

Postmodernism and Indian Society

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Abstract:

There are multiple modernities, so are the postmodernities. The contributions of Lyotard, Baudrillard, Jameson, Foucault, Derrida and several other philosophers certainly offered new perspectives on the cultural condition of the twentieth century West. Although the postmodern cultural ideas and the theoretical insights of the aforementioned intellectual giants have been rattling around since the 1980s, many scholars have simultaneously pronounced the death of postmodern. Despite the theoretical obituary, the Indian experience of the industrial modernity, and technological postmodernity is yet to be systematically explored and theorized. Hence in my conversation, I propose to discuss the afterlife of postmodern in the Indian context. In my paper, I intend to discuss how India is experiencing and negotiating with this 'late postmodernity' in the aftermath of economic liberalization and the internet revolution.

Keywords: *Postmodern, Apoha, Syat, Self*

In order to understand the implications of the postmodernity and postmodernism in India, it is necessary to know whether we, in India, really live in a postmodern society. The discussion must proceed from the knowledge whether India has experienced the required portion of modernity to be a postmodern society. In his article, *Postmodernism and India*, Makarand Paranjape raises some pertinent questions regarding postmodernism and its

relation to India. Considering it as essentially Eurocentric and which is being uncritically and slavishly used, he happens to ask: Do we need postmodernism? ; Do we have any choice? Describing it as neo-colonial conspiracy, Paranjape opines:

In any case, however we may choose to highlight its main ideas, postmodernism was born out of a crisis in Western thought. No doubt this crisis may have in part been quickened by the decline of Europe which might, in turn, have been influenced by events in the Third World. Yet, no one will dispute that internal, more than external causes are responsible for its rise. In India, however, postmodernism is relevant owing to external causes, because it has acquired power in the West. How can we who haven't even had a proper Enlightenment or accepted modernity even at the intellectual level, repudiate it? The whole issue is borrowed and extraneous as far as we are concerned. We have been forced, willy nilly, to take cognizance of postmodernism as the subalterns and underlings of the West. We have, again, welcomed with alacrity our master's discarded and soiled underwear.

Paranjape is right in his perception that it has become almost impossible to do away with postmodernism in India, especially in current cultural and academic scenario though he suggests the ways how it should be used in India of which I shall write latter. The question which seems so pertinent at this juncture to be dealt at length is how in a country like India which haven't *even had a proper Enlightenment or accepted modernity (italics mine)*, it can be argued that postmodernism has made an appearance. How can India be postmodernised, a country where, according to the estimates of Tendulkar report, “every third Indian is living below the poverty line... As much as 41.8 per cent of the rural population survive with monthly per capita consumption expenditure of Rs. 447, in other others they spend only Rs. 447 on essential necessities like food, fuel, light, clothing and footwear...Among the urban population, 25.7 per cent are poor, spending Rs. 578.8 on essential needs (The Hindu, December 10, 2009)”; a country where recent political and societal trends suggest that fundamentalism, communalism, caste politics, colonialism (Brahminical and patriarchal), are still rampant. The country whose majority of the population is still governed by blind adherence to religion, superstition, irrationality, denied of freedom and deprived of justice? In other words, how India, not even modern can be called postmodern? However the recent economic, cultural and societal developments in India are characterised by high disparity and postmodernism has come out as a vibrant narrative employed by the elite few of Indian population as Paranjape has further argued:

Postmodernism has become the latest of tools in the hands of such elites. True, unlike in the past, those who stand most to gain are the young and upcoming academics who can use the anti-authoritarian bias of postmodernism to dislodge the secure

positions of their seniors. The smarter ones among the latter, of course, are playing a very clever game of supporting such movements in return for legitimation. Postmodernism has thus been reduced to the status of the handmaiden of these power-seekers, an esoteric doctrine of which they are the high priests. As in all priestocracies, there are jealously guarded hierarchies within the ranks of the converted, with those at the top having to continuously retain their dominance through a combination of quick promotions, more foreign publications, and extensive networking within the already incestuous and inbred academic community.

Although the observation is highly crucial to understand the cultural politics of contemporary India wherein the westernised Indians are deliberately trying to postmodernise this postcolonial state which has to think afresh on its past and present to overcome its colonial hangover, yet it is not completely unquestionable. Although his insight that “Postmodernism, thus, embodies the hegemony of the West as much as any preceding intellectual doctrine”, yet it would be equally uncritical to think that the contemporary India does not know or exhibit anything of postmodernism.

