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'Hearts of Darkness' in Shining India. Maps of Ecological Un-Sustainability in the North-East

Abstract I: Il tema delle controverse prospettive dello sviluppo e della globalizzazione in India sono state recentemente oggetto di attenzione narrativa. In particolare questo articolo analizza il romanzo di Siddhartha Deb del 2005 intitolato *Surface* che mostra come nel Nord-Est della nazione una nuova generazione di scrittori stia cercando di costruire un contro-archivio in grado di contestare l'immagine dell'India come emergente super-potenza globale. Dando conto di tutte le contraddizioni che il modello neo-liberista di sviluppo sta producendo soprattutto nelle zone più periferiche e multi-etniche del paese, il romanzo di Deb, sulla falsariga del modello conradiano, mette a nudo il cuore oscuro del cosiddetto "India Shining".

Abstract II: A number of recent novels have chosen to variously address the existing conditions of the multi-ethnic mosaic of the Indian North-East. These works of fiction shed light upon a dramatic contemporary condition and propound an alternative historical archive able to perturb the current image of India as a neo-liberal, globalized super power. Indeed, in India's complex, uneven and contradictory patterns of economic and technological progress, perspectives of development prove highly controversial. In *Surface*, a novella written in 2005 by Siddhartha Deb, set in the Northeastern region and seemingly modeled upon Conrad's colonial archetype *Heart of Darkness*, a post-millennial social community of investors, executives, administrators, traders, politicians, journalists, social workers and rebels, inhabit a very complex, and 'dark', territorial reality.

A number of recent novels have chosen to variously address Indian economic modernization, conjugating fiction with a new environmentalist sensibility. These works shed light upon a dramatic contemporary condition and shape an alternative historical archive able to perturb the emerging image of India as a globalized super power encapsulated within the 2004 electoral slogan "India Shining"¹. Indeed, in India's complex, uneven and often contradictory route towards economic and technological progress, perspectives of development, conceived under the aegis of global capitalism, prove to be highly controversial. *Surface*, a

¹ The "India Shining" slogan was initially conceived as part of an official national campaign intended to promote India internationally. The expression was subsequently used as an electoral slogan in the campaign for the 2004-2005 national elections by the nationalist right-wing formation Bharatiya Janata Party.

novel written in 2005 by Siddhartha Deb, centers upon the idea of a voyage undertaken in the peripheral region of the Northeast. The reality described portrays a highly problematic situation in which rather than helping to incorporate these border lands into the post-colonial nation, the development programs in fact render their already conflictual life even more dangerous and explosive. On the basis of some textual traces which bring to mind Conrad's colonial archetype, *Heart of Darkness*, this paper aims to investigate how Deb's novella tackles the question of internal neo-colonialism exercised in India by the nation-state.

In India, recent global economic prominence has granted the country recognition as a confident player on the scene of trans-national capitalism thus substantiating its current rhetoric as an emerging superpower. India's contemporary fiction is often engaged in exploring the 'Indianness' of this neo-liberal swing (Varughese 2013: 5, 152) while underscoring the country's complex, uneven and contradictory patterns of economic and technological progress and highlighting the controversial nature of its development².

The author of *Surface*, originally entitled *An Outline of the Republic*, grew up in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, and after an early career in journalism, wrote two novels set in India's Northeast³. This area has of late borne witness to a new narrative output, mapping in particular the transition from oral to written literatures after the alphabetization of tribal societies. A new and promising generation of writers tries, through narrative, to emerge out of the colonial-ethnographic passive framework of representation, and to build a new subjectivity fostering, through narration, the idea of a shared history and a regional identity. In Zama's words "changing times and its accompanying dynamics have necessitated the various communities of this region to seek new ways to negotiate, translate and expose their world views" (Zama 2013: xii).

