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BLINKERED THOUGHT AND OPEN MINDS: AN OVERVIEW OF FOREIGN WRITING ON INDIA IN THE DECADES SINCE INDEPENDENCE

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ABSTRACT:

This paper gives a short description of recurrent themes on India as ruled the roost in foreign eyes before economic reforms and the shift that followed sweeping economic changes. For the purpose of this paper, only such writing was considered that dealt with socio-economic issues. However, writings that focused on political and religious concerns where they were linked with socio-economic issues were also studied.

KEYWORDS: *economic reforms , socio-economic issues , sweeping economic.*

INTRODUCTION :

When studying foreign writing on India, it soon becomes apparent that there are certain themes that make an appearance almost across the board. Many of these are outright stereotypes, while some are partly faithful. Very rarely does one find writing that is impartial and truthful. This paper gives a short description of recurrent themes on India as ruled the roost in foreign eyes before economic reforms and the shift that followed sweeping economic changes.

It particularly focuses on what Edward Said called Orientalism and examines texts to find if there is evidence of it. For the purpose of this paper, only such writing was considered that dealt with socio-economic issues. However, writings that focused on

political and religious concerns where they were linked with socio-economic issues were also studied. Spirituality: The most common perception found almost universally in the literature studied for this paper is that India is a deeply spiritual land. More often than not, barring ancient writings dealing with the political and social realities of the times, writings on or inspired by this country have an unmistakable spiritual tint. The intertwining of Hinduism, spirituality, caste and 'karma', and their mutual dynamics has been an area oft trod upon. William Jones, despite his contribution to the printing press in India, is better known for his study of the Bhagwad Gita and his translation of the Laws of Manu into English. T.S. Eliot found solace and stability in 'Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.'¹ in times of mental turbulence. Mark Twain waxed eloquent about India and Hinduism:

"... the one sole country under the sun that is endowed with an imperishable interest for alien prince and alien peasant, for lettered and ignorant, wise and fool, rich and poor, bound and free, the one land that all men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for the shows of all the rest of the world combined."²

¹ T.S. Eliot: The Waste Land and Other Poems, pg 69

² www.literaturecollection.com/marktwain : Following the Equator, Chapter 38

And, a few lines later:

“India has two million gods, and worships them all. In religion all other countries are paupers; India is the only millionaire.”³

Present day scholar, Dr. Gail Omvedt, an American who has taken up residence in coastal Maharashtra, studies the caste system as it comes across in the Vedas. Although she has written extensively on subjects like human rights and women’s empowerment, her chief interest and area of study is the unequal treatment meted out to Dalits by upper caste Hindus, once again suggesting that perhaps the westerner finds some social factors more interesting than others.

French scholar, Andre Malraux, was fascinated with the Hindu concept of the forces of Creation and Destruction essentially being two sides of the same coin, as opposed to the western concept of these two forces being exact antitheses of each other constantly vying for their supremacy over the frail and impressionable human mind. His works repeatedly stress this unique feature of India and the imminent doom the West faces because of its failure to accept the concept of the holy Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh.⁴ He once famously told Nehru: “Europe is destructive, suicidal.”⁵ He tried time and again in vain to convince Nehru of the utility of India’s spirituality in today’s world and the need for the country to be the spiritual pole star of the world. Nehru, of course, would have none of it as at that point in time, he judged heavy industries, the temples of modern times, to be more important to India than those devoted to the contemplation of spiritual pursuits.

When Nobel Laureate and noted economist Dr. Amartya Sen arrived at Harvard University in the late 1980s, he went to the famous ‘Harvard Coop’ bookstore and was surprised to find every single book on India kept in the section called ‘Religions’.⁶ Surely this is an indication that India is looked upon as the land of the Spiritual. This also means that certain preconceived notions about the East do exist in the West.

