MODERNITY AS UNDERSTOOD BY GANDHI, NEHRU AND AMBEDKAR

Shiveshwar Kundu

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Jangipur College, University of Kalyani, West Bengal. kundushiveshwarkundu@gmail.com

Abstract

Indian subcontinent witnessed western modernity through colonial intervention. Modernity was indeed conceived differently not only by the different thinkers of different time period but also its impact on the people of Indian subcontinent was not similar. From this different and heterogeneous impact the language used by the important thinkers of modern India was poles apart with different sets of objective through which they tried to transform Indian society. It is in this context the objective of this paper is two fold, firstly, it wants to give vocabulary to the language used by three important thinkers of modern India - Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar while dealing with the predicament of Modernity. Secondly, from the usage of different vocabulary , their different set of objective orientations can be followed and understood. As a result of which a different form of politics originated which provided us different forms of trajectories in order to access the idea of emancipation and freedom.

Keywords: Language, Empowerment, Decorum, Self - Respect, Emancipation

INTRODUCTION

Modernity was an escape from tradition which brought with it a kind of hope of doing away with the archaic elements of the past .The tradition that was discriminatory and exploitative. The location of an individual in the medieval time was entangled with the layers of authority in such a way that the 'self' in individual which had acted in concert with others in classical period got disappeared. Hence modernity for many is also an attempt to reinvent that 'self'. Renaissance and enlightenment had provided the space for flourishment of modern society in west. Philosophers writing during this period either tried to bring 'Aristotelian reason' back in political and social sphere or many of them tried to redefine reason in isolation which led C.B Macpherson to coin a term like 'possessive individualism'.[1] The aim of this paper is not to get

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[1] But in India modernity entered through different route. It is only when Indian subcontinent encountered colonial intervention, political thinkers of India began to talk on issues which were hitherto not deliberated. Prof. Gopal Guru would say it was only when 'dialogue was forced on tradition', mainstream political thinkers became active in responding to the exploitative practices of the past.

into the implication of classical liberal theory in detail but to show how the modernity is conceived by the thinkers of India.

Modernity after spreading all over western and European countries flexes its muscles toward the regions where the lives are still organised around traditional principles. The focus of this paper would be how this moment of modernity was communicated by Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar respectively. Each of them confronted modernity in their own way, even the language they used to articulate modernity and to reach out to people is different from each other. The objective of this paper is to reflect upon their *idea of India* whether has resulted in humiliation, shame or it brought pride honour, dignity and self-respect for the people.

GANDHI'S LANGUAGE OF *INCORPORATION* AND *EMPOWERMENT*:

Gandhi just like Rousseau, Ruskin, Tolstoy, and Marx provides a powerful critique of modernity but his assessment was based on broader horizon than the others. While the above philosophers assessed modernity in the context of Europe, Gandhi did it from both European and non-European perspective. To treat Gandhi only as a critique of modernity will do injustice to his thought .He falls under the category of critical traditionalist whose essential features are said to be as cross cultural, self- reflectivity. [2]

The language of incorporation and empowerment is ingrained in Gandhi's understanding of modern civilisation. By keeping his foot on the tradition he theorised modernity by being a 'political realist'. I will come to his critical perspective on modernity later. Before that I will try to highlight the agreement of Gandhi with some aspects of western modernity.

- Scientific spirit of enquiry (he tried to incorporate the scientific spirit in eastern institutions).

- Modern civilisation emphasis on body has resulted in the invention of various cure related to health ailments, public hygiene, prolong life etc. With a token of appreciation he was also critical about the amount of fear that this progress in medical science has infused within the minds of people.

- Modernity has provided us institutions which often breeds within us respect toward authority, civic virtue, and public morality, punctuality .But the problem is that it has reduced morality to enlightened self-interest and undermined its autonomy.

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[2] Bhikhu Parikh in his work 'Hindu response to colonial rule' categorize four types of modern Indian political thinker: traditionalist, critical traditionalist, modernist and critical modernist.