Indian Postmodern Condition: Capitalism and Consumerism

Postmodernism is an offshoot of capitalism. Frederic Jameson has defined postmodernism as ‘the cultural logic of late capitalism’. There can be no denial that after economic liberalisation in 1990s which finally led to globalisation of Indian economy and consequently Indian culture, capitalism has started dominating life-styles and modes of production. The marketisation of economy and commodification of production processes have eroded tradition cultural patterns. There can be seen a radical shift in the way people look at previous identity denominators liker caste, religion, family, ethnicity and other kinship modes due to the rapid spread of capitalism. Capitalist modes of production have promoted their natural corollary, consumerism which in turn has led to the creation of culture dominated by simulations-there remains almost no difference between the functioning of western and Indian market. Indian market has been ‘mcdonaldised’. Moreover, capitalism and consumerism have fashioned postmodern crisis in pre-modern India where people are now more confused about traditional morality and modern scientific values, old societal functioning and contemporary international cultural models. Thus economic corollaries of postmodernism have already made their presence felt in Indian society.

New Technological Paradigm Shifts

Postmodern condition is characterised by the dominance of mass media and the culture industries, informatics, cybernetics and technologies of telecommunications. During the last two decades, a great number of technological advancements in the field of information technology have converged to constitute a new technological paradigm in the context of India. Television,

one of the first postmodern technologies, has brought about a significant change in Indian society. Linking it to the postmodern, John Campbell describes TV as “ubiquitous, (it is everywhere) capable of manipulating opinion, reinforcing pluralism and revamping reality in a short time. Appearance replaces reality, charisma replaces content and result (pragmatism) replaces integrity” (157). Recent studies show that Television in India has become the most important and most used form of transmitting information and it is making headway to the rural segment too. Now, due to its easy accessibility and large viewership, it has become a key factor of societal change and development as people knowingly or unknowingly absorbs the political, social and economic messages that are programmed to be spread. However, contention does go on in this realm too as many believe, television has made India more modern than was conceived once upon a time, while its detractors state the same has led to an erosion of age-old Indian value system too. Whatever be the impact- good or bad- of TV, it has certainly altered the way the world was understood and inhabited by us. Soap operas, reality shows, the processing of news reports on every subject - whether war, religion, business, law or education – are being presented in a simulated Baudrillardian manner. It has “achieved the status of a ‘meta-medium’ - an institution that directs not only our knowledge of the world, but our knowledge of the *ways of knowing* as well.” Its simulated rendering of reality into images have become more real influencing how one should think and act.

Secondly, the postmodern condition is characterised by cybernetics. Though it has not made rapid advancements in the field, yet it has shown a steady progress enough to announce the herald of cybernetics. Computer has become very technology to feed, save, restore, process and spread information. It has become inseparable part of school curriculums. The easy access of internet has heralded the birth of revolution in the field of information-technology. Emails, on-line chatting, video-conferencing, have become commonplace among educated men and women living in metropolitan cities. The popularity of social networking sites like Orkut, Facebook and Twitter among Indians also speak of Indians becoming netizens. The worth-noticing impact of these postmodern technologies on contemporary Indian culture is that it has transformed traditions and forms of previous social interaction making them almost global citizens. For this minority of Indians, the world has shrunk in the wake of rapid globalisation of India.

New Social Movements

There is another area where the influence of postmodernist narratives can be discerned. New social movements, especially feminist and dalit, have certainly got some impetus, directly or indirectly, from Lyotardian model of rejection of grand-narratives. Although these movements were running within the nation much before Lyotard’s book *The Postmodern Condition* was published, however, more or less, they were reformative not radical in their approach. However, recent sociological studies reveal that these movements are moving towards postmodernism in their outright rejection of Brahminical

metanarratives which have been always the overarching organising narratives of Indian society. The emergence of subaltern studies can be put as an example in case which is deconstructive and attempts re-construct the silence mini-narratives of Indian in order to foreground them in place of exploitative Brahminical grand-stories.