Like other Northeastern authors, Deb qualifies as a novelist, a historian and a social observer, contributing to create what Baral calls the 'ethos of the region' (Baral 2013: 5). By construing his narration as a quest story in the Northeast, in fact Deb focuses upon a territorial reality which, far from being a neutral backdrop, is almost a subject in itself. The plot, triggered by the picture of a girl held captive by one of the many local insurgent factions, leads Amrit, a professional reporter in Calcutta, to discover that the girl had once been connected with a development program known as the *Prosperity Project*, located in the remotest corner of the Northeast region: "the backwaters of the backwaters" (Deb 2005: 57). The quest for the lost girl and the unraveling of her personal story are gradually transformed into a 'reportage' which, by mingling different perspectives of observation, both documentary and symbolical, becomes the exploration of a country caught in a highly problematic historical moment.

Basically a coinage of convenience, the term 'Northeast' figures in contemporary con-

² Enforced as it is by the IMF and World Bank, modernization in the Subcontinent is characterized by the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ), in which highly impacting infrastructural programs such as the construction of hydroelectric dams, mining, and other resource extraction activities, together with processes of deforestation and the massive use of chemical composts inherent to monoculture systems, have radically altered the environment and created ecological emergencies.

³ He is also the author of *The Beautiful and the Damned. A Portrait of the New India* (2012), a non-fiction work on post-globalization in India.

sciousness either as an area of secluded natural sanctuaries or as an insidious land of insurgency and civil warfare. In the aftermath of Independence and Partition, the new independent state tried to convert not-yet-national borderlands into state-ruled areas. Delhi failed to control the Northeastern regions and progressively transformed them into an increasingly disenfranchised guerrilla zone. As Mara Matta convincingly explains:

The architects of Partition had insensitively ignored the fact that these territories were mostly inhabited by indigenous peoples: many ethnic groups shared cultural, religious, and linguistic affinities with others across the border, showing a weak affiliation to the newborn states of India, Pakistan, or Burma (Matta 2017: 199).

In his narrative reportage, Amrit recalls Indian post-independence history to explain the present condition of endemic civil strife in the Northeast. He represents this area's recent past as a process which saw, in the exceptionally diverse ethnic fabric of the district, the emergence of multiple competing forms of resistance on the part of "millions of riotous natives coming to terms with their dismembered freedom" (Deb 2005: 70).

As the novel illustrates, in the Northeastern regions an intricate mix of overlapping ethnic, religious, social, and environmental issues, fuel a political climate in which insurgencies and counterinsurgency operations become the very norm of an everyday 'state of exception' (Agamben 2005) progressively transforming a provisional state of emergency into a kind of permanent technique of government⁴: "the insurgents had been in the region in one form or another for nearly four decades, crystallizing around different ethnic and tribal identities as a distant government in Delhi alternated between complete neglect and brute force" (Deb 2005: 31). Indeed, in a series of landscape descriptions, the pristine, almost archetypal, green heart of the country serves to conceal the daunting presence of the military state: "that initial, aerial view of a green and fecund valley gave way to the camouflage of army uniforms and the dour faces of soldiers" (Deb 2005: 6).

What is more, these distant and sparsely populated territories, generally considered remote and somewhat 'alien', have recently been subjected to national programs based on the intensive exploitation of the local natural resources (timber and oil) thus engendering new forms of social tension. On the one hand, massive immigration flows, either internal (from the subcontinent) or external (from Bangladesh), produce latent and oppressive indigenous/settler tensions leading to a highly politicized dichotomy between tribal and non-tribal groups, with the latter portrayed as usurpers of the economic and socio-political rights of the indigenous people (Matta 2015: 51-52). On the other hand, developmental policies, connected to the privatization of the forests and subsequent damaging impact on tribals and other penurious categories, are generating ecological degradation as well as eco-

⁴ As Sanjib Baruah reconstructs in his study on the contemporary political condition of the Indian Northeast: "In order to maintain a permanent counterinsurgency capacity, India's democratic institutions have acquired certain authoritarian trappings. In recent years there has been significant protest in the region against a controversial law, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, that gives sweeping powers to security forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations. This law violates international human rights laws and norms and is strongly criticized by national and international human rights organizations" (2007: viii).

conomic pauperization while adding that particular predicament described by Rob Nixon as 'slow violence'⁵ to the local varieties of turbulence.

