Darwin in India: Anticolonial Evolutionism at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century

Inder S. Marwah

This article examines how Indian anticolonialists drew on Darwinism and evolutionary theory to resist British imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century. Drawing on archival material from *The Bengalee* (and beyond), I show how Indian nationalists marshaled evolutionist schemas to contest stage-based accounts of social advancement rationalizing despotic rule in India. I argue that Darwinian evolutionism enabled anticolonialists to respond to a particular decolonial dilemma—that of developmentalism, the unilinear notion of historical time justifying India's political subjection. While Darwinism's social application is commonly understood to sustain imperialism, I demonstrate that it served, in the colonial context, to deconstruct historicist tropes portraying India as politically immature. Drawing on evolutionism, nationalists contested the presumptions of imperialist discourse and reconceptualized progress in novel, anticolonial terms. Darwin's travel to India thus exposes a distinctive decolonial quandary, the syncretic Indian anticolonial response to it, and the intractability of the contradictions facing decolonizing movements globally.

Darwinism's and evolutionary theory's encroachments into politics have been, generally, infelicitous. Darwin's own thinking bears the imprint of the high colonial era he inhabited and his intellectual trajectory was marked not only by its ideational conceits, but its material practices, as much of its scientific travel—including Darwin's stint aboard the *Beagle*—contributed more or less directly to European expansionism.[1] This colonial context inflected not only his perorations on evolutionism and human civilization, in *The Descent of Man*, but also worked its way back into the theory of natural selection. "The practices of colonialism that Darwin encountered as a young man," Tony Barta observes, "were embedded in the vocabulary of his most influential work and its reception" (2005, 119).[2] Darwin's ideas spilled across colonial borders in another way: between colonizing societies and colonized subjects. If he spent little time thinking about India, the same cannot be said about the converse. Indians grappled extensively with the evolutionism that Darwin and Herbert Spencer raised to prominence in the mid-late nineteenth century, integrating it into the rising tide of the nationalist movement.

This article considers just this: the surprisingly rich conceptual language that Darwinism and evolutionism furnished for Indian anticolonialism at the turn of the twentieth century. I examine how Darwinism traversed cultural, geographical, and philosophical space to become transmuted into political arguments set against colonial rule in the subcontinent. In exposing evolutionism's uptake in India, I investigate how, as David Scott puts it, certain western logics both shaped the political horizons of the colonized and were exploited by them. Where Scott's investigation of the "political rationality of forms of power" (1999, 23) weighs "the practices, modalities, and projects" (26) sustaining colonial governance, I focus here on their ambivalences and openings, weaponized by colonial subjects to contest it.

This might seem an improbable argument, for a few reasons. First, Darwin's evolutionary theory, in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), most directly addressed natural sciences. Second, social Darwinism is commonly associated with invidious race-thinking more likely to buttress imperialist chauvinisms than to resist them. Third, Darwinism—natural and social—is often framed as a Euro-American concern with little exposure in non-western contexts.

There's some truth to all of these, but none is entirely right. Darwinism traveled far, wide, and fast, as *Origin* was

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translated and spread across the globe almost immediately following its publication, reshaping a wide range of nineteenth and twentieth century fields of knowledge within the humanities and social sciences, from late Victorian fiction (Beer 2000; Amigoni 2007), to nascent social theory and sociology (Burrow 1966; Gough et al. 2008), to religious and theological doctrine (Brown 2010; Ruse 2012), to liberal, utopian, socialist, anarchist, and positivist political thought (Ramnath 2011; Ball 1979; Masters 1990; Richards 2009). Darwinism's currency reached well beyond the west as evolutionary theory was integrated into scientific, religious, humanistic, and social-scientific discourses in China (Pusey 1983), Russia (Adams 2016), the Middle East (Elshakry 2013), and India (Brown 2012; Fischer-Tiné 2014; Killingley 1995). Finally—as I argue here—evolutionism and Darwinism served explicitly anticolonial ends in the Indian context, offering a generative theoretical lexicon to subvert the civilizational hierarchies subtending the British empire.

While nationalists across the political spectrum drew on Darwinism and evolutionism, I focus here on Indian liberalism. This isn't because non-liberals didn't address it—evolutionism pervades the writings of Aurobindo Ghose, Swami Vivekananda, and others—but because I want to consider evolutionism's impacts on liberal notions of social progress underwriting nineteenth-century imperialism.[3] My interest lies in tracking how anticolonialists marshaled Darwinism and evolutionary theory to challenge, alter, or extend the terms of liberal historicism, upending the gradualism implicit in the ever-receding horizon of Indian self-government. Darwinism and evolutionism, I argue, were made to respond to a particular decolonial dilemma: the dilemma of *developmentalism*, the notion of unilinear historical time rationalizing Indian political subjection (Chakrabarty 2000; McCarthy 2009; Nandy 1994; Pitts 2005; Mehta 1999). Historians of colonialism have documented how nationalists invoked science's authority to address other decolonial pressures—notably, the intractable problem of grounding and consolidating a postcolonial national identity (Prakash 1999; Nanda 2020). Evolutionism, I suggest, served a different (if related) purpose, deconstructing the historicism that sustained the deferral of Indian sovereignty and figured Indian development as mirroring that of the west. Drawing on Darwinism and evolutionary theory, nationalists contested imperialism's parameters and reconceptualized progress in entirely novel, anticolonial terms.[4]

While I focus on India, the dilemma that evolutionism was pressed into resolving was not unique to it. It was, rather, a shared condition across the colonial world as anti-imperialists faced the obdurate paradox of charting a course for postcolonial independence outside the Eurocentrist terms upholding despotic rule. In the subcontinent, Darwinism and evolutionism offered a conceptual language to do just this. And as with other nationalist invocations of science, the appeal to evolutionism was profoundly ambivalent—a tool of anticolonial resistance that generated its own exclusions, tensions, and failures. This is, for Partha Chatterjee, the inescapable consequence of seeking to "open up that framework of knowledge which presumes to dominate it, to displace that framework, to subvert its authority, to challenge its morality" (1986, 42). Darwin's travel to India thus exposes a distinctive decolonial quandary, its syncretic negotiation in Indian anticolonialism, and the intractability of the colonial contradictions it had no choice but to confront.

Of course, the problem of developmentalism has received considerable critical scrutiny in political theory's turn to empire, as scholars have exposed the stage-based schemas – particularly in late-modern liberalism—depicting Europeans as at the apex of a universal historical-developmental trajectory (for now-classic studies, see Pitts 2005; Mehta 1999; McCarthy 2009; for more recent entrants, see Williams 2021; Beaumont and Li 2022; Lederman 2022). Generative as it has been, however, much of this literature remains within a strictly western orbit in terms of the thinkers it addresses (Locke, Smith, Burke, Kant, the Mills, Tocqueville, Bentham, Hobhouse), its theoretical concerns (liberalism, utilitarianism, conjectural or philosophical histories), and its contemporary upshot (developmentalism's continuing entanglements with liberalism, Marxism, and critical theory).

