

Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

From the Selected Works of Ananya Vajpeyi

July, 2015

How Modern India Looks at its Premodernity

Ananya Vajpeyi



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/ananya_vajpeyi/103/

How modern India looks at its premodernity

Pankaj Mishra, b. 1969, is an author, essayist, novelist and commentator who has written extensively on modernity, on its histories, forms, and genealogies, not just in India and South Asia but in many other parts of the Asian continent. Most recently, he is the author of *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals who Remade Asia* (2012), and *A Great Clamor: Encounters with China and its Neighbors* (2014). He won the Crossword Award for Non-Fiction in 2013, as well as the Leipzig Prize for European Understanding and the Windham-Campbell Literature Prize for Non-Fiction from Yale University in 2014. He responded to queries from **Ananya Vajpeyi** by email.

You have written extensively on modernity, modernism and on becoming modern in India, in other countries in South Asia, South-East Asia, and East Asia, and in the global South more generally. You must have thought seriously about India's relationship to its pre-modernity, to precolonial times, and to its long, complex and multifarious history. How do you think Indians today look back at the past – with pride, with indifference, with ignorance, with illusions and delusions, or with understanding and appreciation?

In South Asia, and Asia in general, that relationship with the past can only be described plurally, that is to say, we are looking at plural pasts and plural relationships. And we look back at the past while struggling with a project of political and economic modernity which demands, in Asia now after Europe, homogenization and sameness, and which actively uproots people to bring them into a worldwide nexus of production and consumption, and can liberate some from oppressive old bonds and also burden others with anomie and loneliness. So looking back is a fraught venture for all of us who live in the seemingly endless present of capitalism and modernity, and it can provoke both fear and nostalgia. A Dalit from rural eastern U.P. and a deracinated Andhra Brahmin techie in Alabama are likely to have a different view of the past. In that sense, India is the original home

of postmodernism, and the backlash to it. The fragmentation of narratives happened here earlier than in the West, and now we are facing its political consequence: an attempt to rebuild a grand all-encompassing narrative.

From some of your writings – Butter Chicken, Temptations of the West – it seems that India in the 1990s and 2000s has aspired to transcend its past, especially in terms of social conventions and traditional ways of life, to make itself genuinely modern, developed and powerful. But in other works like The Romantics, End of Suffering, and From the Ruins of Empire, you have explored more complex connections between past and present, East and West, precolonial tradition and colonial modernity, culture and nation, philosophy and history. What sort of twist is added to this evolving story of making peace with our past, by the fact of a right wing Hindu nationalist government coming into power in 2014, and by the majoritarian ideology of this regime? What happens to our 'discovery of India' under Narendra Modi?

I think one recessive strand in the Nehruvian discovery of India has become dominant with the advent of Hindu majoritarianism. In that sense, it is a mistake to think of Narendra Modi as a rupture in the evolving story of the idea of India. At a very basic level he was already there, in the Indira and Rajiv Gandhi mode of communal politics and technocracy. On a broader scale, Hindu majoritarianism has tried to complete the project of Indian modernization started by Nehru – one reason why so many intellectuals of the *ancien regime* initially extended their support to Modi. Nehru's own chosen driver of progress and economic growth was the state (and most of our intellectuals were accordingly statist and economists) and the individual was always subject to the needs of the larger Indian community (multicultural rather than Hindu). But mass politicization, followed by globalization, was always going to complicate that top-down project (as it did in many different countries in Europe and Asia).

The BJP has achieved a political breakthrough at a time when Indians experience greater desires and deeper frustrations amid a steadily atomized and highly unequal society and the dissolving of old social bonds of community and family. It attempts to consolidate national unity around certain majoritarian symbols. The BJP, while embracing a market economy, hasn't diminished the power of the state and they never will, contrary to some hopelessly Americanized right wingers who thought Modi was another Reagan; while strengthening the state's power over civil society they have focused on the relatively neglected aspect of Nehru-style nation state modernization: they have tried to reimagine the nation, and the likely sources of its cultural unity. In this political project, understanding the past is merely the means, not an end in itself. It is meant to create a single cohesive image of the past.

