

Debrahminizing Decolonization: Imagining a New Curriculum

Karthick Ram Manoharan

In a speech in 2014, the year he was elected as the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi claimed that ancient Indians were familiar with genetic science and plastic surgery. The first five years of the Modi led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime saw, among other things, changes to the Indian curriculum in schools and colleges to reflect a greater emphasis on 'native', 'indigenous' or 'Bharatiya' systems of knowledge. His re-election to power with a stronger majority in 2019 gave the NDA a boost to pursue this with a renewed vigor (Rahaman). Likewise, in 2019, the home minister Amit Shah candidly said that western standards of human rights cannot be applied to India (Scroll Staff). Intellectuals who defend the NDA regime, in India and abroad, have begun to use the innovative term 'Hinduphobia' to dismiss any criticisms of the politics of Hindutva, human rights violations in India, or the caste system. And academics familiar with the vocabulary of humanities place the primary blame for the caste system as it exists today on British colonialism (Chakravorty).

Given that some well-established scholars in the Western academia like Saba Mahmood and Hamid Dabashi have provided robust defenses for religious identity politics or 'anti-Western' fundamentalist movements and regimes, it might seem natural and even just for Hindutva scholars to attempt the same. While Hindutva scholars are yet to contribute anything original of academic depth, the critiques of postcolonialism against Western knowledge, post-secularism's contention that secularism is not the only way nor even a good way of doing politics, and the uncritical celebration of diversity on Western campuses might provide a gateway for Hindutva to gain intellectual respectability. The multipurpose word 'decolonization' can also be used to boost their currently weak scholarship. Incidentally, a

European sympathizer of the Hindutva project authored a book called *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind* in 2001, several years before the demand for decolonizing the curriculum became prominent.

Problems with Decolonization

Decolonization can mean a variety of things to a variety of people. In common vocabulary, it marks the end of colonial rule. To postcolonialist academics, it is a process of challenging (Western) colonialist discourses. When taken simplistically, it can mean the rejection of Western approaches and/or methodologies of scholarship, science, history and politics (a Hindutva scholar could argue that Modi's discovery of genetic science in ancient India and Shah's opposition to the universality of human rights can also be called decolonization). It can mean the inclusion of marginal voices in the curriculum. But voices that appear marginal in the West might be part of dominant or hegemonic discourses of power elsewhere. For instance, an Iranian supporter of the Islamic Revolution might be marginal in Columbia University, but he is voicing for a regime that suppresses the rights of political dissidents, Kurdish autonomists, religious minorities etc. A Brahmin academic who has moved from India to Oxford might claim to be a 'person of color' while remaining silent on the privileges of her caste and social networks that allowed her such meteoric mobility. What is 'marginal' should not be seen only in relation to the West; systems of power that exist across the globe have to be taken into account.

Postcolonialism can be loosely called a study of the process of decolonization. Indian scholars have made foundational contributions to postcolonial studies, and their scholarship is original, extensive and rigorous. Indian postcolonialists have played a key role in challenging a West-centric approach in the humanities and the social sciences. Yet, it has been a matter of concern that there is hardly any representation of Dalits, Backward Castes, and Tribes – who constitute the majority of the Indian population – among Indian postcolonial academics in the West or at home. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Indian postcolonialism has largely been an upper-caste affair. One could perhaps observe similar exclusions among postcolonialists elsewhere.

From Decolonization to Debrahminization

Ideally, decolonization should not just stop with contesting the hegemony of Western discourses and must seek address these questions as well. Which is why in India, decolonization must be combined with debrahminization. Debrahminization is not an attack on any particular caste nor a plea for token representation, but a process of increased critical engagement with radical egalitarian anti-caste movements, thoughts and thinkers from different parts of India to expand the curriculum of philosophy, political theory, history, sociology and other disciplines of the social sciences and humanities. While a simplified decolonization takes the encounter with the colonial Western Other as the starting point of its critique and a justification for its existence, debrahminization holds no such encounter nor any Other to be its *raison d'être*. It views brahminism as an evolving hegemonic process in the subcontinent through a period of over two millennia and seeks to study brahminism in its complexities and simultaneously discover and expand upon subversions, challenges, resistances to this process in the realms of thought, culture, politics and religion. Building on the works of BR Ambedkar, I have earlier defined the ideology of brahminism as “a system of graded inequality that seals castes in particularist identities and prevents the emergence of any radical universalist politics that could challenge its existence.” Debrahminizing is an attempt to arrive at this universality (Manoharan). And as far as India is concerned, one could even say that decolonization without debrahminization is Hindutva.

Undoubtedly, Ambedkar would be a key thinker whose works are foundational to debrahminization. Ambedkar's robust, systematic and methodic work challenging brahminism forms a corpus that can inform new studies in political philosophy and theory, history, sociology, legal, cultural and gender studies, among other disciplines. Likewise, there is a rich output of academic literature on Ambedkar that builds on his thoughts and seeks to address contemporary sociological and political problems. However, works by and on crucial thinkers from the 'regions' like Jotirao Phule, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, Ram Manohar Lohia and several others from Dalit, Backward Caste, and Tribal communities are yet to make their presence felt in national and international forums.

