

India



**Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, *The Rumor of Globalization:
Desecrating the Global from Vernacular Margins***

London: C. Hurst & Co., 2013. 256 pages. Illustrations, index. Paper, £20.00. ISBN 978-1-84904-141-6.

THIS BOOK brings together a series of essays that have for the most part been previously published in scholarly journals. Written from the vantage point of an insider to the political culture of urban Bengal, Mukhopadhyay's scholarly concerns and colorful writing style reflect the concerns of a Bengali intellectual of his generation, commenting on everyday life in post-liberalization India. This in itself gives the book the value of novelty—I have not come across social science books published internationally that deal with themes that range from folk appropriations of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York to street food in Kolkata and internet sites that celebrate a genre of pornography with the catchy title of “aunty porn.” The unifying idea behind this variety is a concern with the local, so that each chapter offers a window onto globalization, obliquely critiquing it by describing small fragments of everyday life to show how it is being shaped by global forces and how people respond to them. Fragments of conversation culled from the “field” are juxtaposed with long discursions into high theory reminiscent of the *āddā*

(informal group discussion) style that Bengali intellectual culture is known for. Mukhopadhyay presents his work as a counterpoint to Appadurai's famous essay, "The Production of Locality," viewing globality instead as brittle and fractured, emerging through various local sites of enactment (APPADURAI 1996, 501-34). The first chapter, aptly titled "The Rumor of Globalization," evokes the illusionary quality of the global market by describing a specific event in Kolkata that received wide publicity in the local media. Kolkata received an influx of visitors from the rural hinterland in May 2001 as rumors of cheap Chinese consumer goods being dumped in Indian markets circulated wildly throughout Bengal. Villagers whom Mukhopadhyay met after the China sale at the Netaji Indoor stadium in Kolkata perceived these Chinese goods as a form of *dān* or gift—the "gift of globalization" to use their own words. What follows is a fascinating though damning commentary on three decades of communist rule in Bengal where rights (*adbhikār*) have been transformed into gifts (*dān*) distributed by local leaders through a system of political patronage that is all-pervasive. Some of the other chapters that I found particularly interesting were about vernacular travel writing that goes against the dominant Western gaze that we are more familiar with, folk artists representations of a global event such as the 9/11 strike on the World Trade Center, and the way in which certain culinary tastes have been marginalized over time through the experience of colonization and have now acquired transgressive potential as street food. The chapter on Indian porn sites could have been exciting but suffers from a lack of proper framing. In fact, this criticism can be leveled at the book as a whole. Important issues are touched upon briefly but not fully discussed—the author veers off in too many directions. What may make for an interesting conversational style in face-to-face interaction, as in the *āḍḍā*, does not necessarily translate into a good writing style for a book. There is a lack of fit between the theoretical discussion and the ethnographic vignettes presented in the chapters. The book would have benefited from the inclusion of comparative ethnographic perspectives even from studies in other countries or similar issues in India. I give one example from my own fieldwork with slum dwellers in Mumbai who are also deeply engaged with issues around *adbhikār* and political patronage but think about them very differently. Given the long history of labor mobilization in Mumbai, the category of "slum dweller" is thought to be empowering for those so deemed as it transcends ascriptive divisions of caste and religion (see CHATTERJI and MEHTA 2007). Mukhopadhyay's subaltern perspective, while being valuable for its intimate knowledge about Bengal, cannot really offer generalizations even for other subalterns in India. In a different vein, the chapter on the 9/11 paintings is of great interest as I too have written on the same subject, done long-term fieldwork with artists from the same village that Mukhopadhyay talks about, and have read it in its earlier avatar as a journal article. This chapter is valuable for my own work as his fieldwork was conducted a few years before my own, but I found the deliberate exoticization of the subject to be somewhat condescending. I have followed the making of the 9/11 story by the picture storytellers of Naya village and the way it has evolved over the years. Traditionally, these bards used painted scrolls to illustrate the stories that they sang about. Unlike other such communities in India, these bards are also

famous for composing on nonreligious and topical themes. What I found fascinating with the 9/11 story was the way in which the global event is made meaningful within a narrative framework that is rooted in a sophisticated understanding of the mythic universe. More than a story about a cataclysmic event, it is about archetypal relationships and the fraught nature of intimacy. Commodification of this tradition has had very interesting consequences, as it has led to the valorization of the painted scroll as an autonomous object. I have found that the younger generation of storytellers in Naya village spend much more time on the painted scroll and have developed techniques to bring multiple perspectives into the painted narrative that were not possible before, when the focus was more on the musical prowess of the bard (see CHATTERJI forthcoming). The bards of Naya pride themselves on being social commentators and globalization has extended the boundaries of their world (see CHATTERJI 2012). I offer these comments because I think that the book is an important contribution to the field of postcolonial studies and it is a pity that the valuable ethnographic insights sometimes get lost because of the style in which they are presented. Mukhopadaya's project is extremely important and I do hope that he will carry it forward.

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