

INDIA'S FORESTS, REAL AND IMAGINED

Writing the
Modern Nation

ALAN JOHNSON

BLOOMSBURY



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BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain 2023

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-0-7556-3410-1

ePDF: 978-0-7556-3412-5

eBook: 978-0-7556-3411-8

Typeset by Newgen KnowledgeWorks Pvt. Ltd., Chennai, India

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Acknowledgments

This book has been incubating for several years, and I am grateful to all the people, institutions, and organizations who have helped see it through to completion. My home institution, Idaho State University, has offered invaluable intellectual, administrative, monetary, and library support. A sabbatical and an Idaho Humanities Council Research Award helped jump-start the project, as did an Office of Research travel award. The College of Arts and Letters funded a research assistant, two course releases, and three conference travel awards. A Fulbright-Nehru award in 2016–17 enabled the final research phase. I am fortunate to be in a collegial department, English and Philosophy, that provides intangible networks of support and opportunities to develop and share research ideas.

Parts of the project, in various stages of development, were presented at the following conferences and institutions: Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE); CMS College, Kottayam; Dwellings of Enchantment Conference—Université de Perpignan; Forest and Literature Conference—Challakudi (Kerala); Department of Humanities and Social Sciences—IIT Madras; Golden Jubilee/UGC Conference—Berhampur; University of Gour Banga—Malda, West Bengal; Department of English—National University of Singapore; Northeast MLA; Rocky Mountain MLA; ASEAN-ASLE—Manila; Assam University—Diphu; Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation (SCILET)—American College, Madurai; the USIEF Fulbright offices in New Delhi and Chennai; Osmania University; Zakir Hussain Delhi College; National Seminar on Women in Indian Knowledge Tradition—Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi; Central University of Karnataka; and the Idaho Environmental Humanities Symposium.

I thank the many scholars, colleagues, co-panelists, and hosts who have been vital interlocutors, listeners, and supporters of this project, among whom are the following: Nobel Ang, Brian Attebery, Jennifer Attebery, Patrycja Austin, Ralph Baergen, Meera Baidur, Isabel Banzon, Jacob Berger, Amit Bhattacharya, Sivasish Biswas, Sravani Biswas, Alan Blackstock, Adam Bradford, Tera Cole, Sri Craven, Shruti Das, Coralynn Davis, Asis De, Carlen Donovan, Will Donovan, Ebenezer, Jennifer Fuller, Priyanjana Ghosh, Sushilla Gopaul, Susan Goslee, John Gribas, Adam Grotzky, Brandon Hall, Monirul Haq, Hal Hellwig, Bethany Schultz Hurst, Adeline Johns-Putra, Margaret Johnson, Gurpreet Kaur, Hameed Khan, Tom Klein, Pradip Krishen, Mathangi Krishnamurthy, T. Vijay Kumar, Joy Landeira, Dawn Lattin, Sonja Launspach, Dave Lawrimore, Matt Levay, John Lourdaswamy, Kim Madsen, Bill McCurdy, Kanchana Mahadevan, Barb Mayfield, Shelley McEuen, Bénédicte Meillon, Minakshi Menon, N. Nagaraja, Lalitha Nagesvari, Geetesh Nirban, Melissa Norton, R. P. Nair, Joji John Panicker, Premila Paul, Cathy Peppers, Ruth Pison, Tom Pfister, Madhu Ramnath, Giri Rao, Manohar Rao, Usha Devi Rao, Sura Rath, T. Ravichandran,

Liz Reiman, Ignasi Ribo, Mike Roche, Evan Rodriguez, Susmita Roye, Chitra Sankaran, Roger Schmidt, Hansda Sowendra Shekhar, Ruchi Singh, Murali Sivaramakrishnan, Brian Skerratt, Jim Skidmore, Scott Slovic, M. Somasundaram, Michael Sowder, Mike Stubbs, Mali Subbiah, Maya Sundararajan, R. Swarnalatha, Aleena Teny, Lily Rose Tope, Jyoti Tripathy, Kandi Turley-Ames, Matt VanWinkle, Rob Watkins, Russell Wahl, Teresa Warren, Curt Whitaker, Lydia Wilkes, Jessica Winston, Brent Wolter, Michael Wutz, Zainor Zainal, Bonnie Zare, and Amanda Zink.

Parts of Chapter 5 previously appeared in different forms in *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2016), 506–25, as “Sacred Forest, Maternal Space, and National Narrative in Mahasweta Devi’s Fiction”; and in *Dwelling in Enchantment Writing and Reenchanted the Earth*, edited by Bénédicte Meillon (Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), 277–308, as “Shadows of Enchantment in Indian Forest Fiction: Mahasweta Devi’s ‘The Hunt’ and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*.”

Special thanks to my editors at I. B. Tauris-Bloomsbury Academic, David Avital and Olivia Dellow, for their kind attention to and interest in the manuscript, and to the copy editor.

Finally, I am grateful to Margaret and Shirin, Nishant and Roshin for their unending love and support over the years.

I must end by acknowledging the rich corpus of texts that make such a study not only possible, but also delightful. I am profoundly aware that many of India’s great ancient and medieval works have sustained communities of faith for centuries, and I engage them, in translation, with humility and an acute sense of my own interpretive limitations. As will be clear, I approach these works not, as my friends of faith do, on devotional terms, but on their extraordinary literary merits and social–historical roles. Although I sincerely hope my literary and cultural interests are clear, if any should feel a stirring of displeasure, please know that my intentions are entirely opposed to any such effect. These works are gifts to the world; my respect for them has only grown over the decades.

Introduction: Imagining India's Forests

Environments, Metaphors, Texts

A bird's-eye view of India's plains three millennia ago, moving south from Himalayan valleys dotted with oak,¹ would have revealed dense forests of sal, sandalwood, teak, neem, banyan, champa, and other trees. Some of these may have been part of the legendary Naimisha, a dry deciduous forest described in many ancient and medieval Sanskrit texts, but which has now vanished. To the west, our aerial vision would have taken in thorny, dry jungle. Toward the Eastern Ghats and extending down to central India would have been the Dandaka Forest (*Dandakaryana*), described by the poet-sage Valmiki in his Sanskrit *Ramayana*, which covered an area straddling several modern states. Remnants of it still exist: further west our eye might pick out a section of it called *Panchavati*, literally "five banyans." It, too, has disappeared, though the area has remained an important pilgrimage center. Further south still, our flight would bring into view the Western Ghats, a mountain range that extends from roughly the midpoint of India's western coast down to the country's very tip. The rainforest and moist, tropical deciduous forest that thickly cover these hills still harbor, as they did long ago, one of the earth's most biodiverse regions. Still in the south but eastward, we might spot the *mullai*, or forestland, one of the seven (though in practice, mainly five) fabled landscapes, or *tinai*, described in ancient Tamil Sangam poems. Together with the mountainous *kurinji* regions, the *mullai* boasted (as some areas still do) jasmine and *kurinji* flowers, thickets of bamboo, and thick forests of sandalwood, teak, and areca palm.²

The interplay between ecology and legend in this imagined flyover illustrates the subject of this book, which is the depiction of forests in modern Indian fiction. I argue that the forest, a long-standing motif in Indian cultural history, has been a crucial image in modern Indian writing.

