

One Step outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere

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One Step Outside Modernity Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere

The contradictory engagement with modernity by the lower castes has an important message: being one step outside modernity alone can guarantee them a public where the politics of difference can articulate itself, and caste can emerge as a legitimate category of democratic politics. Being one step outside modernity is indeed being one step ahead of modernity.

M S S PANDIAN

I Introduction

‘...although I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget.’

– Kumud Pawde,
The Story of my Sanskrit..

The autobiography of R K Narayan, the well known Indian writer in English, is perhaps a useful place to begin one’s explorations into the complex interrelationship between caste, identity politics and the public sphere. When I read it recently, one of the things that struck me the most was how Narayan, whose fictional world dealt substantially with the life of rural and small town south India, was almost completely silent about his caste identity. In an autobiographical text running into 186 pages, he mentions his caste only in two places. First, when he recollects his schooling in colonial Madras during the 1910s. He was the only brahmin boy in his class in the missionary-run school. The context was the scripture classes in the school where Hinduism and brahmins were deliberately chosen for systematic lampooning. The second instance was from his adult life as a journalist working from Mysore. Here, he wonders how he, a brahmin, was employed as a stringer for the official newspaper of the South Indian Liberal Federation (or the Justice Party), *The Justice*, which vigorously enunciated anti-brahminism in colonial south India. Interestingly, both are occasions when others bring his caste into being – the rabid fundamentalist Christians in one instance, and the exclusivist non-brahmins in the other. But for their

incitement, caste perhaps would not have made even those two appearances in the rich and textured story of Narayan’s life.¹

For a man born in 1906 and who witnessed the most acute battles around caste – whether it be M K Gandhi’s threat to commit suicide which robbed by means of the Poona Pact the ‘untouchable’ communities of separate electorate, or the nationwide movement for temple entry by the untouchables, or the rise of non-brahmin politics in the Madras presidency during the early decades of the 20th century – Narayan’s forgetfulness about caste comes through as a bit surprising. But this feeling of surprise fades away when one does a closer reading of his autobiography. All through the autobiography, caste masquerades as something else and makes its muted modern appearance. For instance, writing about his difficulties in getting a proper house to rent in Mysore, he writes, “...our requirements were rather complicated – separate room for three brothers, their families, and a mother; also for Sheba, our huge Great Dane, who had to have a place outside the house to have her meat cooked, without the fumes from the meat pot polluting our strictly vegetarian atmosphere; a place for our old servant too, who was the only one who could go out and get the mutton and cook it.”² It does not need much of an effort to understand what ‘strictly vegetarian atmosphere’ or meat, which is specified as mutton (that is, *it is not beef*) encodes. It is caste by other means.³

The subtle act of transcoding caste and caste relations into something else – as though to talk about caste as caste would incarcerate one into a pre-modern realm

– is a regular feature one finds in most upper caste autobiographies. Caste always belongs to someone else; it is somewhere else; it is of another time. The act of transcoding is an act of acknowledging and disavowing caste at once.

In marked contrast to the upper caste autobiographies, the self-definition of one’s identity, as found in the autobiographies of the lower castes, is located explicitly in caste as a relational identity. The autobiographical renditions of Bhama or Viramma, two dalit women from the Tamil-speaking region, the poignant autobiographical fragments of dalits from Maharashtra, put together by Arjun Dangle in his edited volume *Corpse in the Well*, and Vasant Moon’s *Growing up Untouchable in India*, are all suffused with the language of caste – at times mutinous, at times moving.⁴ Most often the very act of writing an autobiography for a person belonging to a lower caste is to talk about and engage with the issue of caste.⁵

In other words, we have here two competing sets of languages dealing with the issue of caste. One talks of caste by other means; and the other talks of caste on its ‘own terms’. My attempt in the rest of the paper is to understand the implication of these two sets of languages for the play of identities in the public sphere under the long shadow of modernity.

II A Colonial Story

First, let us have a look at the historical conditions that facilitated and made possible these two competing modes of talking about castes. This straightaway takes

us to the domain of culture as articulated by dominant Indian nationalism, in its battle against colonialism. In an influential formulation, Partha Chatterjee has argued that anti-colonial nationalism marks out the domain of culture or spirituality as “its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power.”⁶ As Chatterjee shows, in the discourse of nationalism, “The greater one’s success in imitating western skills in the material domain,...the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture.”⁷ In arguing so, Chatterjee departs from Benedict Anderson, who treats anti-colonial nationalism as already imagined in the west, and recovers a space of autonomous national imagination for the colonised. Clearly, Chatterjee’s argument, in displacing the centrality of the west, relocates political agency in the colonised.

