in toto* as an imperial institution: Founded in 1814 on an initiative by the Asiatic Society, the museum is both the oldest and the largest in the country. And if New Delhi's National Museum strives to create a narrative of the post-Independence modern nation (of which the Adivasi is and is not a part), then the Indian Museum still reverberates, to this day, with the original colonial aspiration to produce “India... as a single unified site” (Guha-Thakurta, 2004, 46). Therefore, Appadurai and Breckenridge's assertion seems to be particularly pertinent to the Indian Museum: “while the *contexts* of current museum-viewing may require new applications of reception theory, the *texts* contained in many museums (that is, the collections and their associated signage) require the analysis of colonial modes of knowledge and classification” (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1998, 417-18). Indeed, the various galleries of the sprawling museum text range from archaeology and anthropology to painting and numismatics, from geology to botany and mineralogy. The colonial attempt to produce, display and circulate comprehensive knowledge about India has remained clearly discernible so that the Indian Museum itself seems to stand as one vast embodied testimony to what Thomas Richards has called the “imperial archive”: “an apparatus for controlling territory by producing, distributing, and consuming information about it” (Richards, 1993, 17). This aspect, one

would have to add, gets amplified by the imperial (and post-Independence, national) pedagogy in which the museum figures as an ideological and educational space that “hails its audience as respectful trainees. They learn to look and not touch, to walk about calmly and gently, and to distinguish the graceful from the riotous” (Miller, 2002, 314). Of course, as Homi Bhabha has pointed out long ago, national pedagogy gets constantly refractured through the decentred and decentralising from-below’ performativities of ‘dissemination’. This tension can be reconstructed as formative for the very first public museums that democratised the hitherto private-aristocratic displays of significant objects and artefacts, and simultaneously aimed at disciplining the very public they attracted. What Tony Bennett (1995) and Carol Duncan (1995, 21-47) have asserted about the British Museum and the Louvre Museum respectively, holds true for the Indian Museum with a vengeance: Ever since its opening, the museum, designed “as a centre of scientific specialized knowledges, had continuously to face up to its parallel status as a ‘Wonder House’ for the masses” (Guha-Thakurta, 2004, 79). Today, as cultural literacy gets increasingly articulated on consumerist terms, the popular appeal of the museum as part of the India-specific exhibitionary complex may very well collude with the “merchandizing spectacles” of “exhibition-cum-sales” (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1998, 408), so that the display of erstwhile exclusively scientific objects gets associated with, and virtually decoded as, the display of commodified goods.



While the taxonomic displays of neatly classified geological, zoological or numismatic specimens recall the regime of the imperial archive as well as the current insertion of widening strata of the populace into the consumerist culture, they hardly encourage the visitor to construe a narrative pattern. This, however, is offered precisely at that juncture where the National Museum withholds it: in the rooms devoted to the Adivasis. The

section indeed forms one singular and highly teleological narrative arc within an otherwise largely non-narrative scenario. The Indian Museum Gallery Plan announces this section as the collection of “Cultural Anthropology (Indian Tribes & Folk People)”. It is noteworthy that all other galleries are housed in one of the four wings of the main building — a vast cloister-like edifice enclosing an open quadrangle that can easily be traversed. Moreover, the individual galleries have various side entrances through which they can be accessed from the inner courtyard so that visitors criss-cross all over the museum’s ground floor as they please. As a consequence, the galleries appear to be arranged not in a particular order but offer, instead, multiple entry points. The “Cultural Anthropology” section alone is located outside this quadrangular area in a cul-de-sac annexe that can only be reached through a narrow passage; in order to reach this passage and enter the ‘Indian Tribes & Folk People’ gallery, the visitor first has to pass through the dimly lit “Anthropology (Palaeo)” section devoted to prehistoric times. Here, panelled palaeontologic information about the evolution, habitats and times of hominids and prehistoric humans is amplified by dioramas showcasing miniature models of Ramapithecus, Australopithecus or Neanderthal communities in ‘typical’ situations.