The forest afforded India's early nationalist novelists a means of reconciling ancient and modern values in their efforts to forge a new national consciousness. It did so because, as a site that traditionally accommodated a wide variety of opposing forces and beliefs—danger and refuge, authenticity and deceit, mystery and transparency, innocence and depravity, action and contemplation—it seemed capable of accommodating an analogous range of differences, both perceived and lived, among modern Indians, including linguistic, religious, gender, and class differences. In

nineteenth-century nationalist writers' hands, the forest stood, in this sense, for the nation, and has for this reason been an integral part of evolving, and often conflicting, ideas about nationhood. As Jennifer Wenzel has observed, although India can be characterized as a "forest culture," it is one "that has been defined, throughout its long history, as much by *contests* over its forests as by peaceful existence within them" (original emphasis).³

Another reason Indian writers have turned to forest imagery is because colonial modernity in India, which forged many of the categories and metaphors that continue to inform narratives of national development, was infused with a rhetoric of "loss and recovery."⁴ On a governmental level, this outlook assumed that degraded landscapes must be either rejuvenated, such as by reforestation, or turned to uses for so-called improvement. But in the imaginative realm of Indian literature, "recovery," as Ashis Nandy has asserted in his analysis of the psychological damage of colonialism, means enabling a self that can enact "an alternative mythography of history."⁵ At its best, the literary forest thus affords a space in which to present alternative visions to both the physical and the psychological "rhetoric of progress" that continues to frame national development.⁶ Long after India's independence in 1947, writers have continued to draw on the forest images described above, though they have elaborated on and added to them in a variety of ways, often as a means of critiquing national policies and social injunctions.

Indian narratives are not the only ones, certainly, to depict the forest in terms of oppositions like danger and refuge, innocence and deceit. Many of these oppositional features are familiar across cultures. Worldwide, writers have variously depicted the forest as both fecund and barren, innocent yet dangerous, rejuvenating as well as enervating, beautiful and damned. It harbors heroes and demons alike, and is in every way distinctly different from the settled life of towns and cities. Forests are therefore both isolating and social, a polarity that the language and structure of a text sometimes mirrors. Individual trees frequently stand in for individual humans, both rooted to a common soil.⁷ (Happily, scientists have lately found a basis for this arboreal image with the discovery that trees are, in fact, "social" and "care for each other" through biochemical communication.⁸) The forest can be an arena in which ascetics commune with one another and with nature; or a place that accentuates human community by virtue of the latter's conspicuous absence; or a stage for a warrior-king's nonascetic epiphany. The anthropologist Mary Douglas has described the "immense prestige of the forest" for the Lele people of central Africa, who "often contrast the forest with the village." A common saying, therefore, is that "Time goes slowly in the village, quickly in the forest." For the Lele, as with all forest dwellers, the forest is the source of all "good things," including "clean [food]."⁹ Perhaps, as Elias Canetti maintains in *Crowds and Power*, this ambivalent regard is built into the forest's physicality. "Man stands upright as a tree and he inserts himself amongst the other trees. But they are taller than he is and he has to look up at them. No other natural phenomenon ... is invariably above him and, at the same time, so near and so multiple in its formation as the concourse of trees ... none is as perpetually near him as the forest." This dense and immovable entity, Canetti believes, made the forest "the first image of awe" for humans.¹⁰ Canetti and Douglas echo other commentators in further noting that the

forest is usually opposed to its other natural surroundings, such as the grasslands in which the Lele also habitually moved, and that it has tended to be a primarily male sphere.¹¹

In more-specifically literary terms, Robert Pogue Harrison, in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, his oft-cited study of the forest in Western literature, has described the many ways in which forests, as depicted in both ancient and modern texts—*Gilgamesh* and the Bible, Grimm's folktales and Thoreau—have been used to constitute both religious and secular definitions of what it means to be a civilized human. In human storytelling, as Harrison persuasively, if sometimes too sweepingly, claims, forests have since the remote past seemed to be “archaic” and “antecedent to the human world.”¹² Partly for this reason, Harrison emphasizes, the forest served as “an indispensable resource of symbolization in the cultural evolution of humankind” (original emphasis).¹³ Harrison calls forests the “shadow of civilization” to mean that in the physical as well as (and primarily) symbolic forest, apparent dualities “[go] astray.”¹⁴ Using a phrase that characterizes his study and that will very broadly serve mine as well, Harrison examines the long-standing use of “the forest as a metaphor for human institutions.”¹⁵ Harrison illustrates his broad conclusions by ranging, in nuanced discussions, from the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh* and Dante to Giambattista Vico and Joseph Conrad. As humans everywhere consumed more and more trees for shelter and food and ornamentation, they increasingly lamented their loss and invested forests with ever more powerful—and often contradictory—meanings. Harrison uses “shadow” in a double sense: to describe how “Western civilization ... project[s] into the forest's shadows its secret and innermost anxieties” and to characterize the ways in which forests have “cast their shadow” on us. Forests are, in other words, both agent and receptacle.¹⁶

Harrison argues that it was in the early modern period, when the sway of religion began to ebb, that forest settings in literature began to dramatize the world's adoption of an ironic view of the past. In Europe, this change not coincidentally accompanied the enclosure of common lands, meaning more and more privatization of property in the hands of the wealthy and greater restrictions to its access by commoners, a process that in Britain was already underway by medieval times.¹⁷ Ironically, some Enlightenment thinkers, like natural historian John Williams, who advocated the planting of oak trees in Scotland, argued that private property owners—which in the 1770s meant the upper classes—were solely capable of safeguarding these plantations from lower-class tenants.¹⁸ For European romantics in the late 1700s and early 1800s, like the Grimm brothers, the loss of forests translated into the loss of a mystically imagined, open-access human collectivity on both a global and a national scale.¹⁹ Harrison's poetics of the forest therefore crystallizes a profoundly influential development in European national cultures. As forests increasingly fell to create clearings for human settlement and to provide wood for people's needs, settled society grew nostalgic for these forests. Forests eventually came to represent all that urban life lacked: mystery and magic, wildness and deep time. The very density of forests, Harrison argues, came to symbolize a realm “where the logic of distinction goes astray,” where the world is always upside down.²⁰ We might say that the city, broadly speaking, consists of classifications and exteriorities, the forest of murky essences. Yet however much the city displaces the

forest, a vestige of the forest's primordial "grounding" remains,²¹ allowing a few—artists, thinkers—to glean something existentially valuable from that groundedness.

To some degree, as the destruction of sacred cedars in the epic of *Gilgamesh* illustrates, this development seems to have been universal and to have begun very early on, as Harrison usefully reminds us. Ancient Rome, for instance, legally labeled any uninhabited forest *res nullius*, "belonging to no one," and therefore regarded the edges of such forests as marking the "natural boundaries" between the lawless wilds and the *res publica*.²² The root of "forest," after all, is *foris*, or "outside," giving early modern Europeans the late Latin term *forestem silvam*, or "outside woods."²³ Europeans likewise coined "savage" from *silva*, meaning woods.²⁴ *Silva* is likely cognate with the Greek *hyle*—that is, forest—which, Harrison informs us, Aristotle used to mean "matter."²⁵ Ancient Indian texts, as we will see, similarly distinguish forest dwellers from city dwellers. The very interest of cities in forests and forest dwellers, however, shows that they mattered greatly to city dwellers. And, indeed, we find that ancient and medieval writings, whether in Sanskrit or Latin or Tamil, demonstrate that settled societies the world over have long recognized that their cultural vitality is inseparable from their proximate natural environments.

