

Leila Choukroune · Parul Bhandari  
*Editors*

# Exploring Indian Modernities

Ideas and Practices

 Springer

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# Preface

This is the first book published under a publishing collaboration between the Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities (CSH, or Centre de Sciences Humaines) and Springer. For the past 30 years, CSH, based in New Delhi, has produced cutting edge multidisciplinary research in social sciences and humanities thereby addressing many of the pressing issues faced in the Indian subcontinent. In collaboration with numerous prestigious research institutions in India, and all over the world, CSH has created a vast network of leading academics and students of very diverse disciplines. It has reached out to civil society, government and businesses publicizing its research, while also generating new vocations and interest in the study of South Asia at large.

It was an apt time for CSH researchers and the many members of its community of scholars in India and abroad to be able to present their work in a rigorous scientific publication with global ambitions. On the basis of previous successful collaborations including the “International Law and the Global South” series edited by Leïla Choukroune and “Exploring Urban Change in South Asia” series edited by Marie Hélène Zerah (previously with CSH), Springer has now offered us this invaluable opportunity. And so has started the journey of *Exploring Indian Modernities: Ideas and Practices*.

Portsmouth, UK

Prof. Leïla Choukroune

# Acknowledgements

This book is a result of many conversations between the co-editors on the meanings of ‘modern’, which also led to the organization of a CSH multidisciplinary conference entitled ‘India in the Modern: Visions, Practices, and Imaginings’, held at Alliance Française of Delhi in December 2015. The very positive reception of the papers presented immediately made us believe that we could, and should, fill an existing gap in contemporary scholarship: that of a volume on the many Indian modernities. Novel and comprehensive, our approach differs from other recent or less contemporary attempts in that it is not limited to one discipline or a given period of time. The collection of 15 essays covering most of today’s India’s major social and political realities provides the reader with a jargon-free yet precise analysis of complex and essential issues across disciplines. It is accessible to specialists and a more general readership as well.

This intellectual adventure would not have been possible without the enthusiasm of all the contributors whom we would like to warmly thank. We would also like to thank some of our esteemed colleagues more directly including Profs. Saurabh Dube, Ishita-Banerjee-Dube, Upendra Baxi and Carlos Miguel Herrera.

Of course, Shinjini Chatterjee, Executive Editor, Springer, deserves very special and warm thanks for her constant support and encouragement. We are equally grateful to the whole Springer India team as well as to the CSH, and our assistant Sneha Kapoor, in particular, who has now become fluent in all Indian modern languages including that of the communication with social scientists.

Portsmouth, UK  
New Delhi, India

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Professor Choukroune is regularly solicited as an independent expert on international economic law and business and human rights issues. She is an independent adviser to the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and a member of the French National Books Commission (CNL). Before taking the responsibility of the CSH directorship, she was associate professor with the Law Faculty of Maastricht University, assistant professor with HEC Paris, consultant with the OECD, lecturer with Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne and researcher with the French Centre for Research on Contemporary China (CEFC) in Hong Kong. She holds a doctorate in international law (Summa cum laude—highest honour) from the

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**Dr. Parul Bhandari, Ph.D.**, is currently a visiting scholar at St. Edmund's College and the Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS), University of Cambridge. She is also affiliated to the Centre of Social Sciences and Humanities (CSH), the South Asia research unit for the French National Centre for Research (CNRS), where she previously was a postdoctoral fellow (2014–16). She has held guest faculty positions at the Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, and the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IITD). Dr. Bhandari completed her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Cambridge in 2014. Her Ph.D. was supported by the Cambridge Commonwealth Trust. Her main research interests lie in the field of social class, gender, marriage, and family. Her doctoral thesis explained the makings of middle-class identities through the processes of spouse selection. For her postdoctoral research she has shifted attention to the study of elites, particularly the rich housewives of Delhi, focusing on their relationship with money and exploring the themes of honour and humiliation in their everyday lives. Dr. Bhandari has published several academic articles and essays, book chapters, and has written widely in newspapers and magazines. Most recently, she co-edited a special issue *Changing Family Realities in South Asia?* (with Fritzi-Marie Titzmann) for *SAMAJ*, issue 16, 2017, and authored an article 'Towards a Sociology of Elites: Marriage Alliances, Vulnerabilities, and Resistance' in the journal *Society and Culture in South Asia* (2017). Her upcoming publications include two books: one based on her doctoral work on marriages in middle-class India, and the other on the lives of elite Indian women.

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# Chapter 1

## Understanding the Modern in India



Leïla Choukroune and Parul Bhandari

*'Modo'*: just now. *'Modus'*: manner, mode, but also rhythm, measure, and even bound or limit. *'Modernus'*: Modern. *'Modernitas'*: Modernity. The Latin origin of the terms modern and modernity suggest various alternatives yet also additional and complementing paths to approach a multifaceted reality. Why is it then as important as fascinating to, once again, analyse Indian modernity in the plurality of its expressions? Maybe because 'just now', India is confronted with a certain revival of a past depicted by some of its proponents as a glorious yet lost epoch in which social harmony prevailed to the benefit of a powerful and radiating State. Perhaps as well because today, more than ever before, multiple modernities manifest themselves in many different spheres of the Indian society thus contributing not only to the questioning, but also to the re-definition of the modern against the backdrop of post-colonialism and globalization.

