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978-1-107-57128-0 - The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future

Prasenjit Duara

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The Crisis of Global Modernity

In this major new study, Prasenjit Duara expands his influential theoretical framework to present circulatory, transnational histories as an alternative to nationalist history. Duara argues that the present day is defined by the intersection of three global changes: the rise of non-Western powers, the crisis of environmental sustainability and the loss of authoritative sources of what he terms ‘transcendence’ – the ideals, principles and ethics once found in religions or political ideologies. The physical salvation of the world is becoming – and must become – the transcendent goal of our times, but this goal must transcend national sovereignty if it is to succeed. Duara suggests that a viable foundation for sustainability might be found in the traditions of Asia, which offer different ways of understanding the relationship between the personal, ecological and universal. These traditions must be understood through the ways they have circulated and converged with contemporary developments.

PRASENJIT DUARA is Raffles Professor of Humanities, National University of Singapore, and Professor Emeritus of the University of Chicago.

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

4843/24, 2nd Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi - 110002, India

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It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107442856

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First published 2015

First South Asia edition 2015

This South Asia edition is based on Prasenjit Duara / The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future / 9781107442856 / 2015

Printed in India

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-57128-0 Paperback

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“I wonder from where these notes come.”

– Kishori Amonkar

Gaan Saraswati,

Chanteuse extraordinaire

Sounding the transcendent

across imagination’s frontiers

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Preface and Acknowledgements

For the roughly ten years I have been researching, thinking about and writing this book, I was sure I wanted to call it “Transcendence in a Secular World” accompanied by a subtitle that included Asian traditions and sustainability. My editors at Cambridge University Press wisely counseled me to change the title to “The Crisis of Global Modernity.” Since the latter better captures the imperative of the work, I quickly saw the wisdom of their advice. However, in my personal journey, it remains a book that seeks to understand the wellsprings of human commitment to a larger good beyond or ‘after’ religion and across various historical circumstances. The existence of the so-called altruism gene is a neutral matter because epigenetic conditions may allow it to be expressed in many ways or not at all. Thus, if the book is first of all about the crisis of sustainability, it is also about the crisis of transcendence and the search for sources and resources of self and communal regeneration in historical cultures.

A book composed in the later stage of one’s career cannot but also represent a stock-taking of one’s previous writings, recognizing how ideas and materials that once seemed to belong to a different realm fit into this. As such it draws on several of my earlier works and also more recently published essays. In each case, however, the original essay or material is transformed in this study. The database has been empirically expanded and the arguments intellectually developed to contribute to the overall theses of this book.

The work was principally written during the last six years at the National University of Singapore (NUS). I want to acknowledge the generosity and kindness of the senior administrators at NUS, especially President Tan Chorh Chuan and Deputy President Barry Halliwell for giving me the freedom and wherewithal to conduct this work. I keenly hope that the wise administrators in Singapore will continue their commitment to the humanities and social sciences.

One of the most fruitful endeavors that we initiated was the network of reading groups in the Humanities and Social Sciences at NUS. The groups in which I participated metamorphosed over time as our

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explorations deepened. But without my participation in the overlapping religion and historical sociology reading groups, this book would have been much poorer. I know many of the participants have also been producing their own work, and I fully expect that they too will be highly influenced by our energetic discussions over the years.

I cannot mention every name among the many dozens of people who participated in all the discussions I have had over the years, but I must thank those who have repeatedly and closely read my work in the context of our discussions and have helped me immensely. I single out with special gratitude Arun Bala, Viren Murthy and Rada Ivekovic, my generous philosophical interlocutors, for rescuing the analysis from being more naive than it is. Michael Feener, Ken Dean and Tansen Sen were critical fellow travelers through the entire process of conceptualizing and writing the book. Armando Salvatore, Robert Bianchi, Richard Bense, Mayfair Yang, Amitav Ghosh, Andrea Acri, Pheng Cheah, Liang Yongjia, Roger Ames, Nazry Bahrawi, Manjusha Nair, David Strand, Anne Blackburn, Janet Hoskins, Purnima Mankekar, Zhong Yijiang, Han Suk-jung, Bob Gibbs, Wendy Larson, Misha Petrovich, Daniel Goh, Kurtulus Gemici, Michael Hathaway, Rick Weiss, Michael Radich, Sekhar Bandopadhyay, Wang Xiaoming, Bill Callahan, Srirupa Roy, Ward Keeler, Lee Haiyan, Tim Winter, Kirin Narayan and the late S. N. Eisenstadt all gave generously of their time and goodwill. Mohammad Faisal, Huang Yanjie and Arnab Roychaudhury served doubly as research assistants and intellectual discussants. I owe special gratitude to Tay Wei-leong for his fine research assistance in all periods of Chinese history. Brenda Lim and Kristy Won handled the logistics and protected my time with the famed Singapore efficiency and care.

I thank Lucy Rhymer for placing her faith or, rather, hope in me when others thought this was a hopelessly ambitious work and for stepping far beyond her role as acquisition editor to help me draw my wandering gaze back to the reader. The five readers of the manuscript for Cambridge University Press also gave invaluable comments to improve the book. Finally, to Juliette and Nisha, my eternal love.