

## **Decolonizing Theory: Thinking Across Traditions**

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Two decades back the stirrings of decolonization found enunciation in Hindi literary critic Namvar Singh's anguish over India's failure to produce a figure akin to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Chinua Achebe or Ngungi wa Thiong'o.<sup>1</sup> It is a telling comment on the preclusion of conditions necessary for decolonial consciousness. Eurocentrism is not merely a mimesis but a replicatory phenomenon (with occasional disengaged tokenism) in post-colonial countries and this convergence needs to be reckoned for a desired osmosis, will and ethically informed politics for decolonization. Emanating from an awareness of ontological discontent as a consequence of 'coloniality', decolonization has acquired connotations of radical intellectual disposition to Eurocentric episteme. As a movement it envisions alternative indigenous knowledge systems through an epistemic reconstitution and non-conformism to European knowledge tradition, propelling a direction towards reimagining alternative futuristic visions. India's own intellectual response to Eurocentric academic discourse, sans the radical posturing that defines the spirit of decolonization studies per se took a different trajectory. In 2001, Vinay Lal's perceptively observed:

The ten volumes of *Subaltern Studies* suggests that India still furnishes the raw data, while the theory emanates from Europe...The Subaltern historians are comfortable with Marx, Hegel, Heidegger, Jakobson, Habermas, Foucault, Barthes and Derrida, as well as with French, American and British traditions of social history, but the interpretative strategies of the Indian epics or Puranas, the political thinking of Kautilya, and the hermeneutics of devotional poetry, the philosophical exegesis of Nagarjuna, and the narrative framework of *Panchatantra* or the *Kathasagara*, are of little use to them; even the little literature of countless number of little traditions such as proverbs, ballads and folk tales, *seldom* enters their consciousness<sup>2</sup>

Germane to these concerns is Aditya Nigam's seminal text which possesses a certain quality of imminence and marks a concrete move towards contemplating the entailments of decolonization of theory and politics. With the dexterity required of a revisionist (as a disposition), drawing from new spring of histories and empiricism Nigam presents a dense critique of modernity in its avatars, reifications of spatio-temporal concepts and theoretical reformulation in keeping with the spirit of 'thinking across traditions'. What undergirds this critique is the 'outside' as a concept i.e., the 'epistemically dispossessed' entities, spatio-temporal scapes which allows for a simultaneity-thinking through theorization's entanglements in epistemic practices. Given the innovative approach and progressive overflow of ideas in successive chapters, I indicate a few ideas following the narrative sequence of the text.

In tracing the process of decolonization in India, unlike 'decoloniality', Aditya Nigam highlights certain landmarks; firstly, its constricted appearance in nationalist consciousness under the duress of colonial modernity. Thus, the initial quest of the colonized to cast themselves in the image of the colonizer in 'a defensive and apologetic' mode produced a 'derivative 'nativism''. It is during the latter colonial period a decolonial moment appears with the espousal of 'swaraj of ideas' to forge an 'Indian standpoint' on Western thought. For Nigam both 'derivate nativism' and any singular standpoint imperil decolonization. However, while we may have anticipated a departure with 'Gandhi, Ambedkar, Tagore, Iqbal' he provocatively argues that despite their divergent 'response' to modernity neither offer an 'alternative theorization of modernity'. However, they become the source of 'conceptual resources' with 'de-historicization' when we engage with them 'in a contemporary dialogue'. Nigam traces a definitive shift during 1960s when the impulse for thinking independently of European episteme came from intellectuals, collectives and activist scholars *outside* the academy, who in critique of ideas of progress and science turned to indigenous knowledge systems. It is this shift and the formidable contribution of Subaltern Studies and Postcolonialism that Nigam accounts for the eventual rise of decolonization. It is within this historical context that the eventual epistemic and theoretical impasse and the response to it from the vantage of the contemporary, in its thick conception, is subject to a critical engagement. Decolonization then is primarily about overcoming the 'colonial mode of knowledge production' with 'import substituting theorizing' through an eclectic drawing of resources from across traditions grounded in 'historico-anthropological empiricism'. Thus, Nigam observes, thinking in the decolonial mode entails a 'responsibility' which is, "*To think in ways that are at once historical and philosophical*". There being no 'readily available concepts' in Indian 'philosophical language' to contemplate on modern concerns and the nature of modern condition the author makes a case for the wayfarer's mode, fusion philosophy. Finding common ground in 'fusion philosophy' is also a stance against catering to an atavistic impulse, pursuit of singular, 'authentic' indigenous system and 'philosophical solipsism'. However, the discussion of the

sui generis nature of philosophizing in Indian tradition in terms of its insularity or absence of 'philosophical reflection on social and political matters' is puzzling. Problem with Nigam's thus gestured idea is the ascription of ahistoricism to philosophical practices and thought and the assumption that the social/political operated independently of philosophical rationalizations. Nevertheless, the tendency of prevarication in philosophical thinking is in itself worth engaging.

