



## The Fraught Terrain of Decolonization/Decoloniality in India

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### Abstract

The project of decolonization/ decoloniality in the Indian context is particularly fraught because the ruling proto-fascist party and its parent and kindred organizations routinely indulge in decolonization-talk, positing a simple West versus Indian binary, where 'Indian' is defined in elitist Brahmanical and homogenous terms. On the other hand, intellectuals and leaders of the historically most oppressed section of Hindu society – the untouchables – have from the late 19th century onwards, found British colonial presence and the modern discourse of equality and rights liberating. This division has become more exacerbated in recent years since the Hindu Right came to power in 2014. The crucial point that is missed is that the Hindu Right is, in fact, constituted by colonial knowledge in at least two ways. (i) The 'Hinduism' that they espouse is a 19th century invention (through the mediation of Orientalist scholarship and colonial institutions of historical and archaeological research) and formalized as a category by British censuses. (ii) Its entire political imaginary is predicated upon the European ideas of nation, nationalism and nation-statism. Indeed, its entire imagination of the Indian past is based on mimicking the European and the irrepressible desire (common among nationalists of other hues as well) to prove that everything that India too had, in the remote past, what defines Europe in modern times. Its decolonization is therefore about proving India's past greatness in European terms, completely obliterating in the process the counter-traditions that were rapidly marginalized through the collusion and colonialism and nationalism.

## The Hindu Nationalist Project of 'Decolonization'

Decoloniality 'as decolonization' means epistemic reconstitution, while the horizon of decolonization during the Cold War meant to build nation-states (Mignolo 2018: 382).

The project of decolonization/ decoloniality in the Indian context is an extremely fraught one because the ruling proto-fascist Hindu Right party and its parent organization routinely indulge in decolonization-talk, as it sits well with its "indigenist" politics. Positing a simple West versus India binary, it defines "Indian" in very elitist, Brahmanical and homogenous terms. On the other hand, intellectuals and leaders of the historically most oppressed section of Hindu society – the former untouchables or "Dalits" in their contemporary political self-description – have from the late 19th century onwards, found British colonial presence and the modern discourse of equality and rights liberating.

This divide has become more exacerbated in recent years as the Hindu Right's rhetoric has become more strident, now that it has been in power for a decade and is in a position to take over control of all institutions including universities. The actual situation is, however, far more complex than what this binary division allows us to see. The crucial point that I have discussed at length in my book (Nigam 2020) is that the Hindu Right is itself constituted by colonial knowledge in at least two ways: First, the "Hinduism" that they espouse is a 19th century invention that was assembled through the mediation of Orientalist scholarship and colonial institutions of historical and archaeological research and formalized as a category via British censuses. Second, the Hindu nationalist imagination was produced by colonialism in another sense – the sense in which colonialism spawns resentful and inward-looking forces of revenge and xenophobic nationalisms across the world, including monstrosities like that of Pol Pot's Kampuchea, which sought to re-establish ancient Khmer glory in the name of anti-colonialism. Nationalism itself was a colonial-Western import in the rest of the world, though scholars differ on the extent to which its immediate political discourse was directly derivative of Europe's (Anderson 1991, Chatterjee 1986). This point, as I will

discuss at greater length in the second part of this essay, is linked to the larger critiques of nationalism made by the poet-thinker Rabindranath Tagore and underlined in recent times by Ashis Nandy, drawing from Tagore and Gandhi (Nandy 1994, Nandy 2003).

The world of the nineteenth century Indian intelligentsia was a melancholy one, trying to come to grips with its status as a colonized population from which it only started recovering in the latter part of that century. The imaginative universe of Hindu nationalism was enabled by a whole new world that opened up before the defeated and despondent Hindu intelligentsia of the 19th century, following the work of Orientalist scholars of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, set up in 1784, which started throwing new light on 'Indian' pasts. Most contemporary Indians will find it unbelievable that the now commonplace accounts of "India's great past", were brought to us thanks to the labours of the Asiatic Society of Bengal – from the Mauryan empire (321 to 185 BCE), which is celebrated as a period of the great flowering of Buddhism to the so-called Golden Age of the Gupta empire (4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) (Kejariwal 1988). Effusive with the discovery of 'India's influence' in South-East Asia in ancient times, some French scholars in the early decades of the twentieth century extolled it almost "as a civilizing colonial mission rather like the French themselves at the time they were writing." Inspired by their work, in 1926, nationalist historians founded "the Greater India society for the study of Indian culture in East, South-East and Central Asia." (Dalrymple 2024: 14) It is this idea of a 'Greater India' that lies at the heart of the Hindu Right's fantasies of an ancient Hindu Kingdom that it wants to revive as the 'Akhand Bharat' (literally, 'Undivided India') of its dreams.