While we could retrieve no information about the period from which these displays stem, it is very unlikely that they should date back to the colonial era; all the same, the very medium harks back to European 19th-century exhibitionary practice, where such dioramas were fashionable for showcasing exotica and curios (see Griffiths, 2002, 75-77). From this gloomy, conveniently cave-like prehistoric section, an ascending passage leads into the well-lit “Cultural Anthropology” gallery where one finally meets the modern Adivasi — again in a series of dioramas. While the downstairs cases are arranged in a temporal succession and thus evoke an evolutionist progress from Ramapithecus to Homo sapiens sapiens, evolution is suspended in

the upstairs room: It suggests the timeless synchronicity of the geographically disparate. The variety of India's tribal communities is articulated through space: Sixteen symmetrically arranged dioramas — eight on the left wall facing eight on the right one -exhibit 'life group' models of regionally specific indigenous and 'folk' people from such discrepant areas as the Andaman Islands or the Himalaya states of the North East. In all, the passage through the gallery results in the effect of what Alison Griffiths, in her analysis of mid-19th-century diorama shows, has called "promenade ethnographic cinema" (ibid. 41): the cumulative intake of spectacular displays in progression. In almost all cases, the Adivasi are represented by not quite life-size manikins of a man and a woman in what the visitor is encouraged to take for 'typical attire' and 'typical situations'. It becomes tangible that the diorama, in its staging of artificial bodies in three-dimensional space, evokes a heightened reality effect but can at best offer a situation in freeze. In comparison to other representational forms from theatre and film to the zoo or, more pertinent to the ethnographic context, the "anthropological levees" (Poignant, 2004, 125) with their exhibition of live indigenous people, the dioramic simulation must appear highly truncated and particularly dependent on supplementary information by signage. Thus, the first diorama on the right-hand side shows a man and woman in what could spontaneously be decoded as a present-day beach resort advertisement. It is only by reading the accompanying panel that the visitor learns that s/he is looking at a Nicobarese couple with "the man ready for fishing and the woman carrying coconut shells" (Museum Guide, 2005, n.p.). Yet while in this particular case the figures themselves may appear rather 'contemporary' in their beach-style attire and athleticism, the painted background with its domed straw huts and wooden barges clearly signals that they inhabit a culturally retarded formation, one in which primitive subsistence still prevails over the idea of leisure: It is a fish trap and not a Frisbee disk that the Nicobarese male is holding in his left hand.





However 'physically modern', therefore, even the Nicobarese couple are thus overwritten with temporal alterity as they are subjected to a representational mode "of distancing those who are observed from the Time of the observer" (Fabian, 1983, 25). This allochronic distantiation, which invariably places the object of the gaze in the past and accordingly confirms the viewer's being-in-the-present, gets intensified as this 'promenade ethnographic cinema' unfolds. To give just one more example, the Onge diorama presents a couple that, according to the accompanying signage, "belongs to the Negrito racial stock". Furthermore we learn from the 2005 Gallery Guide that the Onge, inhabitants of the Little Andaman Islands, "believe in the Spirits of the sky, sea and jungle". This primordialism gets emphasised by a photograph, placed next to the diorama. Not only does the picture show an Onge man engaged in the archaic technique of fish hunting with bow and arrows; moreover, the flat silhouette of the man in the black-and-white photograph is reminiscent of the style of cave paintings.



The diorama itself highlights the glossy nakedness, and dark complexion of the couple along with the simplicity of a civilisation of hunters and gatherers. While all this strongly emphasises the temporal gulf between the visitor and his/her object, it becomes apparent by now that the diorama as a medium does not make these objects fully available to the gaze. Instead, very much like the camera, it forces the viewer into a perspective that has been framed for her/him. The life groups presented in dioramic installations can be

seen “from one side only, the view [is directed] through a kind of frame which shuts out the line where the scene ends” (Boas [1896] qu. in Griffiths, 2002, 41).