In *Surface*, the protagonist observes and explains how in the post-liberalization era, the developmental thrust from the central state towards its northeastern peripheries, is locally resented as just another exploitative and insidious move to drain indigenous resources and supplement long-standing grudges with new disappointments:

insurgents had blown up a nearby pipeline. [...] Oil, in the middle of this nowhere? Not enough oil to quench the thirst of an entire country, but sufficient to justify expensive equipment and staff, and quite enough to create a grievance for the insurgents who claimed [...] that all the wealth was taken out of their region with nothing given in return" (Deb 2005: 77).

As the journalist Amrit shows, designated fund injections from the central government, often misused and illegally appropriated, give rise to a dangerous mix of bribery and competing interests which foster even more disillusionment among the local populations. With its endemic potential for conflict and its traditional economies and cultures impoverished by forced modernization, the Northeast, traversed and described by Amrit, casts a very dark shadow indeed upon the "India Shining" portrayal which had been coined by marketers to circulate India's official new image as an economic super power⁶.

In many descriptions the almost mystic beauty of the land appears sullied by the dismal ramifications of polluting modernization. As a result, a very old and mysterious land, through a peculiar mix of atavistic practices and the ecological byproducts of modernity, appears shrouded in a sort of uncanny atmosphere, which from the very start summons up the African jungle depicted by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*.

It was an old city, in the memoirs of a Chinese traveler nearly two thousand years ago. Not surprisingly, little of the place he wrote about had survived; just the wide, severe river that rested like a somnolent leviathan next to the shapeless modern settlement, and the temple up in the hills where they performed animal sacrifices throughout the year, the waters of its lake a dull red from blood or mercury deposits (2005: 7).

Evocative of Conrad's Congo river in the shape of an uncoiled snake entrancing the

⁵ "By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2011: 2). In Nixon's opinion we need to reconsider the conventional notion of violence as "a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is event focused, time bound, and body bound" (2011: 3). Instead account needs to be given for the way in which diluted forms of social affliction, in particular environmental calamities, affect the poor resulting in the progressive impoverishment and stark destitution of entire communities. Even more so when, while ecological resources are progressively appropriated by multinationals, local inhabitants are usually not granted equitable access to the fundamental utilities of modernity. "Such communities, ecologically dispossessed without being empowered via infrastructure", Nixon concludes, "are ripe for revolt" (2011: 42).

⁶ See here note 2.

young Marlowe⁷, this literary picture, and in general the natural imagery deployed throughout the narrative as it progresses from the centre to the extreme borders of *the republic*, contributes to create an oneiric, hazy environmental ambience. In effect, Deb's novella is not only built upon accurate reports and social and historical analyses. The narrator's voice achieves a peculiar stylistic blend in which the documentary merges with a level of symbolical connotation apt to endow the writing with a sort of mesmerizing quality, paying open homage to Conrad and his work.

The first convergence between the classic work of colonial literature and Deb's storytelling is represented by the picture of the map which in both narratives seems to perform a sort of symbolic initiatory function and in Deb's novel also that of a *fil rouge*⁸.

Conrad resorted to the colonial map and the blank spaces which still interspersed the dominant 'red' of the imperial British domain to define the sense of fascination – "delightful mystery" (Conrad 1987: 33) which would entice the child Marlowe to become, as an adult, one of the agents of the colonial enterprise and its mapping drive. Deb, instead, chooses to build his counter-archive of local history by adopting the image of a reversed map connected this time not with daydreaming and youthful desire but with a weird recurring dream which seems to anticipate the sense of dislocation and estrangement that would become the dominant mood of the real exploration. In this dream all the Indian metropolises and even the Bay of Bengal "the whole country [is] visible in an instant" (Deb 2005: 22).

I get entranced [...] because it seems to me that through the gap in the forest I am looking at a strange kind of horizon, something familiar and yet not entirely recognizable [...] I keep looking, and I feel dizzy as if the forest is turning on its axis, and then it strikes me that what I am seeing in the distance is really Delhi, but Delhi as it would appear if you were standing on a giant map of India and viewing the distant skyline of the capital from the dark forest of the region (2005: 22).

