Ravindra K. Jain

A CRISIS OF CONSCIOUSNESS: DISCOURSE BEYOND CASTE AND COMMUNALISM

Abstract

This article outlines an anthropological exploration of the evolution of individual and social consciousness in modern India mediated by religious and political persuasions.

The colonial consciousness carried the signature of sanskritization and westernization but it was comprehensively encompassed by Orientalism which prevented an indigenous national conceptualization of 'people' (jana). There were also at play religious influences and political delimitations. During the post-colonial conjuncture this fraught consciousness, aided and abetted by social structural factors, crystallized into dominating regional sub-types. The article concludes with a brief and programmatic examination of its northern, southern and western manifestations indexing incipient changes.

Keywords: *colonial and post-colonial conjunctures; consciousness: individual. social, national; religious and political delimitations; loyalty and patriotism; abortive rebellions; regional subtypes*

On the first page of *Rabindra Rachanabali (*The Collected Works of Rabindranath Tagore) a distinction is posited between *mrinmaya* (of mud, soil, land, territory) and *chinmaya* (of consciousness) in civilization. In redefining what have been called sanskritization and westernization as the impact of British colonialism on Indian society (M.N. Srinivas's Social Change in Modern India), the distinction between geography and territory on the one hand and consciousness, on the other, has been totally obscured. Consequently, the interplay of these two dimensions as affecting nationalism via Orientalism in the melange between sanskritization and westernization, as the twin processes of social mobility and change in Indian society, needs to be understood in its totality.

Let me first consider the thesis of the encompassment of Indian westernization within Orientalism. The bifocality of materiality and

RAVINDRA K. JAIN, Formerly Professor Sociology and Social Anthropology, Jawahar Lal Nehru University and Formerly Lecturer, Social Anthropology, Oxford University, United Kingdom

conscientization in Indian westernization is marked by military domination and trade on the one side and the impact of Christianity, on the other. While the former copula (military domination and trade) is well captured even in the global history of humankind (see, Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*), the impact of Christian proselytization is completely undermined. And it is precisely in this respect that the declamation of Protestantism as public religion has led to a profound effect on Indian society (see, Joel Lee's *Deceptive Majority*) through the conjoint operation of westernization and sanskritization. Here I am assuming, not incorrectly, I suppose, that the 'Hinduism' so-called and its various *panth* ('pathways' to use a felicitous expression of T.N. Madan's) were, before the impact of declamatory Protestantism , individualistic and segmented rather than congregational and public. What the combination of congregational/public religious consciousness and its operation in society (wearing one's religion on the sleeve) and the spectre of material and martial domination did was to create circles of elite exclusivity in regional political systems of India. Here I allude to the typical north Indian small multi-caste regions struggling to define themselves as wider religion-based (temple oriented) collectivities (see Sudipta Kaviraj's *The Imaginary Institutions of India*). What these little kingdoms and zamindaries ended up was as spaces of elite dominance and exclusivity. Public religion (or *sarvajanin* in Sanskrit and in local vernacular usage) was the formation that increasingly occupied the social space. Arya Samaj is an early example of this development and, to take a leap into the present conjuncture, the colossal statutory in public places, a contemporary one.

Exclusivity of the elite, as proto-untouchability in its extreme form, is the combined outgrowth of an Orientalism-induced westernization and the *savarna*-based sanskritization in society. The hierarchical distinctions, cutting across rural and urban, north and the south of India are the products of this dynamic. Consciousness or awareness (*chetna*) is the heart of the matter. The White-man Orientalist never even recognized the natives as 'people' (*jana*) (See, Ravindra K. Jain's Introduction in Text and Context: The Social Anthropology of Tradition). And the real 'people' never had 'religion-wise' the instinct of a collectivity to stand up to the adversary. Interestingly enough while the 'foreigner' Muslim was amalgamated ambidextrously in the category 'native', the White-man Christian stood apart though as the progenitor of a public consciousness he provided the model of elite exclusivity to the native.