One of the most often used terms and concepts in grappling with and understanding Indian reality is indeed that of the 'modern'. The 'modern' describes experiences, outlooks, visions, and imaginations. It also comes to indicate a periodization of time. It is used most generously to address practices and design future ambitions and is viewed as a tool of critique, an instrument to gauge a reality against another one. It is invoked in everyday lives, makings of institutions, and as unintended consequences of interactions and intersections. As a simple example, a cursory read of Indian newspapers, and in particular their matrimonial section, brings out the way in which a woman's status is defined by the 'modern' as

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revealed in the desire for a ‘modern yet traditional’ bride; a walk through newly constructed shopping malls allows us to experience the material manifestations of the modern and processes of modernization, as do the ‘Modern Indian cuisines’ served in these malls and elsewhere. At a more conceptual and political level, the discourse and legal projects supported by the Constitution position themselves in achieving a modern India, one that is defined by progress and development and social initiatives and welfare. There are, therefore, many finite and diverse appropriations and renditions of the modern, which though seemingly easy, are rather difficult to comprehend in a single coherent manner for they do not allude only to a monolithic progressive working of the society. Instead, the ‘modern’ is constructed through an array of features that are also constantly contested, and constructed at times from borrowing from patterns of development and cross-cultural engagements and at other times by invoking a past to make a future.

It is precisely this variegated nature of the ‘modern’ in India that has apparently made it difficult to produce one comprehensive work of scholarship that can encompass the diverse renditions and interpretations of the modern. We therefore find works that limit themselves to either a historical period or a conceptual framework to explain the ‘modern’ of Indian realities.<sup>1</sup> This book, however, is a bold attempt to bring together the diverse interpretations of the modern that have shaped the realities of Indian society. It undertakes not one, but multiple conceptual frameworks to explain the journey of the making and experiencing of the modern as it also points to the loopholes of the project of the modern, and describes the innovations and adaptations and intended and unintended makings of the modern. This volume therefore, takes on a multidisciplinary perspective and fosters an expansive focus as it brings together works from different fields as that of political science, international law and jurisprudence, sociology, anthropology, history, economics, visual studies, history of art, social geography, and the specific lens these fields use to unveil and analyse the ‘modern’ in Indian society. This is indeed an ambitious project. Yet, as editors, we believe that one book that can bring together contradictory and complementary visions and renditions of the modern, is as timely as it is beneficial. Divided into three parts, this book is so structured that it can be read cover to cover with a flow of conceptions and practices of the modern and can also be approached as individual chapters allowing the readers considerable freedom to chart their own trajectory of understanding the term ‘modern’.

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<sup>1</sup>Two more recent edited volumes that explain India’s encounter with modernity, though with specific lens of history and democracy are Saurabh Dube’s *Modern Makeovers: An Introduction* (2012) and Surinder Jodhka’s *Interrogating India’s Modernity: Democracy, Identity, and Citizenship* (2013) respectively. See the selected references on Indian modernity listed at the end of this introduction.

## 1 Tracing the Modern

Many conceptions of the modern that explain and define its contours especially as determined by time, space, practice, idea, and imagination, coexist. There is, for instance, more than *Enlightenment* to the modern and its criticism did not start with post-modern theories but rather the defenders of the ‘ancient regime’ and other opponents to the French revolutionary project. While the main feature of the transition to modernity is generally understood as a rupture with a medieval fixed and unitary cosmic order in which the sources of law and power were reduced to the will of an unchallenged ruler and not yet detached from their communal or religious legacy or other popular customs, the modern manifested itself in a non-linear and heterogeneous manner. It is, as Habermas had put it, ‘an incomplete project’ (1980).

A befitting starting point of a discussion of the modern could however be Max Weber’s understanding of a modern society. According to Weber, the modern world is characterized by processes of rationalization, leading to a disenchantment of the world, where everything is calculable. Weber writes in *Science as a Vocation*:

It means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. (Weber 1946: 294; quoted in Carroll 2011: 133)

With this framework of rationality, Weber traced the rise of western civilization, and as this outlook of rationality progressed, the world was increasingly viewed in the division between the rational and the irrational as also religion was shifted into the realm of the irrational (Carroll 2011: 120). So in the modern world, actions, social worlds, and everyday lives were determined by their extent of rationality. Weber’s conception of modern society was based on features of rationality as that of bureaucracy and law, and found ground later in the works of sociologist, Talcott Parsons. Parsons furthered this Weberian conception, and a utopian envisioning wherein interpersonal relationships are governed solely in legal terms, that is, on a contract, as he proposed a modernization theory as a befitting paradigm to understand the progress of societies. The aim of his modernization theory was to categorize societies in binaries of the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional’. In order to determine the category to which a society would belong, Parsons proposed that progress should be measured along five pattern variables: affectivity versus affective neutrality; self-orientation versus collective-orientation; particularism versus universalism; ascription versus achievement; and diffuseness versus specificity. For him the West, in particular the American society, had successfully laid a claim on the modern as it had experienced industrialization, specialization of occupational roles, urbanization (Parsons and Shils 1951) and other elements of Weberian rationality.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For further discussion see Gilman (2007: Chapter 3).

