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# The Untapped Seam and the Indian Interventions in Theory\*

When pressed by the seminar organisers to provide a title, I opted for a working title. The one which I use does not meet the requirements of what I wish to say. Closer to my intentions may perhaps be a title like 'The Confines and Possibilities of Theory', for I come to the subject with a number of queries, several doubts and a lurking hope of some shift. I begin with a couple of issues: are we out of the postcolonial syndrome or still waiting for someone to announce that it is over and done with? And what, if any, has been the extent of Indian intervention in theory? There are a couple of big names and several small ones, but is it the right trajectory that we are tracing? One can mention names like Gayatri Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Arun Prabha Mukherjee, the two Mohantys – Satya and Chandra Talpade – and the in-and-out of India brigade of critics and theorists. There are the critical introductions by Ania Loomba and Leela Gandhi. Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory* also counts; it attracted a lot of debate when it was published. Debates at home have also taken place and many of them reflected in the volumes edited by Trivedi and Mukherjee (*Interrogating Postcolonialism*), Prafulla Kar's edited anthology *Critical Theory*, and Jain and Singh's *Contesting Postcolonialisms* amongst several others. What need attention are not the names or their visibility, but the theories which they have formulated or dialogued with and even more than that the question

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of what we have made of them as critics and readers. Beside this engagement with postcolonial theory – a term I shall return to a little later – we also have two other parallel trends, one which began with the seminar on 'Nativism' in 1984, followed by Ganesh Devy's *After Amnesia* (1992), another seminar in 1995 (at Kanpur, organised by the Sahitya Akademi), the papers of which were edited by Makarand Paranjape.<sup>1</sup>

Both *In Theory* and *After Amnesia* appeared in 1992. One looked outward from an Indian location and critiqued Said and Jameson, going on to emphasise the need for interrelatedness of language literatures. The other looked inwards and projected the theory of a national forgetting which had disrupted the linearity of native narratives. Critics have interpreted this amnesia in different ways but Devy succeeded in drawing attention to the differentiation between *marga* and *desi*, reproducing the east-west polarity on the home scene. The 1995 seminar, in some ways, was the passing away of 'Nativism' as it appeared to be dangerously close to right-wing ideologies and mistakenly located itself in region and language instead of continuing a search for a pan-Indian contemporary idiom. Prasanna's articulate critique of *Desivaad* states the case loudly and clearly. In 'A Critique of Nativism in Contemporary Indian Theatre', he observes that his own experimentation with it had lead him toward an exclusionist, regional audience. *Desivaad*, if it wanted to project itself as a viable alternative, 'had to find a better way of understanding Indian creativity' (Prasanna 100). There has to be a choice between separatism and invisibility, between going to the west, or returning to the past.

A third major trend has been the persistent preoccupation with the revival and retrieval of Sanskrit aesthetics, which conveniently falls within the scope of comparative and influence studies. It has been more dominant in the South than in other regions, with scholars like Ayyappa Panikar, Krishan Ryan, C.D. Narasimhaiah engaged with the process. The research going on in some of the universities in the South provides evidence of this. A number of volumes of theoretical positions have also appeared like Satish Aikant's edited volume *Critical Spectrum*. But the theoretical positions lie scattered across disciplines – the subaltern historians, the sociologists, the psychologists. Significant statements are made but are not necessarily as visible as Bhabha and

Co. The critical theory scene, on the face of it, appears to be a stream run dry. If we look at it closely it is possible to discern, that all the three main trends are, in some measure, defensive. And defensive strategies are freedom denying and constraining. If we do not want to be confined to a world made by others, we need to step out of this concern with polarities, with centre and periphery, and walk out of the legacy of colonialism and get on with the business of disrupting the linear discourse of subordination.

Bhabha opens *The Location of Culture* with several questions, and one of them is: 'Are we trapped in a politics of struggle where the representation of social antagonisms and historical contradictions can take no other form than a binarism of theory vs politics? Can the aim of freedom of knowledge be the simple inversion of the relation of oppressor and oppressed, centre and periphery, negative image and positive image?' (Bhabha 19) And he goes on to expand on this in his work of the third space, of interstitial spaces and of hybridity. Though Bhabha is often cited for these concepts, the complexity of his concept of hybridity, of his desire to find a way out of this polarity of distinction which he makes between cultural difference and cultural diversity are not necessarily examined in detail or employed as routes of interpreting texts. They have become resting places and defining concepts instead of ways of generating new formulations.