Through this assumption of modernity he thought to incorporate the hitherto marginalised section and to empower them through *swaraj* (politically), *charkha* (economically). Throughout his life he tried to incorporate lower castes within the fold of Hinduism by modifying the discriminatory tendencies within it. This also shows his enchantment with Hindu religion.

While conceiving modernity in terms of incorporation and empowerment he also saw the implication of modernity. Firstly, unmitigated desires that this modern civilisation has produced with its enormous emphasis on reason which has led to spiritual impoverishment. Since it privilege 'body' it is driven by self-interest and undisciplined self-indulgence. Secondly ,Gandhi saw the problem of 'naive rationalism' , i.e modernity has converted reason into 'ideology of rationality' . He raised questions like –how reason could penetrate the sphere of religion which is a matter of *faith* ? He also pointed out the inadequacy of reason in the sphere of politics which should also be guided by wisdom , courage , conscience intuition and moral insight. Lastly, Gandhi's articulation of state is important to understand his conception of modernity. Just like Marx, Gandhi a '*rural romantic*' wanted withering away of state but in a fashion of '*spiritual' anarchist*.

Whenever an individual will attain swaraj to its truest form, then according to Gandhi they don't require state to organise their lives. Just like Marx he felt that whatever the rhetoric in democracy is, state is an instrument in the hands of powerful people, so participation, accountability, and transparency is a distant dream in parliamentary democracy. To moderate inequality and antagonism in society he put forwarded the idea of '*trusteeship*' so that the rich and the poor can have spiritual dialogue within them.

Gandhi's language of incorporation proves his philosophical acumen through which he incorporated western and eastern philosophy with Gandhian signature. His political acumen lies in his creative dialogue with tradition (by providing it with new meaning), for this reason he best captures the political imagination of people and hence was successful in mobilising mass. [3]

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[3] At the same time he failed to see the exploitative practices within the Hindu society and its incapacity to organise a society based on inclusiveness.

NEHRU'S LANGUAGE OF *DEFERENCE* AND *DECORUM*

Nehru's conception of modernity is based on deference and decorum. Western modernity has tremendous influence on Nehru in all its form. In his noted book "The discovery of India", he claimed presence of progress in Indian civilisation in the past. It is somewhere in the eighth century India's degeneration started. Nehru's apprehension in locating the exact cause of India's downward spiral led some of his detractors to criticise him as pseudo secularist. Though he was willing to accept that both external aggression and internal fragmentation was responsible for the degeneration.

Britishers represented energetic and vibrant civilisation, believed Nehru and so they could able to shook the conscience of Indian people. He considered it a boon for Indians and an opportunity to wake up from the centuries of sleep with full zeal and passion. He thought that the elements of modernity can bring the 'deference' among the fellow citizens and will maintain 'decorum' in society through its various institutions.

He thought that deference in Indian society will be possible when there would be no feud among the fellow Indians and hence he opined for the centralised state (opposite to Gandhi) to develop an organic relationship among the citizens. Unequal distribution of resources is one of the cause for all the wars among humans, Nehru saw in modernity the role of the state as an efficient distributor of resources among public. For this purpose he took recourse to socialism which had manifested in nationalization of heavy industries,formation of planning commission.

To chase modernity he tried to infuse scientific temper among Indians by building IITS and IIMS without giving adequate importance to primary education. Similarly his idea of secularism gave state an enormous amount of power to act as an arbitrator of dispute in religious matters.

Nehru's enchantment with modernity as well as with its institution is to maintain decorum in Indian social system .So that the energies of the public can be utilised for productive purpose. This will eventually enhance the prestige of India in international sphere. Precisely we can say that Nehru was chasing the universal ideas without giving adequate importance to the particularities of Indian society.