Parson's modernization theory remains controversial (despite a short comeback in the 1990s), whilst Weberian conception of the modern society is viewed as persuasive, providing a thorough understanding of the modern times through the well-developed concept of rationality, though this concept too is critiqued for furthering a western hegemonic vision (Carroll 2011). Despite these differences in reception and conception, both these works, and many subsequent others, forwarded a vision of binaries to understand society: rational and irrational; modern and traditional; progressive and savage. Works and analyses that made use of these paradigms to map the modernity of society, in turn seemed to promote a neat proposal of the modern, where the modern is determined by rationality, thought, enlightenment, and progress. This paradigm furthermore, seemed most beneficial in establishing the hegemony of western societies who were seen as modern and in due process relegating other societies as 'traditional' (Wallerstein 2004).

### *1.1 Multiple and Contradictory Modernities*

Subsequently, there emerged critiques to this unilinear understanding of the modern, which explained that there is not one idea of the modern but in fact 'multiple-modernities' (Eisenstadt 2000). Eisenstadt argues that contrary to modernization theories, there will not be a convergence of 'industrial societies' towards a homogeneous pattern of working. He argues that each society engenders its own modernities emanating from its specific social and cultural contexts and programmes. The modern, therefore, did not have one singular interpretation but there were in fact multiple ways of being modern, and those that were not specifically dictated by western ideas of the modern.

A second important intervention in critically thinking through the western hegemonic concept of the modern was brought about through works by Dube that argued to not see the modern as a neat proposal (Dube 2012). In doing so, it is crucial to recognize that the 'modern' is shaped by processes that might seem contradictory. He states that the modern is of 'processes of reason and science, industry and technology, commerce and consumption, nation-state and citizen-subject, public spheres and private spaces, and secularized religion(s) and disenchanting knowledge(s)' as it is also about the 'processes of empires and colonies, race and genocide, resurgent faiths and reified traditions, disciplinary regimes and subaltern subjects, and seductions of the state and enchantments of the modern' (Dube 2012: 8–9). The modern therefore is constitutive of hierarchy, struggles, and power violence, as it also shaped by desires and imaginings of equality, reason, and progress. In that the modern is as much about contradictions and contentions, as it is about futurity and neat envisioning of self and society.

## 1.2 *Looking Back and Beyond*

An important element of such an envisioning of the modern is when the modern is not viewed as completely being time-bound, looking at a future, causing a sharp break from its past. On the contrary, it is when the 'modern' is recognized to be inextricably linked to its past. The past, at times might be even more incorporating of contestations, differences, and factions, which the present ideals of 'modern' might overlook. Dube in his work *Modern Makeovers* specifies that the aim of his book was to recognize that 'modernity involves processes of the past and the present' (2012: 7), and this book too cannot emphasize enough the need to look at the past to understand the present and the ideals of future. Consequently, many of the contributors in this book, in order to explain the modern, shift their gaze to the past, invoking memories, nostalgia, loss of freedom, egalitarianism, and dialogue, which, as they argue, modern sensibilities might lack or taking an optimistic stance, the modern can learn from. In doing so, this collection does not view the past as the sphere of 'tradition', one that signifies a limiting and unfulfilling array of ideas and practices. Instead, it recognizes a view that the past was able to provide a liberating and empowering context, which lamentably has not been translated into the 'now'; the 'modern'.

Equally, the modern is also to be viewed in its ability to construct and curate a future, which often emerges out of a critique of the modern self and times. This book, therefore, also includes chapters that place a critical lens on the 'modern', and in so doing provide further conceptualizations and workings to experience and perhaps improve the 'modern'. Such an approach, then, also urges us to see the modern not as a static a-temporal category; but one that changes with time, and in fact, is in a constant state of making. It is an ideal that is desired and is also susceptible to change and innovation. It is in these makings and practices then that the modern is constantly evolving: subject to evaluation, criticism, and contradiction.

A critical element of being able to understand the modern as amenable to change and revision is the ability to recognize the contradictions or dark sides of the 'contradictions'. It is here that Foucault and Adorno's critique of the modern subject are most appropriate. For Foucault and Adorno the concept of rationality is guided by the compassionate awareness of the sufferings of the human body (Honneth and Roberts 1986: 53). For Foucault in particular, the rationalization of society is nothing but 'infliction of violence on human body' (1986: 48). Both scholars believe that the civilization processes, as furthered by the rationalization of society, essentially control and direct the social life, to the extent that modern societies are in principle totalitarian societies (1986: 55). To them, therefore, the modern subject does not symbolize progress and development of body and society but in fact signifies the acute disciplining and manipulation of the body, mind, and self. The modern, in this sense, is marred by violence, control, colonization, subjugation, and rejection. In this volume too, we bring attention to this dark side of the modern, as some contributors discuss the violence on body and self that the modern time produce, for example, by subjugating and controlling sexuality, friendship, and

commensuality. Furthermore, some contributors also explore the modern as an inherently flawed concept, which therefore is in constant look for renewal or revalidation. This book also takes the stand that the modern is in a constant state of making, defined by its bright and dark side, enmeshed in the trajectories of its past and envisions of a future, and practices of the ‘now’. It is thus tied in a web of time, articulating and registering in differing spheres, but never in a state of complete achievement. It is due to this dynamic nature of the modern that we chose to title the volume as *Exploring Indian Modernities: Ideas and Practices*, alluding to the multiple modernities that exist in India and also to emphasize the fact that the makings of the modern are established in ideas as much as in practice.