What is theory? Writers and critics have bent backwards to dwell upon this. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan in a 1997 essay lists four main ways in which one tends to regard theory from a commonsensical standpoint: (i) mere *theory* in opposition to reality, (ii) to the empirical, (iii) to a pragmatism that grounds meaning and intention in the individual 'self' or the autonomous text and (iv) as 'not "historical"'. She goes on to elaborate, 'Historical analysis is specific to a particular situation, recognizes contingency and thereby circumscribes its explanatory force' (Rajan 80). In the subsequent discussion she sets out to upset some of these formulations by looking at the anti-foundational approach of Tharu and Lalitha in *Women Writing in India*, where they approach the text not with any preconceived assumptions but with a desire to explore. Ahmad on the other hand repudiates theory 'through a sustained engagement in theoretical terms'

(90–91). The first allows theory to emerge from reading, the second narcissistically works with itself. The opposition between the two methods is important (though both have their own uses). The significance of allowing the text to generate its own theoretical framework cannot be ignored, but the relevance of theoretical awareness and the need to question other theoretical positions also cannot be disputed. And there remains a lurking doubt that the confrontation as it is framed is not on equal terms.

My own essay, 'Destabilising Meaning: *In Theory and Orientalism*', views the formulation and the questioning of theory as a desire to intervene with history and the historical process. Thus theory is not ahistorical at least not in its inspiration. Even as it adopts a radical or a subversive position, it is engaged in a backward look at history (108–109). Both Tharu and Lalitha and Ahmad, in their different positions are engaged with history. Theory, despite its ruptures and hiccups, flows in a *continuum*. Why else should there be debates and questionings? It is this *continuum* which interests me. Theory is an attempt to understand the past, to perceive its impact on the present, to produce knowledge, often also an attempt to resist other theories and to work out a method or process. The context is crucial to its every stage: formulation, acceptance, questioning/rejection and closure, a closure which often is an absorption, a transformation, or an overlaying. It has a direct relationship with philosophy, culture and psychology. The persistent presence of a Nietzsche or a Heidegger, of a Freud and Lacan, of a James Mill or the Orientalists is evidence enough in itself. Every new theory looks for a guiding principle. Rorty and Ricoeur are philosophers, Fanon a psychoanalyst, Foucault a historian of thought. Again we need to ask: does ideology have a role to play in the formulation of theory? Does it define the basis of our perspective and how far are political ideologies rooted in other disciplines?

It is evident from the above that theory in order to come into existence, needs to cross disciplinary boundaries and interrogate cultural texts; it is equally evident that it emerges from the interaction between practice and representation. In a literary context these have widespread implications. Theory is also a way of perceiving reality. As such it is not in opposition to reality. But reality is not and cannot be in the singular. Can one derive from

this that the theoretical propositions need to take care of at least the known pluralities, if not the unknown ones? In view of the above discussion, it is possible to review the interventions of Indian thinkers. The scene throws up a strange mixture. If we return to a theoretical and historical continuum, one exists in Indian thought and philosophy, one which is diverse, divergent, interrelated and dialogic. But the moment we search for the visibility, it is either very selective, or minimal. Anthologies of theoretical essays, writings of western theorists and even our own diasporic writers have other concerns. It is not that the third world does not find a place but it is India that remains marginal. The desire for visibility leads to an engagement with debates emanating in the west and on their own grounds. At worst there is a surrender to it, at best the native cultural image is suitably framed and marketed.

Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* does contain references to Indian history, the 1857 war, subaltern historians, a stray reference to Tagore, but I failed to locate any to Gandhi, Radhakrishnan, Krishnamurthi or any other major Indian writers (other than Rushdie that too under 'racism'). As against this there are at least thirty references to Fanon, several to Kristeva, Foucault and Freud. Mohanty's *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* has passing references to Ahmad, Bhabha and Spivak, an unlimited number to Fredric Jameson and Derrida and some to Lacan, Paul de Man and Althusser. Ania Loomba and Leela Gandhi's introductory works on Postcolonialism – both published abroad and in the same year are equally west-oriented. In Loomba's work Aurobindo, Ramabai, Rakhmabai and Indulekha get one mention each, Gandhi five while references to Fanon, Said, South Africa, Africa abound. Spivak ranges with them. Leela Gandhi gives four references to Gandhi, none independently to *Hind Swaraj*, some to Partha Chatterjee, a few to Ranajit Guha, two to Tagore while Bhabha, Fanon, Said and Spivak get several. In India, both the volume on *Nativism* (ed. Makarand Paranjape) and *Critical Theory* (ed. Prafulla C. Kar) carry no indices (a fact which says the unsaid). *Nativism* by virtue of its subject could not avoid Gandhi. There is also a reference to Daya Krishna and Gurbhagat Singh writes about the Adi Granth in Paranjape's volume. Concerns may differ from theory to theory, but it is obvious that

the location and readership of the writer have a great deal to do with the thrust, that Gandhi is a marginal name in postcolonial theory and when explored, his ideas are seen to reflect a counter modernity (as Robert Young has observed), that he appears to have little visibility in oppositional theories and resistance discourses. Along with him we can dismiss most of our philosophers, past and present and go on to discard the interventions of our intellectuals in the formation of cultural texts.