The globally shared opposition between city and countryside does not, however, tell us very much about specific literary works or the particularities of the cultures that produced them. The Sanskrit terms for forest, chiefly *aranya* and *vana*, do echo some features of the Latin *silva*, such as the inference that forest dwellers are crude and urban dwellers, civilized. Yet forest settings in Sanskrit literary works, not to mention those in Tamil and other classical languages, are filled with astonishingly detailed and accurate botanical references, which are used to convey very particular sensibilities that no generic term (or translation of a term) can do. Nuanced associations of regional flora, for example, infuse a plant with particular ceremonial and poetic, juridical, and medical usages. Taken together, these infuse a character's outlook, which may differ from that of another persona. The description of a plant or tree, in other words, metonymically carries cultural meaning, which in turn interacts with an individual character's mood, personality, and societal (moral) obligation.²⁶ When the fifth-century Sanskrit playwright Kalidasa, for instance, references the *nava-mallika*—literally, in Vinay Dharwadker's translation of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, "nine-petalled jasmine"—he means the "genus *Jasminum*," and more specifically the *sambac* variety of *Jasminum*, which is different from, and more valued than, the more-common "five-petalled [*Jasminum officinale*]." Both are fragrant climbing vines, and so either one would seem to serve Kalidasa's poetic identification of the character Shakuntala with jasmine. Why, then, choose *sambac*? One reason, undoubtedly, is the latter's varied colors, its petals either "white or yellow,"²⁷ which partly accounts for its comparatively greater value. Its nine petals suggest greater efflorescence and are said to have a reenergizing aroma.²⁸ *Sambac* is also more distinctively native to South Asia, as compared to the much wider distribution of *officinale*, another reason for its value among classical authors.²⁹ The *sambac* variety is therefore the more appropriate metonym for Shakuntala. But in the context of the play, it also functions metaphorically to evoke the constellation of moods and images associated with Shakuntala's forest home, as distinct from King Dushyanta's court.

Both Shakuntala and the forest are presented as bringing an essential moral balance to the royal capital.

Such examples reconfirm the insights of linguistics, that “the conceptual systems of various cultures partly depend on the physical environments they have developed in.”³⁰ Making meaning is a transactional process, in that every culture “project[s]” its spatial metaphors onto its environment. If ideas and environments shape one another, it follows that everyday concepts will differ substantially among cultures and geographical regions. We may thus perceive a copse of trees as forming “a natural boundary” (as the Romans did), or we may “impose boundaries” by constructing, say, a “wall.”³¹ For India, the story of literary forests is considerably longer and more varied than Europe’s, as this book aims to show. The subcontinent’s immense linguistic, religious, and topographical diversity ensures this. Yet because of British colonialism, depictions of forests by Indian writers since the early 1800s also informed developing ideas of modern nationhood, perhaps most notably the trope of regenerating a lost unity through the language of the sciences. Ideas of nationhood involve both people and land, and for many Indians under the yoke of colonialism, the uneven access to land naturally became a unifying rallying point—sometimes against the British, as when rebellious Indian soldiers in the service of the East India Company joined hands with certain Indian landowners in 1857, and sometimes against the Indian landowners, or *zamindars*, themselves.³² In England at this time, “commonable land” had long since been converted to “exclusively owned parcels,” with “the concomitant extinction of common rights,” particularly open pasturing.³³ But in this case, law followed practice, as in the use of hedges to mark property boundaries, which only later became codified and abstracted.³⁴ In nineteenth-century India, however, the reverse seems to have occurred, as Siraj Ahmed argues: British philologists and legal scholars underwrote British land acquisition and taxation by translating and interpreting classic Sanskrit and Arabic texts to serve their interests.³⁵ Nineteenth-century Indian writers who wanted to elicit nationalist sentiment in their readers clearly had a daunting task. Besides colonial censorship and a charged atmosphere of emotive and often polarizing popular symbols, they had to contend with uneven literacy, unpredictable dissemination, and religious and linguistic sensitivities.

What Indian writers did have in their quiver, however, was a vast, multitudinous corpus of cultural texts, in which representations of the forest figure prominently. This rich storehouse of narratives has arguably afforded modern Indian writers unparalleled access to images and associative meanings with which to inform their writing. At the same time, the very breadth of this repertoire has meant that it can inform any kind of meaning. Some of these narratives were restricted to elite readerships, but most have long been enmeshed in the country’s popular, mainstream imagination. The forests in these stories—epics and folktales, poems and dramas—variously connote the following, to cite only a few possibilities: a realm of spiritual rejuvenation, where ascetics can meditate to channel cosmic energy; a setting for the refinement of moral kingship, aided by self-discipline and divine intervention; incivility and wildness, especially when a forest is inhabited by demons; a material resource, with the ever-present potentiality for both abundance and scarcity, refuge and labyrinth, and so a resource of game and a place for hunting and learning to hunt, but also for learning

to live abstemiously; the interface between the natural and supernatural, and so the proper place for sacrifices to the gods; a site of spiritual and erotic play, sometimes questioning normative gender roles and societal strictures; and, at the edges of forests, a space in which to hear exciting new, and potentially heretical, ideas, such as the Buddha preached 2,500 years ago. To these arboreal characteristics we must add the later European descriptions of India's forests with which modern Indian writers had to contend. In European eyes, the subcontinent's forests were alternately beautiful and diseased, abundant with game but also with bandits, and disordered and wasteful but, with "proper"—that is, European—stewardship, potentially "useful" and marketable.³⁶

Forests of Continuity and Change

A broad theme that cuts through the myriad narrative treatments of forests in India, from ancient epic traditions to the modern novel, is the tension between the preservation of tradition and the promise of change. For instance, India's great hero-epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, which have been told and retold in many languages, each contain a Forest Book, or *Aranyaka*, that describes specific woodlands in which the royal warrior protagonists refine their moral compass so that they can then refine their societies. A correlate of this theme is that life is at once ephemeral (for individuals) and unceasing (for communities). But unlike European understandings of the forest as primarily a place for individuals to evade (if also to critique) societal obligations and responsibilities, Indian forests have traditionally been settings in which one learns to take those communal responsibilities to heart.³⁷ The forest in precolonial India, in other words, was not conventionally the site of abrupt breaks with a monolithic and universalized past, but instead signified a multilayered past that simultaneously accommodated a variety of group identities in the present. It was in the nineteenth century, with the growth of nationalist, anti-British sentiment, and talk of how to enact such a break, that Indian writers began to dramatize the forest as a place of immutable regional and national affiliations and associated values. For example, in the ancient Tamil epic *The Cilappatikaram*, the wedded protagonists, Kovalan and Kannaki, must traverse thickly forested countryside between their home city, the ancient port of Pukar (also styled Puhar), and their destination, sacred Maturai (Madurai), in order to escape social stigma. For R. Parthasarathy, the epic's most authoritative translator, the narrator succeeds in "ground[ing] the poem in the actual"—that is, the sensible and material world of ordinary people—"by invoking a specific place." The forest is an identifiably physical realm in "Tamil country" and also, at the same time, a symbol of cultural initiation.³⁸ It is clearly not a habitat aligned with a single group or ideology, in the way that modern writers would come to interpret them.

The fate of trade cities like Pukar, which for millennia depended on its lucrative production of forest products, is apropos of the changes wrought by European colonialism. In fact, historians have turned to *The Cilappatikaram* to mine its detailed descriptions of Pukar's long-standing international trade. Europe was a latecomer to the subcontinent's robust maritime trade and remained an economic toddler throughout the 1500s and 1600s, even after Vasco da Gama's arrival on the

western coast, its endeavors dwarfed by Indian and Chinese production and maritime prowess.³⁹ Later Indian writers knew this history well: their knowledge of Europe's violent wresting of trade from India both on sea and on land in the 1700s, and its subsequent transformation of landscapes, shapes the tone of numerous modern works, which alternate between mourning for lost vistas and adulation of regional landscapes or their future possibilities. In wresting control of this preexisting trade network, European nations eventually fractured it and then fought over the pieces. They established a different kind of commerce, based not on the free flow of goods but on the selective restriction of them by monopolizing trade. Philip Curtin notes, for example, that the Dutch East India Company, or VOC, "created a genuine monopoly over nutmeg and cloves production" in Southeast Asia "by controlling production itself," thanks to soldiers sent from the Netherlands to chop down healthy trees and so confine production to a smaller, controllable number to raise prices.⁴⁰ It is no wonder, then, that da Gama's 1498 entry into South Asia's sea trade is retrospectively seen to be the historical hinge that ushered in monopoly capitalism's effect on the natural environment.