The western emphasis has two problematic implications. First, as David Myer Temin has recently argued, taking developmentalist schemas as implicitly European "reifies a domain of contestable vocabularies *as Eurocentric* that actors at the peripheries reworked for their own purposes" (2022, 2, emphasis in original). Developmentalism's seemingly intractable Eurocentrism is, to some extent, a product of its near-exclusive treatment in western theory; its anticolonial uptake reveals its mutability and critical potential. Second, the western focus occludes the array of non-western critiques, analyses, and responses to these exact dilemmas, *by* those subject to them. Indian anticolonialists developed rich theorizations of their political past, present, and future in navigating the paradoxes of anticolonial sovereignty (Sultan 2020) and envisioning political futures ranging from various federalisms (Mantena 2016; Sultan 2021; Parasher 2022), to autonomy within an imperial confederacy (Bayly 2011; Mantena 2016), to militant culturalisms (Chaturvedi 2022; Kapila 2021), to communist radicalism (Kaviraj 1986; Manjapra 2010). Each in its own way wrestled with the dilemma of developmentalism in conceptualizing India's progress beyond the limits of European modernity.

This article has three related purposes. First, rather than rehearsing now well-worn critiques of developmentalism's Eurocentrism, I show how Indian nationalists negotiated the dilemma of development by denaturalizing western

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notions of progress, recomposing the colonial order's temporal coordinates, and advancing their own constructive visions of independence. Treating developmentalism from the other side of the colonial divide, I argue, illuminates its protean nature and its transfiguration into the grammar of anticolonial politics. Second, I aim to contribute to scholarship on the political theory of anticolonialism attending to the specificities of colonial problematics and treating anticolonial thought as neither replicating European ideals nor merely critiquing them, but as conceptual interventions in their own right—as "political innovations and articulation[s] of alternative universalisms" not reducible to western normative languages (Getachew 2016, 839; see also Getachew 2019; Idris 2022; Kohn and McBride 2011; Getachew and Mantena 2021; Kapila 2021; Wilder 2015). Darwinism and evolutionism, I contend, grounded not only critiques of Eurocentrist chauvinisms, but also the (re)constructive ambitions of Indian nationalists. Finally, while South Asian intellectual history has episodically touched on Darwinism's traces in turn-of-century nationalisms (Dalton 1982; Kapila 2007a; Sartori 2003; Sultan 2021; Bayly 2011; Klausen 2014), it has not, to my knowledge, delved into the distinctive ways that evolutionist paradigms inflected subcontinental anticolonialism, as I endeavor to do here.

I begin by elaborating the dilemma of developmentalism, sketching out both its theoretical foundations in canonical liberals and the political theory on empire addressing it. I then canvass Darwinism's influence over social and political thought in the subcontinent. Finally, I excavate my central interest: anticolonialisms drawing on Darwinism and evolutionary theory to criticize the western interweaving of empire, civilization, and development. Drawing principally (though not exclusively) on archival material from *The Bengalee,*[5] a nationalist broadsheet edited and published by Surendranath Banerjea (a leader of the Indian National Congress's moderates and dyed-in-the-wool liberal), I show how Indian nationalists mobilized evolutionist and organicist schemas in three distinctive ways to negotiate the dilemma of developmentalism: by *denaturalizing* the racialism and teleology underpinning civilizational hierarchies; by *re-localizing sovereignty*, situating the motive power of progress in endogenous forces rather than exogenous political steering; and by *reconstructing* an ideal of Indian advancement, both domestically and within a reconstituted global order, through nationalist self-direction.

The Dilemma of Developmentalism

In the last two or so decades, theorists of empire have exhumed modern political thought's developmentalist, or historicist, bases, taking the "ideal of development" (McCarthy 2009) as the lynchpin of European expansionism. They join longstanding critiques in literary studies (Said 1978; Spivak 1999), history (Chakrabarty 2000), philosophy (Dussel 1980; Mignolo 2011), and postcolonial theory (Nandy 1994; Chatterjee 1986) demonstrating how Euro-American theory secures its "positional superiority" (Said 1978, 7) by portraying the west as the pinnacle of a fixed process of historical evolution. More or less deterministic theorizations of social progress shape the conjectural histories of Smith, Ferguson, Robertson, and Kames (Pitts 2005; Sebastiani 2008; Meek 1976), those of their more critical continental counterparts, such as Lahontan, Turgot, Rousseau, and Diderot (Muthu 2003; Israel 2006), Kant's, Herder's, and Hegel's philosophical histories (Marwah 2021; Church 2022), eighteenth- and nineteenth- century liberalism—most notoriously, in the Mills and Tocqueville (Pitts 2005; Mehta 1999)—and conservatism (O'Neill 2016), Marx's historical materialism (Chakrabarty 2000; Anderson 2010), and twentieth-century modernization theory (McCarthy 2009). For all their variations, these developmentalisms consistently depict European modernity as the endpoint of a singular, universal course of progress.

James and John Stuart Mill's views on India perhaps best capture the overlay of historicist, epistemological, and political presumptions underpinning liberal imperialism's developmentalism. Without rehearsing their fuller theorizations of empire's pedagogical mandate, the Mills shared in the conviction that India was incapable of autonomously raising itself out of its backwardness and up toward civilization. A society mired in stagnation, it had no internal capacity to stimulate progress; British conquest and education comprised the indispensable spark moving Indians toward self-government. "As the manners, institutions, and attainments of the Hindus, have been stationary for many ages," James Mill held, "in beholding the Hindus of the present day, we are beholding the Hindus of many ages past; and are carried back, as it were, into the deepest recesses of antiquity" (1826, vol. 2, 189). No innocent observation, this justified colonial policy. "To ascertain the true state of the Hindus in the scale of civilization," he asserted, "is not only an object of curiosity in the history of human nature; but to the people of Great Britain, charged as they are with the government of that great portion of the human species, it is an object of the highest practical importance" (vol. 2, 134-135). John Stuart Mill reiterated the view rather more pointedly, declaring that "[d]espotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement," since "[t]he early difficulties in the way of spontaneous progress are so great, that there is seldom any choice of means for overcoming them" (1977, 224). Colonial power was, then, required to push past India's internal blockages—namely, customary hierarchies stunting Indians' intellectual development, and by extension, their capacity for self-determination. As Pitts and Mehta argue, this conjunction of theoretical elements—in

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particular, the fusion of utilitarianism and liberalism—scaffolded colonial rule over variously "stunted" non-Europeans.

These historicisms' political and epistemological reverberations have become a central preoccupation of contemporary theorists, as liberals, Marxists, and critical theorists alike have wrestled with the shared inheritance of notions of progress invariably portraying non-Europeans as lagging behind the west. The conundrum lies in how to hold on to a normative vision of political advancement without lapsing into its Eurocentrist "temptations" (Williams 2021). Responses range from provincializing European thought (Chakrabarty 2000), to advancing post-colonialism liberalisms (Ivison 2002), to differentiating more or less developmentalist liberalisms (Pitts 2005; Mantena 2010; Muthu 2003), to tempering Marx's and Marxism's historicisms (Coulthard 2014; Anderson 2010), to "decolonizing" critical theory (McCarthy 2009; Allen 2016). For all its advances, though, much of this literature treats both the problem of developmentalism and its solution from within the confines of western theory, such that progress is recovered by shearing off the Eurocentric excesses of Euro-American thinkers and traditions—by, effectively, rescuing them from themselves. Much less commonly does it consider how non-western and anticolonial thinkers themselves conceptualized progress—what it looked like and how it was theorized from the other side of the colonial divide. This remains the case in more recent works on liberalism, race, empire, and developmentalism centering philosophers such as Mill (Beaumont and Li 2022; Lederman 2022), Hobhouse (Williams 2021; Tan 2022), Smith (Ince 2021), and Kant (Williams 2021; Church 2022).

