



Colonial Modernity: A Critique

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This paper attempts to articulate the predicament of colonial modernity. Since modernity was ushered in India under British colonial rule, should it be renounced? After all this was a period marked by severe forms of violence and exploitation, and retaining institutions and ideas such as the nation-state, parliamentary secular political life, rule of law, university education etc., derived from this period requires some reflection on their origins. Further, many of these institutions have for most part catered to the elite sections of our society and have been beyond the reach of the masses. Moreover, they have shown their insensitivity to accommodate the underprivileged others in a substantive way: these 'others' are those marginalized by race, caste, class, gender and even the empire.

The difficult questions confronting a postcolonial society are as follows: Can one equate modernity with westernization and hold it responsible for our ills? Or can one reconstruct it in a concrete way so that its promise of freedom does not turn into a nightmare for most people? This predicament is explored with special emphasis on gender issues in the Indian context.

One could briefly characterize modernity as the belief in the autonomy of the individual who is skeptical about the claims of traditional authority. Immanuel Kant characterizes enlightenment as the maturity attained by a person who reasons autonomously. The modern age modelled along these lines of autonomy consisted in rooting all knowledge, culture, morality and institutions in the freedom of the individual, rather than tradition. The spirit of modernity maintains that instead of upholding truth on the basis of heritage, one should arrive at truth through reasoned critical reflection and examined evidence. Modernity's commitment to the sovereignty of the subject was practically enshrined in all aspects of western society by the nineteenth century. At the cultural level modernity led to the formation of what Jürgen Habermas has called three distinct spheres of human experience: science, morality and art. Societal modernization produced efficient systems of specialists in economics and administrative politics who pursued the goals of money and power leading to the growth of instrumental rationality (1996a). Although large parts of the world have acquired modern institutions today the process of modernization has not been uniform. The western world reached the apex of modernity in the nineteenth century through an internal process, while the non-western world had a painful transition to institutions of freedom through an external process of colonization by European countries. The late sixteenth century initiated a gradual process of internal modernization in Europe calling the authority of tradition into question and replaced it by reason and freedom. Experimental science, philosophy, literature, economic and political life took a new turn from the sixteenth century onwards in locating themselves within the framework of human freedom.

The Indian Context of Colonial Modernity

The point worth investigating from a colonial context is how "...the emergence of the tertiary sector in Britain depended on the shift to the colonies of production and exploitable labour no longer viable in the metropole" (Hennessy and Mohan). Gayatri Spivak has rightly observed that although a lot of attention has been paid to how Macauley's minutes on education (1835) produced the colonized subject, not enough attention has been given to the codification of the Hindu law that established a system of brahminical Sanskrit studies alongside the British system. The latter has contributed to the production of a homogeneous colonial subject in a gendered context by excluding the peasants, tribals and so forth — an exclusion that has persisted to this day in a very violent form. The prime task of representing India was of course to further