Linked to the massive enterprise of the Asiatic Society is a debate that has never ceased since then – on the claim that Hindus had no sense of history and lived in oblivion of their this-worldly political past. Though this claim was posed by the colonial and Orientalist scholars engaged in the task of reconstructing India's past, this suggestion was not taken kindly to by Indian scholars who produced narratives to show 'we too had history'. This debate continues unabated today. The relevant point here, for the moment, is that the Hindu Right's investment in the colonially constructed

past and the very idea of 'history' as something that belongs to a subject continuous through 'history' (for instance, India, Hindu) is not accidental. This knowledge and the colonial-modern episteme that lay behind it, is constitutive of the Hindu nationalist politics that we know by the name of the Hindutva. The straight line connecting modern Indians today with these pasts could only become possible with the internalization of the idea of 'history' by the modern Indian. Only after the 19<sup>th</sup> century did such straight-line narratives emerge, of the 'secularism' of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE emperor Asoka or of the political history of the 'Hindu' empires that followed, notably the Gupta empire, seen often as the Golden Era by the Hindu nationalists.

Sir William Jones, the founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and philologist, put forward the hypothesis of the probable common origin of Greek, Latin and Sanskrit on the basis of his studies and translations of Sanskrit texts by the Society. The German Indologist Max Muller was another important figure who translated major ancient Sanskrit texts, making them available to the world, adding to a new sense of 'Hindu' identity and pride in India. The discovery of striking similarities between Sanskrit and Greek and Latin in terms of syntax and vocabulary, led to flights of Hindu nationalist fantasy about Vedic peoples and their language possibly being 'ancestors' of Indo-European languages and peoples, not merely sharing common origins. The discovery of a full-fledged Indus Valley civilization by the mid-1920s, once again under the aegis of colonial archaeological institutions, sent the nascent Hindu nationalist imagination into a spin, leading to delusional claims of being the fount of all wisdom – a delusion that still drives the Hindu Right. In other words, every argument of 'Hindu glory' in the arsenal of the Hindutva propagandists can be traced back to these exciting new discoveries of their long forgotten past that the dejected intelligentsia of those times seized upon.

At the same time as the fires of Hindu nationalist imagination were being stoked by the new colonial/modern knowledge and its way of being, the upper caste elites in northern India, in a move reflecting their immense ideological debt to colonial knowledge began displacing the target of their ire from colonialism to the 'Muslim' rulers of the past. These early ideologues of the Hindu

nationalism thus turned the spotlight away from the British to the Muslims. Much of the antipathy towards Muslims was actually predicated on the Islamophobia that the Hindu nationalists had imbibed from the colonial power. Two things are quite clear. One, most 'Hindu' accounts of the period, regarding events like the supposed demolition of a Ram temple by Mughal ruler Babur in sixteenth century, do not consider them important enough to even refer to them, assuming that they did happen. Yet, these 'events' were retrospectively produced as key signs of 'Hindu' victimhood. Two, as scholars have pointed out, the very idea of a pan-Indian Hindu or Muslim community did not exist before the advent of the British (Pandey 1992). Medieval accounts refer to those who came to be described as 'Muslims' by the colonial rulers, as 'Turks' (Turushka), 'Persian' (Parasika) and 'Greek' (Yavana, from the word Ionians, used initially for the Greeks and subsequently to refer generically to foreigners) (Talbot 1995, p. 701). The large and almost homogeneous categories of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' were created in the course of enumeration and classification of populations by colonial censuses, as scholarship in the last few decades, especially by Bernard Cohn (1987) and the Subaltern Studies historians, has shown.

In the discourse of the Hindu Right, apart from the Muslims, the other problematic category has been that of the Dalits who it cannot present as the 'Other' because its entire project depends on incorporating them within a broader 'Hindu unity'. Its attempts therefore have been towards assimilating them within the larger Hindu body – though without upsetting existing power relations of upper caste dominance. This is an impossible task and the 'Muslim', therefore, serves as a convenient

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'enemy' whose very presence can be periodically invoked as a threat to the Hindus, thereby hoping to achieve their much-desired unity.

