Homage

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The Regional and the Universal: Reading Phanishwarnath Renu's novel *Mailā āṃcal* on the occasion of his birth centenary

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Phanishwarnath Renu¹ (4 March 1921 – 11 April 1977) belongs to the first rank of authors in modern Hindi literature. His most famous contribution to Hindi literature is probably his first novel *Mailā āṃcal* (The Soiled Border, 1954),² historically the second greatest Hindi village novel after Premchand's *Godān* (The Gift of a Cow, 1936).

In language and style, Renu's indebtedness to Premchand (1880–1936) is very clear. Premchand's fiction shaped the normative Khari boli prose, i.e. Modern Standard Hindi (MSH). While the romantic *chāyāvādī* poetry in the two decades after World War I under the influence of Rabindranath Tagore's Bengali poetry developed an elevated and highly Sanskritized code as poetic language, Premchand tried to stick to the common spoken language, particularly in his later years. However, his MSH prose is not exactly the common tongue. It is from the very beginning a translated language. The village patois is a dialect, in Premchand's case a kind of Bhojpuri, while the normative literary language that developed in modern Hindi prose literature since the early 19th century, culminating in Premchand, is MSH. Direct traces of Bhojpuri are mostly eliminated, but the dialectal layer under the text is nevertheless alive and always palpable.

In the generation after Premchand, MSH had made it as the unrivalled code in Hindi fiction. Premchand's fictional style was the basis, from which Renu could proceed further. In both cases, the common speech of the people is the creative source of modern novel writing, and the spoken vernacular that is the basis of the MSH text. In Premchand's case from some kind of Bhojpuri, and in Renu's case from Maithili, which in 2002 was itself transformed from a dialect of Hindi into one of the then 22 scheduled languages according to the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution. In other words, Maithili grew from a dialect into a language.

Compared to Premchand, there is a lot more linguistic diversity in Renu's fiction, in contrast to his journalistic writing, which appeared in volume four of his collected works (Renu 1995). The regional element in his language is first of all dialectal glosses from the North Bihar countryside, glimpses of dialect speech (Maithili and Bhojpuri) or occasionally Bengali and Nepali, folk songs and dialectal non-standard phonological spellings of glosses from Urdu/Hindustani, Sanskrit and English reflecting regional pronunciation patterns. This linguistic complexity is an important narrative tool often used to describe certain characters or emulate some kind of emotional intensity (Hansen 1981). Overall, the reader gets a sense of authenticity – Renu's language appears to be even more close to

1 Text: Renu 1995, 2: 21–308. – Common names of authors and places are spelled in conventional Anglicized transcription. Otherwise I quote from Hindi according to IPA transliteration standard. – Thanks to Claus Peter Zoller, Madhu Singh, Linda Lane and Eleanor Coghill for their highly appreciated comments on earlier drafts of this paper and for the language check. Any remaining shortcoming is of course my own fault.

2 Translated by Indira Junghare 1991.

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the spoken language than Premchand's literary language. However, the bulk of the text is still MSH and the gap between it and the spoken language is obvious.

The minute description, often from changing narrative perspective between the all-knowing narrator and reportage, of festivals, legends as well as religious and political songs with a high degree of dialectal influence, creates a polyphonic and compound narrative (Jain/Snell 1982) that leaves the reader with a sense of "the illusion of authenticity" (Gaeffke 1978: 66). This is not to be confused with authenticity as such, which forms the reference of the narrative as such, as there always is a gap between the authentic and its narrative.

In *Mailā āṃcal*, most of the narrative text including the dialogues is in standard Hindi, but English, Sanskrit, Hindi dialect and Maithili. Besides, the linguistic codes of the Adivasi component of village society in Renu's fictitious Maryganj (Hindi: *Merīgāmj*) also appear here and there. In other words, language and style reflect the setting.

In Premchand's famous novel *Godān*, the rural space is contemporary to the author, but somehow undefined in terms of geography and time. *Mailā āṃcal* however, is different. It situates the main story line in a fictitious village in North Bihar close to the border to the Nepalese Terai region and also "close to Pakistan", i.e. today's Bangladesh – as Renu explains in the preface of the 1954 edition. The timeframe is also quite precise. It covers the crucial historical years 1946–1948, i.e. immediately before to shortly after independence.

In other words, a particularly backward region with a low spread of education and far away from the modern upstart India. In both novels, politics and national issues as such seem far away on a first glance. Ignorance and superstition, witchcraft and magic, the absence of modern medical facilities, caste communities, and land disputes between traditional landowners and the landless are object of concern for the villagers and dominate their communications. Hostilities based on membership of different castes or political parties are omnipresent. Anti-colonialism, the idea of independence and the discourse on the nation are rather abstract schemes and only of marginal concern for the village people.