AMBEDKAR'S LANGUAGE OF *SELF RESPECT* AND *DIGNITY*:

He communicated modernity in the form of 'assertion' against tradition. For this assertion he uses the language of 'self-respect' and 'dignity' for which the lower caste peoples were yearning! He was adamant when untouchables faces humiliation and disrespect. In 1939, Ambedkar made his stand clear in the legislative council of Bombay presidency –"Whenever there will be any conflict of interest between the country and untouchables , so far as I am concerned , the untouchable interest will take precedence over the interest of the country" (Note: the space i.e. the legislative council was the colonial modern institution).

The notion of self-respect and dignity was foregrounded in Ambedkar's engagement with modernity as opposed to traditional sphere which is saturated with humiliation, shame, degradation and insult. His treatment of modernity is an end in itself (hence intrinsic). Unlike Nehru whose national philosophy contains the purpose of national unity, secularisation, and centralised states (hence instrumental).

 Ambedkar dealt with modernity in Kantian terms i.e. Dalit should be treated with respect and dignity on being a *human* and hence the treatment should be guided through universal moral principles (Categorical imperative). So we can see a clear distinction between Nehru's language of *deference* and Ambedkar's language of *self-respect* and *dignity*.

Unlike the other nationalist, Ambedkar tried to use modernity for the radical transformation of society for which he demanded centralised state in order to annihilate caste based prejudices in society. Unlike Gandhi he was fond of urban centres as he believed that the rural areas are the den of caste based exploitation .The title of 'crypto constitutionalist' fits him as his reliance on constitution was much more than the nationalist bourgeoisie who were heading the freedom struggle. Therefore he wanted to secure the policy of reservation, weighed representation and the separate electorate in constitution. So that the parliamentary majority cannot subvert it.

Apart from self-respect and dignity he shows his modernist inclination in constitution in general and preamble in particular. Liberty, equality, fraternity which he brought from French revolution, constituted together to form social democracy[4]. Liberty underlies the idea of self-determination and to pursue his/her interest , equality stood for one man one value and it comprised of political and social equality.

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[4] Without social democracy, political democracy cannot be realised and according to Ambedkar it would be in peril.

Fraternity is the idea through which he tried to infuse within the Indian citizen – fellow feeling, sense of concern for and an active interest in the well being of other members of the society. Ambedkar relied on fraternity in the realm of civil society as here the law of the state doesn't operate. Hence it was through the language of fraternity he tried to breed respect and dignity among fellow citizens. For him it was the fraternity which underpinned the idea of liberty and equality.

CONCLUSION:

Gandhi's approach of soft hindutva and village utopia of *Ram Rajya* sounds good in theory through the usage of language of incorporation and empowerment but will bound to have implications once the traditional structures of power of Hindu religion unfold its exploitative practices. Most importantly the oppressed after the years of humiliation and violence cannot imagine to return into the folds of hindutva in spite of the modifications done by him.

For mild socialist like Nehru, political freedom was of utmost priority. Any how he wanted to get rid of British rule and wanted to take India toward the path of western modernity, so that India's prestige could be enhanced at the global level. This he attempted without adequately addressing the particularities and nuanced problems of this diverse country. The language of deference and decorum is instrumental in form because often it misses some central aspects of social issues. To put it precisely, instrumental language misses the particular issues of everyday life related to castes, gender, religion. This particularities gets missed out because the instrumental language is always on a rushing mode to achieve its immediate objectives , for Nehru along with other national leaders it was the political freedom from the Britishers.

Ambedkar saw in modernity a hope of 'universalising' the 'particular' (Gopal Guru: 2011). The negative and critical language he used was germinated out of years of humiliation and shame that the lower caste people suffered and till now suffering to a large extent. His entire political thought was meant to emancipate the peoples belonging to the lower rung of the exploitative caste hierarchy. To understand his recourse to modernity we need to understand that nothing was accessible to him from indigenous dictionary. It is through indignation, pain and anger he asserted for equality and justice for untouchables. At the same time he uses the idea of *fraternity* to infuse the feeling of universal belongingness among mankind (here upper and lower castes). Though theoretically he was more successful than Gandhi and Nehru to lay the normative framework on which an inclusive and just society can be build.

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