While I agree with the new possibilities opened up by Chatterjee’s argument about nationalism in the colonial context, if we pluralise ‘national community’ and ‘national culture’, the obvious triumph of dominant nationalism over colonialism would at once emerge as a story of domination over varied sections of the subaltern social groups within the nation. In other words, if we foreground dominant nationalism in an oppositional dialogue with the subaltern social groups within the nation – instead of colonialism – the divide between the spiritual and material, inner and outer, would tell us other stories – stories of domination and exclusion under the sign of culture and spirituality within the so-called national community itself. That is, the very domain of sovereignty that nationalism carves out in the face of colonial domination is simultaneously a domain of enforcing domination over the subaltern social groups such as lower castes, women and marginal linguistic regions, by the national elite. For example, Partha Chatterjee, in discussing Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay’s *The History of India*, notes, “If the 19th century Englishman could claim ancient Greece as his classical heritage, why should not the English-educated Bengali feel proud of the achievement of the so-called Vedic civilisation?”⁸ If we keep aside the obvious sense of irony in this statement, what we find is a valorised opposition between colonialism and nationalism. The nationalist invocation of Vedic civilisation indeed challenges the claims to supremacy by the colonisers. However, it also carries an unstated

hierarchisation of different social groups that go to make the nation. The normativity of a Vedic civilisation, reinvented by dominant nationalism, would accommodate vast sections of Indians only as inferiors within the nation.⁹ It is not so much the triumph of non-modular nationalism over colonialism, but its inability to exercise hegemony over the life of the nation, is where we can locate the source of two competing modes of speaking caste.

I shall illustrate this by journeying through the biography of a prominent public figure in colonial Madras, P S Sivaswami Aiyer (1864-1946). Among other things, Sivaswami Aiyer was assistant professor at Madras Law College (1893-99), joint editor of *Madras Law Journal* (1893-1907), member of the Madras legislative council, and vice-chancellor of Madras University (1916-18).¹⁰ In keeping with his pre-eminent location in this modernised colonial public, his life in the material domain was governed by what one may term as canons or protocols of western modernity. The telling instance of this was the way Sivaswami Aiyer organised his time: “...daily walks, hours set apart for reading newspapers or magazines, fixed time for bath and food, appointment for interview of visitors, intervals devoted to correspondence and private accounts and family affairs – these made up Sivaswami Aiyer’s well arranged routine.”¹¹ As one of his life-long friends, C R Narayana Rao, recounted, “his habits [were] regulated by clocks and watches.”¹²

However, this modern selfhood of Sivaswami Aiyer in the material domain accounts for only part of his life. The rest was one of ‘tradition’:

In his personal habits he never changed much from the Indian tradition even after his long tours in foreign lands. As a matter of fact, the reason why he spent extra money on a personal attendant throughout his long tours was his anxiety not to depend on food and victuals supplied at foreign hotels...In his life he had hardly any occasion to have food outside except at intimate friends’ places on invitation. His bath at stated time, performance of Sandhyavandanam in the morning, afternoon and evening, annual observances of Sraddhas for his parents – all connoted the immutability of time-honoured regulations that he respected. All religious festivals and special fasts were observed by him... Religious expositions from *Srimad Bhagavata* or *Devi Bhagavata* used to be conducted by some learned pundits and listened to with faith by his wife and himself.

Brahmins were fed in his house in the ancient manner with all the paraphernalia of a Hindu ritual.¹³

Here we have a description of what the author claims to be ‘Indian tradition’. It includes, among other things, notions of pollution, Sandhyavandanam, Sraddhas, *Srimad Bhagavata*, *Devi Bhagavata* and feeding of brahmins. In short, what gets encoded here as Indian culture is what is culture to the brahmins/upper castes. The logic of exclusion from and the inferiorisation of lower caste ‘traditions’ within the so-called national tradition are too obvious for elaboration. Let me also mention here that the book that carries this description of ‘Indian tradition’ has been published in the ‘Builders of Modern India’ series by the government of India.

T K Venkatrama Sastri, one of his early juniors, captured the hybridity that Sivaswami Aiyer was, in the following words: “In the very first week came my test. One night he put into my hands Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies* and asked me to read the title of the book. When I read ‘sesame’ as a word of three syllables, I passed the first test. He was very punctilious about pronunciation...Another night he bade me to read the *Bhagavata Purana*, a favourite study of his. After I had read it for some time, he took it back and read it with feeling...”¹⁴

The seemingly effortless coexistence of Ruskin and *Bhagavata Purana* in the everyday world of Sivaswami Aiyer in colonial Tamil Nadu can, of course, be written as a straightforward story of resistance to colonialism. This is indeed the way the elite Indian nationalism scripted the story by working through the binaries of spiritual/material, inner/outer and valorising the inner or spiritual as the uncolonised site of national selfhood. But it had a less triumphal implication for the subaltern classes.