### ***1.3 Post-colonial Ambivalences of Modernity***

Asking the very question of modernity in India—and what it can teach us—is eventually also an interrogation of the post-colonial history and its conceptualization. This includes other alternative histories of the newly independent State as those proposed by the post-modern and post-colonial critiques and, maybe more adequately, the ‘subaltern studies’. A number of chapters in this volume, for instance, in shifting the gaze and proposing another temporality, allude directly or indirectly to these essential approaches in a general context where post-modern, post-colonial and post-structural critiques have found a remarkable echo in India, perhaps because the very proponents of these approaches, from Fanon and Saïd to Derrida or Lyotard and, to a lesser extent, Foucault, were ‘intimately connected with the colony itself’ and could then easily question the universality of the modernity project (Ahluwalia 2010: 14). The development, reception, legacy, and later criticism of postmodernism and of course, ‘colonial and subaltern studies’ have been of prime importance in and for the subcontinent and so would require a specific analysis (Guha 1983, 1997; Spivak 1998; Chibber 2013). This is not the purpose of this introduction, but it is however necessary to briefly address some of their main features as ‘the colonial condition characterized by the “civilizing mission” was indeed ‘linked inextricably to notions of modernity’ (Ahluwalia 2010: 10). The colonizer’s stance of superiority rested upon the idea of the betterment of the inferior’s condition in providing the indigene with access to a new existence characterized by material progress and the advent of reason. This promise of development was never fulfilled for the colonial system would have collapsed under the realization of equality. As a genre of contemporary history, post-colonialism critically questions the ideas of culture and identities in challenging the narrative of history in a conceptual rather than a temporal manner. At the intersection between ‘colonial’ and ‘subaltern studies’, Gayatri Spivak demonstrates how the subalterns’ proposal has deconstructed historiography in proposing at least ‘two things: first that the moment(s) of change be pluralized and plotted as confrontations rather than transition (they would thus be seen in relation to histories of domination and exploitation rather than within the great mode of production narrative) and,

secondly, that such changes are signalled or marked by a functional change in sign-systems' (Spivak 1998: 270). Hence, the 'subaltern studies' project exemplified by Dipesh Chakrabarty's analysis, aimed at formulating another history of modernity in provincializing or decentering Europe as 'an imaginary figure that remains deeply embedded in clichéd and shorthand forms in some everyday habits of thought that invariably subtend attempts in the social sciences to address questions of political modernity in South Asia' (Chakrabarty 2001: 4). Could we indeed even ask the question of modernity in India without first interrogating the very concepts produced in Europe, which presuppose and support modernity? Yet, as demonstrated throughout this volume, the legacy of Humanism, Enlightenment or the Marxist critique of the same are now globalized and, even more interestingly, (re)localized in many Indian variations embedding native histories, the past and the present. After all, it is from those who 'have suffered the sentence of history subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement' that we learn 'our most enduring lessons for living and thinking' (Bhabha 1994: 172). Renewing the thought 'from and for the margins' also implies, as alluded to by Chakrabarty, a redefinition of the self and what it is to be human in a supposedly disenchanted world (Chakrabarty 2001: 16). Departing from Weber's secular rationality, the realities of Indian modernities propose a form of re-enchantment of the world, a sort of 'secular magic' for the 21st century.<sup>3</sup> Be it in literary forms, or the practice of everyday lives, as shown in this very volume, gods and spirits are constantly present in modern India, yet not necessarily as competing with or challenging the secular order. As such, the Indian modernities envisaged in our edited book are also an exemplification of the non-western and non-linear makings of the modern.

## 2 Modern India

We compile this book at a time when India is witnessing interesting social and political transformations. A strong orientation towards these transformations can be traced to the early 1990s when India opened its economy to crucial liberalizing policies, which ushered in a host of professional opportunities for the burgeoning young population as it also led to the onset of several shifts in social interactions, redrawing of class boundaries, and rise of new identifications and reiteration of certain older ones. As the economic policies interacted with global forces of finance, economics, and politics, Indians debated the rise of a 'new' middle class and appropriated the jargon of 'change', development, and progress. Yet, there also emerged reports of growing inequalities that marked Indian modern reality, brushed away to present the modern and developed face of India.

There was, for example, a visible shift in participation of women in the workforce, promotion of government welfare programmes encouraging girls' education,

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<sup>3</sup>In allusion to Joshua Landy and Michael Saler (2009).

and an increase, though marginal, in the age of marriage. As real as these developments in the sphere of women's progress were, there equally emerged greater reporting of crimes against women. Fighting for caste equality, especially by way of caste reservation in government bodies—educational and administrative—was a defining era named after the commission looking into these reforms—the Mandal Commission, and the post-Mandal era (the 1990s and onwards) was marked by caste violence and fight for equality and recognition by the so-called lower castes. The political situation too underwent interesting changes from the relatively stable rule of the Congress party in the 1990s, under the prime ministership of P. V. Narasimha Rao (Sitapati 2018) to more coalition governments, and rise of an anti-corruption wave which led to the emergence of a 'people's party'—the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which went on to win crucial Delhi elections of 2014. Most significant was the coming into power of the main opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in the general elections of 2014, which shares roots with the right-wing organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The BJP had previously been in power in the late 1990s; however, in the 2014 general elections it leading face a resounding victory, with the controversial Narendra Modi, previously Chief Minister of Gujarat, as its leading face. The victory of the BJP brought back, in direct and indirect ways, religion into Indian politics, in ways which was not manifest in earlier times, though of course it was not completely latent either.