In 1989, W.J.T. Mitchell had used the colonial metaphor of production, raw material versus finished product with reference to literature and theory. He had commented that while the most interesting literature was being produced in the colonies, the most provocative literary criticism was being produced in the erstwhile imperial centres, a situation which reflected the earlier division of labour. Colonial relations had not really ceased to exist instead they were more concealed and insidious.<sup>2</sup> Fifteen years down the road it still continues to be true and is an issue which calls for an intellectual review. Nativism was not able to sustain itself, and the business of research often ends in fragmented statements or descriptions. Theoretical frameworks often stand apart from what they contain. A doubt begins to surface that perhaps we are not at home with theory.

Between the theorist and the text is also the young scholar critic, a person who does not make original formulations but by making intelligent use of existing theories and applying them critically in order to open their implications prepares for the onward journey towards independent thinking. Theory apparently has a multiplicity of functions and one among these to enable the unearthing of meaning and to help trace out histories of cultural genealogy. We theorise also for collectivity and a continuity, to discern a pattern in the flow of events and the mysterious link it has on the actions of men. It does become, at one level, a hermeneutic code.

Continuing with the *bhasha* specific argument of *Desivaad*, translations across languages have a crucial role to play in the construction of any theoretical position. It is simply not possible to rely any longer on single language histories. In order to recognise the full meaning and impact of India's plurality, the simple metaphor of separate and independent existence, the 'thali' does

not appear to be adequate. But assimilative, mainstreaming tendencies are equally unpalatable. Nevertheless, it is apparent that India does not easily lend itself to polarities. I draw attention to an insightful essay by Gurbhagat Singh (an essay which has not received the debate it deserves), 'The Betrayal of Polyphony: Blocked Possibilities of Criticism in India'. Singh projects his theory in three stages. Rejecting a unitary identity, he elaborates upon the concept of 'migrant ontology' – those recognisable features which travel to alien semantics and phonology and conduct themselves in opposition to the imperial metanarratives' (90). Next, he distinguishes between 'difference' and 'differential'. While the first stresses dissimilarity and perhaps uniqueness, the second emphasises distinction and recognises plurality. It automatically rejects a unitary structure. The third step he advocates is the emergence of a differential criticography which seeks to interpret the ontology of each *bhasha* literature as a product and negation of its own genetic geo-culture (93). Singh's theory rejects the imagined unity projected by Gandhi, Nehru and Kabir and projects a confederative one. Singh critiques the hegemony of Sanskrit aesthetics which has led to separatism and enclosures, to the indifference to other languages like Pali and Apbhramshas and its failure to meet the challenge from Muslim cultures. There are living traditions, more flexible and porous. He gives the example of *Adi Granth* and its composition which established the right of the languages traditions to intervene in a major way. Homogeneity privileges power, polarities lead to subordination and inequality in terms of value, but plurality enables exchange and interaction. Any move of a migrant ontology leaves behind a residue. As one travels from one part of India to another, from one language to another, residual elements are traceable even though socio-economic histories differ.

It is exactly in this polyphonic discourse, in the crossing of borders and boundaries that the possibility of a new interpretative discourse lies, for despite all these differences there is an identifiable degree of commonalty in history, in the sense of time, in kinship patterns and in the relationship to land. Another writer whose intervention deserves attention is Agyeya. At a time when the neo-postcolonialists were engaged in defining their positions and the *desivaad* school caught up in its own language euphoria,

two lectures were delivered by him under the Samvatsar series in 1986, coinciding with Rajiv Gandhi's call to the nation to take a 'quantum leap' into the twenty-first century. These two talks responded to the political situation of the time in cultural terms and framed an indigenous position. In *Smriti aur Kal* (Memory and Time) and *Smriti aur Desh* (Memory and Space), Agyeya works out the affiliates of time and space. There is no single measurement of time. Agyeya moves backwards and, in accordance with the Samvat, locates the beginning of the twenty-first century in 1942, the Quit India period – a movement which was also important to us as a nation. The imposition of the Gregorian calendar, (which is now referred to as the Common Era), pushes us into oblivion, our histories into pre-histories, and dismisses the intellectual debates of an earlier period as irrelevant. He argues for the simultaneity of multiple time frames. A logical mind immediately perceives that by this recognition the notion of uni-directional, linear progress is also dislocated. In India there are several time-frames which live side by side, the Hijri, the Zoroastrian, the Sikh calendar and so on. Again if the marker of A.D. is once dislocated the line drawn between *itihaas* – that which is known to be so, and the *puranas, mithihas*, that which is believed to have happened, is also blurred. Agyeya argues that distant pasts, like the birth and identity of Christ, also have plural versions and are veiled in uncertainties. The relationship between reality and imagination is not as final as one would like to believe. The imagined begins differently, it takes us out of oneself, but sooner or later the imagined begins to become a part of the real. The rejection of the imposition of the Gregorian calendar, to the singular time flow, of the arbitrary dismissal of the *puranas* as prehistory, also unsettles the time-lag theory and historical periodisations.