In both novels, the reader has to deal with a multitude of almost equal, only loosely connected storylines as well as with an extensive ensemble of characters showing a broad spectrum of representatives of the village sphere. Like in the classical Indian epical narratives, the plot follows a lot of side-lines and the reader might lose the track occasionally³ – in a way, a particular feature in much of classical modern South Asian novel writing (compare Narayana 1972) hardly noticed by classical novel theory (compare Watt 1957). Nāmvār Siṃh has pointed out that in the 19th century, novel writing was "writing the English way" for somebody like Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838–1894), but this was soon transformed into an indigenized form of novel writing (Siṃh 2003). In addition to the pronounced episodic structure and assembly technique, which are already traceable in Premchand novel writing technique, Renu introduces a collective narrator, creating the impression of polyphony. Kathryn Hansen sees some early form of something like magic realism in Renu's writing.

Regionalism

The opposition between *nāgariktā* ("urbanism") and *āṃcaliktā* ("regionalism") suggests a clear-cut contrast. Modern Hindi fiction in general to quite some extent urban. Banaras, Agra, Delhi, Lucknow, Lahore (until independence 1947) and Mumbai were important epicentres of modern Hindi. They still are. The confrontation of tradition and modernity, individualism and the breakdown of social and cultural values, alienation and new opportunities, cultural hybridity and the affirmation of identity

3 I think this form of episodic composition is characteristic for South Asian epic traditions in general. Mahābhāratas and Rāmāyaṇas in their manifold forms and designs are made up of narratives and all kinds of cross references to stories that different narrators on different levels of the narrative tell each other.

are to quite some extent related to the metropolitan experience in Hindi literature (Dalmia 2017; Hahn 2020). The Hindi term *nāgariktā* (compare Hahn 2020: 185ff) has a complex semantic between citizenship, civilization and urbanism/urban identity. The rural space is often projected in terms of backwardness or in terms of the romantic.

Renu went beyond the clichés, when he focused on the complexity of the regional space as a location of the literary in its own right. However, not any piece of fiction focused on rural space is by definition already *āṃcalik* (“regional”) literature. Pandey (2008) sees *śilpavidhi* (“artistic style”) as the central characteristic feature of *āṃcaliktā* (“regionalism”). The localized (i.e. “regional”) setting of the main plot is of secondary importance according to this argument. In other words: Not all Hindi novels that have a plot dominated by rural settings should be given the label of *āṃcaliktā*. Besides, the interaction of the rural and the urban is somehow always present – Maryganj and Purnia⁴ district in the case of the name giving “regionalist” novel in Hindi, *Mailā āṃcal*, Renu’s first and most famous novel published in 1954.

While Premchand saw the village as a space that is more or less bound up in social inequality, economic backwardness, vices and disaster, Renu is somehow more nuanced, and somehow more optimistic on the dynamics of the traditional village. However, the meaning of *āṃcalik* – an adjective coined by Renu himself in the preface of his *Mailā āṃcal*, often translated as “regional” or even “provincial” – remains somehow obscure. In Renu’s preface, it is a reference to the Purnia region in the Northern part of the state of Bihar, where village Maryganj is located. However, even though the district clearly is the reference localization, the details are fictitious. Kathryn Hansen argues, the narrative connection of scene and sense is based on the “invention of landscape” (Hansen 1990: 17).

However, it may be possible that much of the inspiration comes from a certain Raniganj village that P.C. Roy Chaudhury describes in his classic *Inside Bihar* (Chaudhury 1962: 53), as Indu Prakash Pandey suggests (Pandey 1974: 82). In any case, it is generally unproductive to analyse “fictionality” in comparison to “reality” in literary studies. Fictionality “may be defined as a relation between certain types of discourse and the body of knowledge that is accepted as given and obvious by a certain society or social group at certain time” (Grishakova 2008:70). This is what Umberto Eco calls the “encyclopaedia” of fiction, “is a complex system of shared knowledge that governs the production and interpretation of signs inside communicative contexts. Every semiotic act involves the elements that form the encyclopaedia” (Desogus 2012: 501). Indeed, Renu’s *Mailā āṃcal* is nothing less than a fascinating encyclopaedia.

Āṃcaliktā, mostly translated as “regionalism” in English is a convenient, but easily misleading term. It invokes the image of the village, folklore and romanticism of simple life. This is exactly against Renu’s intention. Pandey (1974; 2008) tries to define *āṃcaliktā* in terms of a dominance of the local in opposition to the linear plot in terms of narrative time, and at the same time refers much to the changing perspective on events through the inner monologues of the persons in the plot, which are constantly intertwined into the narrative. The reader is drawn into village life “but more crucially, into awareness of its patterns of thought” (Hansen 2003: 291).