The juxtaposition of religion and politics in contemporary Indian reality, which is curating the 'modern', then stands at odds with classical conceptions of the modern that suggest a separation of these two spheres. Moreover, not simply in politics but everyday Indian lives are also not far away from the practices of religion, as evident in the increasing rise of religious gurus (saints), who do not necessarily follow any strict tenets of Hinduism but instead, merge the practices and teachings of various religions to propagate their own practices and understandings of religion and spirituality. The other sphere that remains a dominant actor in guiding social interaction in India is that of the family. Yet again, contrary to modernization theories and theories on the rise of individualism, as well as use of technology, we see that the family remains a significant force in dictating social ties in Indian society (Bhandari and Titzmann 2017). Merging together the importance of religion, family, and other communal identities is for example the space of matchmaking and marriage, where whilst the desire for finding 'love' in marriage is paramount, the young population is equally cognizant of respecting caste and community boundaries and upholding family honour. Whilst these structures or units of social life provide a firm communal anchorage to individuals, they also coexist with processes of individualization, which are furthered by use of technology, rise of youth culture, and desire to write one's own biography (Beck 1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

It is these coexistences of seemingly contradictory or contesting values, patterns, and cultures that motivated us to focus on what the 'modern' really means to and for an Indian society, for clearly, we are experiencing a modern that does not fit the western ideals, imaginings, or makings. Furthermore, the Indian history, political, and cultural leanings are constantly making, questioning, and re-making the

‘modern’. The modern articulates itself in different forms in various fields of Indian identities, and we think it is important to bring together these many narrative in one volume to see for ourselves what the ‘modern’ in India truly entails, before we even begin to explain what the non-modern or the post-modern is. In this volume, therefore, we are keen to locate India’s conception of State, justice, law, economy, practices of cultures of art, cuisine, hospitality, makings of cities, marriages, and families, and traditions of oral and art history, as they interact with both Indian and international cultures, people, and concepts. Such an endeavour in particular would be pertinent in the current times of intense global flow of ideas and people and the State’s increasing role and intervention in everyday lives of common Indians by way of social welfare schemes or drastic economic decisions as of demonetization of Rs. 500 and Rs. 1000 currency notes in November 2016. We have aimed to include perspectives of several disciplines, adopting divergent methodologies—archival work, ethnography, practice, and visual analysis—to present their varied views on the modern in India. Some of these contributors adopt a historical-genealogical lens to understand the construction or making of the modern delineating the practices ‘then’ and ‘now’ and how these interacted to shape the ‘modern’. Some other contributors place a critical lens on the idea of the modern as espoused by the State, for example, pointing to the loopholes in its economic policies and treatment of science and welfare and certain others provide suggestions to improve the project of the modern. Certain other contributors shift attention to the makings of the modern as evident in practices and cultures of food, hospitality, and spouse selection. This volume also brings out the constructions of gender roles and expectations as we also review the vast array of sexualities that have dominated Indian literature but which are controlled and curtailed in modern times. This compilation is in no way exhaustive, as there remain several questions and spheres that only challenge our conception of the modern. However, our aim is to not provide a singular understanding of the modern but to let the experiences, texts, and research of scholars speak for themselves, only reiterating that the making of modern India is wrought with contestation and contradictions (Dube 2009, 2012), going back and forth between ideas of progress and control, and the ‘modern’ in India is in a continual state of making, challenging, and accepting the various influences and forces from the past and the present.

### **3 Learning from a Multidisciplinary Path**

Amidst these varied conceptualizations and approaches to the modern, and the shifting realities of Indian society, it is only a mammoth task to be able to provide one coherent understanding of the ‘modern’ that would appropriately capture the lived and imagined realities of Indian society. However, we aim to put forth as far as possible, a coherent perspective, and cover, as far as possible, the various perspectives of understanding the modern in India. In order to do so, we focus on five

thematic perspective to the ‘modern’, which we hope will help contextualize the chapters and ideas presented in this volume.

### 3.1 *Shifting the Gaze*

The ‘modern’ is usually seen to signify the ‘now’, ‘present’ or ‘new’, signalling a forward looking vision where the past is seen as distinct and different, perhaps also uninvolved with the ‘now’. However, we query this unilinear progressive vision by insisting that the ‘modern’ cannot be understood without a look at the past. In so doing we are not simply making a point of continuity between ‘then’ and ‘now’, of the present and the past. Instead, we look at the past as more befitting to ideas and imaginings of the ‘modern’. The past, then, is not a regressive or ‘traditional’ repertoire of time and practices but in fact is a crucial constituent of a modern present. Yet, often, the past is overlooked and presented as much different and less desirable. Querying this image, we argue that the modern struggles in society could in fact learn from the past by recognizing and incorporating the past in the mapping of its future, and by viewing it not as a distant experience, the time of which has come to an end and has little relevance to the practices of the present and future. This dynamic view of time and its impact on the making of the modern, furthermore, crucially turns the binaries as that of modern/traditional, object/subject, masculine/feminine on its head. It enables us to question which category is the privileged gaze in the binaries? Which aspect of the binary indicates the ‘now’, the ‘better’, and the ‘progressive’?