Developmentalist schemas and critical responses to them are, however, by no means the sole purview of western theory, as anticolonialists confronted these historicisms and envisioned their own political evolution in radically different ways. As James Tully observes, conceptual vocabularies consist of "terms that have an indeterminate number of criteria of application, and thus of uses," Wittgensteinian family resemblances that are "fought over and altered in the course of political struggles" (2020, 34). A recent scholarship has begun examining such anticolonial recompositions, and how "developmentalism became one of the primary languages through which actors contested and reimagined anticolonial futures" (Temin 2022, 11). Nazmul Sultan, for instance, shows how Indian nationalists grappled with the "developmentalist figuration of colonial peoplehood" (2020, 82) in claiming political sovereignty. Far from straightforwardly rejecting developmentalist presumptions, nationalists rather manipulated them to reshape the relationship between peoplehood, progress, and sovereignty, turning "developmentalism against colonial rule" (2020, 87; Marwah 2019). Another strand of nationalists—Bipin Chandra Pal, Radhakamal Mukerjee, and C.S. Das—invoked a multilinear view of progress to undercut colonial historicism and advance federalist visions of Indian self-government (Sultan 2021). Drawing on Walter Rodney's critique of colonial underdevelopment, David Temin demonstrates the ways that "context-sensitive developmental theories could be of use for anticolonial politics in analyzing both structures of domination and strategies of resistance" (2022, 7).

In colonial peripheries, then, developmentalism proved a more elastic and critical resource than is registered by much of the political theory on empire, drawn as it was into multifarious anticolonial transfigurations. In the subcontinent, Darwinism and evolutionary theory opened a rich semantic field for just these metamorphoses.

Darwin Comes to India

With Mill, Comte, and other European influences, Darwin inflected Indian social, political, and theological debates at the turn of the twentieth century. A typical article in *The Bengalee*, for instance, sought to "explain social evolution by Natural Selection, the mechanism of evolution as enlarged and accepted since the time of Darwin" (*Bengalee* 1907a). The timing of Darwinism's introduction in the subcontinent shaped its reception, as western thought was increasingly drawn into the tide of anti-imperialism. Evolutionism, social theory, and nationalism intersected, as "Hindu thinkers elaborated a framework of interpretation which challenged those notions of evolution that were usually associated with the writings of Darwin and Spencer" (Killingley 1995, 175). Despite its frequent confusion or conflation with competing evolutionisms—Spencer's especially, but also those of Benjamin Kidd, T. H. Huxley, and others—Darwinism was drafted into the nationalist imagination of Indian progress. This was in part due to its relatively easy assimilation into Hinduism (Brown 2012). Evolutionism was much less threatening to Hinduism's pantheism and cyclical conception of time, with eternal cycles of death and rebirth, than it was to the Christian worldview, which took all species as fixed by a singular act of creation. Overall, "evolution held no such terrors for Hindu thinkers as it did for some Christians" (Killingley 1995, 196; Bayly 2011, 255).

Evolutionism was thus incorporated into Indian reformist movements, over which it left its marks. C. Mackenzie Brown charts Darwinism's passages into distinctive "schools" of Hindu evolutionism that, shaped by nationalism and the colonial context, blurred the lines between spiritual and political concerns (2010, 716). Both the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj integrated evolutionism, as "soft Darwinism was merged with a view of the history of Hinduism" (Bayly 2011, 231). The Theosophical Society, whose influence spread across late nineteenth-century

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reformist organizations, likewise proclaimed Hinduism's conformity with evolutionary science (Bevir 2020). More generally, just as British thinkers such as John Lubbock, E.A. Freeman, and J.R. Green drew on Darwin to map Anglo-Saxon racial evolution from the ancient Teutons up to their present (Koditschek 2011), so, too, did Indian nationalists, such as in R.C. Dutt's *History of Civilization in Ancient India*, appeal to Darwinism's geological time scale to trace Hindu civilization back to its supposed Aryan roots (Prakash 1999; Bayly 2011).

Many of the era's nationalist periodicals addressed Spencerism, Darwinism, evolutionism, and their cognates. *Dawn*, an influential monthly, ran a five-part series in 1898 entitled "From Herbert Spencer Onward" and Spencer served as the intellectual lodestone of Shyamji Krishnavarma's *The Indian Sociologist* (two quotations of Spencer's adorned the journal's masthead). Spencer's philosophy was also plumbed in prominent broadsheets such as the *Calcutta Review*, *East & West*, *Indian Review*, *Indian Social Reformer*, *Modern Review*, and *Hindustan Review.* Articles on Darwin and Darwinism ran through the *Calcutta Review*, *Hindu Social Reformer*, *Indian Social Reformer*, *Mookerjee's Magazine*, *Indian Selector,* and *National Magazine*, among others, along with sporadic references to other notable Darwinists (and social Darwinists) such as Francis Galton, Benjamin Kidd, and T. H. Huxley. Journals ran articles on eugenics and social reform, physical and racial fitness or degradation (a common anxiety of social Darwinists), and hundreds more on progress, civilization, historical development, and evolution—with more or less proximity to Darwin – in the decades surrounding the turn of the century.[6]

Luminaries of the late Bengali Renaissance directly engaged Darwinism, as did Swadeshi-era nationalists who took inspiration from them. In his essay "Mill, Darwin and Hinduism" (1875), Bankimchandra Chatterjee appealed to Darwin to demonstrate Hinduism's alignment with evolutionary theory, and Swami Vivekananda drew on "Darwin's theory" (2006, 3026) to argue, as did Western Darwinists such as Jacques Novicow and T. H. Huxley, that humanity's higher faculties set its evolutionary course outside the laws of natural selection. The so-called "extremists" following in their footsteps similarly absorbed the period's evolutionist timbre. Aurobindo Ghose, arguably the nationalist movement's most prominent radical by 1907–1908, regarded evolutionism as "the key-note of the thought of the nineteenth century" affecting "all its science and its thought-attitude," along with "its moral temperament, its politics and its society" (1998, 169). Evolutionism shaped his spiritual philosophy, which drew on "evolution which the Darwinian theory first made plain to human knowledge" (2005, 211-212), as well as his nationalism, both in its early phases (in articles on social evolutionism in *Bande Mataram* and *Karmayogin*,) and in later essays drawing on a nuanced reform Darwinism to theorize India's movement toward independence ("Is India Civilized?", published in *Arya* between 1918–1921). Treating national advancement as an "organic growth," Bipin Chandra Pal took the law of evolution to dictate that Swaraj was "a growth from within" since "no reform, social or economic or political, can be got from outside" (2020).

As in Europe and America, more invidious strands of social Darwinism also seeped into the subcontinent as "racial theories claiming Darwinian legitimation soon became widespread among the British in India, and were later taken up by Indians, who applied the notion of primitive races to the lower castes" (Killingley 1995, 183; Bayly 2011, 252-259).[7] These currents run through *The Bengalee* in articles such as "Political Degeneration," which invoked an especially crude social Darwinism in admonishing that "[a]ll nations which have prematurely passed away, in natural course, are buried in graves dug by their own effeminacy and ease," having "no thought for the preservation of [their] race" (*Bengalee* 1908a). Over the course of June 1909, *The Bengalee* published a monumental, nineteen-article series entitled "A Dying Race" chronicling Hindus' steady demise at the hand of a more socially efficient Muslim minority. Hindus, Lieut.-Col. U. N. Mukerjee declared, were "a decaying race" whose downward spiral was "a case of the survival of the fittest" (*Bengalee* 1909a). The series painstakingly detailed the role of religious, educational, and class-based differences, the caste system, Hindu commercial enterprises, lending institutions, regressive social customs, and dietary and farming practices leading to "the gradual decline of the Hindu population in India in the great struggle for existence which is continually going on in this world" (*Bengalee* 1909b). Muslims, Mukerjee concluded, could "look forward to a united Mohamedan [*sic*] world" while "we are waiting for our extinction" (*Bengalee* 1909c).[8]

Darwinism was thus integrated into Indian social and political thought in wide-ranging and often novel ways, taken up more or less casually by reformers and nationalists—including anticolonialists.