Within this frame then a compelling reconstruction of modernity is premised on debunking of the 'origin myth' the core essence of endogenous theory of modernization. Instead, drawing upon newer histories, a contrary locus and trajectory outside Europe prior to colonization, a reversal of the diffusionist thesis is in play. Nigam takes us to back to the 8th century and onwards through fascinating glimpses into intellectual/philosophical cosmopolitanism, astronomical, mathematic, scientific and technological inventiveness among the Arabs, China, South Asia that had a formative influence on Europe. It is this contrary flow of science, philosophy, technologies, and ideas of reason and secular into Europe that went into the 'making of modern Europe' albeit the latter built on these, 'developed and transformed to break newer grounds'. It is this past, that Nigam notes is erased in the Western endogenous theorist's as well as the revisionist theory of sequentiality, predicated on singular, linear trajectory, operating in oblivion of these prior histories which galvanized intellectual philosophical thinking and adopted in latter economic practices and scientific/technological inventions in Europe. This has many implications, for Nigam observes that the legitimation of this dominant Western narrative of modernity is derived from the force of 'coloniality of power'. It further problematizes the conceptualization of modernity in discourse on coloniality in decolonization thought which tends to project 'coloniality and modernity/rationality' as not only conjunct but predicated on the same logic- inadvertently misrepresenting the prior non-Western history of reason, science and secularity and the eventual European transmutation/reconfiguration of these key elements that shaped colonization. What then makes for distinctiveness of modernity, ('fashioned' in Europe)? It is this new insight; "modernity is a constellation that emerges with the mode of being called capitalism" (an *ism* that is prior to the actual manifest structure/system). It's 'new ontology of the economic' emanating from philosophical rationalizations encapsulated in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Lockean idea of bourgeois self/possessive individualism, which 'instituted' a new 'relationship to the world', entrenched in absolute commodification once disenchantment transformed relation with the natural world.

Just how apperceptive is European philosophical tradition (especially dominant Marxist tradition) especially when its 'panegyrist' avow that the non-West lacks cognitive ability? The answer in the negative is elicited through a deconstruction of 'muscular and messianic universalism', thinking of Slavoj Zizek, whose not so 'polite ignorance' and the significations of both the

‘ridiculous’ reductionism and ‘true universalism’ purified philosophizing in relation to political in the non/West and ‘reified notions’ in Marxian and in real world. This layered density in the chapter subtitled ‘*Apropos a debate on Slavoj Žižek*’ could stand alone as a remarkable piece, where the author with finesse, harnessing concepts from ‘within,’ offers a caustic and exciting critique. For the insult hurled against the indigenous modes of life by Slavoj Žižek’s obscenely bizarre misogynist, anti-materialism in validation of capitalism’s destructive logic, (notoriously epitomized in his statement ‘nature is a crazy bitch’) along with prejudiced benighted pronouncements on the non-West this is a much deferred salutary critique. What is significant to this debate is the evocation of Indian philosophical concepts – Nagarjuna’s concepts of *anatma* (non-self), *sunyata* (emptiness) and *pratityasammutpada* (dependent arising/co-arising) and Jaina concept of *anekantavaad* with connotations of ‘radical epistemic denial of the access to Truth’ – to critique notions of universalism and totality integral to conceptualization of capitalism. For Nigam, capitalism thus conceptualized in monist absolute fashion, even producing its ‘own negation’ leaves no space for imagination of its outside-pulverising struggles against it as well as in terms of theorizing resistance in the non-West. As a consequence, the discordant ‘outside’ of this time-space/History are entrapped in the apriori assumption of ‘capital’s universal history’/totality even as they resist integration. Thus, instead of the idea of structure as an absolute, self –enclosed structure the idea of dependent arising allows, as illustrated in Nigam’s analysis of modernity, for understanding structures or phenomenon as complex causal interaction of contingent psycho-physical elements/entities, flows, dissonances. Underpinning this conception is the idea of *sunyata* which denies any inherent essence to any single element in the constitution of reality given the nature of interdependent existence. This ‘conceptual apparatus’ from within powerfully disrupt the linear chronology of Western thought formations.