However, as mentioned at the very outset, the overall position of the Dalit intelligentsia is one of celebration of colonialism as the force that made their limited freedom possible. This is not a trivial question that refers to matters past. The very definition of 'Hindu' and 'Hinduness' is at issue today alongside the question of the place of the Dalits within that 'Hindu' society. How this is understood has a direct bearing on how the postcolonial Indian state deals with the question of redressing historical wrongs through affirmative action. The issue of Brahmanical domination remains a live one as does the Dalit stance that the challenge to it can only be mounted in the name of equality and rights, made available by colonialism.

Indeed, one of the most high-profile political cases that the current regime has slapped against a large number of activists, is known as the *Bhima Koregaon* case. This refers to an 1818 battle in which the untouchable community of Mahars fought in the British Army to defeat the upper caste rule of the Peshwas and this event was celebrated by Dr B.R. Ambedkar as a landmark in Dalit history. During the bicentenary celebrations of that event in 2018 the government cracked down. Sixteen lawyers, scholars, activists and artists were arrested without trial on the spurious charge of 'waging war against the nation.' Most are still in prison, some are out on bail after 5 to 6 years and one died while in custody (Shah 2024). The draconian action reveals the danger that Dalit and lower caste assertion poses to the Hindutva project of claiming a unified 'Hindu' community.

Thus, the Hindu Right, by pointing to the obvious Western orientation of Dalitbahujan discourses (the term Bahujan refers to the majority of Non-Brahmin castes) as well as to the 'foreign' provenance of Islam, Christianity and Marxism, identifies them all as 'enemies of Hindus'. However, because it cannot afford to dispense with the Dalit masses, it approaches them directly with their discourse of Hindu unity, seeking to pit them against the Muslims. But as I have argued above this is a false binary in the Indian context given their own imbrication in colonial-modern power-knowledge. The real challenge of decolonizing our

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thinking, I want to underline then, lies not in the search for some authentic, exceptionalist narrative of past Hindu glory but in *thinking our present outside of the frames set up by colonial knowledge and nationalisms.*

### The Real Challenge of Decolonizing

Decolonizing is an imperative today because of the dead-end that we find ourselves in, across large parts of the world, with states of the Global South mimicking Western capitalism in a world where all possibilities of further 'development' stand exhausted and a planetary crisis stares us in the face. This situation announces, as it were, the exhaustion of the modern European (or the colonial-modern) episteme.

We increasingly recognize today that our task in Asia, Africa and Latin America is not to strive to recast our societies in the image of the West but to strike a fundamentally different path from that imposed by the colonial-modern episteme. It is an imperative because we, in the three continents (and the Native populations in America and elsewhere), reject the idea that everything has already been thought in advance for us by Grand Old Men of the West and that our task is to merely execute their thought. It is important then, to underline, once again, that from this point of view, decolonization is not and cannot be an exclusively Indian problem. This means that it cannot be a project of replacing European provincialism by another parochial

'return to the source' – be it ancient 'Hindu' or 'Khmer' glory for that matter. It is about thinking what has been called the 'pluriverse' through an opening out of our thought to other traditions like the Chinese, Arab or Persian in our case, with which we have long had fruitful exchanges, despite conflicts, before nation-states drew borders around them. Indeed, if one looks at it closely, what we know as 'western knowledge' itself was never a hermetically sealed entity and has constituted itself by borrowing liberally from other traditions – even though it transformed it in its own way. Often that transformation was very generative but at one historical moment it also produced the monstrosity that we are left to deal with today.

The very first – and obvious – point to underline here is that anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism in their political form as nationalism/s do not add up to what we understand by decolonization today, which is much more than a political project. As political projects, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial nationalisms could very well replicate all the pathologies of other modern nationalisms, like xenophobia and ethnic cleansing. As they indeed have all over the postcolonial world, with a vengeance. We need to keep reminding ourselves that while the fear of the Other (the stranger) was certainly there in premodern cultures, it acquires the specific political form of ethnic cleansing and mass expulsion of 'non-citizens' only in the world of nation-states, their quest for a homogenous national culture, and the search for permanent majorities (in a perversion of the democratic principle) mainly in the last two centuries. The twentieth century has seen the endless production of 'refugees', 'boat people' and 'stateless people' as the excrement of the production of citizenship – the Rohingyas in twenty-first century South Asia are the most recent example nearer home. In other words, an anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism that merely mimics the nation-state's drive towards homogeneity and wants to produce new nation-states in the image of the West, obviously has little to do with decolonizing in our sense.