By the early 1800s, when British management of Indian topographies intensified, along with their concerted aim of educating, as Thomas Babington Macaulay advocated, "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" to serve colonial interests, change had long since become the leitmotif of Europe's grand narrative of progress.⁴¹ Certain momentous developments—the Portuguese circumnavigation of the globe, for example—were plotted in a purposeful sequence of human perfectability, with Europe, naturally, in the lead. Such developments were seen to betoken breaks with a stultified past, one that Europeans believed they had made with the aid of Reason and, in Macaulay's view, "the languages of western Europe." Only by instructing Indians in the virtues of English, he concludes, can their "prejudices" be "overthrown" and true "knowledge diffused."⁴² This grand narrative seduced many of India's leading intellectuals, including polymathic reformer Rammohun Roy and pioneering Bengali writer Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (or Chatterji,⁴³ and commonly referred to as Bankim), who believed that "British rule was a necessary period of tutelage that Indians had to undergo to prepare precisely for what the British denied but extolled as the end of all history: citizenship and the nation-state."⁴⁴ This acceptance helped early nationalists reconcile the European articulation of history as such with Indian pasts that, retrospectively, are seen to presage the modern Indian state—a dilemma Sudipta Kaviraj calls the "double nature of the imagined community" that these early advocates of pan-Indian nationalism understood.⁴⁵

Of course, the truth was not so simple: Macaulay, and most Europeans, remained excessively fond of their own "traditions." Even Marx, as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, worried about the past's hold on revolutionary ideas.⁴⁶ What interests me about this narrative of historical progress is that the forest in modern times became for European nations a powerful symbol of their own distinctively glorious past. The tropical forest, meanwhile, became in European eyes—especially when characterized as jungle—a foil for the notional European forest and frequently a metonym for savagery. For instance, British politician Samuel Romilly could not help describing the French revolutionaries as "a republic of tigers in some forest in Africa"; and William Wordsworth compared

revolutionary Paris to “a wood where tigers roam.”⁴⁷ Similarly, when enlightened Europeans of the time condemned the rapacity of European colonialism, they resorted to metaphors still used today: Denis Diderot’s eighteenth-century characterization of the colonial settler as a dehumanized, avaricious “tiger returning to the forest” is seconded by twentieth-century historian Fernand Braudel, who describes European global capitalism as a realm in which “predators roam [and] the law of the jungle operates.”⁴⁸ Nineteenth-century Indian writers, who were conversant in both European and traditional Indian arboreal motifs, had to contend, therefore, with myriad, often conflicting, forest images as they forged possible futures for a country steeped in both ancient and modern iconographies. We will see how, for example, Bankim chose to juggle these various, often competing, symbolizations of forests in the context of national aspirations in his influential, though controversial, 1882 novel *Anandamath*. Bankim’s strategy will be more understandable if we look into this colonial context a little more closely.

Indexical Forests, Liminal Forests, and *Darshanic* Vision

India’s modern nationalist writers, to reiterate my argument, were burdened with having to create idioms that were suitably modern, in the European sense, and yet distinctively Indian. Since European colonialist tropes, as the examples above illustrate, spoke so often of the tropical forest—in part because it served as a foil to both European forest symbolism and mercantile interests—a prime strategy of Indian writers was to counter these European tropes by drawing on their own rich corpus of forest narratives and images. Because both Indian and European nationalists were sometimes drawn by their passions into narrowly bounded ideas of nationhood, such as the concept of a singular Teutonic race that certain nineteenth-century German writers espoused or the idea of India as being essentially Hindu that influential Bengali activists proclaimed—a tendency whose current hardline expressions in India scholars term “neo-traditionalist”⁴⁹—it will be helpful, before moving forward, to identify the structural components of such a tendency. The key concepts in this regard are those of the index, a part standing for a broadly cultural whole, and the singular, or imagery that contests the strong tendency in modern systems to generalize. A discussion of how these structuring concepts have shaped both forest symbolism and national narrative, in particular a variety of historical romance that enabled powerful and influential expressions of Indian nationhood, will help guide our circuit of modern forest fictions.

In neo-traditionalist narratives, observes Dipesh Chakrabarty, both modernity and tradition are represented as homogeneous and self-evident, ignoring the particularity, or “singularity,” of peoples and beliefs that cannot be subsumed within the “generality”—the “grand narrative”—of modern history.⁵⁰ Chakrabarty uses “singularity” to mean beliefs and practices that “def[y] the generalizing impulse” underlying our conventional tools of interpretation.⁵¹ Generality depends on categories and regularities, which is how we usually make sense of the world. Modern biology relies, for example, on grouping creatures according to their successive degrees of likeness: species, genus, and so on.⁵² By contrast, something is singular if it seems to be unique, and so less

susceptible to the duplication that modern disciplines treat as part of universalized time and space, which in the national imaginary takes the form that Walter Benjamin notably termed “homogeneous, empty time.”⁵³

These points remind us that the forest is not, and never was, a free-floating signifier, as my own frequent use of the word’s singular form might suggest. If the word “forest” seems freighted with associations that seem archetypal, we need to keep in mind that each of the many forests described in literary works across the world retains its ecological as well as literary specificity, as indicated by my previous comments on forests’ bioregional particularity, their overlapping but situational distinction from the concept of jungle, and their ecological diversity. A particularly helpful way to compare forest imagery in India’s wide variety of works is to see them as indexical. This is philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s term for the ability of sign, whether a textual description or an event, to convey to an observer “a connection” between one event, such as the sound and action of a falling tree, and some other potential event. The index can do so because of the world’s “semblance of regularity.”⁵⁴ As A. K. Ramanujan puts it, each version of a well-known Indian epic “is embedded in a locale, a context ... and would not make much sense without” this rootedness.⁵⁵ A forest is thus indexical of its author’s milieu, just as a tree can be indexical of a particular forest and its context. These, in turn, provide the framework for the text’s ideas.