Here we wish to refer to the fusion between the colonial White Man's Burden and the post-colonial "White Media's Burden" (see, Tariq Mansoor, in Indian Express, dated 21 January 2023), the latter referring to what the author regards as a wilful caricature of Prime Minister Modi in a two-part BBC documentary in relation to the persecution of Muslims in the Gujarat riots of 2002. From the viewpoint of contemporary history, then, the colonialists' game of driving a wedge between the Hindu and the Muslim communities and

installing it as a template in the "peoples" consciousness seems to have succeeded (see, Romila Thapar, in The Wire, dated 20 January 2023). An interesting by-product has been a division in the consciousness of the Muslim community itself vis-a-vis the present ruling dispensation and a parallel schism in the Hindu 'community'. The ambidextrousness of the Indian Muslims is both a cause and a consequence of the fusion referred to above. One is reminded of a characterization of the Indian Muslims by the sociologist A.K. Saran who likened them to the Shiva holding poison in the throat (Nilakantha) neither able to gulp it (proto-Hinduism) down nor excoriate it, unlike in this respect the converts to Islam in Indonesia, for example. (anecdote courtesy T.N. Madan). A way out of this impasse is (in the opinion of a substantial body of intellectuals in India) for the two 'communities'- Hindu and Muslim- to be self-critical rather than laying great store by the critique of each by the other, and of either by a foreign body representing the 'developed' world.

As regards the dominated, the 'native', we find in their consciousness a confluence of loyalty and patriotism (*jus raja tas praja,*' as the ruler so the subjects), culminating in our own times into apologetic patriotism (e.g., Gandhi and Nehru) or, in the Hindi literary genre, into apologetic romanticism (see, for example, Akshaya Mukul's Many Lives of Agyeya).The confluence of loyalty and patriotism is a feature of 'kisan' (big landlords, smaller farmers and landless labourers—all attached to the land as agriculturists) behaviour as well. This category constitutes a very large proportion of the Indian population (nearly 40%) and it would be an oversimplification to reduce all their mutual interactions to the patron-client category. Here the dynamics of role-model enculturation by the lower stratum of the life-style of the higher strata (of this more a little later) seems operative. As a recent field-study of agriculturists on the Bengal-Bihar border shows (to quote from a review of the book by Harsh Mander); "In what he (the author) calls Rahimpur in Malda, he finds the entrenched landlords make common cause with the landless workers against the labour-hiring peasant class. In the panchayat he calls Sargana in Anaria, by contrast, it is the landless and peasants who join forces against the entrenched landlords. He finds that in self-identification, the categories of peasant and farmer are problematic, fluid, slippery; not surprisingly when two-thirds of all marginal, small and medium farmers in Rahimpur, for instance, derive their income mainly from off-farm work.. (He) does not find classes in fixed relationship of adversity or alliance; contentious and collaborative relations exist simultaneously."(Review of Indrajit Roy, *Politics of the Poor: Negotiating Democracy in Contemporary India*, Cambridge University Press, 2018, The Wire, 6 August 2021). In nationalist politics, the apogee of apologetic patriotism was Veer Savarkar. All we are saying is that, suspiciously, there exists a continuum regarding national consciousness between his and the Gandhi/Nehru brand. And that this pattern conforms with the grass-roots peasant life as well. This should by no means be construed as a blanket damnation of the Gandhian and Nehruvian leadership in the freedom movement and, much

less, as the apologists for the present ruling dispensation would have it, a valorization of violent native confrontation with colonial rule in India, viz., the hagiography of Subhas Chandra Bose and Bhagat Singh. (For a subtle analysis of the paralysis of the Gandhian non-violent confrontation itself,(see Jyotirmaya Sharma's *Elusive Non Violence*).

Programmatically, we propose to project the aforesaid argument temporally and spatially. Upholding the perspective of contemporary history, we look at two conjunctures: the colonial and immediately post-colonial era (the movement of freedom struggle and the Nehruvian years) and the post-ltberalization era (post-1991 years of structural reforms and the rise of right-wing politics). Spatially, we would compare and contrast two sub-types of the paradigm, namely, north India and south India with Bengal and Tamil Nadu (then the Madras Presidency) as case-studies. In what follows we would only touch upon the pre-history, as it were, of the two subtypes. Cutting across the two subtypes one may generalize for the macro-structure of Indian society and posit a continuity between the colonial and post-colonial conjunctures. This macro-structure can be summed up in three principles: First, there is a continuing relationship and interaction between proximate generations. Second, the ties of friendship and neighbourliness figure in continuous "ordinary"(See, Veena Das, *Textures of the Ordinary)* interactions. Three, as regards the socio-economic strata there is the process of role model enculturation by the lower from the higher stratum. We find that in varying degrees these three principles are operative in the elite-dominated and elite-emulated hierarchical structure of Indian society.