Challenges and Prospects

There are, of course, challenges in such a project. Unlike Ambedkar who wrote most of his crucial texts in English, the writings of many of the subaltern thinkers are in vernacular languages. This is a key limitation in preventing the circulation of the ideas of these thinkers in India or abroad. The main works of Periyar, who is a key figure in Tamil Nadu, are hardly known even in neighboring states like Kerala, Andhra or Karnataka. Across India, he is often reductively known for his opposition to religion, while his radical ideas on anti-casteism, internationalism, women's emancipation are familiar only to a few. However, in recent times, academics and activists engaging with Dravidian politics have attempted to take these debates to newer crowds. Such work builds on foundational literature by scholars such as the late MSS Pandian – the edited volume *Rethinking Social Justice* was one such joint collaborative exercise (Anandhi). G. Aloysius has translated and published several key writings of Periyar, taking his original works to a broader audience. New dynamic work on Dravidian politics, political economy, and social history is being written and published. I view these endeavors as a movement towards debrahminization.

My current research aims to provide a coherent and systematic reading of Periyar's thoughts to present their key points as a unified whole. It reads Periyar comparatively with Western philosophers, political theorists and feminists to mark his significance to global conversations on identity, anti-caste and feminist movements, and social justice. This research involves an extensive engagement with the primary works of Periyar to throw new light on this thinker and present his ideas to a wider audience. There are vibrant discussions about Periyar and Periyarism in Tamil intellectual and academic circles, and this research attempts to take crucial points of these debates and contestations to the English-speaking academia. Likewise, the research also recognizes several prevailing misconceptions on Periyar – for instance, the allegation that he favored the Backward Castes over the Dalits – and seeks to address and where necessary refute them with evidence from his own works. Unlike Ambedkar, Periyar was not a systematic thinker and it is a tough task to systematize his thoughts from about 37 volumes of his works. He wrote no theoretical books but for the occasional pamphlet, and his preferred mode of communication was the direct speech, which were faithfully recorded by his comrades. He also frequently wrote articles and editorials for

his party paper. Relying on this extensive textual material, one can flesh out the ideas of a complicated thinker who had critically important thoughts on brahminism, patriarchy, identity, religion, nationalism and the state. Theorizing Periyar from his works can contribute to debrahminizing the curriculum.

Debrahminization is not constrained by disciplinary purity and is fundamentally transdisciplinary. It draws from philosophy, theory, psychoanalysis, history, sociology etc. to critically look at how social hierarchies have been produced, exist and are challenged in India. An important forerunner to this attempt would be Braj Ranjan Mani's *Debrahmanising History*. Debrahminization as an academic exercise engages not only with Indian subaltern thinkers but also with radical thinkers from the West, Africa, the Middle-East and Latin America to arrive at a truly global approach to the study of disciplines. It is quite comfortable in reading Phule, Ambedkar or Periyar comparatively with Hegel, Lacan, Fanon, MLK, Freire or Zizek for that matter. Since it is not concerned with the baggage of accepting or rejecting the Western canon, it is more fluid, broader, and inclusive than simple exercises of decolonization, while at the same time being true to one of the key aims of decolonization namely the promotion of new and critical voices from the non-West. It seeks to rigorously engage with thinkers from subaltern communities and take them to a global level through translations, transdisciplinary interventions, and transnational academic collaborations. Finally, it does not celebrate the marginality or particularism of such thinkers, but seeks to mainstream them and highlight their visions of, and their importance to, universalism.

Caste is no longer an Indian problem, but a global one. An Equality and Human Rights Commission research report submitted by a group of internationally reputed scholars documented the prevalence of caste discrimination in the UK and urged for legislation to prevent the same (Dhanda). Recent news report also highlighted caste discrimination in the USA. Violence is the explicit aspect of caste (Kaur). The other more implicit and insidious ways in which caste operates is through nuanced forms of discrimination, privilege, social networking, habitus, hegemony and discourse. Caste is not just about brutal atrocities against Dalits in India – it is also about exclusion of Backward Castes from institutions of higher learning (Kumar). It is also about attitudes towards social and private life. It is also about production, selection and dissemination of knowledge. An anti-caste critique is likely

to be more effective and rigorous if placed in a universalist framework that challenges all such forms of hierarchies and exclusions. Debrahminizing and the centering of anti-caste thinkers in a transdisciplinary curriculum can open up newer, broader approaches to this purpose.

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Author Information

Karthick Ram Manoharan is Marie Sklodowska-Curie Research Fellow at the University of Wolverhampton. He is working on the project “Freedom from Caste: The Political Thought of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy in a Global Context” funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme.