

# Cosmopolitanism and Dissent: The Concurrent Rise of the Subaltern in India and the United States

Arpita Sahai

Department of Linguistics, English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India

*Abstract*— There is an indistinct history that binds the two largest democracies of the world, India and America. Through the 1960s, the boundaries of nation and race were vanquished in order to propel the two nations towards accomplishing their democratic ideas. African Americans and Indians established bonds at the heart of this shared struggle. Various activists initiated, what is known as, Colored Cosmopolitanism that transcended the racial discriminations for the emancipation of the ‘colored world’. The American Declaration of Independence was unavailing when the crimes of slavery were set against it. Similarly, the anti-imperialist eloquence was inefficacious to those referred as ‘untouchables’. The historiography focuses on the confrontations of governments and political leaders of America and India wherein it is sharp but narrow. This paper aims at traversing through the relations of the two nations as being far more than just political bodies. The purpose of this study is to examine the transnational encounters of the neglected historical figures and provide an acute portrait of the renowned bridge-builders, such as Gandhi and Luther, of the two cultures. Moreover, it poses questions on multicultural confrontations with normative cosmopolitanism. It has become increasingly instrumental in understanding cosmopolitanism through the lens of dissent.

*Keywords*— Color, Cosmopolitanism, India, Multiculturalism, U.S.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between cosmopolitanism and border is generally assumed to focus on the capability of a cosmopolitan to traverse a border. This corroborates with the notion that the rising cosmopolitanism is equivalent to the dissolution of a nation-state. However, this is too simplified an idea, which has its foundation in ‘new cosmopolitanism’ that places too much faith on the competence of cosmopolitanism to uproot a nation-state. What is skipped while concluding such accounts is the constantly altering nature of borders. Besides, what sort of freedom gets defined when, under the vast expanse of globalization, national borders are nothing but signposts adjacent to an open road?

On a spring day of 1941, Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya seated herself in the ‘whites only’ division of the train that travelled through South America. On account of the racial exclusion, she was commanded to move by the ticket collector. Her repudiation to switch places strengthened when the displeased collector asked which land she hailed from. At that moment, she could

have unfolded her influential position, and clarified her office, that of a colleague of Mahatma Gandhi, and notified him about her activism in the rights of Indian women. On the contrary, she retorted, “It makes no difference. I am a coloured woman obviously and it is unnecessary for you to disturb me for I have no intention of moving from here.” Through her refusal, Chattopadhyay challenged the legalised prejudice in South America. By declaring herself as ‘coloured’, she demonstrated solidarity with millions of African-Americans who were suppressed with inhumanity as a part of their daily routine. Coloured cosmopolitanism, therefore, transcended the discriminations established on racial grounds.

## II. MULTICULTURAL CONFRONTATIONS

In the late nineteenth century, along with the race and class parallelism, racism exhibited by America and imperialism by British were equated by various scholars. India and America were often paired. However, their connections in the struggle for freedom were as

diverse as the struggle itself. It is not sufficient to understand the subjectivity of freedom struggles and how it meant differently to different people at varied times. To a certain extent, the task lies in comprehending how social activists utilised these key words in order to accomplish transnational unity. The relationship between the struggles of these two nations may be comprehended within the larger framework of empire and imperialism, of racism and anti-racism, and chief historic, global events as the First and Second World Wars and the Cold War. However, such transnational events do not abandon nations for the very ability to forge connections depended on the way each nation understood itself and the delicate histories of the United States, the United Kingdom, India and Pakistan.

Notions of a 'coloured world' were less of an immediate purchase in India which was brimming with the intertwined class, caste and religion issues that masked the colour bias. On the other hand, United States' very foundation was the extermination and enslavement of Blacks. Post the Civil War, the situation remained much the same. Though the European immigrants were oppressed with insidious treatments, they came to benefit from their whiteness. The striking disparity between the ways in which such immigrants and blacks related to the American identity was best understood through the appropriations of different analogies relegated to them. Where the European immigrants were inspired to assimilate in the 'melting pot' of American identity and relinquish the earlier ethnic background, 'one drop' of the black blood exterminated the individual from acquiring the identity. One may conclude, therefore, that the American history, unlike Indian history, was a white affair. India, on the other hand, acted as a dubitable subject for theorists who either bunched them with 'dark coloured' Africans or classed them with Europeans, under the notion that the high-caste Indians were Aryan descendants and the low-caste Indians, 'Negroids'. The links that these nations forged aided in disassembling the tyranny of the British Raj and Jim Crow segregation.