Going on to dwell on the nature of memory, he points out that it is never concrete or real. Earlier memories get overlaid by later memories, memories can be transformed through dislocation and disrupted through imposed or willed amnesia. All perceptions of reality are also perceptions of memory. Further the limits of one's memory are the limits of one's identity – just as Wittgenstein had pointed out that the limits of one's language are the limits of one's world. It is amazing to think of this in these terms, connections which we are all aware of, but have never put them in these terms.



Memory is the *active* principle in literary creativity. By dismissing the division into history and prehistory and erasing the difference between the imagined and the real as constructs of memory Agyeya frees the contemporary writer from the burden of imposed frameworks, prioritises multiplicity and connects the projected reality of a literary text with memory, rather than with 'protest'. By emphasising the significance of location, he offers us a counter-theory for engagement with diasporic writing. The journey outward in the case of many of our intellectuals like Gandhi, Jiddu Krishnamurthi and several others, and of diasporic populations is a shifting of location where a disjunction has been effected with memory, a disjunction which brings about a sense of insecurity, bewilderment and existential awareness, a disjunction which pushes them towards crystallising memory. When I read Agyeya's second talk on '*Smriti aur Desh*', the whole debate about the diasporic writer's concern with memory, history and homeland acquired a new perspective. They were the substance with which identities were fortified.

The anchoring in a location is not merely a comfortable security, it determines 'perspective' – the way one looks at the past and the imagined 'real'. Agyeya's essay can be read in several ways, and at several levels. It is concerned both with the physical presence of space and with the unconscious limits or expanses it makes available to us. One is led into an awareness of both power and reality in a 'space-time continuum' (116). Just as memory limits one's identity, the limits of space limit our being. They act as 'confines', they assert or deny our authority. 'Exclusion' and 'Inclusion' thus are defined by the kind of authority one can exercise in a given space. But beyond these social and physical dimensions, there is also the access to cultural space and to the expanse of imagination. Spatial dimensions can be imagined both inversely and reversely, and through this imagination has the power to subvert the tyranny of space, to deconstruct rigid constructs and to accommodate modernity. In fact, the moment we place tradition within the continuum of time, the static position of both tradition and modernity are challenged.

I refer to these two essays for more reasons than one. They stand between the limiting ideology of '*desivaad*' and the 'raw material-finished product' syndrome. They also refute the need for

the one kind of mainstreaming recognised by the dominant dialogue with western theories. Instead they offer a hope for horizontal interconnections between our multi-lingualism and multi-cultural inheritance. They create the possibility for journeys across the barriers of time and language, and for the use of polyphony as a strength to facilitate work towards an interpretative discourse. Agyeya's essays are of importance to post-postcolonial theorists not because they talk of time and space but because they (i) emphasise the interconnection between culture and memory, and time and memory (ii) also because the simultaneity of time which is not merely a parallel awareness of more than one kind of time but one which (a) destabilises power relationships, (b) is dismissive of the 'theory of lack', and indirectly of the time-lag theory, and above all because (c) it pushes one to locate outside 'postcolonial' space. I also refer to them because there are other writers and thinkers who, like Agyeya, have made important statements and worked out philosophical positions, which are either not visible, or not applied in critical practice. They constitute the untapped seam which the young academia is missing out on. Theory is meant to initiate the mind into a direction of inquiry, and not an attitude of submission. I end with a quotation from the philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurthi, which provides us a methodology for research:

To understand the fact, you must come to it inquisitively, not positively. The positive mind, the positive attitude in one of determined opinion – a conditioned outlook, with a traditional point of view which is established, to which you automatically respond. (32)

#### Notes

1. Also see Sudhir Kumar's 'Nation versus Nativism' Kumar argues that nativism as a language-specific literary theory is 'too narrow a discourse to be tenable for long'. Though he also advocates a falling back upon the 'positive saliences' of Sanskrit tradition (122).
2. Mitchell wrote this in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1989. My reference is through Darshan Perushek's citation in 'Postcolonial Realities, Poststructuralist Diversions. An Unamused Exchange,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 29, 1994.