At this point it is necessary to return to our reference earlier, to the nationalism and nation-statism of the Hindu Right as another way in which it is constituted by the colonial-modern. Discussing the critique of nationalism in three political novels by Rabindranath Tagore, Ashis Nandy strikingly observes that

Each major contradiction in the novels *involves the entry of western ideas of the nation-state, history and progress*, into the Indian life style, as a means of organizing a culture's self-definition...*This success of colonialism is matched by the ambitions of a nationalism, which after faithfully swallowing the colonial worldview hook, line and sinker, is willing to sacrifice Indians at the altar of a brand new, imported, progressive history of the nation-state in the making.* (Nandy 1994, p. 48)

It is the italicized parts that I want to draw attention to because, even though Tagore in his famous 'nationalism' lectures uses the term 'nation', and Nandy additionally refers to 'nation-state' and 'nationalism', it is very clear that neither Tagore nor Nandy are talking only about the political form of the nation and nationalism. This is a category that Tagore sees as epistemic (though he does not use that term). In Tagore, as Nandy rightly suggests, the 'nation' stands in for all these other ideas like history and progress, which he also revolts against because it represents to him an abstraction that kills life. In more contemporary philosophical language, we could render Tagore's point as his critique of the Cartesian break between the subject and object, and the human and non-human. Tagore rejects the abstraction called 'nation' because it destroys the wholeness of life – an idea that he occasionally puts in spiritual language. Thus Tagore in one of his nationalism lectures, underlines what he sees as the crux of the new episteme – the rise of what he calls a 'political civilization' that leads to the colonization of all domains of life by the political, which he sees as little more than a scientifically enabled war machine: "This political civilization is scientific and not human", he says concluding a long diatribe against this new kind of civilization (Tagore 1992, p. 24). However, Tagore does not say this with any romantic idea of the past for he emphasizes:

Before this political civilization came to its power and opened its hungry jaws wide enough to gulp down great continents of the earth, we had wars, pillages, changes of monarchy and consequent miseries, but never such a sight of fearful and hopeless voracity, such wholesale feeding of nation upon nation, such huge machines for turning great portions of the earth into mince-meat, never such terrible jealousies with all their ugly teeth and claws ready for tearing open each other's vitals. (Tagore 1992, p. 24)

The new worldview that places politics at the centre and puts nations in competition with each other in order to attain something called 'progress', leading to wars and colonization – this is what lies at the centre of Tagore's ire. At one point he provides us with a striking imagery of different conceptions of 'progress'. "The railway train makes its progress towards the terminus station – it is a movement. But a full grown tree has no definite movement of that kind; its progress is the inward progress of life." (Tagore 1992, p. 26) We could actually push this metaphor of the tree further – even if it is not a full-grown tree its growth from a sapling to the tree is of a fundamentally different kind from that of the train, which in our present of the ecological and climate crisis also bespeaks a different kind of relation to the earth, fossil fuels and everything else that goes with it.

Since the demand for decolonization in thought and knowledge today, in the decolonial moment, is about epistemic reconstitution, it is here that Tagore's critique of 'political civilization' to which he gave the name 'nation' provides us an entry point for thinking about life and politics differently. "Our real problem in India is not political. It is social ... Politics in the West have dominated western ideals, and we in India are trying to imitate you" says he in his simultaneous criticism of the contemporary modern Indian (Tagore 1992, p. 77). While this indicates a way of thinking how we might put the political in its place, it is also something that can be highly problematic from the point of view of Dalits and the question of caste oppression. But Tagore, in his later life, is aware of the question of caste and inter-community relations and no blind admirer of tradition. He blames 'nationalism' for its defensive disavowal of any social critique. Thus, he says, we "never dream of blaming our social inadequacy as the origin of our present helplessness, for we have accepted as the creed of our nationalism that this social system has been perfected for all times to come by our ancestors who had the superhuman vision of all eternity and supernatural power of making infinite provision for future ages." (Tagore 1992, p. 94) Read in the context of our current concern with decolonization, this passage alerts us to the pitfalls of looking at the virtues of tradition as the answer to our present concerns. What you take from tradition and what you discard is a matter of serious deliberation and in this Tagore's touchstone is "modernism", which he defines as "freedom of the mind, not the slavery of taste." True modernists, he therefore says, do not need to modernize (Tagore 1992, p. 34).