Evolution against Empire

In the anticolonial context, Darwinism and evolutionism served both deconstructive and reconstructive purposes: the former, by decomposing colonial developmentalism's constituent elements, and the latter, by opening a conceptual repertoire for envisioning radically distinctive Indian futures. In what follows, I track three anticolonial evolutionisms that undercut imperialist teleology, grounded political sovereignty in the Indian social body, and projected India's advancement in a reconstituted global order. Evolutionism, I will suggest in the article's conclusion, carved out a space for anticolonialists to chip away at the fixity of nineteenth-century developmentalism and

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reimagine Indians as agents, rather than objects, of progress.

Evolutionist Dysteleology

One line of evolutionist anticolonialism drew on the indeterminacy of evolutionary processes—particularly in Darwinian natural selection—to refute liberal imperialism's teleological developmentalism. Despite its distortion into racialized discourses of social fitness, Darwinism remained conceptually resistant to path-dependent "laws" of progress, since, Paul Crook notes, it "denied that evolutionary change worked purposefully towards a long-term goal (teleology) or that it proceeded in a single direction (orthogenesis)" (1994, 10).

Shyamji Krishna Varma, an industrialist, lawyer, Sanskrit expert, and rabid anti-imperialist, invoked this evolutionary anti-determinism to give the lie to liberal historicism. In the early decades of the twentieth century, he edited and published *The Indian Sociologist*, a radical monthly synthesizing Herbert Spencer's sociology, Dayananda Saraswati's reformist Hinduism, and a truly extraordinary range of eastern and western thinkers to further India's independence movement (Fischer-Tiné 2014; Kapila 2007a; Marwah 2017). While advocating a distinctively liberal politics, Krishna Varma steadfastly rejected its developmentalism and the graduated political sovereignty it countenanced. Against Indians' presumed incapacity for self-rule, he questioned "the connection between education and self-government," given that

> the only test of fitness for self-government which the British Constitution recognises is the possession of a stake in the country … An educational qualification has never formed the test of fitness within the British dominions … going another century or two back, the people of England, man and boy, high and low, with the exception of a mere handful, were steeped in the grossest ignorance, and yet there was a House of Commons (*Indian Sociologist* 1906, 34).

The denial of Indian autonomy rested on a phantasm of social advancement that, he charged, didn't even hold in the metropole. Like Dadabhai Naoroji, who noted that Russia's peasant masses and Britain's own populace "did not so wait for their Parliament" (82), Krishnavarma countered the "not yet" of colonial temporality (Chakrabarty 2000) by undercutting its developmental presuppositions, severing political from educational capacity.

More broadly, he was censorious toward Surendranath Banerjea's view that "progress is the order of Nature in the dispensation of Divine Providence, and the Asiatics, as well as Europeans, under the immutable law of progress must, in the course of time, acquire the habits of self-government." "Evolution has proved," Krishna Varma retorted,

> that there is no law of progress—only an utterly careless and non-moral law of 'ordered change' … Thus, there being no immutable law of progress as Mr. Banerjea holds, it is evident that Indians will have to make a supreme effort before they achieve an autonomous self-government by ridding their country of the foreign despotism which fools or knaves regard "as ordained in the inscrutable dispensation of Providence for India's good (*Indian Sociologist* 1907, 38).

Properly understood, evolutionary theory countered the stadial fiction that organisms, natural or social, advanced through pre-ordained phases of development. Against liberal imperialism's depoliticizing naturalism—its view of self-government as the endpoint of an always-indeterminate tutelary period—Krishna Varma argued that India's progress turned on collective political action. Brajendr a Nath Seal, an eminent Calcutta philosopher and humanist, criticized "Mr. Herbert Spencer and his school" on similar grounds, arguing that its "historico-genetic method is vitiated by an unhistorical and unreal simplicity, a desire to reduce the variety of Life and Nature to a uniform formula." Despite his own Hegelian sympathies, he was equally unsparing of Hegelians who judged "the different races and cults … by an abstract and arbitrary standard derived from the history of European civilization … conceiv[ing] the history of civilization as a single line of progress." By contrast, Seal maintained that "the historic method requires the same correction and extension that the doctrine of biological evolution received at the hands of Darwin," where "development is best represented, not by a line, but by a genealogical tree." Only by integrating Darwin's insights could historical comparison avoid "giv[ing] us mere European side-views of Humanity for the world's panorama" by recognizing "progress along different lines, and the overthrow of the linear conception of the historic method" (Seal 1899, iii-v).[9] Darwinian evolution's implicit indeterminacy rendered Eurocentrist historicism as descriptively fantastical as it was politically untenable, a conclusion shared by the prominent Swadeshi nationalist Bipin Chandra Pal. Since "evolution implies heredity and environment," he reasoned, "it is impossible for any man to lay down beforehand what the particular form of a thing that is passing through a process of evolution will be." Given the limitless complexities between conditions and capacities in "the organism being evolved," "the particular form of the Swaraj that will be established in this country" would ultimately depend on "what lines the historic evolution of modern India takes" (2020, 200).

In a series of articles, Mohini Mohan Chatterji, a Bengali attorney, scholar, and theosophist, similarly appealed to "the progress of biology, initiated by Darwin"—which, he remarked, "has had a remarkable effect on history as a science"—to inquire whether "biology brought into view any law of progress." "The answer," he concluded, "is that evolution does not necessarily

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involve any such thing as progress. It only contemplates change from a state of less perfect adaptation to the environment to a state of more perfect adaptation. But there is no reason to hold that the more perfectly adapted organism is better or higher than the less adapted" (*Bengalee* 1907a). Chatterji also drew on evolutionism to challenge British claims to racial superiority. Confronting the "mysterious entity called race" invoked to explain western ascendency, he queried

> what, after all, is race? If it is merely a name for certain qualities evolved by natural selection and preserved by heredity, and, perhaps, by isolation, it must be confessed that science is unable to throw much light on the process of its generation. If race marks the perpetuation of some prepotent variation by a series of long continued adaptations to the environment under the operation of the law of heredity it is difficult to see how race can be a factor of any great importance … Designations founded upon distinctions of race have ceased to have any meaning (*Bengalee* 1907a).

By decoupling progress from adaptation and race from progress, Chatterji's appeal to evolutionism shifts from a civilizational metaphysics to a grounded physics. From the evolutionist standpoint, neither race nor adaptation implies improvement; they rather account for evolutionary mutations unamenable to value judgments.