How do you interpret the phrase 'the crisis in the classics'? Do you agree that Indians are losing access to the languages, texts and forms of knowledge that have proliferated in and enlivened this part of the world for millennia? How much of this can be blamed on colonialism and empire, and how much on terrible policies to do with language, education and cultural affairs pursued by the post-colonial state, under any and all governments – Congress, BJP, Left or whatever other sort?

Yes, to live in the contemporary world is to live with an ongoing but largely unnoticed cultural genocide. My own explanation for the crisis in the classics goes elsewhere – to the demand for homogeneity made by capitalist imperialism since the 19th century, the utilitarian principle that governs the new materialist civilization in which the study of humanities is a luxury, easily sacrificed to considerations of profit and efficiency. Europe also has this problem today, but its own consolidation of the past happened well before this latest neo-liberal phase that has hollowed out humanities departments. The big scholarly advances, starting with discovery of Greek learning in the Renaissance and ending with the creation of social sciences in the 19th century, have already occurred. The problem in India is also that the underlying cultural unity provided to Europe by a single religion, language and political form – Christianity, Latin, and Roman Empire – is largely missing (or is politically simulated, which creates its own confusions). And then colonialism made a sustained scholarly effort impossible. A place like Germany could practically invent modern humanities despite not being a unified state until the mid-19th century because it could

draw upon universities originally set up in the Middle Ages. And it wasn't physically occupied and forced to embrace another languages for decades. Colonialism in India shattered the country's older epistemologies and traditions of learning, and then created modern universities to create a class of suppliant babus. Modern India with its investments in progress and economic growth through science and technology didn't fundamentally break from the innate philistinism of colonial-style pedagogy.

You have chosen to write in English and to live abroad for the most part. But I know you also read Hindi and keep up with developments in language, literature, press, media and popular culture in Hindi and in small-town India, the so-called 'vernacular' sphere, or the world of 'bhasha' life and sensibilities. Is the 'real India' alive and well in this parallel universe outside of English language writing and scholarship, or do you see signs of trouble there as well? Describe to us what changes you see in non-metropolitan places where you grew up and with which you stay in touch, like Jhansi, Allahabad, Banaras, Nagpur, or remote rural Himachal Pradesh where you continue to maintain a home and an authorial retreat of sorts?

You see contradictory trends – on one hand, the razing of cultural identities by global consumerism, represented by the condo apartment and Cafe Coffee Day, and, on the other, a renewed insistence on more local ways of thought and being as the culture of moneymaking – and it is a whole culture, not a mere preference – menaces all that we have associated with small-town cultures: more leisure and sociability, a civic spirit. Many old institutions have decayed – such as the great universities of Lucknow and Allahabad – but there is much more individual initiative and energy. Things are moving under the new surfaces. A place like Gorakhpur, which I knew as a haven for mafia dons in the 1980s, now has a terrific film festival. I miss a magazine like *Dinman*, and so much of the popular Hindi press is trashy, if not corrupt, but the quality of comment in a paper like *Jansatta* is often far superior to any of the English papers. The other day *Kadambini* had a superb special issue on rivers. So it is hard to generalize across regions and classes, and it is impossible to find the 'real India' since India consists of many worlds. And if you go deeper into a place like Himachal, you'll find that life hasn't fundamentally changed, even where the real estate developers have dug up mountain sides and built apartment blocks for corrupt judges and politicians.

So to paraphrase Adam Smith's famous saying, 'there is a great deal of ruin in a nation', there is a great deal not yet lost in even a fecklessly modernizing country like India.

