

## **Modernity and Democracy: Thinking Beyond the Polis**

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Aditya Nigam's book *Decolonizing Theory* has the potential to stir the placid waters of political theory in India. He takes head on grand ideas and historical processes and institutions from his location to undertake the unfinished task of decolonizing knowledge. Not only does he make a claim for thinking across traditions, but his work crosses the borders between social theory, philosophy and history. His radicalism also transcends the partisan position of the Marxist tradition.

This essay will first try to problematize Aditya's position on modernity and explore its variants and contradictions. Secondly, it will highlight the indigenous democratic tradition in India and how under democratic modernity it offers us new possibilities. Thirdly, I will explore the philosophy of the Indian Constitution as an exemplary document of a new and, if I may say, radical thinking, as the nectar of our freedom struggle gathered by the Constituent Assembly under Ambedkar's leadership. Finally, I will try to raise the importance of new imaginaries and ideals to address our deeply troubled present as part of the project of not only decolonizing theory, but also decolonizing the world in which we live. The two, I believe, are inseparable.

### **The Incongruities of Modernity**

Aditya describes the modernity which colonized the world as a particular assemblage of ideas, knowledges, technologies and practices within a discourse of Progress and Reason, characterized by individual rights, especially property, and endless creation of wealth, as civilization. All this was closely tied to capitalism embedded in the state (p58f). At a distance or outside this modernity was the 'paramodern' world. I wish to argue that Aditya seems to downplay the deep contradictions of modernity and its variants; it's not as seamless as he

wants us to believe. Some of the contradictions of modernity also points to its potentiality of providing alternatives to capitalism and its attendant discourse.

Central to the idea of modernity is the free and equal rational self, which led to the formulation of its ideals in the French Revolution, namely, liberty, equality and fraternity. But these ideals were contested since their inception. The fundamental contestation was between a bourgeois or capitalist interpretation of liberty or equality and a democratic imaginary, democratic not in its formal bourgeois version but in a deep and richer sense. The bourgeois view focused on liberty, which again was seen through the perspective of property rights and equality was purely legal and formal, essentially equality before the law. In the democratic perspective, liberty and equality in a substantial sense was inseparable and property was not central in this imaginary. This property centered vision rested on the Christian view of nature as an object for human use. The Genesis, I:26 puts it, God gave man 'dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.' This dominion was justified as the Bible claimed that God made man in his image. This worldview and image of man, becoming omnipotent and omniscient through advances in science and technology, mixed with modernity led to what is called the era of the Anthropocene. This made for the conceit of reason, knowledge and power; and it is deeply authoritarian.

If democracy is defined in a deeper sense emphasizing justice, equality and respect for the other, then the power and rights of humans is qualified by the claims of nature and future generations of all forms of life. It makes for a humbler image of man; calls for epistemic humility and democracy in every field. The Marxist reformulation of modernity failed to overcome this Christian view of man establishing mastery over the universe by using science to unleash its productive powers. This I would suggest is the contradiction between bourgeois and democratic modernity. Democracy enables new challenges to emerge within the world of knowledge itself and Aditya's project of decolonizing theory is, indeed, part of this larger project.

Secondly, I would argue that the paramodern is not outside modernity, but situated within its heart in the form of the nation and nationalism. Aditya describes the paramodern not being a world of pure rational citizens (p59). Ideally, modernity in its pure universal and rational form has no place for the nation or nationalism and nation-states as both Kant and Marx spell it out so clearly. Nation is not the product of a contract between free and equal rational selves, who are outside society, history and even nature, especially territory. Nation is an imagined community rooted in history and territory. The bond of nationalism is emotive; loyalty and love tested by the willingness to die for the nation or kill its enemies. Yet, actually existing modernities are unthinkable without the nation, nationalism and the nation state. Societies, economies or politics may vary from capitalist, socialist, tribal, religious fundamentalist or democratic, yet they all are held together by the power and legitimizing

discourses of nationalism and the nation state. It's the conceit of reason and modernity to imagine that it would shape the world in its own image. In the real world the cunning of history limits the project of modernity. Nation is the best example how modernity compromises with the irrational and the historical.

In the early imaginary of modernity ideas were indeed, drawn globally across traditions, but these were soon provincialized to match the historical project of capitalism and the nation state. This conceited bourgeois modernity sought to remake the world in its image through the expansion of capitalism and colonialism, under the garb of civilizing the world. It impoverished the ideals of the French Revolution into formal and legal categories. It reduced democracy into a fine art of seeking and manufacturing consent of the people. The Marxist critique of bourgeois modernity and the socialist alternative initially held high hopes, but the experience of the socialist world was soon found to be worse than liberal democracies.