What Darwinism ultimately enables is a concept of progress untethered from the naturalism underwriting imperialist teleology. In each of these instances—educational qualifications, social evolution, racial hierarchy—Darwinian evolutionism *denaturalizes* the teleological rationality depoliticizing Indian subjects, whether in the deferral of self-government (Mehta 1999; Chakrabarty 2000), situating India in a fixed developmental trajectory (Pitts 2005), or treating Indians as racially inferior (Koditschek 2011). It grounds a conceptual relocation from the colonial order's indefinite temporal horizon to the immediacy of the political present: if progress is variable, contingent, and non-linear, Indian sovereignty could only emerge from determinate collective action, and not a fantastical civilizational unfolding. By denaturalizing, Darwinism re-politicizes: it rejects the stadial categories of colonial historicism by figuring progress as "the movement of colonized societies through history via their active self-fashioning" (Temin 2022, 2). Absent the "law of progress" that Krishna Varma so forcefully repudiates, Indian evolution falls to politics, forged by and within the peculiarities of its historical and social circumstances. In his later years, Naoroji came to the same politicizing conclusion. "It is futile to tell me that we must wait till all the people are ready," he intoned in his 1906 Congress address, "we can never be fit till we actually undertake the work and the responsibility" (1917, 79). Darwinism's contingency anchors a notion of progress shorn of Eurocentrist developmentalism: if social evolution moved toward no particular end, it remained for Indians to fashion their own future through their own powers.

Liberal Organicism

A second line of evolutionist anti-imperialism transmuted the mechanistic-sociological terms of liberal historicism common to Mill and Comte into organicist-biological ones, treating societies, as did Herbert Spencer, as cohesive organisms modeled on biological entities and largely subject to their evolutionary movements.[10]

Organicist schemas of social organization were in many respects politically problematic, particularly in the hands of cultural nationalists—Pal, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Ghose—and with the rise of Hindu nativism accompanying the Swadeshi movement. As Manu Goswami recognizes, depicting India as an organic unity cast all "foreign" elements—the British, but also Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, and others—as outside the national body, degrading an otherwise pure Indian-cum-Hindu civilization (2004). Nazmul Sultan (2021) is likewise wary of the organicist propensity toward flattening out social and cultural variances in claiming political sovereignty. Such exclusionary tendencies were not particularly pronounced in Spencer's social organicism, which was rooted in a broader evolutionism encompassing natural, biological, social, and cosmological processes (his antipathy toward government, also, made him no friend to nationalists or imperialists). But pressed into the nationalist cause, it all too often portrayed "Hindus as the original, organic, core nationals [and Muslims] as the foreign body, an external element within the corporatist vision of an organic national whole" (Goswami 2004, 188). As a result, such nationalist organicisms tend to be associated with the neo-Vedantic revivalism, and ensuing chauvinism, emanating from some quarters of the Congress's so-called extremists as a reaction against the moderates' westernized liberalism (Bayly 2011; Goswami 2004; Nanda 2020).

Social organicism was, however, curiously amenable to Indian liberalism, not least in its adoption of western liberalism's temporal arc and universalising proclivities.[11] In *The Bengalee*, this developmentalism was channeled into an evolutionist paradigm conceptualizing Indian society as a distinctive social organism. From this organicist standpoint, "social institutions, customs, and habits" comprised a "whole in the biological sense—there is undoubtedly an interdependence of parts and functions, and through every part and every organ it is the life of the organism as a whole that is perpetually manifesting itself" (*Bengalee* 1909e). Chatterji adopted the same view, claiming that "societies are capable of classification with reference to organisms, analogously constituted. Upon the basis of the ethical type indicated biological laws can be applied to societies" (*Bengalee* 1907c). These "biological laws" merged with historical ones. Far from abandoning

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liberalism's historicism, *The Bengalee*'s biopolitical recombination rather stretched its terms, retaining the view of societies as agglomerations of related elements—social, political, economic, cultural—moving through history as a "synthetic whole" (*Bengalee* 1907c). The "organic view of life" showed that "different departments of life should be regarded as inter-dependent, each acting on every other and being reacted on by it in turn" (*Bengalee* 1909e). Particular "social phenomena," then, would "invariably be associated with a certain stage of political existence" (*Bengalee* 1907c).

While this at first glance appears akin to Spencer's view, in the colonial context the organicist standpoint enabled a notable shift by situating the motive force of social and political evolution not in *external* steering, but *internal* transformation. Progress turned on Indians' own capacities to reform social, political, and economic practices—to heal the social body—as a conjunct organism, from within. The organicist argument re-localized the impetus for political regeneration from "self-extinguishing despot" (Chiu and Taylor 2011) to internal reorganization, without which improvement would remain impossible despite colonial authorities' best efforts. In this framework, "society was not a mechanical structure to be tinkered with, overhauled, redesigned, or scrapped and replaced with a new model"—James Mill's stated ambition in the subcontinent—"but an organism which could change only by the gradual development of its existing resources" (Killingley 1995, 184).

Evolutionism thus opened an ideational landscape in which India's progress emerged from its inner capacities, and more specifically, from reforming "indefensible social laws" (*Bengalee* 1909f). Customary practices such as prohibiting widow remarriage, caste discrimination, and denying women education were "eating into the core of our social life" (*Bengalee* 1909f), stunting Indian advancement. Such communal cancers degraded the national body, whose constituent elements were inexorably entwined. If India comprised an interdependent organic unity, it would be "no more possible to solve the social question without attending to … the laws of political and economic growth" (*Bengalee* 1909f). As a singular organism, India's political evolution was bound to the reconstitution of its internal structures. By linking social reform, political progress, and liberalisation, organicist evolutionism spelled out a nationalist program of self-regeneration in liberal terms, but driven by Indian powers. The ideal of "organic growth now dissociated from empire," Sultan observes, "was linked inextricably to the practices of self-rule outside of the colonial state" (2020, 86).

Abandoning neither liberalism's social and political ambitions nor its historicism, organicism shifted the locus of sovereignty from benevolent empire to the Indian social body, pinning India's advancement on the social organism's endogenous evolution. Like natural evolution, social evolution was shaped by external pressures; but in either case, the organism ultimately survived or perished through its own adaptations. If, "as Herbert Spencer points out, it is impossible essentially to change the type of a social structure by a revolution," (*Bengalee* 1909g) then India's maturation depended on transformations within the social body that alien elements were powerless to enact. From the organicist standpoint, "the life of a people at a particular time is itself a development, on all points, from the life that it led before. It is an organic growth, and the idea of an organism absolutely excludes the notion of a new element being introduced which has not its roots in the original constitution of the being" (*Bengalee* 1909g).

Spencer's evolutionism informed a second strand of liberal organicism differentiating "organic" and "inorganic" social organization, a distinction that nationalists operationalized in a few ways. First, they appealed to Indian society's "organic" character to accentuate the disjuncture between ruling and ruled classes in the colonial context: "the Government is not the servant of the people and does not stand in the same organic relation to them that Governments elsewhere do" (*Bengalee* 1906a). These took India's progress as stunted by exogenous political rule.

But drawing on evolutionism's theoretical nomenclature—fitness, selection, adaptation—nationalists also demarcated organic and inorganic societies based on their competitiveness in the evolutionary struggle for survival, adapting the notion of "social efficiency" popularized by Benjamin Kidd's *Social Evolution* (1894). In an article published in *The Bengalee*, Charles Allen took "the doctrine of evolution … applied to society" to demonstrate that

> the development of human society is regarded as the product of a process of stress, in which progress results from natural selection along the line of the highest social efficiency in the struggle for existence. In the intensity of this process, society evolving towards higher efficiency, tends to become increasingly organic, the distinctive feature being growing subordination of the individual to the social process … In considering the application of the principle of natural selection to human society there is one fundamental fact which controls all phenomena of social evolution: and that is that the potential efficiency of society is always greater than the sum total of the potential efficiency of all of its members acting as individuals (*Bengalee* 1908b).