Conventionally, a specific event or thing is not at all unique, but instead part of a meaningful pattern. If something does not fit into a pattern, it does not mean that it is nonsensical. But as Ranajit Guha has shown with regard to British misinterpretations of events leading up to the 1857 war that very nearly drove them out of India, it is easy for outsiders to mix up the visible signs of an impending event. In this case, when the colonial government was informed of the passing of a chapati (unleavened bread) from one village to another in the north-western provinces, it was befuddled. After the war began, however, the British decided that the chapati was a definitive signal to rebel—in other words, a signal that fit with conventional notions of how rebellion (in Europe) was incited.⁵⁶

With the concept of singularity, Chakrabarty tries to find a way of seeing the circulated chapati for what it is, a symbol that makes sense to its handlers—perhaps in accordance with supernatural forces—but that cannot be assimilated into modern colonial schemas. For those who created it, the chapati as communicative symbol was, like “gods, spirits and other spectral ... beings,” an interpretive “part of a network of power and prestige within which both the subaltern and elite operated in South Asia.” Gods and goddesses were not, therefore, representations “of some deeper and ‘more real’ secular reality.”⁵⁷ They *are* reality. To try to understand such symbols on their own terms requires not just an unusual degree of sympathy, as Hamish Dalley observes, but also, as a preliminary step, a conscious resistance to the tendency to typify.⁵⁸ To shoehorn a symbol like the chapati into patterns and types is to strip it of its singular quality. But if this singularity is not simply uniqueness, what is it? If we were to claim that the circulated chapati is a metonym for the scarcity of food, say, or a metaphor for regional unity, we would fail on both counts. The chapati is not exactly what we expect of either a metonym or a metaphor in the conventional sense. In fact, the very inclination to find in the itinerant chapati a particular meaning betrays the

generalizing impulse Chakrabarty wants to avoid. To the degree that supernatural or mythic qualities attach to it—to the degree, that is, that its significance is wrapped in its local cultural context rather than determined by British administrators—the chapati resists being entirely one or the other. Above all, if we accord the chapati this singularity, it cannot be abstracted, or generalized. It is not substitutable with any other chapati at any other time, yet it is still an identifiable item belonging to a food group called chapati. To grasp something of the untranslatability of the circulated chapati, we must at minimum try, Chakrabarty argues, to hold onto its “uncanny” figuration, so that it is both familiar and entirely strange.⁵⁹ We must allow the chapati to elicit, in Guha’s words, “a vagueness of meaning” deriving from its “polysemy.”⁶⁰

The forest, like the chapati circulated by villages in the nineteenth century, is both a generalizable object and a singular entity, depending on who is observing it or relating to it. We must scrutinize our concepts further, however, if we want to tease out the many ways in which forests can be viewed. My reference to the chapati’s supernatural elements, for instance, suggests (as the conventional use of supernatural implies) that the realm of the gods is distinct from, or beyond, nature. One could argue that in many literary works, whether of the “West” or the “East,” nature is clearly infused with divinity, as for example English Romantic poetry frequently emphasizes. But here, too, an interpretive limit obtains since each romantic poem, as a product of European modernity, is understood to be a reflection of an individual and self-consciously reflective mind. As moderns, in other words, these poets bring to their craft a particular worldview that thinks in categories and that has the privilege of being able to take the nation-state, as a historical and political entity, for granted.⁶¹ This is why, as we will see, current writers of historical fiction like Amitav Ghosh create singular characters whose perceptions are neither exclusively ocular nor purely visionary, in the manner of disembodied mystic apprehension, but rather a combination of the two. Each of these characters’ bifocal, idiosyncratic outlooks challenge conventional ways of seeing and of expressing what we see. And it is the forest, and imagery evocative of the forest, that, to reiterate, affords writers the relatively indistinct, or liminal, spaces that can best contextualize and communicate such double-sightedness to modern readers.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has amplified our understanding of the value of singularity with the phrase “ethical singularity,” meaning an honest relationship between individuals in which each acknowledges the other in the humility of accepting that neither of them can fully know, or control, the other. In this two-way (and admittedly rare) exchange, each person retains their integral persona, along with the many cultural, historical, and environmental layers that compose that persona. This is why Spivak sees ethical singularity as the first, indispensable step in trying to achieve an “ecologically just world.”⁶² Readers can enact a notional kind of ethical singularity if they approach a particularly sensitive, nuanced literary work with a like openness and humility. Several of Ghosh’s characters, for example, exemplify a multifaceted vision that neither the prose of conventional realism nor of magic realism can credibly express. Their uncanny perceptions of both everyday life and portents of larger, globally inflected changes must be described with a similar openness to multilayered sight.

My uses thus far of the word “vision,” though not semantically identical in each instance, invoke a concept concerning perception in the Indian context that importantly

underlies my discussions of fictional works that reimagine history from a South Asian, rather than European, standpoint—a strategy Dipesh Chakrabarty has termed “provincializing Europe.”⁶³ This modern reimagining of received histories draws, as I have said, on a multifarious corpus of texts whose leitmotif is the Indian forest, a setting that, together with its associated images, interconnects ecological and social environments that would otherwise seem to be unrelated and even, as mentioned, in tension with one another: land and sea, the natural and the supernatural, and eroticism and asceticism. The forest’s liminality often, in fact, provides writers with a context in which to envision, and to show, the fluidity between these apparent oppositions. Of particular help in representing these layered interconnections is the perceptual concept, and practice, of *darshan*, the traditional Indian term for apprehending a correspondence between ocular and divine (or pseudo-divine) vision. Traditionally, *darshan*’s effect builds on a culturally shared knowledge of not only its practice, but also of what is being viewed, whether a revered person or the iconic manifestation of a deity. Gandhi, for example, was approached daily in this way by crowds of people.

Darshan is “a form of knowing,”⁶⁴ but not in the purely subject-oriented, individual, and Western sense that John Berger, for instance, has enlighteningly examined.⁶⁵ It is instead “both a subject-centered and a subjectless practice,” as Chakrabarty observes (in his discussion of Bengali nationalism), in part because in this practice, the viewer is also the viewed.⁶⁶ *Darshan* is a dialogic mode of devoted seeing in which a sacred aura attaches to the visible object, eliciting an emotional response that is almost tactile; for to see is also to touch and be touched.⁶⁷ This kind of seeing is arguably a more far-reaching apperception than that afforded by empirical observation. In a later chapter, for example, we will see that Amitav Ghosh’s 2008 novel *Sea of Poppies* opens with the character Deeti perceiving the “apparition” of “a tall-masted ship” even though she is “four hundred miles from the coast” at the time.⁶⁸ *The ship, the Ibis* is a portent of momentous changes in the lives of Deeti and many other key characters, amplifying the weight of her vision. Even the “light grey” of her eyes makes Deeti “seem at once blind and all-seeing.”⁶⁹ We read her instances of second sight, or what we might call *darshan*ic vision, in the same vein in which the narrator tells us the specific distance of Deeti’s village “from the coast”⁷⁰: two ways of perceiving the world offered up in one breath, as it were. The reader in this way apprehends something of what Deeti senses when she “sees” the *Ibis*. Ghosh’s narrative strategy is, for these and other reasons that I will later discuss, more convincing and ethical—in a word, more successful—than Bankim’s earlier, more narrowly construed manner of countering colonialist history through an innovative combination of historical romance, realism, and mythic tropes.

Modernity, Romanticism, and Nationalist Fiction

Despite the innovative and influential narrative strategies developed by Bankim and others, nineteenth-century novelists in India could not overcome the intrinsic unfeasibility of having a single geographical and linguistic region speak for all other regions of the subcontinent. But this did not prevent numerous writers from trying. In *Anandamath*, as I mentioned, Bankim wishes for Bengal’s forests and histories

to represent India as a whole. In the context of modern nationalist movements, this desire is understandable, and perhaps even laudable. But if the effort is ultimately unachievable, the strategies that writers fashioned in the process have had lasting effects on later narrative innovations, on ideas of nationhood, and, as this book shows, on representations of forests. Here, to convey a sense of this challenge, we may note that one way Bankim addresses this is by conjoining epic forest tropes and ecological details. But even these epic tropes, familiar across India, have distinctively regional assignments, such as in Tamil Sangam literature's *tinai* landscape conventions. And when we factor in narrative treatments of forests by Adivasi (indigenous), Muslim, and other non-Hindu mainstream writers, the possibilities quickly multiply.