In the writer’s personal experience in the US and Europe, the West assigns a few other attributes to India besides just the spiritual tag. Many assumptions, taking the place of hard facts, conjure up an image of India that is clearly unfaithful to reality. Once again, the assumptions are almost uniform in theme. For example, at least pre-reforms, it was a common perception that India is largely a wilderness rampant with snakes and elephants. Another perception, perhaps a result of the interest the Kumbh Mela generates in the Western observer (the curiosity value of graphic pictures of naked, ash-smeared naga sadhus being high indeed), was that unkempt, bearded, naked – or at most saffron-robbed – sadhus constitute the majority of the population of India. As for the rest of the population, it was mostly tribal lorded over by imperious maharajahs on (again!) elephants.

Poverty: Another recurrent motif is the poverty of India. No reference to India would be complete without allusions to the poor living standards of the country. Without doubt, the poor of India live an undignified existence by any standards, but Indian poverty tends to get distorted beyond proportion in the West. People with no firsthand experience of India thought of all Indians, barring a very select few, as dwellers of mud or straw huts. This is best illustrated by an incident in the writer’s life when she showed some photographs to a Senior Class in a High School in the US. (The Senior Class would be equivalent to 12th Standard in India.) Among others, there was a picture of her house. One of the students asked, in all sincerity, if the photograph was that of the Indian President’s house. The house in question was a modest two-bedroom affair with an equally modest courtyard. The fact that it could be mistaken for the Indian President’s mansion is a good pointer to the flawed Western understanding of the living conditions in the East.

³ ibid

⁴ Discovery Channel: The India of Andre Malraux, aired 8:00pm, 08/08/2007

⁵ Embassy of France in India: Malraux and India, pg. 46

⁶ Amartya Sen, The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity. Pg. 152

Illiteracy: The West also thinks of the East as the illiterate part of the world. Once again, there is no debating the established fact that literacy rates in many parts of the East are lower than those in the West, but to assume that illiteracy is almost an epidemic is fallacious. The East, and particularly India, has produced some fine professionals with the best work ethics who have regularly been absorbed in the Western job market and have contributed significantly towards the further development of already developed countries.

The White Man's Burden: It would be premature to say that dynamics between whites and browns/blacks are at equilibrium. Granted that in today's day and age, Rudyard Kipling may seem too much of an imperialist to even Western minds. His infamous 'White Man's Burden', written on the occasion of the American takeover of the Phillipines, reads thus:

"Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child."⁷

Although such an open avowal of the white man's alleged supremacy may be a little too hard to condone in the more liberal (or perhaps more politically correct) atmosphere of today, the fact remains that the 'white man's burden' is one more stereotype where the white man assumes superiority over the coloured. Even children's comic books reinforce this stereotype. One has but to look at the Phantom series to understand the subtle brainwashing that begins at an early age. The Phantom is a tall, white man among black African Pygmies, and is revered among the dwarfs as their saviour – not too far a cry from Kipling's view of the benevolent white man whose worldview has to be enforced so as to 'civilize the savage East'. Times may have changed enough to demand the subversion of such colonial mind-sets, but it is still too soon for attitudes that remain too deeply embedded in the Western psyche to be altered completely.

Acknowledgment of Orientalist Writing: In describing western women travellers' experiences in the East, Dr. Maureen Mulligan finds that when the going gets tough, liberal values find themselves on shaky grounds. Dr. Mulligan's doctoral thesis in 1999 dealt with the travel writing of British women travellers, contrasting the late colonial period with post-colonial texts. She has this uncomplimentary comment for Robyn Davidson (traveller to India) and Sarah Wheeler (traveller to Bangladesh):

"Both writers assume they have a clear liberal, post-colonial conscience, but their texts reveal the superficial nature of this position when confronted with the reality of a non-western culture."⁸

Robyn Davidson, who traversed the desert in Rajasthan, India, soon found to her own surprise that she was liberal so long as it did not cause personal inconvenience, but when faced with what she perceived as hardships of rural and nomadic life, she cracks under pressure. Dr. Mulligan quotes Davidson thus:

"Lately, battalions of judgments had been arriving unbidden from some less evolved self and nothing I could do would fend them off."⁹

Likewise, Dr. Mulligan also quotes the example of Sarah Wheeler who toured Bangladesh extensively. Wheeler was taken aback to find that she could not communicate with the people of the country in English. She had simply assumed that since Bangladesh had been a colony like India, she would face no problem communicating. She did not feel the need to equip herself with the local language to facilitate communication. Her surprise at her own snobbish assumptions is evident in another of Dr. Mulligan's quotes of Wheeler:

"I was annoyed to find such a nasty little colonial assumption lurking under my cozy liberal carapace."¹⁰

Two other writers, William Randall, and Sarah MacDonald have made a mockery of a narrative in the name of Indian chronicles. Randall 'accidentally' lands in an orphanage, straightens out the rowdy kids with love, and saves the land on which the orphanage stands. This he does, according to his account, by staging a charity show of the Ramayan and raising money to buy the land off the sharks. Ludicrous as it is, it would still have been acceptable if he admitted it was a figment of his imagination that suffered a bad case of white man's burden. Instead, he has the cheek to imply that it is a true story. As for MacDonald, it is almost as if she first made out a list of things to mention in her book and then started penning it. Caste, Sati, women's inequality, crime, and oh yes, spirituality, all are covered without delving deep into a single issue. A writer may be excused for choosing what to write on and how much, but casual attitude towards the subject she has chosen is evident from a series of factual errors. She also takes the liberty of formulating her own spellings of places in India. It is a dismissive attitude to say the least.

Bias Toned Down: A majority of writings on India are in one way or other of the Orientalist tint; however, there are some who are less biased as compared to the blatant assumptions that go in the name of scholarly writing about India. Edward Luce, an English journalist who spent some time in New Delhi as the South Asia Bureau Chief for the Financial Times, has given a more impartial analysis of the situation on the ground.

Luce says that the development seen in pockets of India may rival Silicon Valley, but the reality of rural India with its lack of even the most basic amenities like clean drinking water and public health is centuries old and amounts to criminal neglect. India may well be an unstoppable juggernaut and the middle classes may well be riding the crest of a wave that can lead on to fortune, but there is no denying the fact that practically half the population of India still lives beneath the poverty line. While the middle class is expanding, it is still not doing so fast enough to encompass the teeming millions who do not know where their next meal will come from, or if it will come at all.

In fact, the three are interrelated, he says. Luce sees endless possibilities for India, but there is always a rider. For instance, Luce finds it impressive that India has been able to remain a democracy despite predictions of doom during its first few years as an independent country. Few people expected India to stay united because of its immense geographical and cultural diversity. Also, true to international expectations, India has seen any number of secessionist movements, from Punjab to Assam to Kashmir. However, Luce asserts that India stayed independent, democratic and united not in spite of, but because of its diversity. There is no threat to democracy as such in the foreseeable future, but (and this is the rider) the quality of governance which suffers due to the caste politics Indian leaders routinely engage in leaves a lot to be desired.

In Luce's opinion, a moderately satisfied people do not demand independence from their mother nation. People crave freedom when they feel that their hopes and ambitions cannot be realized under what

they feel is a stifling rule. When caste politics takes precedence over even the most basic needs, amenities and infrastructure, it is a perfect recipe for disquiet to go on the boil. Yet, Indian politicians routinely choose caste over stability. Luce quotes the example of Mayawati, whose election speeches often consist of an exhaustive list of candidates and their caste origins.¹¹ This is clearly a call to respective communities to vote for candidates of their caste. More often than not, the electorate complies. An indication would be her election to the post of Chief Minister for a second term after a gap of five years. For the first time, in a bid at 'social engineering', a Dalit leader had openly wooed Brahmins in pockets where the Brahmin population was sizeable enough to be in a position to influence the outcome of the election. Muslims were also given proportionate representation. The formula clicked and in an era of unavoidable coalition politics, Mayawati's BSP won by a landslide, pocketing 206 seats out of a total of 403 – a clear majority.¹²