An organic society maximized its evolutionary efficacy, understood in clearly social Darwinist terms, relative to natural selection in the "struggle for existence" between social groups. As social efficiency augmented by subsuming individual needs to collective exigencies, an organic society was one that best facilitated and integrated cooperation. This wasn't always the case: in "primitive society … the predominant factor in the struggle for existence is brute force" (*Bengalee* 1908b). But under modern conditions, evolutionary fitness turned on the kind of social combination exemplified in India's village communities.

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In Allen's hands, the argument in fact supported empire, undercutting Congress extremists by depicting their nationalism as aiming at "revolution, rather than at evolution" (*Bengalee* 1908b). But its logic was taken up and driven to its natural conclusion. If an organic society maximized its efficiency through the individual's willingness to, as Allen put it, "exert himself to the utmost to strengthen the national resources" (*Bengalee* 1908b), then it had of necessity to be *self*-governing rather than ruled by compulsion, characterized by Allen himself as primitive and inefficient. Empire represented an antedated and dysgenic political form whose evolutionary advantage —"brute force"—was rendered obsolete by cooperation, coordination, and self-sacrifice.

Allen's lecture was published mid-September 1908. By January 1909, articles in *The Bengalee* proclaimed that "the State in India is inorganic," and that as long as it remained despotic rather than popular, "the essential character of the State … must still be inorganic" (*Bengalee* 1909d). Lord Morley's reforms, which drew Indians into government but fell short of establishing a parliamentary system, would "not, even by a process of evolution, lead up to that form of government … there is no transition, in the evolutionary sense, from an inorganic State to one that is organic" (*Bengalee* 1909h). No society ruled by a foreign power could become organic—efficient—if its citizenry remained recalcitrant and unwilling to fulfill the state's demands. Such arguments were, of course, unrepentantly liberal and set against Swadeshi radicalism. But they pushed the notion of social efficiency to its logical end: despotic government was implicitly inorganic, as unproductive as it was unprogressive. Sovereignty's legitimacy, in this schema, turned on its organic relation to the governed. Stripped of Allen's racialized social Darwinism, Indian nationalists retooled its evolutionism to tie Indian efficiency to popular sovereignty and self-government.

Overall, then, organicism responded to the quandary of how to constitute the "people" as subjects of sovereign authority rather than objects of development (Sultan 2020). Without minimizing its problematic features—not least, the homogenization of Indian pluralism—organicism was plied into the "struggle to authorize swaraj in the name of the people" (82) by incarnating a cohesive body in which to invest political sovereignty. Against the colonial state's "developmental deferral of colonial peoplehood" (81) and the early nationalist elite's anxieties concerning subaltern political capacities, organicism re-localized sovereign authority from the colonial state to the Indian corpus. It enabled anticolonialists "to posit a sovereign people that could authorize the founding of self-rule" (81) by circumventing colonial incrementalism, finding in the social organism an entity capable of adaptation, self-amelioration, and self-direction. As Andrew Sartori argues, nationalist organicism worked "to ground politics in the life of the people" (2008, 169) by anchoring sovereignty in the "fundamental substratum [of] organic social solidarity" (2008, 155). To be sure, organicism confronted some tensions surrounding sovereignty while sidestepping others. While it answered whether India could become modernized without colonial tutelage, it left unresolved who within the social organism might lead its advancement—the critical disjuncture between nationalist elites and subaltern masses.[12] For gradualist moderates such as G. K. Gokhale, affirming Indian political capacity did not imply absolute self-rule; given India's "national defects," he fretted, "only mad men outside lunatic asylums" (Ghose 1975, 18) would consider handing the reigns over wholesale. Without defusing all the tensions entailed by colonialist developmentalism, organicism was nonetheless among the "varied ways in which the problem of popular sovereignty was imagined" (Mantena 2016, 298)—and claimed—by anticolonialists.

Conscious Evolution

Finally, a series of articles differentiated Europe's "unconscious" evolution, witnessed in the "transition from the fifth European century to the twentieth," from India's "conscious" evolution, which "cannot possibly take as long a time as it took the European nations" (*Bengalee* 1909i). This was because of "the difference between conscious evolution—evolution directed to a definite, well thought out end, and brought about by methods which in some of their aspects have already been tried among other nations—and unconscious evolution, which often follows the same lines as those of evolution in nature" (*Bengalee* 1909i). Swayed by unguided natural pressures and happenstance, Europe's social evolution had been incremental, fitful, and inefficient. Driven by conscious evolution—by specific social, political, and ethical imperatives—India was, conversely, positioned to ameliorate itself without having to suffer the externalities of fifteen centuries of European history. "Unconscious evolution not only takes far more time than conscious evolution," one article observed, "but involves greater waste" (*Bengalee* 1909e).

While this evolutionary gloss may at first glance appear glib, it integrated the principal insights of "reform" Darwinisms which, as of the 1880s, resisted "the brutal laws of social Darwinism" by stressing "the importance of 'intellect' and 'culture' in human evolution" (Bannister 1979, 11; Crook 1994, 54-62). This was at the root of T.H. Huxley's "Evolution and Ethics," which sharply differentiated natural and social evolution as not only unassimilable, but as opposed to one another. While acknowledging the evolutionary truth that "in the living world, one of the most characteristic features of this cosmic process is the struggle for existence" (4), Huxley distinguished between the social and natural spheres within which it took place. At the human level, the evolutionary struggle wasn't *between* individuals or groups, as with

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other species in the natural world, but rather *of* human beings against the destructiveness of the natural world, an antagonism "everywhere manifest between the artificial and the natural" (13). While "the characteristic feature of the [natural world] is the intense and unceasing competition of the struggle for existence," Huxley claimed, the "characteristic feature of the [human world] is the elimination of that struggle, by the removal of the conditions which give rise to it" (13). Humanity's social evolution consisted of progressively reducing the competition between human beings to increase "the efficiency of the corporate whole in the battle with the state of nature" (14). In the human realm, then, the mitigation of conflict comprised an evolutionary advantage in competing against nature. As "the ethical process is in opposition to the principle of the cosmic process" (31), we approach the ideal polity "not by allowing the free play of the struggle for existence, but by excluding that struggle" (20).

The anticolonial argument for conscious evolution drew on precisely this distinction: between natural evolutionary processes—unconscious, subject to contingent organic forces and natural selection, and propelled by competitive struggle—and social evolution, subject to conscious human control. "If the one process is the process of nature," one article synopsized, "the other is essentially spiritual" (*Bengalee* 1909e). The argument for conscious evolution took the social sphere as under the sway of artificial—non-natural—pressures set against those operative in natural selection, and so, as driven by ethical choices and concerted steering. As a product of unconscious evolution, European history was marked by the inexpediencies and brutalities characteristic of competitive struggle in the natural world. But through the conscious navigation of the nationalist movement—through autonomous self-direction and learning, rather than competition—India was positioned to propel itself forward. From this standpoint, the nationalist movement was the agency of India's conscious evolution:

> The question of bringing about that transition … is no longer in the hands —in the unaided hands—of English statesmanship. Indian patriotism has appeared on the scene and has already made remarkable contributions. In the coming years, that patriotism will, we are confident, be one of the foremost agencies … it will solve the problem of India in what may be regarded from the point of view of unconscious evolution as an incredibly short time (*Bengalee* 1909i).

This also inverted Eurocentrist civilizational hierarchies by casting European development as a primitive struggle within the natural world, and India's as within "the kingdom of Man, governed upon the principle of moral evolution" (Huxley 1896, 205) suited to advanced, enlightened societies.

