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Dilemma of Culture: A Polycontextual Discourse

SUKALPA BHATTACHARJEE

The dominant discourses of power do not assign subject positions to the dominated, whom they colonise. They are turned to mere "marginal" and "peripheral" entities, whose voice remains unheard, whose anger and pain remain repressed. Thus a colonial discourse operates through a regime of truth/power that gives rise to forms of hegemony—social, economic and cultural. Power is invested, reproduced and circulated through these various forms of hegemony. This is how the dominant discourses articulate the "Will to Power."

The individual self is lost in the nexus of various forms of hegemony. With the emergence of post-colonial discourse, a lot of attention has been given to the location of the sights/sites of power and to liberating the disempowered subjects from the tentacles of the various institutions of hegemony. In the endless play of domination, the emergence of the disempowered subjects designates a place of confrontation, which is a 'non-place', an interstice. This place of confrontation, where the emerging subject articulates his/her anger and pain and appropriates the currents of dominant discourse, locating his/her subject-position provides for what we could call the "socio-cultural space." In this space, the subject reconstructs his/her lost self and locates himself/herself in his/her relationship to the "other". The "other" is what the self is not. It is in tracing the "other" that the self is able to reconstruct itself.

The Indian State is also a hegemonising institution, where the individual self is lost under the coercive institutions of hegemony. The average Indian subject has been caught in the web of a hundred laws and regulations. This has necessitated for the average Indian subject to interrogate the legitimacy of such a state. Culture, which

is a very important aspect of a national life, could be one aspect, on the anvil of which one could make such an interrogation. Cultural domination was also a major aspect of imperialist domination and 'culture' is always, therefore, a major site/sight for resistance. Category of nationalism and category of culture constitute the composite category of "Cultural Nationalism". The issue of nationalism is very difficult to settle, because nationalism is no unitary thing and so many different kinds of cultural and ideological practices have invoked the nationalist claim. The Indian state has always ignored or suppressed the divergent nationalist claims.

The passion, pain, perplexity and perspective surrounding the concept of a nation generate more and more frustration in the average Indian mind. V.S. Naipaul is, however, quite optimistic, as he states in his book, *India: a Million Mutinies Now*, "A million mutinies, supported by twenty kinds of group excess . . ." "contrasted with . . ." a central will, a central intellect, "a National idea." (1991, p. 518). The book concludes celebrating this theme of contrast which rather sounds very romantic and ideal.

"Excess was now felt to be excess in India. What the mutinies were also helping to define was the strength of the general intellectual life, and the wholeness and humanism of the values to which all Indians now felt they could appeal. And strange irony—the mutinies were not to be wished away. These were a part of the beginning of a new way for millions, part of India's growth, part of its restoration." (1991, p. 518).

To Naipaul, the idea of "a central will, a central intellect, a national idea" is a nostalgic account of his native country, and in such a 'centrality' he sees the integrity of India. But is this a real experience, for an average Indian, in his/her lived experience of power, especially if she is from a corner of north-east India? To an average Indian, Naipaul's celebration of this 'centrality' is either an Utopia or a site/sight of oppression. Yeats had said in his "The Second Coming": "Things fall apart/the centre cannot hold" and the average Indian experience is that the "Centre" should not hold because it has failed to hold the parts together. The Centre is to be decentred to liberate the oppressed subjects from the currents of the dominant discourse of "a Central intellect", "and a national idea."

The historic task of nation-building has remained incomplete in

the case of India. There was no cultural cementation of the myriad of sub-nationalities and ethnic groups and tribes in India and instead of a structure growing from the grass-root level, a mosaic was superimposed. In the euphoria of having attained political independence, these loopholes were temporarily repressed but gradually the hydra-headed monster began to raise its head. As a result neither a national culture was possible in reality nor a "cultural nationalism". It resulted in discontent, dissention and disapproval among various groups, which thought that the dominating 'centre' was swallowing up their culture and tradition. Thus one initial blunder like the initial murder in *Macbeth* paved the way for a thousand other blunders. This became the central problematic of India as a nation and the question of a national culture. The prospects of having a national culture is bleak with the advent of neocolonialism, which takes the form of derecognizing the political and cultural independence of the former colonies, their ability to speak for themselves and define themselves, while allowing the global financial system to reduce their so-called independent sovereign states to colonies of the Empire. This is actually, a celebration of what Derrida refers to as "Western metaphysics" a "plot logocentrism", as he has most cogently argued, "nothing but the most original and powerful ethno-centrism, in the process of imposing itself upon the world." (1978: 4)

The whole cultural problematic has been further accelerated with the politics of representation, viciously practiced by the 'Centre'. The small ethnic groups and communities, which have their distinct and unique socio-cultural life, felt that they were never represented adequately. While representing them, the 'Centre' distorted and deformed their cultural entity by projecting them as backward in comparison to others. By projecting them as the 'Other' the Indian dominant ideology promoted the difference of these groups with the Indian mainstream. This was further accelerated by the introduction of the national language, which had no affinity with languages of various communities. Therefore, a linguistic bridge also has become impossible.