Incidentally, similar tendencies appeared in other literatures in India, starting already before independence, as for instance *Pānakāla* (The rainy season) by R.V. Dighe in Marathi (1939), which is sometimes referred to as the first *āṃcalik* novel in India altogether.⁵ In contemporary Hindi literature, it is interesting that for example Raṇendra’s famous recent novel *Global gāṃv kā devtā* (The Lord of the global village, 2010) is often discussed as an *āṃcalik* novel, continuing Renu’s incentive, which however somehow neutralizes the political and ecological critical content of Renu’s famous novel.

In any case, post-independence Indian literature’s *āṃcaliktā* was on linguistic and communal representation, localization, and the anthropological setup of the North Bihari village. On a deeper level,

4 Also spelled Purnea.

5 Das 1995: 296ff.

it initiated a new perspective on cultural diversity and on how various communities, backward or forward, enter the discourse on nation, nationhood and nationalism. And it was a protest note against the “hegemony of the urban” (Gajarawala 2013: 102) in the Hindi novel after Premchand.

In contemporary discourse, the term *āṃcaliktā* – an abstract noun following the adjective *āṃcalik* – is more or less bereft of any transformative potential. Renu, however, saw the village in North Bihar as a dynamic space of negotiation of contradictions, firstly of tradition and modernity, but also between the individual and the communal, between female and male, and between caste identities and the national. Besides, *āṃcaliktā* is a form of resilience against the focus on the city and the metropolitan middle class, which is the focus of much of the literary production in postcolonial India (compare Dalmia 2017).

Following the lead of Premchand, the village and its characters are mostly the focus of Renu’s fiction. In many of his plots, simple persons reveal themselves as complex and extremely profound characters with a vivid sense of the difference of good and bad, truth and lie, and a good sense of human psychology. Definitely, the sympathy of the author is with the simple but upright poor of the village, while the landowners, the shopkeepers and moneylenders and the traders of religion use their skills basically to unscrupulously exploit the poor for their own purposes. The intruders from the town look down on the village people and eventually try to infuse modernity into what they perceive only as backward. This is even true for the doctor who tries to fight malaria and serve the community in this way with his message of medical modernity (as in *Mailā āṃcal*).

Renu’s language “changes according to situations, characters and different types of actions” (Pandey 1974: 98). As he says in an interview: “You see, when one has to say, what simple people utter, one has to be clear, that they speak in the village dialect, when they talk ... but I have to write it down in Hindi” (Renu 1967; 1995).⁶ Following this statement, Renu explains that it is important to follow the rhythm (*lay*) of the original code and try to maintain it when writing in MSH. Renu was fluent not only in the dialects of Hindi and Maithili in North Bihar, but also through his schooling in Nepali, and in Bengali as well.

He even authored a book on the revolution in Nepal and was also drawn into the “Total Revolution” (*sampūrṇ krānti*) movement started by his friend Jayprakash Narayan. Both ended up in custody under very harsh conditions during the emergency rule under Indira Gandhi. In a letter to Jayprakash Narayan dated 12.8.1974, while describing the sickening conditions in his jail in Purnia, he asks himself whether the India of 1974 was really better than the India of 1942, when the Quit India movement started and ten thousands of freedom fighters were interned.

Renu understood himself very much as a political author, and his Maryganj is certainly “particular” in the sense of Ian Watts⁷, and not de-localized, i.e. in an isolated space and time. Rather are contemporary politics, medicine and technology in an initial phase of intrusion into the village, and the national as well as the global are quite visible. In modern terminology, *āṃcaliktā* is somehow close to what has been described as “glocalization” in literature – a form of narrativity that is localizing and de-territorializing, universalizing and particularizing, contextualizing and de-contextualizing at the same time (compare D’haen 2006).

6 Interview on *Ātmā-sākṣī* with Lothar Lutze, reprinted in Renu 1995: 435–444 (original publication: *Ādim rātri kī mahak*. Dillī: Rājkamal, 1967, pp. 156–172).

7 Ian Watt in his classic study on the historic rise of the novel in English literature writes about the “new literary perspective” that the rise of the novel meant: “the plot had to be acted by particular people in particular circumstances, rather than, as had been common in the past, by general human types against a background primarily determined by the appropriate literary convention” (Watts 1957: 16). Theoretical debates on the relation between the universal and the particular in the novel are perennial.