Conscious evolutionism anticipates an insight into non-Western modernities theorized by Sudipta Kaviraj. In sketching his revisionist theory of modernity, Kaviraj treats its constituent elements—the centralization of the administrative state, capitalist industrialization, sociological individuation, the secularization of politics, the rise of new orders of knowledge (2005, 508-509)—not as aspects of a singular phenomenon, but as distinctive processes whose historical sequencing yields fundamentally divergent experiences of modernity. The ordering of modernity's components in different parts of the world, he argues, "determine[s] the specific *form* of modernity in that context" (514). This suggests that "latecomers into modernity have the vast expanse of the historical experience of modern European civilization open for critical examination before them" (524), enabling them to both learn from European modernity and subject it to scrutiny. Such a "late entrant into modernity", Kaviraj reflects, "might not applaud every aspect of modern European civilization" and might well reject "some major proposals of modern politics or ethics" (524). Conscious evolutionism advances just this claim *avant la lettre*: Indian social progress could avoid Western modernity's shortcomings by adopting what suited its political and sociological circumstances and abandoning the dredges of unconscious evolution.

The argument also incorporated Peter Kropotkin's conviction that humanity progressed through "the *elimination of competition* by means of mutual aid and mutual support" (2017, 79), which he envisioned spreading "from the tribe to always larger and larger agglomerations, so as to finally embrace one day the whole of mankind" (2017, 210-211). Anticolonialists absorbed the principle of mutual aid in framing Indian self-direction as "ethical progress," understood as an ever-widening sphere of self-governing societies. "Ethical evolution" proceeded not through Indian assimilation to British civilization, but rather by "invest[ing] the nations of the earth with the character of different representatives of the human race" (*Bengalee* 1907c). In this near-Herderian view, social evolution inhered in the manifold efflorescence of human societies, not in their reduction through existential competition.

By pitching the evolutionary struggle at the *species*-wide level, nationalists thus recast social progress not as a contest between human groups (where imperialist power might denote civilizational fitness), but as humanity's collective resistance to natural forces (where cooperation and mutual aid comprised evolutionary advantages). By tracking humanity's increasing entanglements—"the great truth that humanity is one—an indivisible whole" (*Bengalee* 1909i) and that "civilizations of the different peoples, to whatever continent they maybe belong, are largely interdependent; and the interdependence grows as humanity advances" (*Bengalee* 1909i)—this evolutionism elicited "the spirit of mutual aid … strong enough in every ordinary group of men to impel them voluntarily to work for the common good if it is allowed free play" (*Bengalee*

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1906b). "The growing consciousness of the organic character of humanity" (*Bengalee* 1909i) demonstrated that "humanity is a great living entity, with the nations as its parts and organs, every one of which is living the life and fighting the battle of the whole" (*Bengalee* 1909i). Against the age of empire, of unconscious evolution driven by inter-group competition and political domination, anticolonialists advanced a vision of national independence nested in a network of global interdependence. Looking to the future, they proclaimed that "tomorrow will be marked by the creed of mutual co-operation among the nations … it must always be remembered that it is the battle of humanity that we are fighting in our Fatherland, that so far as anything contributes to the progress life of any portion of the human family, it really contributes to the progress of the whole" (*Bengalee* 1906b).

These evolutionisms share in what Manu Goswami describes as anticolonialism's "distinct future-oriented politics," "the fusion of radical politics and futurity beyond an initial European sphere" (2012, 1462). India's political advancement was conceptualized not only in terms of national autonomy, but as part of a reconstituted global order predicated on mutualism, reciprocity, and symbiosis. In this political imaginary, nationalism was neither reactive nor restricted to the confines of the subcontinent. It was, rather, the spark for global metamorphoses ranging from the world-historical transition beyond European hegemony envisioned by Ghose (Marwah 2019), to Krishna Varma's Pan-Asian Parliament and "alliance of England's oppressed" (Fischer-Tiné 2014; Ramnath 2011), to M.N. Roy's Indo-communist revolutionism (Manjapra 2010). Conscious evolutionism captures Indian anticolonialism's constructive, worldmaking ambitions, the "open-ended constellation of contending political futures" (Goswami 2012, 1462) spilling past the borders of the nation-state. It belongs to the "radical critiques of the existing international order" that, Karuna Mantena observes, fueled "the political imagination of Third Worldist nationalism" (2016, 298).

Conclusion

Postcolonial theorists and political theorists of empire have detailed how developmentalism rationalized nineteenth-century liberal imperialism. Democracy and sovereignty were the endpoint of a temporal order that, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, measured the space between cultures in historical time. And yet, much of the theoretical literature wrestling with developmentalism remains within a western problem-space where European theory is taken as self-correcting, replicating a certain Eurocentrism by implicitly closing itself to non-western political thought. These are the political possibilities I have aimed to recover, the notions of progress advanced by Indian anticolonialists contesting just this developmentalism. Historicism's harms are by now well documented, but as a "political rationalit[y] of colonial power" (Scott 1995, 193), it's perhaps less conclusive than it might seem. In the subcontinent, evolutionism enabled its recombination into "the ideological content of nationalism which takes as its adversary a contrary discourse—the discourse of colonialism" (Chatterjee 1986, 40).

As such, it was pressed into responding to a common decolonial pressure: how to negotiate constructions of historical time, modernity, and social development governing the relationship between metropole and colony. Evolutionism enabled Indian anticolonialists to navigate this tension by conceiving of progress in non-teleological, non-deterministic terms—Darwinism's very attraction for Krishna Varma, Seal, Pal, and Chatterji. Decolonial evolutionisms fed a futurity centered on a pluralistic view of political development, cleaving to no fixed institutional form or social ordering, and set outside the universalist abstraction of western modernity. Refusing the gradualism constraining Indian sovereignty, anticolonialists indexed progress to political ideals of self-determination rather than a fabulous (and nebulous) civilizational maturity, shifting its coordinates from the horizon of socio-cultural transformation to the immediacy of the political present. In this context, Darwinism and evolutionism served to dislocate colonialism's temporal order, reconfigure its historicist logics, and advance a notion of development grounded in the imminence of anticolonial struggle.

Evolutionism thus charted a middle course that neither adopted western ideals of progress nor gave up on the notion altogether, furnishing a generative political vocabulary "to argue in favour of political possibilities which colonialist thought refuses to admit" (Chatterjee 1986, 41). This is not to minimize its harms: like other nationalist appeals to science, Darwinist and evolutionist schemas "fueled the Hinduization of Indianness and the Indianization of Hinduness" (Goswami 2004, 269). That their nationalist uptake was beset by frictions and shortcomings, however, does nothing to reduce their political necessity. It evinces, rather, the ambivalences entailed by the impossibility of their task. "Nationalist ideology," Chatterjee recognizes, "is inherently polemical, shot through with tension; its voice, now impassioned, now faltering, betrays the pressures of having to state its case against formidable opposition" (1986, 40). My interest here isn't to absolve these evolutionisms of their failures or to take them as normatively desirable. It's to show how they were made to respond to an intractable political problem as "claims of ideology … directly located on the terrain of politics, the field of contest for power" (1986, 40). Chatterjee characterizes anticolonial nationalisms as polemical, capturing their agonistic tenor as struggles for authority within particular structures of justification anchored in particular social realities. Darwinism and evolutionary theory served this polemical function by "assert[ing] the feasibility of entirely new political

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possibilities" (40) against those proffered by colonial historicisms.