Tagore's scathing critique of 'political civilization' and 'nationalism' underlines what I understand to be the most fundamental reason why we need to push for decolonization and epistemic reconstitution: the continuing exclusions and ontological depletion of the non-West that is reinforced every moment of our being. When we learn for instance, that all problems of the non-West in the present arise from its incomplete modernity, corrupted secularism or deformed democracy – in other words, from its inability to mould itself in the frame of the modern West, that's when the demand for decolonizing comes up with all its force. That's when we encounter Tagore telling us that the problem, rather, lies in our imitating the West, having abandoned our 'freedom of the mind.' When an African intellectual like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o raises the demand for the 'decolonization of the mind', he does so precisely to emphasize independence in thinking because he understands how the language of the colonizer becomes the instrument of continued exclusion of the colonized and even of the postcolonial subject – and her modes of thinking and being.

The edge of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique was of course, not directed only against the colonial oppressors but also against what has been called the 'coloniality of being' (Maldonado-Torres 2007) in the language of decolonial theory – that is to say, against the ways in which colonialism permanently transforms the colonized's ways of knowing and being. This, however, is something that is experienced not just by the colonized subject, individually, but also as a society that is internally split between strata that are schooled in the colonizers' ways, in their institutions and those who remain outside them.

The situation becomes extremely complex, especially in societies like India's, where the educated modern secular subject is, ever so often, so completely sold on the idea that everything associated with the past is worthy of rejection and ridicule. Not only is such an attitude politically disastrous, it is, in fact, historically incorrect and bespeaks of a certain kind of illiteracy and reproduces our ontological 'lack' on a daily basis.

So, if the Hindu Right revels in a ridiculously fantastic discourse of ancient Hindu glory, it finds its mirror image in the secular-modern that has (with some important exceptions) only specialized in dismissing everything associated with the past, thus unwittingly giving in to the Right's claim

that the entire Indian past was all only about Brahmanism and spiritualism. This is something that exists more at the level of the secular-modern common sense, often retailed by academic scholars, but not entirely true of the huge body of work produced by Indian historians and thinkers, including those of Marxist persuasion. One only has to read Debi Prasad Chattopadhyay's *Science and Society in Ancient India* or his works on Indian materialism and the Charvaka tradition, or the more recent studies by Ramkrishna Bhattacharya on Lokayata/ Charvaka philosophies to get a sense of the scientific rationalist and materialist traditions in ancient India. One has to simply dip into the scholarly historical investigations of a DD Kosambi, Romila Thapar, DN Jha, RS Sharma, Harbans Mukhia, Irfan Habib or more recently Nayanjot Lahiri and Upinder Singh (to name just a few names) to realize how complex and variegated the 'Indian' past has been, which is so often just dismissed as simply Brahmanical and spiritual. No less important is the work of many Western Sanskrit scholars or historians who have added to our knowledge of ancient and medieval India. We may have our own critiques of these historians' work today as more and more new vantage points open up and new research surfaces, but we can only dismiss them at our own peril.

The point is more than strategic – as it concerns our ability to grasp different aspects of the Indian social formation. Today, from a decolonizing perspective, we might want to interrogate, re-read and critique all these works in terms of their assumptions, but we cannot fail to recognize that they tell us a story of 'Indian pasts' that are far more complex than what the Hindu nationalist and secular-modern common sense would have us believe.

To conclude, from this perspective, decolonization demands that we also think afresh the narratives of Indian history by reinstating the diversity of perspectives of the subaltern castes and classes that were marginalized in the colonial construction of 'tradition', especially with respect to our understandings of caste (Dirks 2002, Mitta 2023). However, the recognition that decolonization cannot be an India-specific exercise also demands that we develop our own concepts and frameworks in conversation with others in the Global South who are struggling against the continuing hegemony of the colonial-modern episteme. This is an imperative if we are to find a more just and sensitive solution to the crises of our societies.

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