The continuous preoccupation in the political is then directed towards one of the conundrums in social and political theory, the obscured idea of ‘relative marginality of political power’ as well as its relation to the social in Indian ‘traditional conceptions’. In reformulating the idea of the political contra West the category of *mandala* (a polysemous category with phenomenological, geopolitical and cosmological connotations) is foregrounded to account for the distinctive nature and form of political formation in India, as part of the South East Asian model. The specific nature of political is also elicited through an enquiry into the relationality between state and society, centering on the issue of absence of ‘political center’ that plagued theorists, is subject to conceptual and historical analysis. Nigam posits *mandala* as a ‘normative vision’ based on the principle of ‘dispersed foci of political power’ replicated at different levels and as characteristic of political formation during the pre-colonial period. However, the form continues into the modern democratic politics, which is itself transmuted by this ‘vision’. Thus, the Indian party system, it is argued, is analogous to the mandala form, with significant

power vested in and calibrated by regional forces. There is a greater, autonomous, 'self-regulatory' force that the political has to contend with i.e., the social. Nigam suggests that despite the dissonance between political/power and ritual hierarchy political tends to be marginal to the social/caste which through complex play limits political power. Operating 'at a distance from political power' the social contains the potency to impinge on the political as evidenced in modern democratic politics. This feature is encapsulated in Nigam's revised idea of 'social polity' and its 'micro powers', inhering anti-democratic potency, to understand the newer forms through which juridical political power is abrogated. Importantly, attention is directed to its tendency to 'exercise anti-democratic force against 'lower' castes. Thus, the analysis attentive to historical dynamic and traversing different temporal sites to discern the intricate mutuality, the 'darker aspects' in the social is a necessary corrective to earlier formulations that drew primarily from the perspective of mechanisms of 'mobilizational democratic politics' exclusively emphasizing the 'benign' aspects and effect of caste on the political. In arriving at these formulations, the rupture, it is argued, in the pre-colonial political is effected by colonialism's reconfiguration of this relationality. For it is with the institution of modern/colonial state that the "social becomes the object of modern state transformatory agenda", nevertheless appropriating and allying with 'traditional structures of micro power'. It needs to be noted that this reconceptualization has immense potentiality because it enables us to perceive the *mandala* form's resonances in the social in its connectedness with the political; constituted as it is by its own decentralized mechanisms, mediating local and supralocal networks and points of alignment and dissonance from the political. However, a limiting factor in the analysis, while not subscribing to the idea of a pan Indian social model, is that the referent is titled towards the 'varna order' which overlooks the diverse social imaginations and orders and the implications they have for understanding the political. To just cite one prominent case; the intricate relation of the left and right hand castes model with the political in South India and its disappearance with the institution of colonial authority. Secondly, ascription of the transformation of the political, so as to now re-inscribe the 'social', with whatever agenda, to the colonial rupture is simply dodging the paradigmatic case of the Peshwas, which illustrates the 'normative vision' of the social it sought to institute coercively through political authority. The question then is; was the Peshwa case an exception?

The social gains concreteness when Nigam discerns its ontology in the 'puranic mode of being' with regard to the problematic of secularism's negative relationality with certain forms of religiosities and being. The analysis navigates through different spaces to unravel the complex entanglements of secularism, nationalism, fascism as they manifest in the 'puranic' (subalternity) to 'rethink modernity's project'. As against modernist reification of contemporaneous non-modern sites as 'past' Nigam posits these sites at the center to critiquing the perceptions and limitations of transformatory projects of liberal secular