First of all, courting the west in the material domain by means of accessing English education, falling in line with certain time discipline, participating in the language of law, and so on, provided the Indian elite with the means to take part in the colonial structures of authority (though indisputably as subordinates to the colonisers). Often such authority, working itself through the language of English and disciplinary institutions like the court of law meant a compelling moment of exclusion and disempowerment for the subordinate social groups within the ‘national community’. For instance, *Pradabha*

Mudaliar Charitram, the first novel in Tamil, published in 1879, talks of the effect of conducting court proceedings in English for the ordinary people, as follows: "They returned home without any gain like a blind man who went to watch theatre and like a deaf man who went to listen to music."¹⁵

Simultaneously, the so-called sovereign domain of culture uncolonised by the west remained a domain to affirm elite upper caste culture/spirituality as the culture of the nation. We have already seen this through the instance of Sivaswami Aiyer's spirituality. This act of mobilising a part of the national to stand for the whole, not only inferiorised vast sections of lower castes as inadequate citizens-in-the-making,¹⁶ but also significantly *delegitimised the language of caste in the domain of politics by annexing it as part of the cultural*. It is only by unsettling the boundaries between the spiritual and material, inner and outer, could the lower castes (and women) contest the logic of exclusion inherent in the so-called national culture and talk caste in the colonial public sphere.

The intersection between the act of unsettling the boundary between spiritual and material, and the efforts of dominant nationalism to enforce this very boundary is the point at which we can trace the arrival of the two modes of talking about caste which I have mentioned earlier. In fact, much of the politics of Periyar E V Ramasamy or Babasaheb Ambedkar can be read as an effort to unsettle the boundary between the spiritual and the material, and recover a space for the language of caste in the colonial public sphere. However, it is a far more interesting story how the mainstream nationalists, in confronting this language of caste in the domain of politics, responded to it.

In 1933, the municipality of Pollachi, a small town in western Tamil Nadu, introduced a regulation to do away with the separate dining spaces marked out for the brahmins and the non-brahmins in hotels. Sivaswami Aiyer opposed the move by claiming that it was interference in personal matters.¹⁷ Here is an obvious story of pushing back caste into the inner domain of culture. But most often, caste, once brought into the public domain, refused to heed such nationalist advice. It stayed on, speaking its own language, though from marginal and stigmatised spaces.

In the face of such stubbornness, caste often gets written out as a part of the

colonial strategy of 'divide and rule' and, thus, its invocation in the domain of politics stigmatised. The story of how the nationalisms of E V Ramasamy and Ambedkar are suspect even today; and how they, in the dominant nationalist thinking, remain as 'collaborators' with the British, would illustrate this.¹⁸ At another level, caste gets transcoded as a modern institution in an effort to shut out the language of caste from the public sphere. Let me take the case of untouchability. There was an avalanche of publications in the first half of the 20th century, which explained away untouchability by resorting to a discourse of hygiene. P V Jagadisa Aiyer, whose monograph *South Indian Customs*, published originally in 1925 but in print even today, has the following to say:

The Indian custom of observing distance pollution, etc. has hygienic and sanitary considerations in view. In general the so-called pious and religious people are generally most scrupulously clean and hence contact with people of uncleanly habits is nauseating to them...people living on unwholesome food such as rotten fish, flesh, garlic, etc. as well as the people of filthy and unclean habits throw out of their bodies coarse and unhealthy magnetism. This affects the religious people of pure habits and diet injuriously. So they keep themselves at a safe distance which has been fixed by the sages of old after sufficient experience and experiment.¹⁹

This quote is interesting on several counts. There is not a moment when it acknowledges caste. The upper castes, on the one hand, get encoded here as 'so-called pious and religious people' or as 'religious people of pure habits'. The lower castes, on the other, are encoded as 'people living on rotten fish, flesh, garlic, etc.' Fish, flesh and garlic – all are tabooed in the world of the brahmin and certain other upper castes. Interestingly, Jagadisa Aiyer does not invoke merely experience, but experimentation as well. The authority of experimentation summons science to validate caste pollution.²⁰

In other contexts, caste, in the hands of the upper castes and dominant nationalists, reincarnates as division of labour. Though one can easily provide several instances to illustrate this, let me just confine to one. In an editorial, appropriately titled 'How Caste Helps', *New India*, the journal of the Theosophical Society edited by Annie Besant, noted, "However much we may declaim against the thralldom of caste in details, the fundamental four

divisions of men are so much part of the natural order of things that they will remain as long as servants and traders and soldiers and teachers perform their duties amongst us." It further added, "...caste in itself is not peculiar to India, but is found everywhere. Servers, merchants fighters and rulers, priests, every people has them, though the name is different according to the nation."²¹ Here, Annie Besant, a vociferous defender of brahminism, who tried her best to wreck the non-brahmin political mobilisation in colonial Madras presidency, naturalises caste. In doing so, she assimilates caste as part of a universal structure of division of labour and denies it any socio-historical specificity. Both the acts of naturalising caste and denying it any specificity, work in tandem to invalidate caste as a relevant category in public sphere and politics.