The Muslim minority in India poses just such a question. The population of this minority community exceeds the total number of Muslims in Pakistan. The unsavoury relations between Islamabad and New Delhi do nothing to ease either the minority bashing by Hindutva hardliners or the minority appeasement of vested interests come election time. Other religious communities, too, have a strong presence in India and the particular brand of Secularism that is unique to India follows brings with it its own set of problems. He also speaks at length of the beating freedom takes at the hands of self-appointed religious leaders. In another instance (with reference to caste-based reservations in jobs and educational institutions), he says:

“By diluting the principle of equality before law, Indian Liberalism was encumbered with a handicap it has yet to escape.”¹³

However, where he fails is when he portrays hardliners as jokers who can be ridiculed and wished away. By projecting zealots as buffoons, Luce has failed to lay the required emphasis on the dangerous consequences of zealotry. This could be looked upon as an instance of the Christian view that any religion that is not Christianity is a non-serious religion and should be treated as such.

Otherwise, one is hard pressed to explain Luce's relief on being able to bring back his photographer, a Muslim, alive out of an RSS camp. While Luce was at an RSS training camp at Nagpur, he was accompanied by a photographer called Sohail Akbar. Because of Akbar's religion, both felt it necessary to conceal the photographer's full name while they interacted with the rank and file of the RSS. As they left unscathed a few hours later, Luce quotes Akbar as saying:

“If they had known it was a Muslim taking their photographs, God knows what they would have done.”¹⁴

Luce adds:

“His apprehension was perfectly reasonable. The Bajrang Dal played the leading role in two of India’s three worst riots of the last quarter of a century in 1992 and 2002.”¹⁵

While this is certainly true, and riots are condemnable by any standards, the Bajrang Dal has not been known to lynch individuals. The case of Graham Staines (a missionary who was burnt alive along with his sons by a lynch mob of the Bajrang Dal) comes to mind, but it was very different in the sense that Staines was no ordinary photographer. He was a missionary with an agenda – always a prime target for Hindu aggressors. By saying that Akbar was at risk at the training camp, Luce seems to be overstating his case.

Another author who has been more faithful in his writings about India is author of the award winning novel *Shantaram*. To quote a couple of examples, Roberts was horrified at the poverty in which slum dwellers live. He was even more shocked to see that the most abject and degrading poverty resided in such close proximity of the modern, air-conditioned airport. Angrily, he remarks:

“What kind of a government . . . what kind of a system allows suffering like this?”¹⁶

Although this theme of economic paradoxes also occurs in Edward Luce’s writings, Luce’s treatment of the problem is academic and not emotional like Roberts’. On the one hand, Roberts describes the absolute poverty of the slum dwellers of Mumbai, and on the other, almost as if to soften the blow of his criticism, he repeatedly talks of their love and solidarity and cheerfulness despite their station in life.

Roberts’ views on the simple village life could also be tallied with the writings of BBC Correspondent Mark Tully. Where Tully is more of a chronicler, Roberts is the die-hard romantic in his musings on village life in India. His romanticism often overshadows obvious realities as will be evident from the following contrast. On his visit to his guide Prabhakar’s village in Maharashtra, Roberts says:

“It wasn’t paradise. Some of the men exhausted themselves, after their work in the collective fields, trying to wring profits from a cash crop.... Rains came early or late.... Fields flooded, or succumbed to the predations of insects and crop diseases.... Others watched the slow waste of bright children who could’ve been more and done more in some other, busier place....”¹⁷

But on the very same page, Roberts glosses over the tragedy of lost opportunities and perpetual poverty of the common Maharashtrian farmer and contradicts himself with the following lines:

“If an abundance of good food, laughter, singing, and an amiable disposition can be taken as indicators of well-being and happiness, then the villagers eclipsed their western counterparts in those qualities of life.... Moreover, the men and women in Prabhakar’s village were robustly healthy.”¹⁸

This is a definite case of romanticizing. Village life in India is notorious for its lack of the most basic amenities and infrastructure, and health facilities in particular. Since this has not escaped Roberts' attention, it is inconceivable that Indian villages should be depicted as the idylls they most certainly are not. Village life in India is mostly full of hardships and heartbreak, and though the reality has not escaped Roberts, his romanticizing eclipses it.

A Balanced Approach: By balanced, the writer by no means implies that all glowing remarks on India are the truth. It is the Orientalist tint that she means to criticize. Mark Tully is one of the few writers on India who have done full justice to this country. He is never all appreciative, but he is more aware of the strengths and weaknesses of India and lists them logically. He is also not dispassionate; in fact, his love for India is such that he decided to stay back in India even after retirement. But what is different about his writings is that he writes with a proper understanding of India and its people.

The Kumbh Mela of India is known to elicit reactions from two ends of the spectrum. It either conjures up awe at the colossal display of spirituality, or it fills the observer with disgust at the teeming and grossly polluting humanity. It is worth noting that Tully does neither. Nowhere does Tully criticize the devotee who is at the Mela for nothing more than a holy dip. The writer is of the view that millions of people taking a holy dip in the Ganges on one day in 12 years is no way a threat to progress and development. The very people who have travelled arduous miles for the sake of their Hindu faith will vote secular once they go home. The real danger, according to Tully, is a head-on collision between this harmless faith and the unyielding secularism of the elite of India. Sounding a warning, he says:

"Khomeini was a backlash against the Westernized shah of Iran."¹⁹

At the same time, Tully doesn't mince words in talking about those who come there with the sole aim of whipping up a religious frenzy in the name of Nationalism. Unlike many non-Indians, Tully is not given to euphoric panegyrics about the spiritual wealth of India:

" The pandas feed on the carrion of superstition and justify the Indian elite who write off Hinduism as backward, priest-ridden mumbo-jumbo –a brake on progress and development, the gods of the twentieth century."²⁰

Yet, he also has no kind words for the elite, educated Indian who dismisses the Mela as an uncouth spectacle, or, worse, sees it as a threat to his notions of secularism. To him faith poses no problems and he does not see it as a divisive force.

As regards other issues also, Tully, ever the journalist, does not usually let his personality enter even the most personal of his essays. He goes about collecting different views, sometimes even skillfully veering the conversation around to his own ends. Views that don't leave him much convinced, he treats with tongue-in-cheek humour, subtly pointing out his opponents' flawed arguments. When, among his interviewees, he hears a pragmatic voice that finds an echo in his own mind, he leaves it at that, not risking taking a stand and opening up debates with his reader. But he also always makes it clear as to where his loyalties lie. It is here that we see the balance that is lacking in the casual writer.

CONCLUSION:

India, as experienced by Indians, and as finds an echo in academic writing can come out only in the works of people such as Tully. Neither is this surprising. It is but natural that someone who has had a long

innings in a certain geographical location should know it better than anybody giving only a cursory glance towards the place. Yet, it is worth noting that most whirlwind tourists take the view of India they are expected to. Book after book, essay after essay talks of the same things – the colours of India, its rampant poverty, its cheerful people despite their station in life, caste discrimination, discrimination against women, the high importance accorded to religion, pollution, and the such. It is on such a list that prejudices get reinforced.

While Sa`id was concerned with another part of the world, the essential premise remains the same: Western eyes look through their own tinted glasses. The premise can be adapted for the present thesis. Whether India is considered a land of and for the spiritual where one finds his identity, or whether it is considered a land of babble and confusion where one loses his sanity, neither picture does any justice to the reality of the here and now of India.

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