

The Decolonial Saboteur

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Theory has to be *decolonized*. Why only *de*-colonized? Should it not also be *de*-prejudicized, *de*-jargonized, and also, if one may add, *de*-Brahminicized? Who would perform that defiling act to render theory *de*-sanctified, shorn off its usual halo in the academia and its self-patting, world-conquering pretensions? Moreover, why do we need theory? Because the question - why do we need theory - can only chart the extent to which we want it to be *de*-colonized. Is it not after the demise, we search for ways to reconstruct, reassemble from the dead parts while infusing new shapes and contents? Is doing theory, after the demise of 'Theory', a similar kind of grave digging act? The making of a 'Ship of Theseus', so to say? After all, what comes after crucifixion is resurrection. But, what do we resurrect, how do we resurrect when it comes to doing theory in the post-colonial world? Are 'postcolonial theory' and 'doing theory in the postcolonial world' identical? The book promises to 'decolonize theory', just as it illustrates what remains of theory when one attempts to reorient it in a 'postcolonial' world. If the postcolonial imaginaries promised autonomy – *swaraj*, the 'theory in the postcolonial world' looks for '*swaraj* in ideas', in thinking as an 'intellectual bricoleurs' (27), in freely conceptualizing issues that affect the everyday life. Sundar Sarukkai (2012), however, poses the question as, 'what is theory' in the postcolonial context, no matter how vexed and clichéd that question may sound. 'What is theory' and 'decolonizing theory' – do they somewhere interact? How to flesh out that interaction?

The Postcolonial Bricoleur

As the author, Aditya Nigam, explores the 'ever receding' (21) horizons of decolonizing theory to resurrect theory from 'our own manufactories', 'our own infrastructure' (16), a rich 'osmosis of concepts' - bricolage- sets in (17). The author identifies his efforts as approximating – 're:emergence' (*a la* Jonardon

Ganeri) and ‘fusion philosophy’, ‘borderless thinkers’ (*a la* Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber). He primarily tries to ‘theorize our own condition adequately for ourselves’ (21). But who is this ‘our’ being invoked at so frequently? Before anyone raises the question of who is included or excluded from this ‘our’, the author in a preemptive manner (something that one expects from a decolonial thinker) states that this ‘our’ is not a geographical space (except that it is non-Europe), but it intends to map a whole range of conceptual registers that he calls, ‘paramodern’ – ‘broader domain of those banished and excluded from the rational secular moderns’ (23) – and the ‘puranic mode of being’ (23, 179-220) that continues to rejuvenate the everyday lives of people in South Asia. Finally, ‘decolonizing’ (in distinction from ‘postcolonialism’, ‘decoloniality’), for Nigam, amounts to striking a ‘democratic dialogue’ (203) with these excluded forms of life that hardly find any bearing on its own in the normative theorization. It is in ‘letting them speak’ (21), ‘the colonial mode of knowledge’ (21), that reduces the colonized into an empirical other, is debunked. This book therefore plans to go beyond the ‘Euro-normality’ (45). It wants to meet the more tenuous and demanding task of producing the actual non-European episteme. Thus the postcolonial bricoleur in Aditya Nigam, who is also a postcolonial critic/activist, embarks in the book on creatively weaving in ideas/concepts from and across different traditions of intellection in non-European sources. More than pondering over ‘Can the non-Europeans think?’, the bricoleur in Nigam tracts the ways in which the non-European thinking proceeded in exploring the material and social issues, the respective registers it engaged, and how far the coordinates of these registers can unravel the ‘nonsynchronous synchronicities’ (226) in the contemporary. The ‘non-Europe’ as a category is finally wished to be redundant, as the larger objective of the book is set around Samir Amin’s concept of a ‘polycentric world’ (37) where binaries are not framed with the Europe at its center, rather they are transcended. The author has ransacked a wide range of resources and a remarkable set of literatures that cut across disciplines to think independently about the contemporary, and importantly without the binaries. The bricoleur qua postcolonial critic/activist has to both question and efface the binary. It is in killing the father at a symbolic level, Oedipal is born. How can Oedipal now forget that past, the grievous act that both liberates and incarcerates? How can one *decolonize*, where the ‘colonize’ as a suffix is fixed, or the ‘coloniality of being’ (54) is supposed to be permanent? The postcolonial bricoleur looks for that *impossible* task, how to escape the *inescapable*, decolonize from an ‘outside’ within the colonized? This is not a constitutive ‘outside’, rather a surplus of inside. It emanates from a non-self-transparent, recalcitrant space that refuses to be tamed, co-opted. However, without turning the inside into a conceptual/ideological space, this ‘outside’ cannot be glimpsed. Therefore, Capital has to be distinguished from Capitalism, Secular from Secularism and Modernity from Modernism, where all, Capital, Secular, Modernity, according to Nigam, mark modes in which people live and relate to world. All ‘ism’ as

suffixes, in contrast, institutionalize such perspectives and attribute to them a political fixture. Nigam, as a postcolonial bricoleur tears into that conceptual/ideological terrain by parading an alternative set of ideas- 'Puranic', 'Mandala', 'Segmentary state', 'social polity', and 'paramodern'.