In tracing the historical moment of the arrival two modes of talking about caste in the Indian public sphere, as it unfolded in the womb of colonialism, let me emphasise two key points: first, the very nationalist resolution founded on the divide between spiritual and material rendered the mode of talking caste on its own terms in the material/public sphere, an illegitimate project. Two, its response to those who still chose the language of caste in the domain of politics by crossing the divide between the spiritual and material, is one of mobilising modernity (hygiene and division of labour as instances we have seen) and nation to inscribe the language of caste as once again illegitimate.

The intimacy between modernity and the desire to keep caste out of the public sphere had its own particular career in post-colonial India, to which now I turn.

III Post-colonial Angst

With the end of colonial rule, the ambivalence towards the modern exhibited by the Indian nationalist elite during the colonial period withered. Now it is modernity on the terms of the 'nation' itself. The character of this new journey along the path of the modern by the Indian nation state has been captured by Partha Chatterjee in the following words: "The modern state, embedded as it is within the universal narrative of capital, cannot recognise within its jurisdiction any form of community except the single, determinate, demographically enumerable form of the nation."²² However, it is important here to recognise

that this very opposition between the state (and/or capital) and the community would make community indispensable for the articulation of the nation. After all, only by recognising the presence of communities can the nation state deny their legitimacy and affirm the nation. This simultaneous inseparability and antagonism between the modern state and community is of critical importance to understand the politics of two modes of talking caste in post-colonial India.²³

In exploring this connection between modernity and caste in the post-colonial India, the writings of M N Srinivas, who was committed at once to the developmental state and sociology,²⁴ is most helpful. Let us have a look at his much-hyped theory of Sanskritisation and westernisation. Stripped down to its basics, the theory, within a comparative framework, claims that the lower castes sanskritise and the upper castes westernise.²⁵ Taking a cue from Johannes Fabian's argument about how the west constructs its 'other' by "the denial of coevalness",²⁶ we can immediately locate a teleological scheme within Srinivas's comparative analysis. The teleology moves from lower caste practices to sanskritisation to westernisation. This very teleology sets caste as the 'other' of the modern.

But we need to remember here that what looks here like the unmarked modern is stealthily upper caste in its orientation. What M N Srinivas offers us as the history of westernisation in India is eminently instructive here. He writes:

Only a tiny fraction of the Indian population came into direct, fact-to-face contact with the British or other Europeans, and those who came into such contact did not always become a force for change. Indian servants of the British, for instance, probably wielded some influence among their kin groups and local caste groups but not among others. They generally came from the low castes, their westernisation was of a superficial kind, and the upper castes made fun of their Pidgin English, their absurd admiration for their employers, and the airs they gave themselves. Similarly, converts to Christianity from Hinduism did not exercise much influence as a whole because first, these also came from the low castes, and second, the act of conversion often only changed the faith but not the customs, the general culture, or the standing of the converts in society.²⁷

Very clearly, for M N Srinivas, the source of the Indian modern cannot be the lower castes. Their attempts could only remain

superficial trapped in pidgin English and absurd admiration for their employers. Interestingly, this is one of those several paragraphs in Srinivas's book, which refuses the distinction between his own view and that of others whom he is talking about.

Let me stay with this theme a bit more. M N Srinivas, in the course of his book, gives us a list of 'westernised intelligentsia' who were, in his words, "the torchbearers of a new and modern India". The list runs as follows: Tagore, Vivekananda, Ranade, Gokhale, Tilak, Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Radhakrishnan.²⁸ Let us for the moment not get caught in the question of how complex figures like Gandhi find a place in this list of westernised intelligentsia. What is of interest here is the glaring absence of the names of those who courted the modern for the mobilisation of lower caste. Babasaheb Ambedkar and Periyar E V Ramasamy are obvious instances here. It is evident that Indian modern, despite its claim to be universal – and of course, because of it – not only constitutes lower caste as its 'other', but also inscribes itself silently as upper caste. Thus, caste, as the other of the modern, always belongs to the lower castes.²⁹

Given this particular character of the Indian modern, it proscribes and stigmatises the language of caste in the public sphere. It does so even while it talks caste by other means. In understanding the politics of this authorised language of the public sphere, M N Srinivas is once again helpful. It was thanks to Edmund Leach that Srinivas, who spoke all the time about caste in general but never about his own, spoke of his caste identity. In a review of Srinivas's *Caste in Modern India*, Leach called his Sanskritisation model 'Brahminocentric' and taunted him whether his interpretation would have been different if he were a sudra.³⁰ If the incitement of the rabid Christians and the non-brahmins occasioned R K Narayan's acknowledgement of his upper caste identity, the incitement of Edmund Leach prompted Srinivas to concede his own caste identity. He claimed:

...my stressing of the importance of the Backward Classes Movement, and of the role of caste in politics and administration, are very probably the result of my being a south Indian, and a brahmin at that. The principle of caste quotas for appointments to posts in the administration, and for admissions to scientific and technological courses, produced much bitterness among