To come to the prehistory, so to speak, of our aforementioned paradigm, the uneasy blend of sanskritization and westernization in the 19th century Bengal is well captured in the novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) which Sudipta Kaviraj has aptly summarized as "the unhappy consciousness". To generalize it along the hinterland of north India, we find the imperfectly religion-based rebellion of 1857 (on which a little more anon), and in our own times, with Bengal as the leitmotif, the Durga Puja festival (more carniivalesque than religious) all through the Indo-Gangetic plain. One should also note variations such as the Chhath puja in Bihar tending towards a sarvajanin or public celebration of religion, and perhaps a trajectory along similar lines to analyze the Kumbh mega-festival in Allahabad. All these instances reverberate with the limits and possibilities of Hindu 'panths' struggling to be collective. The small-kingdom socio-political boundaries had set inexorable limits to the expansion of individually-tuned religious gatherings. Thus we find in north India the rise of bhakti cults such as the kabir-panthis, nanak-panthis, raidas-panthis and so on and more infrequently the 'congregational' followers of bhajans or devotional songs of Mirabai and Surdas. However, the main modality of performance here is the Baul of Bengal who is not oriented to a congregation. The collectivities, such as they were, remained

linguistically and ethnically circumscribed; there was no question of congregations such as the church service or namaz in a mosque. Within the realm of the bhakti collectivity, the individual worshipper reigned supreme.

The unhappy consciousness of Bankim Chandra, the Bengali novelist was, from the viewpoint of his inner conflict, an expression of the indigenous individual belief system reaching out to a publicly articulated foreign congregational/Christian model. The abortive violent confrontation by martial Hindu sects against the alien White supremacist—a perennial theme in Bankim Chandra's novels—has to be seen in that perspective. It is a forerunner in the literary genre of the ambiguous and ambivalent religious consciousness that was to reverberate strikingly, and possibly reached its denoument ,in the rebellion of 1857.

The second case that we take up is Tamil Nadu. Here we do not consider the prehistory of the south Indian conjuncture with resort to a novelist like Bankim Chandra, but via the figure of Ramaswamy Naicker Periyar in Tamil Nadu. As the founder of the well-known *suye-maryadai* or Self Respect movement Periyar initially championed the non-Brahmin parties (the Justice Party) as against the dominance of Brahmins but increasingly veered toward not only anti-caste but anti-religion agitation culminating in what has been called an indigenous brand of anarchism. Apparently Periyar's "political atheism" (see Karthick Ram Manoharan's Periyar: A Study in Political Atheism) attracted a number of aspiring young politicians, e.g., C.N Annadurai, but his message of Self Respect remained confined to a smaller group of acolytes until a social language was found in the shape of Tamil popular culture and Dravidian identity. The individualistic conscientization of Periyar fell short of a mass movement which was to be subsequently carried on the shoulders of D.K. and D.M.K. parties in the political arena. The ambivalences of Periyar himself in regard to power politics and his 'unprincipled' stand on state power (his early period of dalliance with Russian inspired socialistic regime) make him an enigmatic figure in the annals of Tamil Nadu socio-political space. It may justly be said that the failure of Self Respect as a *social* movement lay in its character of being a mirror-image of the individualistic religious consciousness of the Tamil Hindu pantheon. Had it not been for the heteroglossia of Tamil film, theatre and popular literature the Dravidian political movement could barely have survived on Periyar's anarchic belligerence alone. As it became clear early on neither the anti-God nor the anti-caste posture of Periyar had a long shelf-life in Tamil Nadu.

This then is the abortive history and geography of rebellion in colonial and post-colonial Indian society. The valorization of sanskritizaton and westernization as material facts of social mobility and change does little to hide the crisis of consciousness that underlay these processes. For north India, the Indian National Congress sponsored Brahmin-Bania-Hindi nationalist

discourse and for south India the Dravidian-Tamil-non Brahmin 'regional' discourse typify the modalities of socio-political consciousness in the country. That this consciousness was heterogeneous and uneven throughout the spatio-temporal conjunctures of colonial, post-colonial and post- 'structural reforms' Indian society ,is a story imbricated in the annals of contemporary history. It continues to haunt the politics of our own day. In all this, it is the accent on Tagore's *chinmaya* rather than *mrinmaya* alone that we have attempted to highlight.