Of the writers and commentators of your generation, you have perhaps been attacked and reviled most consistently by Hindutva trolls, who accuse you of being 'anti-national', 'anti-India', unpatriotic, a Naxal sympathizer, pro-Muslim, anti-Hindu, and so on. This has been the case from the time you began to make your very first interventions in political and intellectual life in India. Whether it was the conflict in Kashmir back in the 1990s, or more recently acts of censorship against books like Wendy Doniger's The Hindus, you have always stood for democratic rights, freedom of expression and civil liberties.

Do you feel that the Hindu Right's utterly aggressive and abusive stance towards someone like you (who is often critical of the Indian state) stems from a thorough misreading of the idea of India on their side? Does it betray deep insecurities and anxieties arising from their failure to appreciate what India is supposed to be about as a secular, plural and inclusive democracy – and ultimately, does their hatred arise from a fundamental discomfort with the very nature of India's history, both past and present, which is mixed and contradictory?

Do you suspect that you are being particularly singled out and lambasted for the stands you take – not just in India, but also among NRI Hindus, more so in America than in the UK where you live – because of your apparently Hindu, upper caste Brahmin name and your opposition to the kind of views that votaries of Sangh ideology would have wanted someone like you to represent and defend?

Yes, I sense some angry disappointment there: ideally, a Hindi-speaking Mishra should have been promoting the wisdom of Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya. I experience of course a relatively benign side of the vicious stereotyping in which people with Christian and Muslim names are automatically stigmatized. But it is actually hard to take any notice of what the trolls say, let alone engage with their idea of India. Almost everyone with a mobile phone these days feels free to venture an opinion, however illiterate or crude. I did face much criticism when I wrote about Kashmir or challenged euphoric accounts of how India was becoming a superpower and so on. But criticism is one thing, and slander another. The latter conceals an intellectual fail-

ure and psychological damage, and the sad fact about these perennially aggrieved neo-Hindus is that while they can persuade their NRI friends to lavish money on their ventures, they can't create an intellectual culture that is worth taking seriously. The Indian version of Burke or even Peguy is yet to be born. The right wing hacks and trolls are interesting only as a symptom of a pathology: the culture of resentment. The neo-Hindu NRIs in particular seem to suffer a great deal from a sense of inadequacy, induced by slights and injuries suffered in the white man's world, and so end up looking to strong quasi-Indian creeds and leaders for relief.

I should say here that though I am of course opposed to Hindutva, I am not enamoured of the 'idea of India' as a vantage point for conducting and understanding ideological conflicts in India. There have always been many ideas of India among the country's diverse communities, but the singular idea of India, even though it claims to accommodate pluralism and secularism, is an ideological construct of the ruling elites and the class of native intellectuals in a modern nation state – like the assertion of American exceptionalism by mainstream American politicians and historians. Like the American version, this discourse too is deaf and blind to what its victims think of it, and its singular and unitary nature helps ideologues of all sorts, Hindutva-wadis as well as Nehruvians, to appropriate it. Intellectuals ought to approach this *sarkari* mode of thinking about India with the greatest suspicion. Instead, several generations of Indian thinkers have been under its spell, and remained frozen into a reverence for Nehru and Gandhi, and locked into a naive view of just how state-mandated secularism works on the ground. Not surprisingly, it has taken so long for Ambedkar's critical modernity to be discovered, and so many other Indian ways of thought still remain obscure and marginal.

With Modi's ascent the time has come to move on from the mainstream Nehruvian-liberal interpretation of India, and to become more intellectually resourceful. I hate to quote myself but in an article I wrote in 2007 about intellectuals who justify their near total indifference to the obscene facts of large-scale murder and torture in Kashmir by piously invoking the idea of India, I said that this secular narcissism will not survive the enthronement of Modi in Delhi. The long history of Indian cultural and philosophical traditions before the nation state – or India before Gandhi – will always remain a valuable resource. But now that a man like Modi is prime minister, we need to give up at least some of our comforting hopes about the exceptional nature of India's secular democracy and multicultural-

lism, and India's unique trajectory as a nation state and so on, and bring India – India after Modi, or India as illuminated by Modi – into a global history of capitalism, imperialism, nationalism and postcolonialism. It remains very important to provincialize Europe but it is now even more important to universalize India's experience, to think of its experience in relation to the experience of other societies – of Europe as well as Asia – and large trends and movements in the last century.