Jotirao Phule, a persuasive critic on caste prejudice, in 1873, invoked the racial exclusion in America to condemn the caste bigotry in India. The gravity of a transnational comparison triggered from the demands of the local impacts. *Hunt's Merchant's Magazine*, that promulgated the goods produced by the slaves in America, declared Hindus as "the most enslaved portion of human race." However, Phule's akin comparison was aimed at rebelling against the caste oppression rather than gloating over the achievements of the British Raj. As Phule drew from abolitionism to challenge caste issues, so did the abolitionists voice against the legitimization of slavery by

using examples from India. An antislavery activist, Adrienne Moore, inspired by Ram Mohan Roy, declared him to be "one of the most enlightened and benevolent of the human race now living, though not a white man" before the U.S Congress (*Ram Mohan Roy and America*, Satish Chandra Chakravarti, 1942, 164). Gandhi, later, applauded David Thoreau's Civil Disobedience as a tool against slavery. He translated an anti-slavery passage into Gujarati and published it in *Duties of Disobeying Laws*. Samuel Clemens, known by the pen name Mark Twain, witnessed the transition from slavery to empire. His writings on his visit to India expose the key affinity between slavery and empire, that of racial hierarchy. Witnessing the physical abuse inflicted upon a worker in a Bombay hotel made Clemens compare the incident with the one where a slave was murdered "for merely doing something awkwardly, as if that were a crime." Comparing the color line in the two nations, he writes in *Following the Equator*,

It is curious—the space-annihilating power of thought. For just one second, all that goes to make the *me* in me was in a Missourian village, on the other side of the globe, vividly seeing again these forgotten pictures of fifty years ago, and wholly unconscious of all things but just those; and in the next second I was back in Bombay, and that kneeling native's smitten cheek was not done tingling yet! (Twain 29)

A multitude from West Coast visited India and checked on Indians for they were assumed to be a cultural threat. In 1907, Indian mill workers were thrown out from Bellingham by a gang of five hundred men. 1908 began with a 'San Francisco Call' that suspected a "Hindu Invasion". Asiatic Exclusion League hindered the immigration of Indians to The United States and curbed the rights of those already inhabiting there. India was relegated to the "barred zone". Estate brokers were committed to not sell properties to "Hindoos and Negroes". The party involved in such anti-immigrant acts failed to acknowledge the fact that only a few generations ago, the West Coast was a Mexican territory. The 'openness' that is mandatory but not a sufficiently defining element of cosmopolitanism indicates not just a nonchalance for difference but a potential for humans to alter their perception as they confront alternative schemes. Also, it is not a necessity to move in order to acknowledge the form of cosmology one is best suited for or the world one would wish to inhabit. The non-admission of Indians in the American lands indicates towards a similar idea of cosmopolitanism.

Shridhar Venkatesh Ketkar, around this time, was pursuing a PhD in Sociology at Cornell and he, in *History of Caste in India*, gave an account of how most of

the states declared some as 'non-whites' if one-eighth of their blood was 'coloured'. Ketkar mocked such a form of 'scientific' discrimination. He gathered that racial distinctions, like class and caste, had their foundation in artificial beliefs which were "arbitrarily administered". He claimed that the racial bias was deeply embedded in the nation and it added to the misunderstood notions and application of the Western practises to the history of India. In his words, "White races came in contact with dark races in America as they did four thousand years ago in India and attempts were made to discover the 'colour prejudice' in every document of this ancient land." He criticised the racialized concepts of caste and asserted that such notions had persuaded them to discriminate with fellow Indians, not only based on caste, but colour now. Witnessing the situation in America, Aryans felt encouraged to distinguish themselves from the Dravidians. Bhartan Kumarappa, a student cum activist in the Indian National movement, was imprisoned for dissenting against the British when he was working on *My Student Days in America*. His unity with "those who suffer at the hands of the whites" indicated not only of the 1940s but the times he spent in America. Racial theories, however, fulfil a very small fraction of the purpose of dividing people. Many activists employed a language of racial pride in order to bring forth the people of these nations together in solidarity.

### III. COSMOPOLITAN UNIVERSALISM

Cosmopolitan universalism saw the light of the day because of the capability of Indians and African-Americans and many alike to accommodate intense diversity but this new way of sorting the affairs arose due to a self-driven motive. Instead of oversimplifying the intertwined relationship of universalism and particularism, Ernst Troeltsch, while addressing the First German Congress of Sociology in 1910, contested that there exists a gulf between the historical crisis that propels such a form of universalism and its admittance among people who believe it shall work out in ideal situations. He argues that the congruity remains neither in an ideal perception of beings nor in the socio-historical conditions that lead to a form of political unity. Troeltsch points out that universalism triggers from a desire for unity *because* the present scenario reinforces differences and conflicts. Central to this idea was not the demand of a world government or a single political entity for the world but a philosophical stance that helped us reconstruct our understanding of who we were as beings and the notion of a singular species that was established via its diversity.

A succinct summary, of how the battle that African-Americans and Indians were waging was not against people who were intoxicated with the pursuit of power and "endless bull-fight of politics" (Tagore, *Nationalism*, 175), can be understood through the multidimensional words of Gandhi on Non-Cooperation movement, "Our Non-cooperation is neither with the English nor with the West. It is with the system the English have established, the material civilization and its attendant greed and the exploitation of the weak." Gandhi attacks, not the individuals, but the exploitation of systems set up globally. The universal nature of his words prove that the rebellion is not only with a particular regime of power that resides within the boundaries of India but with all-encompassing forms of injustice which include empires, industries, technology, trade, commerce that dehumanize arbitrarily. The act of Indians burning clothes marked the rebellion against the hegemonic nature of tyranny. Spinning and wearing *khadi* marked not only an advertisement of indigenous products but their commitment to self-mastery, to author their own pursuits rather than being bound to collectivities, to accomplish their capabilities as far as it did not trespass the rights of others.