More broadly, recovering the nationalist reimagination of developmentalism attends to anticolonialism's theoretical register by situating it within the political problematic generating its meaning, following James Tully's Wittgensteinian emphasis on the contextuality of all sensemaking (2020, 32). Making sense of anticolonial theory requires attending to its specificity—its political quandaries, conditions, and negotiations—rather than assimilating it into the grammar of western theory, "standardly presented in general or universal terms" (31). As Prathama Banerjee observes, thinkers from the global south commonly conceptualize the political in idioms distinctive from those assumed in and by mainstream political theory (2020, 9). It behooves us, then, to read such theoretical formations not as competitors or latecomers to an existent and ostensibly neutral tradition of political thought, but as particular modes of contextually grounded and historically situated theorizing (Getachew and Mantena 2021). Put otherwise, rather than drawing anticolonial theory into an already-constituted theoretical sphere, we might open ourselves to the challenges its imaginary poses to the discipline. "New histories of political thought need to not only contend with new sources and resources," Humeira Iqtidar argues, "but more importantly, they need to redefine terms of use to engage meaningfully with a wider range of ideas" (2016, 438). If, as Tully suggests, "the genre of political theory in the west is only one species of the larger family of forms of political 'thought'" (2020, 33)—and a rather peculiar one at that—we stand to benefit from considering how anticolonialists criticized, reconfigured, and reconceptualized developmentalist logics, rather than treating colonial subjects as simply entrapped by them.

Finally, while South Asian intellectual history has glancingly touched on Darwinism, evolutionism, and organicism in the subcontinent's anticolonialisms, commentaries tend either to be somewhat episodic (Kapila 2007a; Klausen 2014; Sartori 2003) or to center their chauvinistic, racialized, or exclusionary uptake (Goswami 2004; Sultan 2021). By contrast, I've aimed here to read Darwinism and evolutionism as a semantic field for anticolonial articulations of social development, sovereignty, and self-rule. While Darwinist schemas undoubtedly fed racial, religious, and caste-based hierarchies, so, too, were they drafted into anticolonial politics.

The South Asian context also provides a certain insight into the boundaries of western political theory. That is that the perception of Darwinism's socio-political toxicity is at least partly due to its near-exclusive analysis in western contexts. Debates on social Darwinism overwhelmingly center American, British, French, and German social thought, where it fueled contests over more or less interventionist social policies, with free enterprise "conservatives" on one side and reformist "progressives" on the other (Bannister 1979). But the terms of social Darwinism, in these cases, emerge from and are constrained by the particulars of their Euro-American grounding, with no equivalent in Indian or colonial contexts. The questions that both generated social Darwinism and were answered by it remain within the closed circuit of the west: the regulation of markets, poverty relief, international interventionism, population control, and so on.

These had no relevance in the subcontinent. There, Darwinism generated a novel politics concerning the constitution of nationhood, lineages of progress, and conditions for self-government. From the colonial vantage point, it gained a different social and political traction; Darwinism couldn't address familiar debates because their context was unavailable. But evolutionism itself was far from unavailable. Indian anticolonialists engaged Darwin, Spencer, Kropotkin, Kidd, Huxley, and many others in crafting a multifaceted vision of political advancement outside the terms offered by imperialist powers. These are just a few of the political Darwinisms illuminated by the South Asian context, and often obscured by political theory's cloistering tendencies.

Ultimately, what Darwinism introduced into the colonial periphery was a certain plasticity—the conceptual space to rethink the idea of progress and Indians' role in it, emerging out of the stresses and fissures of an increasingly untenable nineteenth-century historicism. As such, it serves as a window onto the great hybridity of political thought at this juncture, at the turn of the twentieth century, and onto the depth of the decolonial challenges to which it responded. The nationalist movement faced the insoluble dilemma of forging a unified nation independent of the west while also speaking in its terms. Its resulting schisms are well noted by colonial historians: between elite and subaltern classes, between Hindu culturalism and modernizing cosmopolitanism, between the structures of the state and the histories of its peoples. These are the tensions that evolutionism both reflected and helped navigate, an aperture through which Indian anticolonialists began claiming, however differently envisioned and however fraught, their own political futures.

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Notes

1 For Darwin's colonial entanglements, see Barta 2005. For a few of many examinations of the influence of Victorian social and political concerns over Darwin's theory of evolution, see Crook 1994; Bannister 1979; and Young 1985.

2 For Darwin's own "social Darwinism"—his faith in Europeans' superiority over non-European races—see Bowler 1996, 189.

3 For evolutionism in non-liberal Indian political thinkers, see Kapila 2007a. In very broad terms, the early nationalist movement became divided between so-called "moderates" (liberals) and "extremists" (cultural nationalists) as of 1907; this article focuses on the former. For the Congress' moderate-extremist split, see Sarkar 2017; Ghose 1975; Argov 1967; McLane 1977.

4 This article focuses on political-theoretical questions surrounding anticolonialism, not historical questions on the merits or failures of the Indian nationalist movement, a subject exhaustively covered in the historiographical literature. My interest lies in the anticolonial appeal to evolutionism, as a political intervention responding to a particular decolonial problem, and on its utility and ambivalences in the context of anticolonial theory. As such, I remain agnostic here on the nationalist movement's successes and shortcomings (without, for that, disregarding them) and on the appropriate historiographical standpoint from which to assess them.

5 *The Bengalee* was by no means unique in its uptake of evolutionism, as I discuss in Darwin Comes to India. I focus on *The Bengalee* here because it was among the most widespread nationalist weeklies of the period, it was recognized as an organ of the Congress moderates (given Banerjea's editorship), and it was firmly liberal in its orientation.

6 Indexical references to the era's periodicals are available at ideasofindia.org.

7 Extensive literatures in the histories of biology and sociology treat the concept of social Darwinism. In the popular imagination, social Darwinism remains associated with a clutch of "conservative" British and American thinkers, such as Herbert Spencer, Franklin Giddings, and William Graham Sumner, who, Richard Hofstadter charged in his influential *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), applied Darwinian notions of struggle, competition, and natural selection to human populations in defense of laissez-faire government, eugenist population control, and unfettered capitalism. They are understood to have ushered in the civilizational hierarchies, racial sciences, and rationalizations of empire typically understood as social Darwinist. For a sampling of prominent social Darwinists' writings from this period, see Ryan 2001.

A revisionist scholarship is considerably more catholic, taking "Darwinism as a multiplex phenomenon translatable into many social and ideological idioms" (Crook 1994, 12). Robert C. Bannister (1979) has refuted Hofstadter's characterization, arguing that "reform Darwinists"—progressives arguing for interventionist social policies—much more commonly used the label "social Darwinist" as a term of opprobrium for their opponents.

On the term's fluidity, see Hawkins 1997, ch. 1. For treatments of social Darwinism more generally, see Burrow 1966; Crook 2007; Dickens 2000; Sober 1984; Rogers 1972; Fichman 2002; Bowler 1983.

8 For a specifically eugenist argument, see *Bengalee* 1907b. For social Darwinisms addressing the degradation of the Aryan race in India, see Nanda 2011, 321-324.

9 I am indebted to Nazmul Sultan for drawing my attention to this text and generously providing me with a copy of it.

10 For Spencer's organicism, see Simon 1960; Offer 2010; and Gray 1995. For Spencer's influence over Indian organicist nationalisms, see Bayly 2011, ch. 9.

11 Spencer's political philosophy advanced just this synthesis, of radical individualism and social organicism, a position whose tensions were noted by T.H. Huxley as early as 1871 and by many others since. For Indian liberalism's integration of organicism, see Bayly 2011, 262-263.

12 I am grateful to one of the journal's reviewers for pushing me to disentangle these facets of nationalist claims to sovereignty.

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