ADDENDUM

Western India and Dalit Futures

We have spoken earlier of the exclusivity of the elite as proto-untouchability. In the eradication of this virus the north Indian Brahmin-Bania-Hindi discourse of the Indian National Congress failed miserably. Even the southern Indian Dravidian-Tamil-non Brahmin discourse as signalled by Periyar's own futile efforts had a limited (and that too primarily 'political') success. However, when one comes to western India, it is the call of Ambedkar's movement against untouchability as the kingpin for the "annihilation of caste" that commands our attention. Before tracing its gradual evolution in the twentieth century (see Nirupama Rao's The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India) we may consider seriously its twenty first century avatar, particularly its convergence in today's conjuncture with the footprints of Periyar's anti-caste movement (see the Conference in Wolverhampton University, 2022). The analytical standpoint that unites the anti-proto-untouchability tirade through the convergence between Periyar and Ambedkar is the insight that the untouchable/untouchability is the *constitutive outsider* of the caste (jati/varna) order. As we have seen, when we trace the trajectory of 'untouchability through the Orientalist character of sanskritization and westernization the phenomenon spreads far beyond the ritual purity and pollution of the Brahmanical taboo. It straddles all exclusionary taboos of the *savarna* ideals that may be generalized as *ghrina* (disgust or extreme aversion or hate) involving contact with those who are lower in the socio-economic hierarchy (See, Joel Lee's Deceptive Majority, and also Aniket Jaaware's comprehensive discourse on touching and not touching in Practising Caste). The temple, with its tabooed sanctum sentorum is the epitome of this exclusivity with the suggested 'public' solution that the sacred image be displayed on a tower outside the temple (a *manastambha*) for "everyone" (the people) to see. The acute manifestation of ghrina practised by the savarna power holder against the subservient untouchable was resisted in such confrontational movements as those demanding temple entry, end of exclusive seating in schools and the struggle to draw water from village tanks. The extreme counter-reaction to elite ghrina came in the 20th century Maharashtra in the form of Dalit Panther

movement which was a heightened, atavistic, surge of collective untouchable sensitivity mostly expressed in individual acts of creativity through dalit literature.

Here we must meditate on the intimate but contradictory consciousness of the untouchables as both vulnerable to exclusion and attacks by the savarna and their self-conception as outsiders guarding the purity and inherent self-esteem of the higher-ups. (see, for example, the character of the dalit protagonist adolescent girl Maadathi in the film of the same name). This self-same contradictory consciousness is also well captured in the irony and sublimated frustrations of the protagonist in dalit literature . It also runs aground the legal and constitutional 'protective' measures instituted by the State. This is the story of the dalit acceptance/non-acceptance of the anti caste atrocity legislation. There is thus a fusion in the Dalit predicament of what one may term (after Michael Herzfeld) "subversive archaism" and what Foucault would call "surveillance" via imposition of discipline by the State. The imbrications of the former intimate self-realization in the dalit behaviour and consciousness are through ritual and the response to the latter is political. These two dimensions of dalit consciousness are ably delineated in Anupama Rao's narrative; they constitute the limits and possibilities of dalit conscientization in late twentieth century Maharashtra.

As we follow to the end Anupama Rao's narrative, a light at the end of the tunnel seems to appear in the form of the advent of Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh. But in our view that light failed when Mayawati's BSP as a political party fell into the trap of dalit jati fragmentation and fractionalism at the minimal level of the hierarchy and an improbable block-solidarity(sarvajan rather than bahujan) in alliance with the savarna at the maximal level of hierarchical segmentation. In Maharashtra itself, to turn to the very recent development, the ruins of Ambedkarism in terms of Prakash Ambedkar's Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) political party let themselves be absorbed in the encompassing factionalism of Shiv Sena, thus further clipping its wings as the vanguard of dalit emancipation.

Whereas the party political process seems to be the Achilles' heel of dalit emancipation and the "annihilation of caste" the growing clout of youth and student activism on the wider canvas of India shows positive portends. The heteroglossia of cultural revival—films, literature, arts, and the social media in general—reveals and at the same time impacts youth consciousness. This consciousness is at the intersection of generations, friendship, neighbourliness and role model enculturation. The intersections help as well as hinder the chinmaya (ideational potential) of emancipation. Will they overcome the hubris of territorially bound nationalism (mrinmaya) remains to be seen.

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