Whilst most chapters in this contribution invoke the past to understand the ‘modern’, three papers specifically fall on this axis. Mokkal’s chapter (Chap. 12) questions the heteronormative conception of masculinity and femininity as defined by the discourse on reproductive family, by turning attention to novellas and movies in Malayalam, which espouse a range of sexualities and non-heteronormative takes on gender. By conducting an analysis of literary and visual cultures of Kerala, Mokkal brings out the disjuncture in the modernist project of taming and domesticating desires. The focus of her work is not simply on feminine figures but the ‘unruly feminine figures’ as the mad woman and the witch, as she also brings together the human and spirit (ghosts) to explain the varied constructions of femininities as captured by regional literature. These stories and movies based on vernacular literature, she argues, give shape and form to ‘transgressive feminine desire’ which contests the modern heteronormative discourse on sexuality and gender.

Turning the binaries of ‘colonizer/colonized’ on its head is the chapter by Avijit (Chap. 16) who argues that colonial art in fact provided the Indian tribal with far more agency especially in relation to the Indian painters of the Bengal School (1920s–1950s). By undertaking an extensive and rigorous analysis of Santal tribal art, Avijit argues that it was the Bengal school of Art that curated the image of the tribal as the primitive by returning them to their forests, drums, dances, which they

believed were the true characters of the Indian primitive. He argues that the colonizer was in fact cautious to not cage the tribals in the language of orientalism. Avijit's chapter seems most counterintuitive to the generalized conceptions of the 'modern' for he argues that the colonizer was in fact removed from the making of the 'primitive'. According to him, it is the colonized that made (curated) the 'primitive' images to chart the paths of a nationalist 'modern'.

Simona Sawhney's chapter (Chap. 11) focuses on the ideal of hospitality as invoked in texts of the past to question if hospitality is really all about inclusion or in fact exclusion. She asks if hospitality espouses equality or plays out hierarchies. By drawing attention to two literary texts, she explains the asymmetrical relation between the guest and the host through the lens of religion, caste, and class. In so doing she turns the dichotomy of the guest and host on its head as she asks if it is in fact the guest who does not belong, pushing us to re-think the position of power and privilege of the guest, and also relating it to the modern policies of immigration.

### 3.2 *The Governing Principles of Modernity*

The Indian constitution was seen, as later unveiled by the *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* Supreme Court judgment, as the means to bring about a 'non-violent social revolution'.<sup>4</sup> 'Workable', 'flexible' and 'strong enough' to 'hold the country together both in peace and in war time', the Constitution eventually offered the promise of a nation-state and that of a political modernity.<sup>5</sup> In this context, several chapters of our volume address, in a critical perspective, this yet unfulfilled—or perhaps failed—promise of modernity.

On the basis of the Indian constitutional project, Choukroune (Chap. 3) argues that the normative 'internationalization', in which the national judge plays a central role, brings even more promises in emerging economies like India where foreign and international laws are not only domesticized but also held as powerful instruments for empowering the national democratic process by shielding it from internal pressure, yet sometimes at the risk of being rejected as a form of judicial hyperactivism. She shows that this dynamic and incomplete process is all but irreversible at a time Indian law is challenged by a form of revival of the past. As such, she argues that it may well be that Indian law is not quite modern yet already post-modern. But the post-modern character of Indian law does not rest upon a frustrated reaction to the colonial 'modernism' and legal 'positivism' equally alien to the national genius of the people of India. It is the expression of a plural, highly diverse society, which evolves in multiple realities and thinks and acts in many apparently irreconcilable ways. Indian legal modernity then has the capacity to

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<sup>4</sup>*Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*, (1973), 4 SCC 225.

<sup>5</sup>See Ambedkar's introduction of the Draft Constitution in the Constituent Assembly on 4 November 1948, reproduced in Jadhav (2014: 466).

accommodate different de-territorialized legal spheres in one hybrid project testing the limits of history. The ambiguity of the constitutional regime is equally exposed by Baxi (Chap. 2) who argues that since the 1980s, the Supreme Court has become the ‘co-governor of the nation’, which makes ‘laws’, ‘a large number of policies’ and invents ‘structures of enforcement’. In crafting a new concept of ‘demosprudence’, Baxi proposes to ‘devise, and think about, some more apt ways of understanding in which judges and lawyers think through the problems of maturation of a democratic order with human rights assurances’. In so doing, he gauges the contrasts and contradictions between judicial action and democratic praxis and explores, in the Indian context, a potentially new constitutional theory, which goes beyond the accepted separation of powers and deeply questions the idea of norms.

Ghosh (Chap. 4), in her incisive analysis of the economic programmes of the Indian government, makes a call for including both formal and informal economies to realize the project of the modern. She remarks that the government’s inability to recognize and address ‘traditional’ forms of social hierarchy, exclusion and discrimination, has obstructed the realization of the modern project. She also questions the role of ‘modern’ devices such as technology and increasing digitization, cautioning that these may create further divisions and inequalities.

Providing a more positive analysis of the Indian State’s project of the modern is the contribution by Arora and Kailash (Chap. 5) who bring out the relevance and importance of the practice of ‘the Group of Ministers Device’. This practice, according to the authors, completes and emboldens the constitutional project and fills the gaps of a perfectible parliamentary democracy. They explain the ways in which this practice bolsters the project of the modern, specifically as it allows expression of diversities and promotes an Indian heritage of tolerance and accommodation.