What I propose to indicate that the process of post-modernisation of Indian society has already begun although it is found in various degree at various places. The process is on and it has given birth to a crisis owing to a long jump from pre-modernity to postmodernity and its reasons are obvious-globalisation and consequent dissemination of capitalism and consumerism.

Postmodernism and Indian Philosophical Tradition

Although there is nothing to suggest that Postmodernism has borrowed or has been influenced by ancient Indian philosophical traditions- whereas Postmodern philosophy was born out of a historical crisis in west accentuated by the rapid growth of capitalism, industrialism, science and technology materialism, failure of modernity, death of religion and god etc., Indian philosophical tradition, on the contrary, is essentially idealistic, transcendental, spiritual- yet a comparison can be made between the two diverse streams of ideas contain some points of convergence.

Derrida and *Apohvada*:

Although Derrida is usually considered as the father of post-structuralism, yet he can be also associated as one of the most important philosophers of postmodernism. What Derrida seeks to undermine in common with other postmodernists is the fixity of meaning, that the words can represent reality. He contends against the notion that words or images directly refer to a pre-existent reality. Postmodernism always tends to celebrate his notion of 'difference', a complex term which implies that meaning arises from differences between words-how any word always depends for its meaning not on its natural association with real but also on its difference with other words along a whole chain of significance. In Derrida's view, words differ from (difference) and defer (deference) their meaning for which Derrida offers a neologism, difference. Buddhist notion of *Apohvada* anticipates this Derridian hypothesis of difference indicating that meaning is not only present in the signifier rather also depends on its absence. *Apoha* is negational (*abhavatmaka*) in nature. Dinnaga, a renowned Buddhist theoretician says that "all words, all names, all concepts are necessarily relative so unreal. A word can be described only negatively. It can express its meaning only by rejecting the opposite meaning. A 'cow' means a 'not non-cow'" (Quoted in Sharma 136). Shantrakshit and Kamalshila, other two very noted Buddhist theoreticians opine that the conceptual notions and verbal expressions have no real basis. They are of the opinion that *Apoha* is the denotation of words. In fact, words are neither synonymous nor not-synonymous. They produce just imaginative reflection of a thing which in turn leads to the exclusion of the other objects by implication.

Postmodern Perspectivism and *Syadvada*:

Postmodernism upholds that reality and truth are a construct showing the lack of belief in absolute truth or the idea of a reality. Drawing from Nietzsche, the forerunner of postmodern philosophy, who opined that truth is a matter of individual perspective, and that we cannot have knowledge of the thing in itself, postmodernists also says that one may adopt one of the possible perspectives but no perspective is more valid than the others. Thus postmodernists, here, seem to align with perspectivists denying the existence of 'objective' reality and holding reality to be a matter of individual perspective. This perspectival explanation of 'reality' can be discerned to have a parallel in the philosophical meditation of Jainas. The Jainas believe in the plurality of reality. They believe in separate and independent existence of innumerable material atoms and innumerable individual souls (Anantadharmakam vast. Anantadharmatmkameva tattvam: Anyayoga). This is what is known as *Anekantvada*. Since they believe in the 'manyness of reality', they are, at the same time, of the opinion that the total knowledge of reality is impossible. We by mistake take one-sided and partial view as the whole truth or reality. To explicate the nature of reality, Jainism offers the theory of *Syadvada*. The word *syadvada* comes from the word '*syat*' meaning probable, perhaps, may be implying reality is a question of perspective, neither absolute affirmation nor absolute negation. Defining *Syadvada* and the word '*syat*', C. D. Sharma writes:

The world '*syat*' is used here in the sense of the relative and the correct translation of *Syadvada* is the theory of Relativity of knowledge. Reality has infinite aspects which are all relative and we can know only some of these aspects. All our judgments, therefore, are necessarily relative, conditional and limited. '*Syat*' or 'Relatively speaking' or "Viewed from a particular view-point which is necessarily related to other view-points' must precede all our judgments. (52)

Further, holding reality or truth to be partial, relative and conditional, Jain philosophers state seven-steps to judge reality, called *Syadvada* or *Sapta-bhangi-naya* which is as follows:

1. *Syadasti*: Relatively, a thing is real.
2. *Syannasti*: Relatively, a thing is not real.
3. *Syadasti nasti*: Relatively, a thing is both real and unreal.
4. *Syadvaktavyam*: Relatively, a thing is indescribable.
5. *Syadasti cha avaktavyam*: Relatively, a thing is both real and is indescribable.
6. *Syannasti cha avaktavyam*: Relatively, a thing is unreal and is indescribable.
7. *Syadasti cha nasti cha avaktavyam*: Relatively, a thing is real, unreal and indescribable (Quoted in Sharma 53-54).