### **Towards a Democratic Modernity**

Today we are facing a global crisis, largely caused by bourgeois modernity. It's a crisis of survival, not only of humans, but all forms of life and nature itself. It calls for a new universal beyond the limits of both bourgeois as well as Marxist modernity. We need a new democratic imaginary and ideals to address our world. Aditya says that critics of modernity in India like Gandhi, Ambedkar or Tagore do not offer us an alternative theory of modernity (51). I would argue that there are crucial elements in their writings which can help build an alternative theory. In fact, Tagore provides a comprehensive view of the self and a new perspective on nature, which is inseparable from humans and hence cannot be seen as an object for humans to know and master. Shankha Ghosh in his book *E Amir Abaran* provides us with a fascinating reading of his poetry to work out such a philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Tagore's idea of the self is ever expansive, ultimately identifying with the universe but, at the same time free and situated in history and culture. He was a critic of modern nationalism; his cosmopolitanism was however, rooted in the local. It is best expressed in the motto of *Visva Bharati*, 'where the world makes a home in a single nest.'<sup>2</sup>

Aditya is critical of the nationalist project of decolonizing knowledge for having got trapped into a narrow Brahminical idea of tradition, oblivious of the subaltern world (40). Again, I wish to invoke Tagore and the entire Santiniketan project which drew an important part of its intellectual and aesthetic sustenance from our non-Brahminical past, especially the Buddha-Bhakti streams of thought. In fact, Tagore's cosmopolitanism not only drew its resources from western modernity, but also from East Asia and the Islamic world. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, Kshitimohan Sen and others tried to recover the thought of subaltern thinkers like Kabir, Dadu and the Bauls. All this was best expressed in the new art practice of Santiniketan marked by major works

of Benode Bihari Mukherjee, (the Hindi Bhavana mural depicting medieval saints), which I would interpret as celebrating the long history of popular democratic practice in India and, significantly, made at the time of independence. Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij were the other two very powerful artists and sculptors laying down the foundations of a new and democratic modernity. Nandalal's works show how nature is incorporated in this democratic imaginary as equally worthy of respect and care, as much as is owed to humans. Ramkinkar's sculptures celebrating the life of Santhals, or Buddha, Sujata or Gandhi is a far cry from anything remotely Brahminical. Unfortunately, the sharp break it makes with the Bengal school of art, especially on this count, is not often appreciated or even noticed.

What has also been forgotten is Tagore's later project christened Sriniketan as transcending the limits of Santiniketan, which increasingly came to be identified as elitist. Sriniketan as part of the emerging university, Visva Bharati, tried to place labour, crafts, agriculture and artisans at the centre. It was so close to Tagore's heart that he sent his close ones, including his son, Rathindranath to America to study agriculture. It was unthinkable when Bengali elites could not think of a liberal education beyond Oxford and Cambridge. Sriniketan was an important milestone in this project of decolonizing the mind as well as the world right in the heart of a university.

This emerging imaginary of a democratic modernity located in real history has another element, namely, panchayat; which again Aditya seems to have glossed over in his interpretation of Indian political thought and practice (chs. 4 & 5). Panchayats as a democratic idea and institutional practice is perhaps older than the Greek polis and what is more significant is part of India's living traditions. If the state or kingdoms and mandalas were one part of our political edifice of power and domination, the panchayats were an institution of popular democracy autonomous of the state. In fact, the autonomy of society thesis, I would propose was possible because of the existence of peoples' self-governing institutions, namely, panchayats. Panchayats were locally and often socially constituted along *jati* or community lines. The entire village would gather in larger panchayats to address common issues. The Gandhian ideal of self-governing village republics, which is part of our constitutional ideals and promises, exists in the form of panchayats. It represented the autonomous and countervailing power of the people and its various sections.

What is fascinating about panchayats is its idea and practice. Central to it is the metaphor of *panch* or five. It is a recurrent metaphor, drawing its inspiration from our five senses and five fingers. The word *panch* perhaps has the largest number of dictionary entries as a prefix in most Indo-Aryan languages, ranging from *panchabhoot*, *Panchatantra*, *panchamrita*, *panchanan to our everyday panchphoron* or *panchkan* in Bengali, and so on and so forth. The word *panch* or five is used in two senses, as representing the entire diversity as well as the totality. What could be a better democratic ideal? The functioning of

subaltern *jati* panchayats shows all the crucial democratic ideals at work, including deliberations, representation of diversity and participation. Satadal Dasgupta's study of panchayats among Dule Bagdis of a region close to Calcutta in the 1960s shows these features at work (*Caste, Kinship and Community: social system of a Bengali caste*). Or look at the role of *mahapanchayats* in the farmers' movement in north India. Panchayats, of course, are contested spaces and are often captured by patriarchal and authoritarian forces. However, my focus is more on the idea and ideals of panchayats, rather than their actual practice.