the colonial empire, but as Feid has so perceptively documented in his *Orientalism* this was also done through the control of knowledge and history. Colonization provided the cheap raw material and labour to make possible both industrial life and markets that women entered in the nineteenth century England. Thinkers as diverse as Hegel and Rosa Luxemburg have observed that modernity, which develops the accumulative principle of wealth, colonized premodern societies in Asia, Africa and Latin America in search of raw materials and cheap labour. Laws, education, bureaucracy and so forth were subsequently introduced in colonies to maintain them. Thus, the possibility of women's equality (which is important despite its strong patriarchal overtones) in England depended upon the empire. The connection becomes clearer when we see how the woman's question was articulated in India in the context of colonial modernity. The encroachment of the British empire into India which began in the mid-seventeenth century was consolidated in the nineteenth century. During this period gender questions were foregrounded in the battle between orientalists, utilitarians and nationalists. Explicit legal and cultural representations of women were initiated both by the British rulers and the nationalists. Feminists such as Pandita Ramabai (who was also a nationalist) questioned the patriarchal aspects of their representation. A glance at the social scenario during this period reveals a society trapped between tradition and modernity. Many traditional evils haunted Indian women which were of a caste specific nature. Upper caste women faced problems such as ostracization of widows and domesticity. Lower caste women who performed caste-based occupations, which involved intensive manual labour were potters, sweepers, washerwomen and so on. Many of them engaged in subsistence crafts such as the making of poultry, milk, and food products. All these jobs used local material, crude tools and were unspecialized, and with the introduction of modern transport system, capital and mechanization, these were transferred to men. Consequently, many lower-caste women were confined to the sectors of domestic service and agriculture or were even driven to prostitution because this transitional stage did not uproot caste totally to permit occupational mobility to the lower castes. Moreover it was men for most part who moved to the urban areas in search of jobs, leaving behind their spouses in the village to look after home and children under very insecure family conditions. Traditional society slowly gave way to a colony with some modern dimensions such as the public/private divide: the state and the family, the secular law governing crime and business and personal law based on religion governing domestic matters, an economic, civic life where women had a marginal presence and a domestic sphere where women were defined as the property of men. The forging of an ideal femininity or Indian womanhood and contestation of patriarchy took place in a society that retained many of its traditional problems despite undergoing major changes.⁴ Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha rightly observe..."we find all the grand abstractions of the times — Empire, Human Nature, Ethical Responsibility, Tradition, Nationalism, Indianness, Masculinity, each with important stakes in the woman's question — imaged in the unfamiliar mirror of these changing subjectivities. For gender, as we shall see, was far from being marginal to the new world. It had a major role to play in the structuring of a whole range of social institutions and practices. Neither the authorial selves, nor the readers they address, can, therefore, be thought of in an ahistoric mode or as primordially female. Their self-hood or subjectivity cannot be separated from the specific historical and political conjunctures that constituted their world."(153) Colonization and orthodox religion proscribed and proscribed the limits for Indian women. Among the British colonizers there were two approaches to the India which shaped their gender analysis: Orientalists such as Max Muller (1823-1900), H.T.Colebrooke and William Jones (1746-1794) picked up ancient sacred texts and defined India as having a golden age in the past in brahminical and Sanskritized epoch (Edward Said has documented this process of constructing



the colonies by the West as its Other in his Orientalism) who glossed over the past because they often relied upon indigenous Brahmin pandits. Max Muller did not explicitly write on the woman's condition of the past, but his research served as the backdrop for Mrs Speir(1856) and Ciarisse Bader (1867)to make observations (of the golden age as conducive to the well-being of women. The orientalist consolidated the view that the Vedas and the Upanishads represent the essence of everything Indian and their contribution was intended to give the so-called natives a sense of their own heritage. They celebrated the Indian womanhood that prevailed in the golden era by claiming that sati was a spiritual act of supreme sacrifice. Colebrooke's piece "On the duties of the Faithful Hindu Widow" served as the basis for stereotyping Indian women as burning on the pyre. Chakravarthi writes, "Colebrooke's account of sati highlighted an 'awesome' aspect of Indian womanhood, carrying both the associations of a barbaric society and of the mystique of the Hindu woman who 'voluntarily' and 'cheerfully' mounted the pyre of her husband."(31) Their contribution was "...the transformation of the Hindu golden age into an Aryan golden age wherein men were free, brave, vigorous, fearless, themselves civilized and civilizing others, noble and deeply spiritual; and the women were learned, free and highly cultured; conjointly they offer sacrifices to the gods, listening sweetly to discourses, and preferring spiritual upliftment to the pursuit of mere riches. Additionally they represented the best examples of conjugal love, offering the supreme sacrifice of their lives as a demonstration of their feeling for their partners in the brief journey of life."(46) An alternate conception of the Indian past can be seen in the attitudes of the utilitarians such as J.S.Mill and his father James Mill who deplored Indian society as debased and in need of reforms that only the British could provide. They argued for India's colonization claiming that Indian society was barbaric which was especially testified in the inferior condition of Indian women as taking to sati and the alleged effeminacy of Indian men. The connection between the gender debate in England and the empire which sustained is obvious in the figure of J.S. Mill the philosopher who wrote the pioneering essay of Western feminism "On the Subjugation of Women" was in his early years an officer with the East India Company. In the latter capacity he also recommended some stern legal and other measures for reforming the allegedly poor condition of India. He also expressed his pessimistic views on the Indian population's ability itself in philosophical treatises. In this context, the project of empire building is directed to the protection of Indian women whose status was perceived to be inferior. Nationalists such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Dayanand Saraswati rebutted this utilitarian critique by internalizing the mindset of the orientalist. They advocated a nationalism that could counter alien rule by promulgating virtues such as vigour conquest and expansion. The rejuvenation of Indian society was left to the women whose task it was to produce the sons for the country. Vivekananda also went on to add asceticism and courage to the picture of Indian womanhood. He argued that sati went against spiritual learning which Indian women are capable of and in India alone according to him women performed religious duties alongside men. The nationalists modified the shastras to suit a changing society by claiming that there is no vedic support for sati and women are eligible for moksha undermining the popular belief in pativrata or devotion to the husband. Women had to perform a more urgent task of courageously defending the nation like their predecessors in the golden age. Feminists like Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) questioned these claims about Hindu women. Ramabai pointed out that there was no golden age of Indian womanhood, and both Western and Indian societies were anti-woman. She analyzed three phases of Indian womanhood: (a) Childhood—one suffering and overcoming the curse of infanticide. (b) Married Life—child-marriage, ill-treatment and absence of freedom, honoured as mothers but condemned in other ways. (c) Widowhood—child widows and at stage seen as a retribution