When you travel in and write about places like China, Japan, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan, how do you compare the way in which pre-modernity and non-modern pasts are dealt with in these countries with the situation in India? Do compare most especially China and India, since you have been spending so much time in China of late. Does China do better with classical scholarship, despite Communism, than India does, even with its liberal democracy? If so, why do you think this might be the case?

Comparisons that assume India to be a democracy and China as authoritarian are not very productive. They inevitably force us to go beyond normative understanding of these Cold War terms, and we can quickly get lost. The terms of comparison have to be drawn from actual experience rather than the abstractions of postwar American political science. For one, the Chinese did not ever have to renounce the Chinese language, and they are a much more homogenous population. And the Chinese nation state retained to a degree not matched by any empire of the past – whether the British or the Hapsburg or the Ottoman – the territorial boundaries and basic political institutions of the Qing. This already sets China well apart from India in its relationship to the past, and traditions of classical scholarship, which were upheld and patchily maintained even during the destructive Mao era.

But if you are looking for similarities, then the CCP's effort to create a new basis for nationalism in China has also invoked the past, enlisted Confucius among others, to provide a 'pure' system of ethics and governance that is not compromised by modern ideologies of greed and expansion. They haven't done away with Mao – they can't, and in fact Mao himself drew upon a Confucian tradition of moral improvement, so there is a strong element of continuity in the CCP's project of self-legitimation, which now has to be supplemented with other sources of ideological legitimacy. In fact, Chinese, Russian, Turkish, and Indian regimes are engaged in a common project of refurbishing their

earliest nation-building ideologies. The result are hybrid narratives, postmodern collages, Mao-plus-Confucius, Savarkar-plus-Ambedkar, Ataturk-plus-Islam, Stalin-plus-Orthodox Christianity, which do away with the old tradition-modern, old-new axis and propose a new synchronicity. But to understand them we need to get away, as I said before, from the Cold War reference point of democracy, and other essentializing narratives about India and China.

Finally, could a young man from a poor family studying at a provincial university in Uttar Pradesh today still hope to discover his Edmund Wilson in a dusty library over the months of a summer vacation? Do you feel that this new India, supposedly shining and growing and aglow with acchey din, affords the widening of mental and emotional horizons that you describe so movingly in accounts of your early youth and the discovery of your vocation as a writer? Has India multiplied the pain but shrunk the possibilities of 'becoming modern' for young people these days, or do you see some ray of hope somewhere?

In many ways, the expanding of imagination and the deepening of sensibility – previously facilitated by chance readings or lucky encounters – is now widely available through the internet. The books and magazines I cherished at the BHU library can now be easily accessed. And I meet or hear of many more writers and artists from small-town backgrounds like myself, who have made lightening quick journeys. That said, becoming modern also has a broader meaning now. I lived in the 1980s in Banaras and Allahabad with a different sense of time and space. I had a very keen sense of the limits of my world, and knew, too, because I was so ignorant, that the modernity for me constituted a constantly renewed awareness of the self and the world, a culture of criticism, including self-criticism. But the biggest casualty of a globalized and interconnected world is the sense of the world at large – a sense of the world as perpetual challenge and daunting complexity. Becoming modern now seems something easeful. A sense of limits is missing, and a shallow but electorally potent promise like 'acchey din' is premised on that indifference to limits – environmental as well as political and intellectual – and an infantile fantasy about the modern. It basically says that you don't need the intellectual culture of modernity for modernization, and the latter will come about when Narendra Modi presses a button and his bullet trains shoot out of railway stations across India, connecting one smart city to another.