Before I conclude let me draw Aditya's attention to the importance of ideas embedded in social practices as well as 'ideas pulsating in the minds of the masses' as Krishnachandra Bhattacharya puts it in his celebrated essay, *Swaraj in Ideas*. Intellectuals need to draw them out and work on them as important sources of critical and imaginative thinking.

The practice of caste is almost universal in India and it has mostly been seen as an epitome of hierarchy and how it has changed from the four varnas to regional *jatis*. Finally, under democracy how castes are becoming central actors of politics, demanding equality of power, rights and opportunities. I wish to make two points; first contrary to demands and beliefs that under modernity caste would subside or that it had to be annihilated, caste has shown tremendous flexibility and resilience. To use the *panch* metaphor caste system has been transformed from *chaturvarna* to *panchajati*, where *panch* refers to the diversity and equality of all, much like our five fingers. The key ideal embedded in the struggle of *jatis* under democracy is equality of all *jatis* and the re-imagination of our polity as a union of diversities, where all its components are free and equal. The struggle for *jati* based politics and reservations most remarkably seen in Tamil Nadu points to a new imaginary of India. The official, elitist or even Brahmanical imaginary was based on the ideal of India seen as a unity in diversity. It meant that unity was prior to diversity and underlying diversity was a common thread, which held us together. The struggle of castes and communities for proportional sharing of power and opportunities and equal respect shows the latent thought of building a new free and equal union of diversities. BSP's central slogans and ideals also points to this way of thinking embedded in the politics of subaltern castes.

Finally, let me conclude by highlighting the philosophy, promises, ideals and rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution as a shining example of not only decolonial thinking but also the making of a decolonized world. Again, I am not examining the actual working of our state, but the distillation of key strands of thought of our freedom struggle from liberalism, to socialism, to Gandhism, all under the chairmanship of the beacon of Dalit emancipation, B R Ambedkar, which went into the making of the Indian Constitution. Unfortunately, radical scholars, including Aditya, have not appreciated the radical possibilities of this, much abused, Constitution.

What makes the philosophy of the Indian Constitution democratic and not just liberal, like the French or American Declarations, is the centrality of

the idea of justice elaborated as social, economic and political justice. This is, of course, in addition to promising liberty and equality. Justice is placed prior to liberty and equality in the Preamble. Secondly, the Directive Principles of State Policy, a crucial component of the Indian Constitution starts by promising a social order, where 'justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all institutions of the national life' (Article 38, Clause 1). It lays down a paradigm of new and democratic rights, like the right to an adequate means of livelihood, health, education, work, and decent minimum wages. It also promises to protect nature and the environment. Further, it envisages a new form of polity and society based on *panchayats* as organs of self- government. This is clearly a non-national future pledged by our Constitution.

Interestingly, the Indian Constitution was repeatedly amended, and whatever their intentions or result, several of them further enhanced the radical declarations and possibilities. Two of the most important changes, after a protracted struggle, were the removal of the right to property as a fundamental right and secondly, giving priority to the Directive Principles over Fundamental Rights. Finally, non-violence and the protection of nature as a fundamental principle find a place in this document.

Thus, the Indian Constitution must be given central importance as a key text of Indian political thinking and theory, which unfortunately, Aditya ignores.

### **Decolonizing the World**

Any project which seeks to decolonize theory must also address ways to decolonize the real world. From Plato to Marx, all major thinkers engaged with their present injustices and dreamt of utopias. The richness of our thinking produced by the freedom struggle, compared to our academic output in universities, is glaring to say the least. The reason is obvious; the freedom movement was engaged in the twin task of critical as well as utopian thinking. For utopian thinking to flourish we need to engage not only with ideas and concepts, but with ideals as well.

The central ideal of our time is justice, yet the paucity of literature on justice in India again points to the blinkers in our academic discourse. Unfortunately, the Marxist project of making utopias scientific further impoverished our imagination. Again, drawing upon the richness of our Constitution makers we can point to justice, democracy and non-violence as the central ideals for our time. Only the pursuit of ideals will decolonize our minds and lead to the decolonization of theory.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Shankha Ghosh, *E Amir Abaran*. Kolkata: Papyrus 1980.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance, *The Visvabharati Quarterly*. Santiniketan 37 (3&4), 1971-72.

### About the Author

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