Besides the representational effects of writers who sought to express nationwide coherence beginning in the modern period, the tendency to homogenize national culture can have, as noted above, real and serious consequences for the natural environment. Indeed, the efforts to forge a modern culture distinct from European culture may ironically come to mirror, in the postcolonial period, Europe's acquisitive habits, as Frantz Fanon cautioned.⁷¹ This means that we must not only critique the homogenizing tendency whenever we detect it in literary works, but also identify and commend the singular features of a text that challenge this tendency. Broadly speaking, this tension is obviously not unique to Indian literature. For example, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o refers to the British devastation of Kenyan forestland in his novel *Petals of Blood*, about the 1950s Mau Mau rebellion, when he has an elderly character recall that the forests that once covered the land, bringing rain and shade, have been "eaten" by the railway.⁷² In Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, as family patriarch José Arcadio Buendía attempts to forge a path through thick Colombian rainforest, "that paradise of dampness and silence," he and his men are "overwhelmed by their most ancient memories."⁷³ And Tayeb Salih, in *Season of Migration to the North*, has a Sudanese emigrant tell an Englishwoman who has exoticized him the "fabricated stories about ... jungles" with "non-existent animals" that she wants to hear.⁷⁴ The examination of forests in modern literature also, therefore, requires a consideration of how these depictions have mediated imagined pasts, presents, and futures. Forests and jungles may be allegorical settings for cultural and political conflict, or they may serve as metonyms for specific forms of environmental, and so cultural, degradation.

What makes India's literary treatments of forests stand out among those of other parts of the world, however, is the country's distinctive role in the development of European romanticism, a movement that is inseparable from expressions of modern nationalism. A paradoxical feature of this entangled history is that it is dependent on expressions of singularity as it is on ideas of generality. The notion of singularity is literally grounded in materialities—woods, rocks, rivers—that distinguish a region and that are believed to long antedate the present. To illustrate singularity in modern European works, for example, Harrison reaches as far back as Plato, who, in *Critias*, contrasts the considerable and ongoing deforestation in contemporary Greece with the "abundance of wood" in the not-so-distant past. The trees were cut, Harrison tells us, mainly to satisfy "the Athenian navy's need for wood."⁷⁵ Because Plato's story reflects his Athenian loyalty, his lament for trees lost to ship making points the finger at the enemies of Athens, whose attacks on the city necessitate the maintenance of an able

fleet. The particularity of this fact contrasts with Plato's own writing method, which (to use today's genre categories) favors allegory in the service of political-philosophical arguments. This illustrates Harrison's point that the loss of forests haunts not just modernity, but also the classic texts that ground that modernity. A similar tension, as I have noted, can be seen in Bankim's *Anandamath*, in which Bengal's forests serve the practical need of concealing an insurgent army while also functioning as mythic and allegorical frames for the expression of modern national piety.

The words I have used here—"practical," "mythic," "modern"—are freighted with presumptions and connotations that reveal their European provenance. These are also words used by nineteenth-century writers like Bankim, who called for his compatriots to learn the British aptitude for "outward" and "practical" forms of knowledge, such as modern science and political action.⁷⁶ However, determining the degrees to which such ideas influenced nineteenth-century Indian intellectuals is, as we will see, complicated by the country's different relationships to forests on both practical and religious grounds. These relationships were shaped by the mix of European and Indian attitudes, which produced the tensions that persist to this day. An especially potent strain of European literary visions of nationalism in the nineteenth century was romanticism, whose influence on India's contemporary elites has been well-documented.⁷⁷ By the late 1700s, Europe's pillaging of American and Asian lands, combined with a growing distaste for urban sprawl, generated the romantic attitudes to nature that are so familiar in European literature.⁷⁸ Romantic poets, as we know, resisted Europe's commoditization of nature, which had been a powerful ideological motivator, and a colonialist trope, since at least the early 1600s. Katie Trumpener, Ian Duncan, and Beth Fowkes Tobin, among others, have detailed the effects of these attitudes on European authors of the period, from Aphra Behn to Walter Scott, and through the nineteenth century.⁷⁹ In his first published work of fiction in 1842, Gustave Flaubert has the narrator describe his coming-of-age as being "like an immense Indian forest where life throbs in every atom" and where "the mysterious and unformed gods were hidden in the hollows of caves amid huge piles of gold."⁸⁰ These romantic attitudes inevitably influenced, in turn, those educated in the colonial system, especially the nineteenth-century Bengali writers I discuss, though the effects were often contradictory. Romanticism's influence could not but be contradictory in light of its colonialist heritage, which was at odds with the movement's revolutionary idealism. For instance, some Indian writers who espoused this idealism nonetheless accepted, and at times even endorsed—in the name of development—British colonialism's extraction of resources at the expense of natural environments.⁸¹ Indian writers were painfully aware of the irony of British colonialists mouthing democratic ideals while ravaging the subcontinent, especially its forests, just as they were aware of their own elite and conflicted status in this milieu.⁸²

A broader context for such ironic awareness is the fact that modernity is steeped in irony, whose leitmotif is the vanishing forest. Echoing Heidegger, Harrison says suggestively that in the modern era, "We dwell not in nature but in the relation to nature" and that "We dwell not in the forest but in an exteriority with regard to its closure" for "the forest remains an index of our exclusion."⁸³ One consequence of this exclusion for Europeans, Harrison argues, has been the development of a deep sense of irony, an awareness of the loss of forests and the innocence they signified.

Yet this innocence was, according to Enlightenment thinkers, really a symptom of past societies' naïveté and irrationality: their very absorption in nature obstructed critical thinking. "Irony," concludes Harrison, "is the trope of detachment," for the post-Enlightenment critique of the past is also inescapably marked by our separation from that past. A potent emblem of this self-awareness is the loss of forests, which generates a sense of perpetual "longing" for the "loss" of a past "plenitude."⁸⁴ If, to use a well-known example, we apply Harrison's points to romantic poet William Blake's lines "Tyger tyger burning bright/In the forests of the night," we could say that the poet understands that the material, elemental space of woodland is inseparable from its spiritual mystery. Such a reader might answer the speaker's question about what kind of awesome "art" can create the tiger's "fearful symmetry" by saying that it is the poet's very craft that produces a discursive, and still powerfully resonant, tiger. The poet's art thus mirrors, however weakly by comparison, the cosmic artistry that has produced the awe-inspiring, sublime tiger and its sylvan habitat.

This familiar reading of Blake's poem is an apt illustration of forest imagery because it connects to India by way of cultural-historical context and does so in ways that crystallize key strands of this study. Yet the poem and its context reveal some significant absences in Harrison's analysis. We should note, first of all, the provenance of the tiger image. Blake published the original poem along with his own, colored intaglio drawing of a tiger standing beside a tree, which represents the poem's "forests of the night." Tigers had long been, as Blake's intentionally archaic spelling indicates, a familiar ingredient in European lore. But it was only after Britain's violent insertion into Indian affairs starting in 1757 that European artists began to exhibit their on-site drawings of India to London audiences, particularly in the 1770s. Before this time, which saw the emergence of public zoos, hardly anyone had seen images of India or its flora and fauna.⁸⁵ Indian trees, too, were soon in vogue, especially those conjoining religious sites. Edmund Burke based part of his 1757 thesis on the sublime on the prints he had seen in the English translation, published in the 1730s, of Bernard Picart's influential *The Ceremonies and Religious Customs of the Idolatrous Nations of the World*.⁸⁶ Burke is particularly drawn to a plate in this book that shows Hindu devotees in various postures of worship beneath a banyan tree that has spread expansively around an ancient temple. For Burke, as Srinivas Aravamudan explains, the banyan and the worshippers represent immense "*vacant spaces*" (original emphasis) that provide no familiar reference points to the European eye, no ready means of making meaning.⁸⁷ In Burke's sublime, such vast and penumbral spaces, when viewed either in situ or, less effectively, as a representation, overload the senses and induce terror at the recognition of one's comparative insignificance. The pleasure derived from such scenes, according to Burke, is, in effect, relief—the relief of returning to the world of familiar perspective.⁸⁸ Although the temple-and-banyan image Picart ostensibly documents (though he never visited India) is not beautiful—the Burkean sublime is distinguished from this—it apparently gratified its viewers nonetheless.