Indeed, advancing from the metropolitan centre towards dangerous forested peripheries, the voyager experiences an off-putting, disconcerting perspective in which progressively everything, including the centre itself, becomes not only distanced but somehow alien and increasingly incomprehensible. However, as the mystery which is at the base of the plot begins to unravel, the reader, following the traveler's transfixing experience, is able to retrace other elements explicitly suggestive of Conrad's prototype.

For example, while solving the case involving the developmental program to which

⁷ "But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird – a silly little bird" (Conrad 1987: 33).

⁸ Deb's treatment of the map motif is indeed so highly resonant of Conrad's model as to create in more than one passage, an almost *verbatim* coincidence between the two texts. See for example the following passage against the backdrop of Marlow's famous recalling of his passion as a child for maps (Conrad 1987: 33): "The road snaked down southwards on the map [...]. The space looked intimate on paper, an area thick with lines and dots and strange names, but when I followed Highway 39 [...] the map changed character. Across the border, in Burma, it was all blankness" (Deb 2005: 120).

the lost girl had been connected, Amrit comes across Malik, the director and main deviser of the ambitious *Prosperity Project*. Clearly evocative of Conrad's Kurtz, Malik is characterized and introduced as: "A creator of order in the wilderness. A messenger of hope for an area plunged in darkness" (2005: 35). Lexical connotations leave little room for doubt about the intentional Conradian pattern adopted by Deb. The woman, an enthusiastic follower of Malik, and possibly an updated version of the character of Kurtz's 'Intended'⁹, was in town raising funds for the project. Eager to reach her hero at the Community site, she was taken hostage by a local guerrilla group and apparently sentenced to death for having been involved in nothing less than 'pornography'. Her capture serves "to impress upon the people the importance of desisting from all corrupt activities encouraged by Indian imperialism" (2005: 71). It is a clear warning to steer clear of the emissaries of 'development', in turn reminiscent of Conrad's 'emissaries of light', as Marlow's aunt calls the men of the 'Company' (Conrad 1987: 39), although the 'colonial' power emerges here as internally exerted by the Indian postcolonial nation upon its own subjects.

Indeed, as Amrit proceeds in a liminal, foggy landscape of continuous frontier-crossings, patrol rounds, curfews, alerts and actual ambushes, the truth he hopes to uncover proves difficult to grasp, wavering on the sharp edge between appearance and disenchantment. In any case, everything progressively tends to converge towards the fascinating yet ambiguous figure of Malik, who, in a country mired in civil warfare and swept by all sorts of illicit traffics, is credited with having brought about a miracle of social equity, progress, and economic opportunity. The *Prosperity Project* presents itself as "an environmental project" (Deb 2005: 34) and makes much of its "completely integrated developmental set-up" (34), able to reintegrate maimed people into their traditional communities, and to introduce traditional economies to modern techniques. "All this [...] achieved without money from the government or interference from the insurgents" (148).

Increasingly Malik begins to appear not only as a "remarkable thinker [...] almost a visionary [...] an inspiring figure in a place where so much is bleak. [...] An emissary sent from the heart of the republic to its borders" (35), able to erect "a tower of hope in the very heart of despair" (241) but also as "a subtle man, an individual who understands ambiguity, and that may explain how he succeeded where all others had failed" (37), "the centre of gravity for whatever activity was being recorded" (147).

Of course at the end of the journey, just like that of Marlow in the African jungle – "as if I had sleepwalked my way to the edge of the republic" (255) Amrit says – at the core of this miracle there lies another hollow *heart of darkness*. Everything is fake. Malik, an impostor and a charlatan (165), a go-between for government and insurgency, probably an intelligence operator who, presiding over a counterfeit money business, connives with the insurgents with whom he shares the profits (133) of the whole artifice. The project turns out to be just "a carefully constructed narrative" (147). The station, the clinic, the rehabilitation center, all the structures and environmental activities are nothing more than forged accom-

⁹ As Jai Arjun Singh (2015) highlights, there are indeed many similarities between Conrad's Kurtz and Deb's Malik: from the words used by admirers to describe them as 'remarkable', 'extraordinary', 'genius', to the presence of a woman who never loses faith in the fallen figure despite all evidence to the contrary.

plishments, falsified reports, stolen pictures, and counterfeited videos. A feigned world of mere shadows.