In interrogating a complex process of interactions with the West, Savitha Singh meticulously deconstructs modernity as a theory of knowledge and shows that beyond the apparent epistemological objective, a specific Indian interpretation is emanating as the genuine project of being itself. This complexity has been grasped on the basis of many different languages constructing a discourse on modernity, a long conversation on its own, which is bringing out much more than the truth.

### ***3.3 The Practice and Understanding of the Modern in Everyday Lives***

The modern is also experienced in the everyday practices of contemporary life and is presented as an ideal that is strived for by structures and organs of society. This understanding of the modern is most strongly manifest in everyday practices as those related to food, social interaction, and marriage. The special focus of this theme of the modern therefore, is in the externalization of the ‘now’, the ‘present’, and it shifts our attention to the ways in which the modern is experienced,

externalized, and presented to make sense of the everyday realities of Indian society. In pursuit of this approach, our emphasis is not simply on the uplifting or empowering elements of the modern, instead we also draw attention to its critiques. Furthermore, we do not envision the modern as a necessarily complete project but as one that requires constant re-working and re-envisioning and therefore understand the modern as in a constant state of making; requiring and desiring practice and vision.

Several chapters of this volume particularly bring out this conception of the modern that is in constant mode of making and experience and that is enabled by practice. Shifting focus from the macro to the micro practices of everyday living are papers by Bhandari and Brara (Chaps. 7 and 10). Both these chapters explain that the practices of the modern are not based on the exclusion of certain aspects usually associated with being pre-modern as that of religion and family, but in fact the 'modern' are crucially determined by their inclusion. Bhandari show that the presentation of the modern in marriages though articulated by experiences of love is not defined only by the realization of individual love and will. In fact, it crucially includes parental consent and authority such that these aspects are not viewed as 'traditional' or 'non-modern' but are able to transform themselves as the modern. She argues that the modern choice in marriage is not about excluding the parents but instead is of including them in the process of spouse-selection. Based on ethnographic work she also explains that the processes of modernization, as the use of technology in matchmaking, support this making of 'modern' choice in marriages. Brara's chapter focuses on the everyday practice of animal slaughter for human consumption, specifically *halal* and *jhatka*. On the basis of ethnographic work conducted in Hindu and Muslim animal slaughter houses, Brara argues that religion is not the realm of the 'pre-modern', but continues to be an important aspect of the public sphere and the makings of a modern nation-state.

### 3.4 *Trajectories of the Makings*

The fourth axis on which the understanding of the modern can be read is about the mixing and amalgamation of ideas and practices, of 'then' and 'now'. This thematic approach assists us to view the modern as a creation of diverse forces working in tandem with each other. It does not understand the modern in temporal categories of past, present, and future, but as a flowing phenomenon that goes back and forth, carries insignias and visions through every time and space it encounters. At times, the resultant 'modern' is absolutely unintended, as it has been borrowed, incorporated, and appropriated from the many, however, soon the resultant 'modern' also comes to identify itself strongly with a particular origin or state of being. In this volume, this approach is best captured in three chapters, one of which looks at the making of the city of Bombay (Mumbai), the other focuses on the making of 'modern' Indian cuisine, and the third is on the rise of languages to understand the 'modern'.

Ithurbide in her chapter (Chap. 8) explains the rise of Bombay as the centre of art and culture. Undertaking a historical analysis, she traces the rise of Bombay as an art territory, which was shaped by a spectrum of experiences of diverse classes, communities, and individuals. She explains the ways in which the city transforms into a cultural metropolis with circulations of idea, actors, and material culture. The city, she lays out, is an amalgamation of modernity designed by the British colonial administration, desires and styles of life of the Indian elites, and oppositions to the concept of ‘modernity’ as voiced by several groups. All these aspects, she argues, work together to create the cultural metropolis of Bombay that then became a potent symbol of modern India.

Banerjee-Dube (Chap. 9) pays attention to the makings of ‘authentic fusion food’ which has come to symbolize a modern Indian cuisine. Banerjee-Dube unsettles the binaries on which the modern and traditional are supposed to be based as she explains the blend of ‘authenticity’ and ‘hybridity’ as well as that of ‘tradition’ and ‘innovation’ in the making of Indian food. She traces the making of ‘modern’ Bengali cuisine from the mixed heritage of *Mughlai* (derived from the Mughals) and Anglo-Indian food as well as the crisscrossing paths of ‘curry’. Banerjee-Dube’s research is crucial to recognize that the ‘modern’ is in fact embedded in the mixes—as of hybridity and authenticity, of ‘then and now’ and works towards producing such a conception which finds significance for all forms and content and therefore is easily appropriated by the diverse Indian realities as its own, as in this case, the notion of authentic Indian fusion cuisine.

Shifting attention to Indian literary field is the chapter by Paul Kumar (Chap. 13) where she argues that modernism in Indian fiction has a distinct colour and shape, born out of borrowing from the West and by also immersing in the cultural diversity and linguistic plurality of its own country. In that sense, ‘modernist writing’ should not be seen as a ‘cultural sell-out’ but as a result of cultural, political, and social setting of India, especially in the context of post-Partition India. She explains the ways in which creative expression can be viewed as the Indian brand of modernism, as it develops due to an assimilation of the new philosophic and cultural temper, caused in the cultural crisis created by Partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

Each of these chapters with its unique focus on making of a city, cuisine, and literary tradition, explains to us that the modern is not conceptualized in neat categories. Instead, it is a result of interaction with the diversities of Indian realities as it is also shaped by definitive moments in history as that of influence of European art in social and cultural spaces of a city or the Partition of the country in 1947. The ‘modern’ therefore, is a product of the mixes, of interactions, of specific contexts, and changing realities.