Both Blake's poem and his accompanying painting, part of his "Songs of Experience" cycle, aim to evoke just this kind of sublime pleasure, one that is amplified when contrasted with the poet's "Songs of Innocence." The tree in his painting, with its tendriled branches forming a border for the words, is likely meant to be a banyan. As the

popularity of Picart's engraving suggests, the banyan became for Europeans "one of the most celebrated tropes of the Indian geography," as Romita Ray informs us.⁸⁹ Romantic poet Robert Southey's Orientalist narrative poem of 1810, *The Curse of Kehama*, dotes on the vast spread of a "venerable [Banian]" in a forest's "sunny glade." In the shade of this "temple"-like tree, which Southey's protagonists worship, they build a shelter of "jungle-grass" and "lithe creepers."⁹⁰ A member of the fig family, the banyan shoots branches down into the ground to create new trunks (Figure 0.1), so that a single tree can cover acres of land, effectively creating a kind of forest—a feature that beguiled the ancient Greeks no less than modern Europeans.⁹¹ (David L. Haberman surmises that this feature may explain why the banyan is today a common "metaphor for Hinduism—simultaneously singular and vastly divergent."⁹²) Describing the banyan's depiction in well-known drawings made in India by Johan Zoffany in the 1780s, Ray says the tree fascinated Europeans because of "its embodiment of the strange and unusual," key constituents of the Orientalist outlook.⁹³ The banyan, just as in Picart's and Blake's representations, "is the threshold at which the gaze converges and diverges, registering asymmetry as a form of cultural/visual 'in-between-ness' shaped by the multiple realities of India."⁹⁴

Blake and other European romantics maintained an abiding interest in Indian flora and fauna, which they took to be emblematic of an inchoate, primeval originality that served as atavistic source for, and foil to, European modernity.⁹⁵ If the banyan could be classified and described, they surmised, so could Indian society, for as Ray puts it, the banyan represented "the primeval as a desirable threshold of Otherness."⁹⁶ Romanticism and modernity would not, in fact, exist without European colonialism, since the latter was the violent means by which Europe, through "war-driven capitalism" (rather than abstract capital) became modern.⁹⁷ I will have more to say about the connections



Figure 0.1 Banyan tree, St. Thomas Mount, Chennai

Source: Photo by author.

between romantic and Indian writers, but here I want to comment on Harrison's important point that the romantics turned to the natural world, rather than to the civic, in part because they believed nature's primordially to be a source for renewal, for a genuine (often national) essence that could "liberate the past from the grand narrative schemes of classical" thinking that were stifling people's "spirit."⁹⁸ The forest, as the Brothers Grimm famously proclaimed (having in mind the Black Forest), is the wellspring of a people's physical as well as spiritual authenticity.⁹⁹ Because it was the commons of ordinary folk, the forest was a space that, unlike cropland, "cannot be owned" by individuals, as Harrison says of the contemporary romantic view.¹⁰⁰

This last statement presents problems, for although Harrison pinpoints many of the effects of romanticism on European nationalism, he does not consider the role that non-European cultures played in this development and, more importantly, in offering alternative considerations of forestland. This oversight may be because, as Partha Chatterjee has observed, European nationalism, which has shaped modern considerations of forests for centuries, has been accepted as the model for all other regions, rather than one of many possible versions of collective identity (which it was).¹⁰¹ The British did, in fact, declare their ownership of forests in India, basing this claim on the idea of commercial, rather than autochthonous, rights, which in turn rested on the pretense of responsible stewardship (as opposed to indigenous "wastefulness"). Among the most important, and contentious, of these claims were the rights to the forest, which in colonial modernity meant that those with power—namely, British administrators—were within their "rights" to control woodlands. In other words, colonial ideology defined legalisms like "land rights" so as to serve their commercial interests. Harrison's tendency to universalize Europe's relationships with forests¹⁰² overlooks non-European ways of imagining and inhabiting forests, which the representative modern Indian texts I examine variously describe. Although very different from one another, these texts "fashion alternative narratives"¹⁰³ more suited to the times, peoples, and places—especially forests—that they depict.

These political and cultural contexts obviously made it immensely challenging for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalist writers to craft a vision of the country that could effectively balance a variety of perspectives. Influenced partly by the European constructs they had imbibed and partly by their own urban preconceptions, writers regarded the jungle as simultaneously holy and profane, spiritual and demonic. Consider, for example, the modern association of the popular, or the folk, with nature in the evocation of national consciousness. National spirit is frequently identified with its "heartland," the countryside, including its woods, as the beating pulse of a transcendent community. The Grimm brothers, Wilhelm and Jacob, "famously declared 'Old German forests,'" including the Black Forest, to be the nation's heart, its locus of origin.¹⁰⁴ Seeking narratives for a country that was "divided" and besieged, and inspired by compatriot Johann Gottfried Herder's celebration of an idealized *Volk*, or common people, the Grimms turned to the forest as a space that was, as Jack Zipes puts it, "unconventional, free, alluring, but dangerous."¹⁰⁵ In the Grimms' eyes, the forest space was not inherently "enchanted," as in the folk tales they collected, but instead "*allows* for enchantment and disenchantment" (original emphasis).¹⁰⁶ As the main proponent of linking romantic ideals to ancient India, Herder viewed human

civilization as growing from its “one old ... trunk,” spreading forth its “boughs and twigs.” He believed that the Vedic peoples represented the best of human societies, “the gentlest branch of humanity.”¹⁰⁷ For Schlegel, too, India was “the eternal home [of the soul],” fulfilling the Enlightenment’s yearning for a place of unspoiled “origins.”¹⁰⁸

Herder, as it happens, had also championed Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala*, which was first translated into English by William Jones in 1789 and into other European languages soon after. The play, much of which is set in a forest, was celebrated by adherents of the budding romantic movement, including Friedrich Schiller, for extolling nature, and likely influenced the Grimms—probably alongside Schiller’s hugely popular play *The Robbers*, which had appeared in 1781. In 1790, Schiller published, in his journal *Thalia*, part of a German translation of Jones’s English rendition of *Shakuntala* by Georg Forster.¹⁰⁹ The irony for nineteenth-century Indian intellectuals who were educated in colonial institutions was that *Shakuntala*, like most Indian literature, was deemed by the British to be too indecent for instruction.¹¹⁰ *The Robbers*, on the other hand, was judged to be consonant with colonial enculturation.¹¹¹ The greater irony, then (as I discuss more fully below), is that while early Indian nationalists were inspired by the ideas of European romantics, the latter had been energized by the works of ancient India, which they believed to be the cradle of humanity and a model of nature devotion.¹¹²

Although these cultural intersections might have generated mutual admiration between European romantics and Indians in the early 1800s, and a shared perception of nationhood, this did not happen. German romantics, in particular, believed they had found in ancient Sanskrit literatures a model of societal harmony that could help alleviate their own region’s modern fragmentation.¹¹³ The paradox was that whereas German romantics sought inspiration for cultural awakening and unity from ancient India, Indian intellectuals were at the same time trying to graft a form of European modernity onto their rapidly changing society in order to unify their own compatriots.