The village community and its characters

The name of the village in the centre of *Mailā āṃcal*, i.e. the location of the main plot, is itself is a symbol of colonial modernity's⁸ inroads into the space of tradition. The village is said to have been baptized Maryganj by an English colonial officer, a certain Mr. Martin, whose wife Mary is believed to have died here. Even though precise information is not available, the suspected ruins of Mr and Mrs Martin's earlier home are still a place of awe for the villagers, reminding them of the past days of indigo plantations in greater Bengal. It is said that the spirit of the dead Mrs Mary is still present on the spot. In other words, Mr and Mrs Martin are very much part of the village's narrative.

However, life is not disturbed by some awesome space close by. The village follows the seemingly eternal cycle of the agricultural year, interrupted by the common festival occasions, marriages, child-births and deaths. The outside world with upcoming independent India forms part of communications and the changing social fabric of the village. Caste alliances are re-modelled and re-invented following the lines of party politics: The congress party is mainly in the hands of the rich landowners, while the local branch of the socialist party is also more or less caste-based, even though its leader, Kālicaraṇ tries to broaden the support. However, he is ready to use physical violence to achieve his aims, and even goes into robbery and mafia-like behaviour. When he ends up in prison, he has no support at all: Even the party secretary from Purnia town does not respond. Manipulated by the *tahsildār* Biśvanāth Prasād, the villagers target innocent Santhal-Adivasis, killing and injuring several of them.

The communist party is briefly mentioned in connection with the arrest of Praśānt Kumār. Another group are the "Black Caps", i.e. a local unit the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which is the political platform of the village's Rajputs. The local astrologer Jotikhī Kākā sees the total destruction of the village and the world as a whole in near future. The Mahant ("abbot") of the local Kabir Panth Ashram misuses a servant girl to serve his lust, while he at the same time praises asceticism and separation from worldly affairs as the way towards salvation. However, servant Lachmī/Lakṣmī (dialectal orthography/high Hindi orthography) is a model of religious service, who is able to express her emotions and interpret the world in the expressions of traditional Kabir Panthi hymns. The text of the traditional hymns become meaningful and real in her recitation. In the novel, she clearly is the incarnation of Mother India, who maintains her dignity even though her appearance is disgraceful. Mother India's Sari border is dirty (Renu 1995: 2, 241), but she is very much alive in the villages (Renu 1995: 2, 146), even though she is crying (Renu 1995: 2, 283). Lachmī is an outstanding character: understanding, spiritually profound, and emphatic, particularly in her loving respect for the ascetic freedom fighter Bāldev.

Doctor Praśānt Kumār is the prototypical harbinger of modernity and social change in *Mailā āṃcal*. Following an idealist and somehow social reformist left wing impulse, he comes to Maryganj as a successful young doctor from Patna to take over the management of the malaria treatment centre that had just opened in the village. While the villagers initially treat the outsider and messenger of modern medicine with full respect and even awe, he quickly and inevitably is drawn into the complications of relationships in the village. The seemingly most valuable tool that makes him part of the social setup is his love affair with his patient Kamlā, the daughter of the landowner and tax officer. Praśānt becomes increasingly involved in village life. He even decides to settle down permanently in the village. There are also numerous other love stories in the village, particularly the one between Lachmī, a former temple servant, and Bāldev, a member of the pastoral caste who gained influence and prestige in the village through his engagement as a Congress Party activist.

The importance of Praśānt Kumār in the narrative is related to the intrusion of modern medicine into the village. Traditional medicine is resilient (in the person of Jyotikhī Kākā), but the belief in

8 See Osterhammel 2010 on imperialism and global modernity in a connected history.

Western ways of treating diseases is overwhelming. Doctor Praśānt gets a strong and positive feedback in the village, as long as he does not go into preventive measures that might have an effect on the traditional ways of living. In front of the reader unfolds the complicated dynamics of the introduction of modern medicine and its bearer. Ebrahimnejad argues in the introduction of his anthology on what he calls “modern medicine” (not: Western medicine) in “Non-Western countries” that modern medicine developed over time and space at different rates, and its accommodation, interaction or assimilation within a modernization process was far from monolithic (Ebrahimnejad 2009).

The 19th century had become crucial for the introduction Western medicine and its institutions in India. A crucial step was the planting of cinchona for medical purposes in the 1860. Quinine, produced from the plants bark, is a medicine against Malaria. Cinchona bark was sometimes called “Jesuit bark” since Jesuits, based on indigenous knowledge, described its curing effects and were behind the introduction of the cinchona plant in Europe and later in Asia as well. Karl von Linné, professor of Botany in Uppsala, had defined the genus Cinchona as a botanical family in 1742 as an important step towards the worldwide plantation of the plant in the fight against the then globally endemic Malaria (Priya 2016: 604).