The 'Our' Space

As already stated, for Nigam, this space of the **'our'** holds the key. This space of the **'our'** is non-essentialist, non-totalitarian and yet draws from ideas that gave priority to social components in a polity. The post-Orientalism scholarship that rallies around calls of revisiting the global history from the perspective of global south, and, in the process, produces a 'revisionist' cartography of modernity, civilization and intellectual history of the world emerges as a dominant conceptual reference point for Nigam to elaborate his idea of the 'outside'. He cites most of the great names in this line of thinking, from Reinhart Koselleck, Martin Bernal, Anibal Quijano, Ranajit Guha, to Jack Goody, John Hobson, Wang Hui, Talal Asad, Majid Fakhry, Ashish Nandy, Sudipta Kaviraj and so on (One can add a few more seminal ones such as Michael Herzfield, Kai Kresse, and J.G.A. Pocock in this field). Therefore, the world of **'our'** that this book unfolds include a broader panorama and significantly steers clear of any regressive celebration/romanticization of indigeneity. He cites references from East Asian contexts to Sri Lanka, Chinese thinking and a whole lot of scholars from the Middle East to build the chorus of **'our'** 'across traditions'. If on the one hand this **'our'** is stitched around notions of 'cultural subjection' (33), 'epistemicide' (38), 'ontological depletion' (44), 'epistemic violence' (45), 'ethnic cleansing of philosophy' (88), on the other hand this **'our'** implies this constant journey across shores, horizons, frontiers to perpetually leave home and arrive at one, thus becoming 'borderless', to be precise. So, if this **'our'** upholds a canvas where victimhood as an identity stands tall, it also unfurls a 'deep social life' (172), 'micro-power of social polity' that asserts autonomy by refusing to indulge in the delusional cosmology of modernity and Capital. In the economic sphere, this **'our'** manifests as an 'outside' to Capital (numerous moments of anti-disaffection, anti-land acquisition movements), just as in practice it takes the form of 'need economy' (run on the basis of subsistence in the periphery of Capital accumulation, in a post-transitional world). In the social and cultural sphere, this space of the **'our'** transpires in popular beliefs, religiosity, myths, 'mythstory' (191), that ceaselessly weave in and weave out of the life-worlds of common people. The division between fiction-fact, myth-history, society-polity, public-private, secular-religious holds no significance in this life-world. Lastly, in the political sphere, this space of the **'our'** is 'lodged between the micro powers of caste and the macro-power of the state'. These spaces are identified as the 'mandala' and the 'dispersed foci of power' (177), which traditionally characterize the respective autonomy of social polity in India. This is the reason why these

spaces enjoy such authority in villages, a sort of ‘relative autonomy vis-a-vis state and submerges the central state, often accounting for its inefficiency in many crucial matter’ (177). Mandala acts out as vectors of the ‘shadow state’ (Das, 2016), the extra-democratic forces that control politics at a rudimentary level. What Partha Chatterjee calls as ‘political society’, resonates closely with some dynamics of mandala in contemporary India. Importantly, politics in forms of mandala epitomizes various negative aspects of social polity that also need to be admitted to ensure ‘meaningful project of social transformation’ (177), something that B. R. Ambedkar, Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, Nicholas Dirks, and Bhupendranath Dutta discussed through ideas of ‘segmentary state’ (150) ‘social polity’ (169-171), ‘heterogeneity of social’ (169), among others.

Even though this space of the ‘our’ is internally riven and immensely contentious, it frequently manages to disturb/rub the surface of modernity and Capital. It is in painstakingly resurrecting this conceptual ‘our’ space, the terrain of postcolonial political gets visible. Nigam expresses his disagreement with Partha Chatterjee in making this space of politics completely dependent on state/government axis. He does not visualize this space as a totality, driven by a self-evolving internal logic either. On the contrary, this space of the ‘our’ is too fluid and disaggregated to be delinked from the outside or hemmed in narrow fascistic imaginaries. It is in retaining and perpetuating the act of rubbing the surface of modernity, in constantly inscribing the space of heterogeneous ‘our’ in the homogenous Capital, in inventing the norm-deviant moments in place of the singular norm, in unraveling ‘otherness’, an epistemic ‘outside’ to regimes of monolithic truth, the ‘theory in the postcolonial world’, not the ‘postcolonial theory’ per se, can take its own course. For Nigam, decolonizing theory finally means a combination of all these heterodox proclivities that ‘tentatively and suggestively’ (259) strive to lay its hand on the right question - ‘Where do our questions arise from? How do we formulate them?’(260).

The ‘Decolonial’ Saboteur

Does setting the right question for a decolonizing agenda also take us to asking what is theory, and why theory? What are the things/elements we take on board as we identify a conceptual act as theory? Further, what do we exclude as we demarcate the specialized terrain of theory? Does the inclusion of ‘decolonial’ episteme, by any means, transform the notion of theory? Or will ‘Theory’ with capital ‘T’ shall continue to enjoy its authority in knowledge domains? The book ends by posing the necessity of ‘right’ question for decolonizing theory, and who knows the ‘right’ question could well lead to the deconstruction, the unraveling of theory. After all, by including the excluded, by accommodating the ‘outside’ within, the inside is bound to change, transform. To what extent that change can transform the whole act of doing theory will depend on to what degree/intensity the decolonizing process is

undertaken. The ‘decolonial’ saboteur will eventually move beyond decolonizing theory to deconstruct it, to give more premium to the realm of experiential, the everyday. The inclusion of ‘puranic’ temporalities or the ‘paramodern’ ways of living do not just decolonize theory, it puts the whole existence of ‘Theory’ as a specialized mode of knowledge discourse at stake. Nigam’s book importantly wraps up by silhouetting that horizon of radical possibility.

Works Cited

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About the Author

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