### ***3.5 Locating in Transnational Exchanges***

An explanation of Indian modernity significantly takes into account the influence of British colonialism, especially as propounded by post-colonial theories. From the

use of English language to the setting up of parliamentary democratic systems, to cultures of food and social interaction, much of Indian modernity has emerged in the context of its colonial history. However, in this volume, whilst in full cognizance of this influence, we are also keen to bring out other significant forces of international interactions that have shaped the notions, practices, and imagining of the Indian modern. In unveiling these interactions, we are yet again not invoking a linear version of the modern where these international forces shaped the modern of India but are also interested in delineating the ways Indian experiences also influenced notions of modernity of these other societies. In other words, in this volume we also want to understand the modern in India not only as a final product of makings but also a potent agent that influences the modern experiences of other societies as well. Whilst most chapters do allude to the influence of British interaction on the shaping of realities of the modern in India, two shift attention to international exchanges and interactions.

Minni Sawhney (Chap. 14) focuses on two Latin American writers' encounter with Indian modernity.' She explains how these authors—Octavio Paz and Severo Sarduy—in order to better understand Mexican identities, engaged with ideas in and of India by, for example, looking for clues in ancient Hinduism and relating them to the Iberian and Aztec civilizations. Paz also looked for analogies between Christianity and Hinduism and Buddhism, and offered comparisons between Hinduism and Islam. Sawhney too delineates Sarduy's encounter with India, as he travelled extensively mainly as a tourist but providing nuanced understanding of Indian selves, and engaging in a self-Orientalism that was highly reflexive. Sawhney then tells us that these two Latin American writers punctured the Orientalist discourse and in so doing engaged with non-western frameworks of understanding modernity.

From Latin America, the chapter by Idier (Chap. 15) shifts our attention closer home to India's neighbour, China. Idier recognizes the significance of looking at the past to understand the present in curating the experience of the modern for Indian society and explains that this methodology is in fact also central to Chinese society. Idier is particularly interested in noting the role of the past—as an ideological tool—to build processes of political and national modernity. Whilst he observes many differences, in this paper he is keen to unveil the similarities, especially as espoused in fiction writings of these two cultures.

Providing a sound theoretical and ontological understanding of these cross-cultural interactions is the contribution by Savita Singh (Chap. 6), who explains that Indian modernity is certainly not a project of the European subject but has developed through complex channels of interaction with the modern West. The forces that shaped the modern were not dictated by an objective relationship, instead they developed through a relationship of 'interaction and interpretation'. These, she argues, are best captured in what she describes as three languages of modernity, namely, the traditionalist neo-conservative language, nationalist language, and hermeneutical language.

The motivations to use these specific five approaches in this volume are mainly two-fold: first, our aim is to include a wide array of theoretical perspectives that will

form the framework to understand the ‘modern’. In particular, we are keen to unsettle the easy acceptance of binaries of ‘old’ and ‘new’, and ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’, each signalling a set of preconceived notions. Second, we are committed to providing clear empirical arguments with sound theoretical underpinnings, and have thus included papers that are based on extensive fieldwork from every aspect of Indian life. The idea of a modern India is visible in the many manifestations of being India, which include its formal structure of governance, constitutional authority, legal systems, social practices, everyday lives, and written, oral, and, other artistic traditions. In other words, the ‘modern’ in India is imagined and articulated in its structures and principles, experiences in its everyday practices, social rules, and rituals, and narrated through texts and oral traditions. Working firmly on this idea of India, we divide our book in three sections, each presenting empirically grounded works with strong theoretical underpinnings of the ‘modern’, namely (a) Imagining the modern (b) Experiencing the modern and (c) Narrating the modern.

With 15 contributors organized in three parts (ideas, institutions, and challenges; makings and practices; texts and travels) *Exploring Indian Modernities* showcases the multiple ways of being modern, without necessarily expressing the modern as all rational, egalitarian, and neat. Instead, it highlights not simply the ideas of progress and gain but also of nostalgia and loss that mark the practices of modern in India. Most importantly, it explains that there is not one imagining, practice, or vision of the modern for India, but that in fact the modern is constantly constructed, practised, and lived in contradictory, changing, and contested spheres. It is, for example, enshrined as one vision by the State and its organs but appropriated differently by its citizens. Its origin might be based on a past that seemed empowering for all but its contemporary forms of practice might challenge norms of openness and progress. It also provides agency to curate experiences in structures that might seem difficult to be contested. Indian modernities therefore exist in very diverse forms brought together as different articulations in our volume.

What *Exploring Indian Modernities* then teaches us is how to feel a ‘richer and wiser’ (wo)man in accepting and engaging with the multiple realities of one’s space, time and self (Muller 2002).<sup>6</sup> So that the lessons learnt largely cross the boundaries of the Indian subcontinent to support the development of a new social sciences scholarship both globalized in its vision and outreach, and localized in its approach.

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<sup>6</sup>In allusion to Max Müller’s seminal Lectures to Indian Civil Service officers of Colonial Britain at the University of Cambridge, which beyond a certain romanticism, indirect accusations against “Mohammedan” invaders and his limited firsthand experience of India, testify of a genuine endeavour to look at other histories to understand History.