for past crimes. (d) Sati—a sporadic event. Unlike utilitarians Ramabai maintained that the low status of the Indian nation is not due to any inherent barbarism, nor is it due to a degradation of a golden age. Rather if Indian men are weak it is because of the subjugation of Indian women, especially mothers who have been in this condition for years. Subjugated women produce a subjugated nation (against nationalists like Tilak) and to create strong women for nationhood we need education, freedom, remarriage etc., that would give them more freedom. As Chakravathi observes, the above controversy regarding Indian womanhood takes the high caste woman as its focal point, either to glorify her as a role model or condemn her status as needing reforms. One needs to add here that in both instances she is established as an object of protection from either the colonial or nationalist point of view. The very modern notion of nation is appealed to as womanhood: either women were appealed to as objects of protection by their colonial masters for their own project of empire building or indigenous nationalists appealed to them for fighting colonization on behalf of a new nation. The stereotyping of femininity ensured that "...Indian women were almost built up as super women: a combination of the spiritual Maitreyi, the learned Gargi, the suffering Sita, the faithful Savitri and the heroic Lakshmi Bai" (Chakravathi, 79). Yet as this superwoman fought for her nation, her own others, namely, the washerwomen, the domestic servants, the wet-nurses, the lowercaste, Muslims and Christian women were forgotten — in short the 'vedic dasi' was overlooked in the homogenization of Indian women in the project of modern nationalism. In this, the discourse on sati that was abolished by the British in 1829, is very interesting. Gayatri Spivak observes that sati was an exception, and many a time when it did exist in Bengal it was only to prevent widows who had inheritance rights from exercising them. Moreover, the term sati literally meant good wife, and the British imposed a "...greater ideological constriction" on Indian women by equating it with self-immolation at the husband's funeral pyre. Thus, whether in condemnation or in praise of the supposed courage and free-will of the women who went to the pyre, an attempt was made to produce a sexed subaltern subject as an object of protection. "It is thus of much greater significance that there was no debate on this non-exceptional fate of widows- either among the Hindus or between the Hindus and the British - than that the exceptional prescription of self-immolation was actively contended." (Spivak, 1993) In the twentieth century, women contributed to the nationalist movement through complex roles that straddled the frontiers of ideal femininity and free personhood. The nineteenth century representation of womanhood was not relinquished even in post-Independence India, which still has to go a long way in deconstructing its myths about Indian womanhood.⁵ The nation-state is a modern phenomenon. There are many scholarly definitions of nations that rival one another. But one can unravel three major features in nationalism: autonomy or liberation from external constraints to pursue one's own ideas of freedom etc, unity where internal divisions of race, caste and gender are dissolved into a single historical territory and identity — the people identify with their culture and territory by right and pass it on from generation to generation.⁶ In this process women occupy a peculiar position: on the one hand they are abstract citizens in the eyes of a law that is quite formal and indifferent to their specific needs, on the other hand their identity is evoked in a distinct and substantive way as preservers of the nation. The essentializations contained in the latter makes it close to difference and otherness as is clear from the constructions of British and Indian femininity discussed above. This contradictory position was and is still occupied by most women in relation to the nation. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1994) delineate five ways in which women contribute to nationhood: 1. Biological reproducers of ethnic collectivities 2. Reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups: proper way of having children etc. where the symbolic identity of the group is reproduced. 3. Reproducers of ideology and transmitters of culture. 4. As symbolic representatives for the