ideologies and to engage with unaddressed ‘darker side’ of political society. To this end he introduces a neologism-‘paramodern’ as a temporal and spatial category and the ‘puranic mode’ as an ontological category. By reiterating their ‘Now’ness he breaks away from earlier related conceptualizations that cast them as temporal disorders or distorted remnants. The non-anthropocentric and enchanted universe inhabited by the puranic mode of life is no passive site as it constitutes the cultural source of nationalism and breeding ground of fascism. The puranic mode in its metamorphosis (elaborated in the Monkey Man episode), is according to Nigam is “expressive of a deeper crisis of subaltern populations imperiled by the ‘technocratic state’ ensuing ‘destitution and deprivation’”. The outrage of the rationalist response against the irrationality of the subaltern ‘terror’ of the Monkey Man and their call for modern agents to rally against the dangers it augurs for rational sensibility and civil society are encapsulated. But Nigam is disinterested in examining this ‘rationalist discourse’ reiterating that it is ‘a certain chasm that marks the existence of societies like ours’ and the expansion of ‘the horizon of the imaginable’ by affective ‘new media technologies’. This ‘episode’ occasions Nigam’s crucial insight into the modernist fallacy, “science does not, by itself, enable the power of Reason and in certain conditions can itself acquire a strange mystical or magical aura or the fantastical in everyday life”. Indeed through this disclosure of the ‘brutal and ruthless’ ‘face of Science’ as it erupts into ‘the political scene’ producing ‘destitution’ Nigam takes us to another discursive space, History, the constitutive site of contemporary politics and folk memories of the historical where its practitioners encounter subjects who destabilize the historian’s ‘protocols’ and the ensuing ‘aporia’ in ‘evidence’ in encounter with profusion of non-human entities/agents and metaphorical, idiomatic usages in puranic memory in recounting historical events. Recognizing the metaphorical life that such renderings take on, the value they possess Nigam makes an important observation concerning the irreducibility of mythical to the historical. Instead of simply questioning the binary, or effecting a temporary crisis he foregrounds the puranic as follows, “puranic narrative modes, should not simply be seen as narrative strategies but the ways in which - or through which-lives are lived” through which, by implication, an immediacy and epistemic potency is conveyed.

This re-reading of the historian’s ‘quandary’ strikes the ways in which aporia is not an external contradiction that the puranic narrative forms in post/colonial discursive site are fraught; the historian is the aporia. The puranic is at ease in confronting the modern, inscribing its own spatial and temporal configuration onto the modern, negotiating with multiple spatio-temporalities and modern usages. To complement Nigam’s idea of irreducibility, the puranic form or folk consciousness, is not reducible to the fantastical either, given its eclectic porosity which allows dynamism for a particular form of reflexive capacity to continuously assimilate and transform elements outside itself to its own ends. Through this creative recasting of the puranic, allowing its

eruption/disruption without resorting to apriori script, Nigam restitutes the folk as potential sites of reflexivity and theorization to rethink modernist projects, processes engendered by certain kind of politics and complex formations beyond constrictive categories.

Similarly, the replication of non-modern phenomenon in the economic domain is examined through representations of 'non-synchronous synchronicities', in diachronic ordering of synchronous temporal experience in Marxist discourse on capitalism and teleology. For Nigam the problem lies in orthodox Marxist universalism which tends to attain the quality of metaphysical truth, "untouched by the messiness of the historico-aleatory world"- which in turn casts the non-synchronous (posited as uneven development) as simply an effect of structural logic. Through a re-reading of passive revolution in the context of post-colonial Indian experience, he attributes the persistence of non-synchronous as but one of the many deviations from the ideational, to specific historical formations, rendering futile the efficacy of purified Marxist categories, suspending even the category of bourgeoisie. Nigam perceives similar such fallacies in postulations of totality in postcolonial histories of capitalism as encompassing even the forms outside of capital. Discarding the reified idea he reformulates the non-synchronous synchronicities in a way that the 'prior' by the very logic of its contemporaneity with capital do not constitute 'past' rather is outside and this locus is in concrete 'radical alterity' to capital/ism. With this theoretical departure Nigam performs yet another act of irreverence through repositioning. The *outside* is reinstated as site/agent of resistance (to capitalism).

Through the text the presence of a contemplative, persuasive, provocative author is palpable, disentangling knotty theoretical and methodological challenges involved in this quest. The text is a fine demonstration of the inceptive form a shift towards decolonization can engender. The book must be read for inspiration and provocation to reclaim our thinking self.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Namvar Singh and Harish Trivedi "Decolonizing the Indian Mind" *Indian Literature* 35, 5 (151) (Sept-Oct., 1992): 145-156, p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> Vinay Lal "Walking with the Subaltern; Riding with the Academy: The curious Ascendency of Indian History" *Studies in History*: 2001(17/101): 101-133, p.119.

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