In this dangerous performance, the girl whose picture had triggered the quest turns out to be, rather ironically “a small-town girl with big ambitions trapped by the turbulence of local politics and a bad decision in her choice of boyfriend” (156). When she begins to doubt the very existence of the *Prosperity Project*, Malik is ready to hand her over to the insurgents and to organize the fake trial of the fake porn actress she has been turned into¹⁰. But daring too much himself, Malik too is in the end abducted and killed. Amrit is informed that Mr Malik, like *Mista Kurtz*, “He’s dead” (212). Like Conrad’s Kurtz, Malik too is a man whose “imagination and genius” (187) had been diverted and corrupted by the intricacies of a *colonial* situation, with, in this case, the Indian central state playing the exploitative and pillaging role of the mother country.

In *Surface*, a post-millennial social community of investors, executives, administrators, traders, politicians, and even social workers and rebels, give life to a sort of tragic pantomime in which almost nothing is what it pretends to be. In the tangle of double, maybe even triple dealing, interests are disguised as commitments, political extremism is nothing more than a ferocious blend of hypocrisy conjoined with cynicism, and the region indeed resembles Kurtz’s empire of darkness. But the vague and slippery nature of Kurtz’s ‘horror’ is here transformed into a far more crowded universe.

With its governmental, corporate, police and guerrilla, and even NGO actors, the Indian Northeast is archetypical of the new social map of the contemporary Global South. Deb’s critical geography is born of the overlapping of a post-liberalization geography and a local or, as defined by Nixon, ‘vernacular’ landscape: “a vernacular landscape is shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised over generations, maps replete with names and routes, maps alive to significant ecological [...] features” (Nixon 2011: 17).

By contrast, a neo-capitalist map of the global South retraces the landscape in a manner which is both bureaucratic and instrumental, giving rise to deeply estranging, unsettling effects. In this case, the Indian Northeast presents a series of exponentially complicated national, globalized and post-liberalization maps superimposed over a tribal, non-national borderland map transformed into an “apocalyptic end of the world” (100). The suggestive power of Deb’s novella, somehow following the path of Conrad’s paradigm, lies in his drawing a pitiless picture of such an ex-vernacular landscape, with the once luxuriant and awe inspiring nature transformed into an appalling palimpsest of national-global contradictions. An explosive assortment of badly handled issues involving private and public investments, capitalist assaults on resources, immigration, nationalisms, communalisms, religious fanaticism and gender discrimination¹¹ turn the so-called *Seven Sisters*¹² into a land of ecological and human disposability.

¹⁰ At least the girl is not executed but ‘only’ injured and goes underground to continue her work with Burma dissidents who operate from the Indian side of the border (2005: 216).

¹¹ The novel for example records how “the traditional independence of the hill women had been eroded by the violence of the government and the insurgents” (139).

¹² Also known as “Paradise Unexplored”, are the contiguous states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura in Northeastern India.

In the third millennium, India is going through the throes of rampant modernization. Maps of ecological un-sustainability problematize the extent and the nature of its accomplishments. Confronting the effects of the nation-state's empowerment, *ecocritical* works of fiction, among which Deb's novel figures significantly, expose the other side of progress, denouncing how the enhancement of civil and military infrastructures often bring about the destruction of natural resources and injure the local population's right to autonomy and survival. Catalyzing alarm and encouraging reflection upon new forms of social, cultural and economic vulnerabilities, this kind of ecologically concerned fiction conveys environmental forms of anxiety in order to reveal, in the "alienating wake of globalization" (De Loughrey & Handley 2011: 9), so many inherent new *hearts of darkness*.

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