Not surprisingly, given the complexities sketched out here, Indian nationalists articulated a wide range of ideas as they tried to find a common narrative for the country’s diversity of cultures and terrains. For example, in his famous 1946 tribute to a still-colonized India, *The Discovery of India*, India’s first prime minister, British-educated Jawaharlal Nehru, identified his compatriots as the true manifestation of nationality, as opposed to the country’s topographical features. “You,” he declared to audiences, “are ... yourselves this Bharat Mata [Mother India].” Environmental historian Ajay Skaria cites this example¹¹⁴ to underscore the paradox of the construct, whose appeal to the new nation-state is premised on the primitivism which, even as it looks forward to industrialized progress, was Nehru’s particular interest (as opposed to Gandhi’s agrarian vision). The modern Indian nation-state, in other words, carried forward colonial policies rooted in utilitarian science, but at the same time invoked an ostensibly folk-based geographical romanticism that was in many ways opposed to such utility. Nehru’s impossible task was to somehow balance three different outlooks: an ancient Vedic ethos, a non-Vedic folk perspective, and a modern scientific interest. This amalgam continues to characterize India’s evolving social and political idioms, and, more pertinently, its literary expressions. (I follow common usage in using the adjective Vedic to refer to the four ancient and canonical Hindu scriptures,

written in Sanskrit, called the Vedas: the *Rigveda*, the *Yajurveda*, the *Samaveda*, and the *Atharvaveda*. The Vedas, like the epics, advocate moral behavior, but with far more detailed injunctions about how to do so in a social system whose hierarchical categories descend from Brahmins, the priestly caste, to cities, villages, animals, and forests.¹¹⁵)

One writer, for instance, might allude to the association of Sita with a grove of Ashoka trees, as in the epic *Ramayana*, in order to highlight a present-day woman character's devotion to her husband. Another writer might make the same comparison, but in an ironic sense. A single novel, in fact, may contain both of these depictions (and more) and may even set these off against yet another one, such as a forest tended by an indigenous people who call it home and speak a different language. These differences exemplify an undercurrent of tension in nationalist novels especially, but also in many postcolonial ones, between regional and cross-regional identities. Bengali writers, who were in the vanguard of Indian nationalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, famously extolled (with what Western readers may consider to be a romantic eye) their region's natural beauty, in part to rebut colonial British disparagement. Where a colonial agent saw only diseased jungles, for instance, Rabindranath Tagore appreciated the open countryside's "unobstructed sky ... filled to the brim, like an amethyst cup."¹¹⁶ Tagore and most other Bengali writers of the time represented Bengal's natural environment as representative of India as a whole, which Bankim incorporated into the influential image of Mother India in *Anandamath*. Although this prioritizing of Bengal served a wider patriotism, which Julius Lipner calls "the cultivation of a certain lifestyle that focuses on service to the motherland,"¹¹⁷ it is important to consider, as this study does, how this maternal image's grounding in a localized environment—and more specifically a forest—can conflict with images arising in other regional environments. For example, a national motherland premised on Bengal's forests, both actual and imagined, collides with an idea of nationhood derived from writers in Tamil Nadu, India's southern-most state, whose forests have provided equally fertile grounds for imagining the nation.

This variance among writers should not surprise us, given that physical forests differ greatly from region to region across the vast subcontinent, from the mangroves of the Sundarbans in Bengal, on India's northeast coast, to the rainforests (*shola*) of Tamil Nadu's hill ranges (Figure 0.2). At the same time, Bengali and Tamil writers (to continue with this example), although geographically distant, share a rich inheritance of Sanskrit epics, Puranic legends, folktales, and, beginning in the early twentieth century, nationalist media. Nationalist writers in particular, such as Raja Rao, thus drew on both regional and cross-regional tropes of landscape to capture local idiosyncrasies while also appealing to a nationwide readership. This can result, at times, in a writer displacing forests geographically, as it were, as when a South Indian novelist uses an epic trope based on northern Indian forests to illuminate his southern setting and characters. This occurs in older works, too. For example, classical Tamil texts describing Shiva's adventures in the Darukavana (or Daruvana) Forest of the western Himalayas, which is made up primarily of a cedar called the deodar, transplant the forest wholesale to the Tamil region, or "Tamil country," which has no such trees, in order to lend the region a textual sanctity befitting its immanent holiness.¹¹⁸ A nineteenth-century Tamil poem by Nellaiyappa Pillai is, indeed, "the most elaborate version of the Daruvana



Figure 0.2 Shola forest, Palni Hills

Source: Photo by author.

story.”¹¹⁹ This may seem surprising, since ancient and medieval Tamil poets have long been noted, as A. K. Ramanujan has observed, for accurate descriptions of their physical surroundings. “These poets knew their fauna and flora,” he says, for “their botanical observations ... are breathtakingly minute and accurate.”¹²⁰ Though their descriptions of natural environments work as symbols, they are “half-motivated by botanical facts” and so “never lose sight of the ‘real world.’” Ramanujan uses American poet Marianne Moore’s line to characterize these Tamil poets as “literalists of the imagination.”¹²¹

The imaginative relocation of epic forests makes more sense, however, in the context of a specifically Tamil nationalism, which since the nineteenth century has accentuated a sacred Tamil geography distinct from northern India’s Sanskrit-inflected landscapes.¹²² As Sumathi Ramaswamy makes clear in her 1997 book *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970*, Tamil has increasingly come to denote ethnic, linguistic, and geographical identity all at once.¹²³ What has not changed significantly in these constant retellings and relocations of ancient stories, however, are some central tropes, the most important of which is, as we will see, the hero’s transformational passage through the forest. The latter’s liminality—the sense of in-betweenness conditioned by the forest’s assemblage of beings, moral choices, and sacred and profane spaces—tests the hero so that he can grow into the fullness of his expectant kingship.¹²⁴ These examples illustrate two often conflicting authorial motivations in the context of local and national identity formation—namely, to emphasize a distinctly regional space while, at the same time, connecting that space to the wider world of the subcontinent and beyond.

Region-specific texts are not alone in displaying such motivational conflict. Cross-regional fiction can do so as well, such as by placing a particular forest tree in an ancient setting, despite the fact that this tree was brought to India during the relatively recent period of British colonialism. A topical example appears in Book One of a popular novelization of the *Ramayana*, Ashok K. Banker’s *Prince of Ayodhya*, which describes “a small grove of eucalyptus” in ancient northern India—an impossibility.¹²⁵ The British imported eucalyptus trees from Australia in the mid-1800s as their need for timber grew.¹²⁶ Not only did the fast-growing eucalypts provide wood for the expanding railway system’s sleeper cars and fuel for stoves, they were also thought (mistakenly) to keep diseases like malaria at bay.¹²⁷ Eucalypts demand lots of water, so the British chose the Nilgiri Hills of southern India, with their abundant rainfall, for new plantations of the tree (along with acacia).¹²⁸ But the trees soon crowded out native species, and their shallow roots caused them to topple easily in monsoon storms and the soil to erode, problems that continue to this day. (Underscoring the shortsightedness of ecological imperialism is the fact that in the 1960s, a century after the British imported eucalypts for their ostensibly fast growth, researchers found that the tree did not, after all, grow any quicker than a number of native Indian species.)¹²⁹

Eucalyptus plantations also took an immediate toll on local indigenous communities, especially Adivasis (the preferred name in India today), whose livelihoods and cultures, such as those of the Badagas in the Nilgiris, were forever changed.¹³⁰ Local indigenous folklore, religions, and customs were, and in some instances still are, entwined in forest habitat, which were shaped by these communities, who for centuries before Europeans arrived had resisted encroachments of land-hungry pastoralists.¹³¹ But