The ongoing discussion on *Syadvada* clearly indicates that Jainism anticipates perspectivism of postmodernism almost more than 2500 years ago however

the factors responsible for these two entirely different philosophical meditations remained poles apart.

Self in Postmodernism and Indian Philosophy:

Postmodernism has rejected the unity, coherence and autonomy of western humanist self celebrating fragmentary, chaotic and incoherent nature of human subjectivity. Drawing on the theories of Nietzsche, Foucault, Freud, Lacan and others, postmodernists have announced the death of the man highlighting his constructedness, a prey to ideological, cultural, linguistic, or such other forces. Emptied of 'essence', man becomes merely an effect, always in process, bereft of individualism or independent autonomous identity. If we closely look at the major philosophical meditations on 'self', we find that Indian philosophical notions of 'self' seem to anticipate what postmodernism has to offer. In this regard Paranjape writes:

Yet, strangely, this [anti-essentialist] conception of human nature can find lots of backing in various traditions of Indian thought. In India we have never believed in the autonomous human being, capable of free agency and will, but rather in an idea of self which is the outcome of a web of causality called Karma. This is very similar to other ideas of determination, whether they are social, historical, or ethnic. So I would say that Indian psychology has always recognized the provisionality of the self. Whether the self be a combination of gunas or qualities as in Samkhya, or as an ascending hierarchy of levels of consciousness constituted by manas, buddhi, ahankar, and chitta of Vedanta, or of the same stuff as the universe as in Advaita, or pure flux as in Buddhism, or pure matter as in Jainism or Charavaka, the self is always a position, ever an autonomous entity. Even in the medieval bhakti literature, the self is still provisional and dependent on the personalized Godhead for its sustenance. In modern times, Sri Aurobindo has seen the self as made up of three levels, physical, vital, and mental, all of which prepare it for its transcendence into the supermental planes. For J. Krishnamurti, the self is merely an outcome of the individual's particular conditioning. This inexpert survey, it seems to me, indicates very clearly that we in India have never been enamoured by any essentialist notion of human nature. In its most lofty flights as in Sri Ramana Maharshi, the Indian conception of self becomes so expansive as to exclude nothing from its purview: there is only the Self, no Other. Thus, either we deny the fixity of the self so as to deconstruct it or widen its scope so as to include the entire universe. Both methods to avoid duality and Othering are available in Indian thought. Hence, I am not sure what postmodernism has to offer us here.

Paranjpe is probably right in his observation that several schools of Indian philosophy have anticipated what postmodernists propound. Special mention can be made of Buddhism which with its theory of No-self anticipates Hume and later on, postmodern philosophers regarding self in the process of continual change and which shall be discussed in detail in chapter 4.

Thus we see that some of the propositions of postmodernism have never been completely alien to Indian soil. Moreover, the rapid growth of consumerism and capitalism in the wake of liberalisation of economy and globalisation has certainly contributed to the expansion of International postmodernism in India also. There can be no denial, despite high disparity in the economic development of the nation characterised by the co-existence of two nations within, that for a limited section of Indian society, especially those who live in metropolitan cities of India, the world has shrunk in the wake of globalization; advancements in information technology like the encroachment of TV, Computers, Internet have brought about changes in the way they 'experience' their lives; reality shows like Big Boss have become more real than real. Thus Postmodernism has certainly crept in. However, the other larger section still lives a pathetic life of penury without proper fooding, housing, clothing, what to think of sanitation, medication and other such facilities. Thus, from the view point of this majority chunk, India is still pre-modern. However, this seems to be a lopsided analysis of Indian societal tendencies. Perhaps it would be more judicious to claim that India as a nation simultaneously demonstrates paradoxical coexistence of postmodernity and pre-colonial backwardness from economic point of view. However the dissertation tends to ignore sociological study of postmodernism. The subsequent chapters will attempt to analyse Indian English novels published after 1980s in the light of philosophical and narratological aesthetics of postmodernism.

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