Naipaul's vision proves more and more to be an Utopia in the Indian national life. This is perhaps because of Naipaul's "affiliation" in the Caribbean, which has made Naipaul a cultural "other" of an

average Indian. He is an "outsider" writing from outside.

Contextualising the average north-eastern experience one finds that, situated at the periphery of the Indian mainstream, the north-east is a marginalised 'other' of India, which is the post-colonial "other" of its Imperialist counterpart. Therefore the north-east is an "other's" "other". Caught within such a geo-political and cultural ambiguity, one speaks a language which is perhaps neither understood nor recognised by the national mainstream nor promoted within the state in which one lives. And so one's cultural language also remains undeciphered.

In almost all the states of north-east, one confronts with the word 'Outsider' or 'Foreigner' in the slogan of almost all the student groups, constituted on the basis of language or ethnic identities. One needs to perhaps examine the cultural implication of this word. Does an 'outsider' mean the cultural 'other' of the sloganists? Or does it indicate a kind of insecurity on the part of the propagandist—economic or cultural? Or should one understand this word in terms of Camus's "Outsider"? This is very much related to the demand of various organisations in the north-east, for autonomy. Perhaps the people demanding autonomy are like John Kumalo in Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, who says: "What God has not done for South Africa man must do." (1948: 21) Here the indigenous people must do what the Central Government has not done for them.

In the north-east, one often finds the question of preservation of traditional dress and costumes in the Constitution of almost all the organisations, organised on ethnic basis. It is one's fundamental right undoubtedly, to strive for the preservation of one's own native tradition and culture. But the point which bothers me is the fact that, in all communities, only the women-folk are required to put on the traditional costume and are sometimes pressurised into doing it. The men are most cosmopolitan in their dress and are obviously more comfortable in it than they would be if they were in their dhotis or other traditional dresses. I have always discussed this with my friends in the tribal community and I have also interrogated such a practice. The reason for my concern over this point, which is otherwise a very insignificant matter is that, by imposing the traditional dress on the women-folk, the tribal society is projecting its own patriarchal orientation. They are marginalising their own

women, in the name of liberating them from the spell of the dominant discourse. My point is that, the women are turned into an "Other" by being forced to do something, which they might have done out of their own choice.

In the north-east, one also notices a lot of turbulence centering round the question of language. There is a cultural politics behind most language policies and state languages are imposed, instead of being adopted through a mutual agreement. A language cannot be imposed as a State language, doing away with all other languages, especially in an area where people from other linguistic communities reside. A cultural atmosphere needs to be generated, whereby people from other linguistic groups feel a natural urge to learn the state language for all practical purposes. Imposition is no substitute for a cultural groundwork and hence cannot be equated with a sense of victory.

The various conflicts and contradictions which are inherent in the Constitution of India as a Nation, has rendered it extremely problematic to have anything as national culture. The same phenomenon has resulted in the impossibility of having anything like a national literature which Frederic Jameson would have called 'national allegories' or a regional literature. Tejaswini Niranjana has interrogated Aijaz Ahmed's categorisation of "Indian Literature" and I would support her because one would have to take into account the presence of various linguistic groups in categorising anything like that. The Indian State has never recognised or promoted the language of the minor linguistic groups of the country. Under such circumstance, "Indian Literature" would include only the literature of the dominant linguistic groups of the country. It would take the same picture in the north-east—if one were to talk of a Regional Literature. Which languages would be taken into account? Besides the 'Centre' has kept many cases pending in the Court which involve the sentiments of so many linguistic tribes in the north-east and which also would determine the linguistic status of certain communities. The irony of the whole situation is that some communities and tribes look to the 'Centre' for being named ethnically or linguistically.

And so we have all the reasons to be grateful to the English language, which is for the time being bridging up the gap between

the various linguistic groups in the north-east. Thanks to English education also, which is providing for an alternative culture by exposing us to the Western culture, in the adoption of which the youth of this region are unanimous to an extent. But this is again another painful story, as we are bearing the "Burden of English" as Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak has stated in her essay with the same title. The English language and English education bears the legacy of our Imperialist "Other", whose "Otherisation" we are striving to liberate ourselves from. This is how we are constantly entering into the cultural jigsaw puzzle, which has rendered us a culturally displaced generation. Half of us neither know our mother tongue nor the national language, and the situation gets worse when we step outside this region. This is our predicament of a post-colonial subjecthood, which looms large and vivid, when we try to trace ourselves in relation to our culture. I say 'trace' because the self has been shattered and we can only find traces of it in the gaps and fissures and silences of the post-colonial discourse.

A desired alternative state of affairs would be a celebration of the politics of difference while leaving a room for dialogical exploration of specific features of difference and similarity. The narrative of a politics of difference gives diverse groups a sense of a loose, non-essentialist framing project. It means that the essentialist views of difference seek to portray group experiences as unbridgably distinct, cultural entities as sealed entities against which the post-colonial dialogic position thwarts monolithic closures. The polarisation that is possible within the play of power is an open post-colonial space that can be pulled back by creating forms of social reflexivity through which the post-colonial encounter can figure as a picture of dialogic that subverts current forms of cultural hegemony.

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