Mysore brahmins. Some of these were my friends and relatives, and I could not help being sensitive to their distress.³¹

This is familiar enough. Distress of the brahmin is the theme song of the post-Mandal modern public sphere of India. M N Srinivas, to his credit, talks of it even earlier. But what is quite illuminating here is that as soon as he confesses his caste identity (with the caveat of 'very probably'), he hastens to enfeeble it. In the place of his sensitivity to the distress of the Mysore brahmins, now he presents a range of things that has nothing to do with caste as such, as the reason for his opposition to caste quotas. He could not help being sensitive "to the steady deterioration in efficiency and the fouling of interpersonal relations in academic circles and the administration – both results of a policy of caste quotas. As one with a strong attachment to Mysore, I could not but be affected by the manner in which conflicts between castes prevented concentration on the all-important task of developing the economic resources of the state for the benefit of all sections of its population."³²

Srinivas, at one level, emerges here as one of "...those 'experts' on caste who consider it their duty to protect caste from the pollution of politics."³³ Here is a torrent of words – 'decline of efficiency', 'fouling of interpersonal relations', 'the benefit of all sections of the population' – all conspire to keep caste out of public articulation. In the heart of all of it what we find is the well known principle of 'common good' as a civic ideal. As the feminist and other minoritarian critiques of civic republican ideal of 'common good' has shown us, the deployment of 'common good' as the so-called democratic ideal elbows out the politics of difference based on inferiorised identities and sports the interests of the powerful as that of the society as a whole. As Chantal Mouffe has argued, "all form of consensus are by necessity based on acts of exclusion."³⁴

However, this is not merely a story of interests, but of democracy and its articulation in the public sphere. The deracinated language of 'common good' comes in the way of the formation of an inclusive public sphere. The pressure exerted by the modern most often forces the subordinated castes into silence and self-hate. D R Nagaraj, a fellow traveller and a scholar of the dalit movement in Karnataka, notes, "The birth of the modern individual in the humiliated communities is not only accompanied by a painful severing of ties

with the community, but also a conscious effort to alter one's past is an integral part of it."³⁵ The moving story of Nanasahab Wankhede, as recounted by Vasant Moon, then a deputy county commissioner in Nagpur, is instructive here: "We went to the house of Nanasahab Wankhede, the retired deputy county commissioner... Nanasahab was an extremely warm person, but he lived completely apart from the community. He didn't care to mix with me even as a deputy commissioner." He told Moon, a fellow mahar, that displaying books on Ambedkar and Buddhism would land him in trouble. But when the news of Ambedkar's death was brought to Wankhede, "he broke into tears".³⁶ It is not words of dialogue in the public, but moments of despair in the private, that the Indian modern offers the lower castes. It demands and enforces that caste can live only secret lives outside the public sphere.

The response of the Indian modern, when the insurrection of the prohibited language of caste occurs in the public sphere, would illuminate the contradictory relationship between modernity and mass politics in India. The year 1990, when V P Singh as the prime minister of India decided to implement a part of the Mandal Commission Report, was such a moment. As an illustration, let me take the response of Ashok Mitra, well known Marxist and a believer in 'People's Democracy'. His modern selfhood is not in doubt at all. In a rather revealing statement, he claimed, "The government's decision...represents the ultimate triumph of the message of Babasaheb Ambedkar over the preachings of secularists".³⁷ Sullied by the language of caste, Ambedkar cannot be part of the secular-modern. He goes on, as a Marxist, to enumerate national ills – which are, for him, more real – such as misdistribution of arable land, near-universal illiteracy and general lack of health. Caste is, however, refused a place in his secular-modern reckoning.³⁸

Then come his ruminations about mass politics: "For the nation's majority, the oppressive arrangements the system has spawned are little different from what obtained under medieval feudalism. With just one exception, medieval tyrants did not have to worry about votes. Modern leaders have to. They cannot therefore ignore pressure groups, who claim to speak on behalf of neglected classes or sections. These groups have to be taken at their face value for they supposedly represent solid vote banks. Revolutions are not next door,

but the threat of votes withheld, or being hawked around to other bidders, works."³⁹ The simultaneous disenchantment of the Indian modern (even in its Marxist incarnation) with the language of caste as well as that of mass politics is all too transparent here. The perceptive comment about the doctrinaire modernist made three decades back by Rajni Kothari, still holds true: "Those who in India who complain of 'casteism in politics' are really looking for a sort of politics which has no basis in society. They also probably lack any clear conception of either the nature of politics or the nature of the caste system (Many of them would want to throw out both politics and caste system)."⁴⁰

IV In Conclusion

In concluding this paper, let me dwell a bit on how the Indian modern's revolt against democracy has shaped the lower caste responses. In their response, the modern is both mobilised and critiqued, for the promises of modernity and what it delivers in practice are often in contradiction. A fragment from the real-life story of how Kumud Pawde, a mahar woman, became proficient in Sanskrit, is a good instance to explore the distinguishing features of these responses.

It is a story of intense struggle, discouragement and ridicule. However, with determination, Kumud Pawde pursues Sanskrit, gets a postgraduate degree, and teaches it in a college. Gokhale Guruji, an orthodox brahmin, was exemplary as a teacher. Her caste did not matter to him. But when she began her MA course in Sanskrit, her own professor – someone other than Guruji – disliked her learning Sanskrit. As Kumud Pawde narrates the events:

The Head of the department was a scholar of all-India repute. He didn't like my learning Sanskrit, and would make it clear that he didn't. And he took a malicious delight in doing so...I would unconsciously compare him with Gokhale Guruji. I couldn't understand why this great man with a doctorate, so renowned all over India, this man in his modern dress, who did not wear the traditional cap, who could so eloquently delineate the philosophy of the Universal Being, and with such ease explain difficult concepts in simple terms, could not practise in real life the philosophy in the books he taught. This man had been exposed to modernity; Gokale Guruji

was orthodox. Yet one had been shrivelled by tradition, the other enriched by it...⁴¹

Here is an anguished statement of wonder from a dalit woman of great accomplishment about how to delineate the meaning of the modern and the non-modern in the context of caste. Modern experience and modern expectation are obviously at loggerheads.⁴² However, it would be a mistake to read this as the lower caste rejection of modernity. It is at once a critique of the modern for its failure as well as an invitation to it to deliver its promises. In other words, the lower castes' relation to modernity can best be described as 'antagonistic indebtedness' – a felicitous term used by Paul Gilroy in the context of Black politics.⁴³

It is by critiquing/rejecting the civilisational claims of modernity that the lower castes, at one level, could claim a space for their politics. The vast corpus of literature produced by the dalit intellectuals during the past decade in Tamil Nadu is illustrative here. For instance, Raj Gowthaman, one of the leading Tamil intellectuals and a dalit literary critique, rejects the civilisational claims and the teleology of modernity, and instead recuperates the past of lowly hill cultivators, hunters, fisherpeople, pastoralists, and the like as the high point of human achievement. He characterises their social life as communal, with people pooling together and sharing food with a sense of equality, without much internal differentiation. Flow of history ceases to be civilising and Raj Gowthaman incites the dalits to step outside it.

In carrying forward his agenda of carving out a space for those who are outside the pale of civilisation in Indian modern's reckoning, he argues that one needs to resignify as positive those cultural practices which are deemed by the upper castes as lowly. Beef-eating, drinking, speaking in dalit dialect are necessarily part of this cultural politics.⁴⁴ The need to reclaim what has been stigmatised is essential because that alone would end the self-hate that Indian modern has produced in the lower castes. Like D R Nagaraj, Raj Gowthaman is aware that the lure of Indian modern is capable of silencing them: "We could see the elements of these protest cultures disappearing among those dalits who have migrated to urban areas seeking education and jobs...We could see the dalits avoiding and covering up these counter-cultural elements because of the consciousness that they are uncivilised."⁴⁵

It is evident that this new political project is addressed to the lower castes. And it gives rise to a sphere of politics outside the modern civil society/public sphere. The very appellation 'dalit' attached to everything that takes place in this sphere signals it.⁴⁶ The refusal to concede the demands of Indian upper caste modernity to hide and at once practise caste has alone ensured this subaltern counter-public.⁴⁷ And this is a public where the language of caste instead of the language of speaking caste by other means, is validated, encouraged and practised. However, it should not be forgotten that this is a public which is simultaneously in constant dialogue with the modern civil society which, in its invocation of modernity, has and continues to resist the articulation of lower caste politics. We do know that most often this dialogue about the new sphere of politics takes place in the sheer despair and condemnations expressed in the modern civil society. The response which the arrival of dalit literature and dalit literary criticism in Tamil Nadu brought has forth from the avant-garde little magazines is a case in point. For instance, responding to the claim that dalit writings constitute a separate literary genre, Tamil Selvan, an activist of the cultural front of the CPI(M) and a thevar by caste, noted in anger, "...stop your pointless howling. Some professors are organising here and there conferences [on dalit literature]. They rebuke others. They try to impose on others' heads what is in their heads. These are unnecessary conflicts." In a move – perhaps inspired by Marxism – towards conflict-resolution, he suggested to the dalit writers, "Give up your pointless howling... [Instead] produce serious writing."⁴⁸ In other words, the subaltern counter-public, in extracting the response of the modern authorised public sphere with its upper caste protocols, is engaged in an antagonistic dialogue with the Indian modern. Equally important is the fact that this sphere of politics outside the modern civil society is in constant dialogue, collaboration and discard with the other strand of lower caste politics which mobilises modernity and speaks a language of universal freedom.

This contradictory engagement with modernity by the lower castes has an important message for all of us: That is, being one step outside modernity alone can guarantee us a public where the politics of difference can articulate itself, and caste can emerge as a legitimate category of democratic politics. Being one step

outside modernity is indeed being one step ahead of modernity. [FV]

Notes

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- 1 R K Narayan, *My Days: A Memoir*, Indian Thought Publications, Mysore, 2000 (1974).
- 2 R K Narayan, *My Days: A Memoir*, p 161.
- 3 There are uncritical admirers of R K Narayan who would object to this mode of reading his writings. For instance, N Ram, a co-biographer of Narayan, writes, 'The criticism is occasionally heard, from literary scholars and others, that Narayan's Malgudi is a literary cocoon, where real-life conflicts, turbulence and socio-economic misery are not encountered. Naipaul, for one, seems to have given some credence to this complaint. But when Narayan is in flow, such criticism seems misdirected, almost banal. Who is to say with what theme or problem or slice of life or imaginative experience a novelist must deal?' (*Frontline*, June 8, 2001, p 12). Such generosity towards the flow of creativity locates creativity outside the social and declines to interrogate critically what an author chooses *not to engage with* is as important as what *she* chooses to.
- 4 Bhamu, *Karukku*, Samudaya Sinthanai Seyal Aaiyu Mayyam, Madurai, 1994; Viramma et al, *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable*, Verso, London, 1997; Arjun Dangle (ed), *A Corpse in the Well: Translations from Modern Matathi Dalit Autobiographies*, Disha Books, Hyderabad, 1994 (1992); and Vasant Moon, *Growing Up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography*. Tr Gail Omvedt, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, Lanham, 2001.
- 5 Though the paper talks about caste in general, it draws its instances from the brahmins and dalits. It is so because, given their location in the caste hierarchy, their instances can be of help in delineating sharply the argument of the paper.
- 6 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*: Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995 (1993), p 7.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid, p 98.
- 9 Partha Chatterjee is not unaware of this problem. However, even while acknowledging this problem, the primary focus of the book is on the opposition between nationalism and

colonialism. It is my plea that if we shift the emphasis from the contradiction between nationalism and colonialism to the contradictions within nationalism, the outcomes would be rather different.

- 10 K Chandrasekharan, *P S Sivaswami Aiyer*, Publications Division, Government of India, New Delhi, 1969, pp 152-53.
- 11 Ibid, p 119.
- 12 Ibid, p 113.
- 13 Ibid, p 114. This story of Sivaswami Aiyer is not an exceptional story. One can produce innumerable similar accounts about the Tamil brahmin elite. Take, for instance, the case of S Satyamurti, lawyer and a nationalist who is well known for his debating skills in English. Of him, it was written: '... He believed in all the rituals ordained by the Shastras as well as tradition. His day would usually begin very early with a bath and the performance of daily religious rites. He would recite or read (do 'parayana') at least a few verses of the *Ramayana* and perform the simple ordinary poojajs which every Hindu householder is enjoined to do and then only proceed to attend to his normal duties as a public man. Even when he was courting imprisonment, he first finished his daily religious routine and then went and courted arrest. Even in the prison he would not give up his daily routine of poojajs'. (R Parthasarathy, *S Satyamurti*, Publications Division, Government of India, New Delhi, 1979, p 201).
- 14 K Chandrasekharan, *P S Sivaswami Aiyer*, p 23.
- 15 Mayuram Vedanayagam Pillai, *Prathaba Mudaliar Charitram*, Chennai, 1984 (1879), p 302.
- 16 It is rather instructive here to take note of what Stuart Hall and David Held have to say about citizenship: 'The issue around membership – who does and who does not belong – is where the politics of citizenship begins. It is impossible to chart the history of the concept very far without coming sharply up against successive attempts to restrict citizenship to certain groups and to exclude others. In different historical periods, different groups have led, and profited from, this 'politics of closure': property-owners, men, white people, the educated, those in particular occupations or with particular skills, adults.' Stuart Hall and David Held, 'Citizens and Citizenship' in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (eds), *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1989, p 175.
- 17 *Gandhi*, November 6, 1933.
- 18 For a recent attempt to characterise Ambedkar as a British collaborator, see Arun Shourie, *Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar and the Facts which Have Been Erased*, ASA Publications, New Delhi, 1997. Characteristically, one of the chapters in the book is titled 'The British Strategem and Its Indian Advocate'.
- 19 P V Jagadisa Aiyar, *South Indian Customs*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1985 (1925), p ix.
- 20 Here is yet another instance of bringing forth western authority to defend caste pollution: *Arya Bala Bodini*, a children's magazine brought out by the Theosophical Society, wrote in 1897, 'The Brahmins, particularly the

- Vaisnavites, insist that they be not seen by others while at dinner. The custom is denounced and declared silly. Efforts are made now and then to bring a miscellaneous crowd to eat together and any success that might attend such gatherings is advertised as grand. People, who ought to know better, exult in such small triumphs, as they would put it, over blind orthodoxy. Let us, however, see what a distinguished westerner has to say on this subject. Says Professor Max Muller in the *Cosmopolis* thus: "The Hindus seem to me to show their good taste by retiring while they feed, and re-appear only after they have washed their hands and face. Why should we be so anxious to perform this no doubt necessary function before the eyes of our friends? Could not at least the grosser part of feeding be performed in private, and the social gathering begin at the dessert, or, with men, at the wine..." (*Arya Bala Bodinin*, III (5), May 1897, p 114).
- 21 *New India*, 58 (77), April 1, 1916.
- 22 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, p 238.
- 23 For a recent and highly sophisticated account of the simultaneous inseparability and antagonism between state and community, see Sankaran Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka and the Question of Nationhood*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1999. Let me also note here that the relationship between the narrative of capital and that of community need not always be one of opposition. They can come together in denying a universal western narrative of capital. For example, see Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logic of Transnationality*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1999.
- 24 Emphasising these two roles of a sociologist, M N Srinivas wrote, "The government of India has an understandable tendency to stress the need for sociological research that is directly related to planning and development. And it is the duty of the sociologists as citizens that they should take part in such research. But there is a grave risk that "pure" or "fundamental" might be sacrificed altogether", M N Srinivas (ed), *India's Villages*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, et al 1963 (1955), p 5.
- 25 M N Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1972.
- 26 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, Columbia university Press, New York, 1983. Walter Mignola characterises the 'denial of coevalness' as 'the replacement of the 'other' in space by the 'other' in time...and the articulation of cultural differences in chronological hierarchies' in Walter D Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonisation*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1995, p xi.
- 27 M N Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, p 60.
- 28 *Ibid*, p 77.
- 29 This is very similar to the manner in which race figures in the western discourse. As Paul Gilroy notes, "...the history of slavery is somehow assigned to blacks. It becomes our special property rather than a part of the ethical and intellectual heritage of the west as a whole." Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1996 (1993), p 49.
- 30 M N Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, p 148.
- 31 *Ibid*, p 152.
- 32 *Ibid*, pp 152-53.
- 33 Rajni Kothari (ed), *Caste in Indian Politics*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1986 (1970), p 6.
- 34 Chantal Mouffe, 'Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics' in Judith Butler and Joan W Scott (eds), *Feminists Theorise the Political*, Routledge, London, 1992, p 379.
- 35 D R Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet: A Study of the Dalit Movement*, South Forum Press, Bangalore, 1993, p 7-8.
- 36 Vasant Moon, *Growing Up Untouchable in India*, p 159.
- 37 Asghar Ali Engineer (ed), *Mandal Commission Controversy*, Ajanta Publications, Delhi 1991, p 190.
- 38 In fact, Ashok Mitra's view on the implementation of Mandal Commission is not different from that of M N Srinivas. Srinivas too lists, in the context of his opposition to the Mandal Commission recommendations, a similar set of problems as the real ones: 'Social and educational backwardness are best tackled by anti-poverty programmes. Backwardness is due in large measure to poverty and the many ills that go with it. Malnutrition affects productivity; illiteracy is inseparable from ignorance and superstition. The lack of access to shelter, clothing and hygiene and sanitation makes people backward. There is such a thing as a 'culture of poverty' (*Ibid*, p 133). The obvious similarity between Ashok Mitra and M N Srinivas points to the elite consensus on the question of caste despite their differing ideological locations.
- 39 *Ibid*, pp 190-91.
- 40 Rajni Kothari (ed), *Caste in Indian Politics*, p 4. For a similar argument, see D L Sheth, 'Changing Terms of Elite Discourse: The Case of Reservation for Other Backward Classes' in T V Sathyamurthy (ed), *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*, OUP, Delhi, 1996.
- 41 Arjun Dangle (ed), *A Corpse in the Well*, p 32.
- 42 See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p 49.
- 43 *Ibid*, p 191.
- 44 A more systematic statement of the same can be found in Kancha Illiah's notion of 'Dalitisation'. See Kancha Illiah, *Why I am Not A Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, Samya, Calcutta, 1996, chap VII.
- 45 I have analysed Raj Gowthaman's Writings in detail elsewhere. The material used here is drawn from 'Stepping Outside History; New Dalit Writings from Tamil Nadu' in Partha Chatterjee (ed), *Wages of Freedom: 50 Years of the Indian Nation-State*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998.
- 46 Upper caste politics which refuses to speak caste as caste is what gets written as politics without any qualification. Politics that invokes caste is always dalit politics or the politics of the 'backwards'.
- 47 On the notion of subaltern counter-public, see Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' in Craig Calhoun (ed), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1996 (1992).
- 48 Quoted in V Arasu, 'Tamil Sirupathirigai Choolalum Dalit Karuthdalum' in Ravi Kumar (ed), *Dalit Kali-Illakiyam-Arasiyal*, Dalit Kalai Vizha Kulu, Neyveli, 1996, p 217.

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