In other words: Even while the anthropological section posits its visitors as modernists looking at primitives, it also permanently reminds these same visitors to the fact that their gaze is not spontaneous and free but channelled and in fact limited by an authority with which they have entered into a contractual relation. To be empowered to view the showcased Adivasi implies to submit to that power that renders the Adivasi available to the gaze in the first place; and it is up to that power to decide what can and what cannot be seen. We will never see the face of the Onge man for instance, nor the content of the woman’s basket, let alone the reverse shot to the perspective that this diorama establishes. Analogous to what film studies have theorised as the effect of suture, the diorama allows only for a tutored gaze. “When the viewer discovers the frame [observes Daniel Dayan] the triumph of his former *possession* of the image fades out... The spectator discovers that his possession of space was only partial, illusory. He feels dispossessed of what he is prevented from seeing” (Dayan, 1993, 448). The viewing subject gets thus inscribed into the spectacle only as a bearer of lack. What begins as scopic mastery is turned into the awareness of the limitedness of vision. It is this effect, by way of which the visitor gets posited as a subject of lack, that enables the

“ethnographic promenade cinema” to be finally transposed into a teleological narrative that culminates in the arrival at the point of plenitude — a plenitude that resides, of course, in the nation-form, again.

For at the far end of the gallery, the series of tribals and ‘folk’ people behind glass gives way to a huge map of India mounted on the wall from where it virtually presides over the entire section. The visitor approaches this mural map like a shrine or devotional icon. Around the outline of India, twenty-five figurines of male-female couples are arranged representing the “Regional Costumes of India”. The Onge can be seen at the far right at the bottom, the Khasi or the Andamanese are there as well as the Punjabi, the Gujarati, or the Bengali couples. As in the National Museum, then, the Adivasi are put on the map of India by way of integrating them into the federal structure of the nation-state: While the Delhi narrative emphasised that the regional belongings of the different tribal groups can be identified with particular modern units — the respective Federal States whose territory they happen to inhabit — the Indian Museum integrates the Adivasi as so many ingredients of the melange of India’s diversity. Representing the Adivasi like all the other regional groups, namely as a specifically costumed couple, the mural display enforces a rhetoric of likeness. Moreover, the outlines of the map confirm the integrity of the territorial body of the nation, thus ensuring that this diversity will, in Nehruvian terms, be ultimately subsumed under the centripetal force of unity.



The even distribution of so many ‘different’ couples turns them all into ‘typical’ representatives of their respective regional or ethnic contexts and hence into tributaries to the massive stream of the nation. The map is therefore imagined as completely suffused with the body of the nation people that, all its internal differentiation notwithstanding, is held in place precisely by the coherence of territory. On this map of unity in diversity, there is no place for a figure like Devi’s Douloti. Unlike the diorama Adivasis or the



tribals in Elwin's photographs, she does not inhabit a temporally removed cultural niche, timeless and virtually untouched by mainstream modernity. Instead, as Devi painstakingly drives home, she is integrated into this modernity in the most crushingly exploitative way. Enslaved and prostituted, Douloti is not admitted to citizenship, not constituted as a national subject, not allotted a speaking position within responsibility (responding and being responded to). To step out of this radical subalternity, Devi seems to suggest, is only possible at the cost of life. It is as a dead body, and only as a dead body, that Douloti begins to 'speak' as an embodied "graphic comment on the whole map of India" (Spivak, 1993, xxiv), a comment that effectively undoes the fiction of the nation's oneness but that derives from an agency which is inherently self-effacing. Reading India's official museums in tandem with a narrative like that raises the question, as yet unanswered, whether a form of Adivasi subjectivity could be imagined, and more importantly: enacted, that is neither acquired in the tragic-heroic mode of self-annihilation nor subjected to the "generalized terrain of India that blocks off subaltern and minority identities" (Varma, 2003, 216).

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