However, I shall advance a contention in this view. Such forms of multicultural confrontations, more often than not, tend to be a breeding ground for dissent, political or otherwise, which are disposed to contradict cosmopolitanism and the way it is normatively understood. It leads to re-nationalization or reinforces the nationalistic sentiments. As migration gains pace, as the population becomes more heterogenized, multi-colored and multi-cultured, such people come in a direct contact with one another. People with a difference, who might not appreciate the difference, put up with one another in a fairly confined space. So, what is observed is an entwining and antagonism of religions. The 'other' is not elsewhere but amidst us because we are enmeshed with the cultural other. The universalistic claims collide which leads to a potential for violence. However, nations are barely ever culturally homogenous so to dismiss cosmopolitanism on the grounds of heterogeneity is naive. Ulrich Beck, in 'Global inequality and human rights', poses a discursive question,

The crucial question is how the hegemonic meta-power games of global domestic politics can be shaped and interests pursued in such a way that they serve the realization of common cosmopolitan goals. In short, how can private vices be transformed into public, cosmopolitan virtues? (Beck 313)

Plausibly, one must rework on the way one defines cosmopolitanism and understand it through the lens of recognizing the interests of others and their inclusion while calculating self-driven motives.

Very often, African-Americans compared their situation of belonging to a minority in a white country with the Indian experience of belonging to a majority suppressed by a minority. However, theorists dismissed the contrast on the basis of African-American diaspora. The latter were held to be 'Negroes' and, therefore, complemented, like the Indians, an enormous group demographically. In the wake of the First World War, African Americans were motivated to participate in the hope of advancement in their socio-economic conditions. However, the massive surrendering of lives did not, in any which way, lead to an abatement in racial hostility. Likewise, such unfulfilled, keen desires were experienced by the Indians who faced immense repression after the war and the notorious Rowlatt Act which curbed their civil liberties, otherwise granted to them. The first chief wave of African-American engagement with India thus began with the latter's wake of Non-Cooperation. Horace Mann Bond in *The Servant of India*, points out that nationalism and race-consciousness can both be a tremendous aid in liberation of its people, but only when it is moderate and the core idea is universalistic humanism. He highlights the fine difference between race-consciousness and racial chauvinism thus, "Too strong a race-consciousness maybe as disastrous as none at all. What we should value as more enduring and important than any race-consciousness is a realization of ourselves as simply and wholly human."

The commonalities of struggle among the people were constantly sought for by theorists in order for them to promulgate ideas that could bring them together in solidarity. Pratap Bhanu Mehta, in *Cosmopolitanism and the circle of Reason*, positions cosmopolitanism between "the logic of assimilation that eroded difference". David Hollinger, likewise, locates it between a universalism that would shun the differences away and a pluralism that essentializes the difference against universality. Colored cosmopolitanism, then, occupies the middle ground that Hollinger and Mehta take. Their colored cosmopolitanism is inclusive in nature that opposed chauvinistic ways of understanding nation, religion or race while at the same time reinforced unification. As opposed to the impenetrable notions of unity that omitted the hardships of women, poor, Dalits and homosexuals, colored cosmopolitanism acknowledged how multiple repressions intersected and formed associations across social and political movements and borders. Often, the transnational bonds between United States and India served as a prism,

refracting a single issue into a larger, much broader, concern for the varied struggles of suppressed groups, both at home and outside.

The dissolution of white hegemony and the advancement of the darker races was anticipated in the wake of the First World War. Du Bois, in 1914, asserted, "considering the fact that black Africans and brown Indians and yellow Japanese are fighting for France and England it may be that they will come out of this frightful welter of blood with new ideas about the essential quality of all men." The relegation of color had already become a Bois hallmark by then wherein he emphasized on the idea of unity in diversity. Towards the end of the twentieth century, cracks in the establishment of white supremacy could be observed which led to the widening of how 'we' was earlier known. Racial hostility was no longer legally supported, the public sphere stood to be secularised and women were granted the American citizenship. Much similar forms of freedom were fought for in India that resulted in de-colonization.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Societies that withhold from the opportunities of transcending the nation-state model cannot serve the democratic purpose in its fullest possible way, nor can it feign to safeguard and advance the human rights. It is favourable, therefore, to bridge theories and actions for both the universal and the particular, the self and the other, the national and the international, and the local and the global and channelize dissent while acknowledging the complex, intertwined repertoires of identity and interests.

Vivekanand recited the following lines on the anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence which resonate universally,

Move on, O Lord, in thy resistless path!  
Till thy high noon o'erspreads the world,  
Till every land reflects thy light,  
Till men and women, with uplifted head,  
Behold their shackles broken, and  
Known, in springing joy, their life renewed!

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