construction or reproduction of ethnic boundaries 5. As participants in national, economic and military struggles. Indian women's relation to nationalism traverses each of these dimensions in a colonial context. Since colonial modernity with its notion of nationhood has not been particularly gender sensitive, should one repudiate it totally as many postmodernists suggest? In which case one would also* have to renounce the woman's question as well because it too has colonial origins. Moreover, since the nineteenth century gender issues in Britain were implicated in colonization they would have to be forfeited as well. Clearly, matters are not so simple. Since one does not live in a perfect world nothing is pure, as philosophers from existentialist and poststructuralist traditions have maintained. Instead of looking for some unconditional point outside the sphere of colonization as the solution to the dilemmas of exploitation and homogenization it poses, one has to work within it to move towards an alternative that is both egalitarian and pluralistic. The challenge confronting Indian society, is one of salvaging the constructive aspects of phenomena such as the free institutions or the woman's question that have profane origins in imperialism. Thus, one would comprehend modernity as a dialectical phenomenon that is on the one hand oppressive but is also at the same time 'problematic instead of rejecting modernity tout

Given the context of colonial oppression, a nationalism that aspired for self-determination was important. The forces of cultural and religious chauvinism notwithstanding, nationalism also spawned a movement that brought divided and heterogeneous people together in a common project (who were unfortunately divided again through the painful experience of Partition whose roots also lie in the policies of the British empire).⁷ This movement picked up the concept of the modern nation and turned it around to apply it in the colonial context to the subjects of imperialism at the expense of the empire. The rulers of the empire certainly did not visualize the possibility of nationhood leading to the disintegration of the empire! The British had confined the term nation to their own terrains and considered their colonies unfit to have the status of nationhood. The national liberation movement also permitted women to come out in the open to participate in political life. Further, people from various caste and class hierarchies worked side by side in public spaces during the freedom struggle leading to the formation of civil society. A secular civil society is an important antidote to the duty oriented caste and communal hierarchies, and is also the basis of a democratic will formation and political life. Since it was formed in tumultuous times through the efforts of the Indian people, the civil society cannot be perceived as a gift of the British rulers! These gains cannot be renounced «specially because they need to be developed further constructively. The tasks of nation-building with the spirit of internationalism are yet to be completed, along with the accomplished goals of gender parity and an expansion of the democratic space of civil society in non-hierarchical and non-casteist directions. Thus, nationalism, gender issues and civil society have to be sensitized to the issue of otherness where the voices of those marginalized by class, religion and caste can be heard. One cannot resort to revivalism because the traditional mould has no answers for resolving the question of otherness raised by colonial modernity. Turning to revivalism is very problematic in a pluralistic society such as India where there prevails what Max Weber has termed as the polytheism of gods and demons. Moreover, a blind espousal of premodernism would jeopardize the conditions of the 'others' excluded by colonial modernity even further by ignoring that a considerable part of modernity in India is the outcome of the efforts of the Indian masses. Questions about the problems confronted, say, the dasi or the tribal woman, are questions about social justice and freedom which certainly are modern ideals which require the context of a modern civil society. Yet one has to recognize that the nation-state or civil society or gender issues have unfortunately catered only to a privileged few whose identity has been homogenized and imposed upon



'others'. Abstract nationhood's indifference to otherness is very explicit in the case of the construction of the paradigmatic Indian womanhood who closes off all difference in the form of occupations, class and caste. The problem with the notion of abstract citizenship in a modern nation state is precisely that it is insensitive to the limits that some sections of society would have moved in reaching towards its abstract ideals. In a parallel way the European citizen was also insensitive to its others in the colony. Despite these very corrupt origins in colonialism the notion of free citizenship can be retheorized in ways that can take differences into account. This would require a concrete and non-essentialist understanding of civil society and nationhood where its members do not have an imagined antiquated past and its boundaries are never closed. There should be sensitivity towards those who are limited by circumstances of race, caste and class and gender running across these to exercise their freedom. Thus, the circumstances from which freedom is exercised would have to be theorized, so that the obstacles that prevent underprivileged subjects from translating their rights into reality are addressed. In rethinking the nation one would have to understand it in constructive ways so that the political lives of concrete citizens are enhanced whereby they contribute to it and it contributes to them. The critique of abstract ahistorical subjectivity made by many contemporary and even diverse philosophers such as Jacques Derrida or Habermas can inform these reconstructions. A solution to the problems of colonial modernity will have to ask for more, rather than less, freedom! But the specific way in which freedom is tackled would have to change. A brief attempt to this effect is made in what follows. The expansion and reconstruction of the modern notion of freedom in the light of the colonial predicament is an urgent task. The notion of freedom developed by European modernity, namely the freedom to own property, culminated in empire-building, and cannot be affirmed as the basis of proclaiming the exhaustion of the project of modernity. After all, the critique that one does level against colonization is not that it is committed not to the supremacy of some specific culture or group, it is committed to the freedom of those who have been excluded from decision-making processes. One critiques the violence underlying the exclusion of women and colonial subjects from colonial definitions of legal personhood, or one critiques the exclusion of say peasant/tribal women from mainstream definitions of womanhood, in order to improve the status quo. One need not have a blueprint of a perfect society but one can still have the Utopian impulse. Thus, the notion of freedom does not just mean the right to own property, or the standard negative conception maintaining the separation from obstacles to pursue one's goals of profit etc. Thus, as Habermas puts it, "if the process of social modernization can also be turned into other non-capitalist directions, if the life-world can develop institutions of its own in a way currently inhibited by the autonomous system dynamics of the economic and administrative system." (1996a) By the life-world Habermas means the realm of shared everyday life, which the economic and administrative systems have conquered. One has to critique existing modernity in order to envisage a better future for it. This critique is not done from some premodern perspective or some perspective outside the sphere of modernity, since it has paradoxically taken recourse to the principles of modernity themselves. One could follow Habermas in viewing modernity as an unfinished project—there are corrections to make and promises to keep. There is no absolute meaning attached to the word modernity, since words do not have absolute meanings. Modernity developed and advanced through its commitment to a very individualistic idea of freedom as the individual's right to own property which relied upon the notion of instrumental rationality as an efficient means of securing goals. Consequently, freedom produced terror in the form of gratuitous technological advancement, fascism, expert cultures and colonization. Thus, the very antithesis of democracy prevailed in the colonial and even post-colonial epoch and it still persists. But one need not constrain the term freedom



to this narrow definition, since the above critique of modernity reveals an alternate conception of freedom. Structuralism and post-structuralism among many other linguistic approaches in the twentieth century have taught us that words do not have ontological referents i.e. there is no ultimate reality out there viz. colonial modernity, to which alone freedom should refer. One can extricate the word freedom and even modernity from their impure origins to rethink them in new ways. This is because there is no metaphysical or karmic order of necessity governing the emergence of any phenomenon in the universe. The phenomenon of modernity is no exception - its origins and its further development are to some degree contingent. This contingency opens up the promise of reshaping it in concrete ways. Words are not bound to some ultimate context; nor are they bound to the intentions of a speaker—they cut across contexts and subjectivities. Thus, though the British may not have intended the use of freedom as, say, a collective project in the ex-colonies, there is no ultimate law preventing the colonized people from transgressing the British. Indeed, it is precisely through such a transgression that one can envisage a radicalized modernity in the post-colonial context. Mahasveta Devi's story "Draupadi" contains some openings in this direction by poignantly revealing how a concept can be put to use in ways that have been unintended by its origin

Conclusion

The challenge provided by colonial modernity is that one needs to take differences amongst human beings seriously while reconstructing freedom. Clearly atomic models of freedom would have to be rejected in favour of collective ones that are sensitive to otherness. In this context one could examine the writings of philosophers such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas who have diagnosed the crisis of modernity in the western context and have labelled capitalist modernization as the "dark side of the enlightenment." Since these philosophers have written in an exclusive western context, their writings are silent on the issue of colonization. This is where perhaps Indians can step in to write their own philosophy by seeing the relation between the history of modernization in India and the basic principles of capitalist/colonial modernity. What Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas have labelled as the paradoxical position of modernity instilling terror and fear instead of liberating human beings from obscure forces and dogmas is very starkly visible in India. Hence, as the children of colonial modernity, we have the arduous task of developing the "bright side" of modernity by looking upon freedom as an ongoing task rather than an accomplished project, where modern freedom can entail openness to the 'others' excluded by colonial modernity. A focus on abstract individual rights for all citizens is quite problematic from the gendered point of view, since it does not take into account the specific problems and situation of women. Yet to homogenize women or Indian women as a uniform category cannot be the basis of their freedom, since they depend upon what Habermas calls "overgeneralized classifications"(1996b, 422). Women can exercise their individual autonomy in both the private and public spheres only if conditions of solidarity and equality exist in all spheres. Further, an integral aspect of exercising autonomy would consist in women contesting the private - public distinction if the situation demands it.



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