Quarantine regulations became an important part not only of the control over epidemics, but also of the imposition of discipline in public health matters. They were certainly intended as preventive measures, but also an instrument of administrative control over the population. Much dreaded quarantine stations were set up in the expanding colonial townships.

From the 1870 onwards, the picture on visitations of epidemical diseases and their toll of death becomes clearer. Cholera regularly appeared on the scene with a death toll of sometimes more than 3 per 1000 individuals per year. Between 1896 and 1921, the plague caused about ten million deaths and malaria possibly twice that number. The influenza pandemic of 1918–19 swept away twelve to fifteen million (Arnold 1986: 122ff). The rhetoric on epidemic diseases control corresponds literally to the military in colonial India. Epidemic diseases attack and invade, break through and are defeated. They devastate or meet resistance, they take over and are brought under control (compare Arnold 1986: 126).

The desired victory is a conquest by Western medical science, which also highlights the widening gulf between indigenous and western medicine and the different systems of thought and practice they once represented. In the early 19th century, European doctors were still influenced by the old Greek medical belief in the balance of the body liquids as an ideal state. Later on, in the 19th century, they saw themselves more than ever before as the enlightened alternative to the traditional Hindu *vaidyas* and Muslim *hakīms* (compare Arnold 1986: 135). This encouraged Indian resistance against hospitalization in general, particularly when compulsory hospitalization was introduced, clothing and bedding was fumigated or burned, and suspected dwellings evacuated. Another point was the social isolation particularly in the quarantine blocks that were set up in colonial India as part of the policy of the control of epidemic spread of diseases (Arnold 1986: 137).

The knowledge of the power of Western medicine trickled down wide and far and contributed much to the overwhelming effect of colonial modernity. *Mailā āṃcal* can be read as an illustration of the dynamics of the introduction of a form of medicine that is perceived as “Western” and in opposition to Indian medicine. For the villagers, the belief in the magic power of the injection, which at the same time is the proof of how serious a medical problem is (part one chapter 18), the belief in the stethoscope as the “snake-thing” (part one, chapter ten) is an important instrument of modernity. Jyotikhī, the representative of the backward and corrupt village astrologer and healer, does protest against the diagnostic methods of the “Western” doctor (Renu 1995: 2, 75–83), but in vain. Praśānt himself believes in the “new medicine” as an almost magic tool that would wipe out bacteria and leave mankind healthy and strong (Renu 1995: 2, 147–149).

“The Soiled Border” also is a reference to India as a nation: She is a mother, a female representation of India as a whole, with a Sari that is not proper, but soiled: She is, first of all, a suffering, crying and poor mother. Praśānt, the harbinger of modernity, wants to eradicate malaria, cholera and all kinds of diseases from the village, but at the same time earn his fame as a medical researcher by publishing academic articles on his fight for a healthier village – the ambassador of medical modernity in a backwards place. At the same time, he is blind to the psychosomatic reasons of Kamli’s constant fainting. Only after Kamli sends out rather drastic messages, he starts to react on the constant erotic messages that Kamli’s body sends to him.

The regional and the universal

Mailā āṃcal, the novel that Indu Prakash Pandey in his 2008 publication describes as the “best novel of Hindi” (*hindī kā sarvaśreṣṭh upanyās*, Pandey 2008: preface), is on a first reading a novel on the confrontation of modernity, history and modern medicine with the backwardness, the eternal dumbness and the unchangeable social and economic North Indian village.

On a second view, however, there appears another, and deeper aesthetic mood behind the local: the text stimulates a sense of empathy in the reader with what is usually perceived by the predominantly urban reader as the backward space on the map of India, i.e. the rural. Even though the border is soiled, the village is a unique place, which brings forward multiple forms of social interaction, and the social and the individual as complementary factors of the fabric of life.

Lachmī vividly displays this contradiction: Her poverty, disgrace and simple-mindedness notwithstanding, she is a strong and quite individual character. Even though always endangered, she manages to create and defend a space of her own in the monastery and in the village. Like Lachmī, who reveals her grace and dignity as an incarnation of Mother India only on a second sight, Merīgām̃j too reveals its grace only to those who are ready to leave prejudices and ready-made convenient judgments behind for a moment. Merīgām̃j reveals itself in the novel as a miniature model of India in form of a concrete rural space in North Bihar with Nepal and East Pakistan (i.e. Bangladesh) within reach, symbolizing the tension between the modern and the traditional, the communal and the individual, and dignity and disgrace.

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