



Maulana Azad Memorial Lecture

11th November, 2017

Challenging Colonial Historiography : The Indian Scenario

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Let me at the outset, express my gratitude to Prof. Ghosh and Prof. Srivastava for giving me the honour to deliver the Maulana Azad Memorial Lecture and that too in this prestigious centre, renowned internationally for research in Social Sciences. I have been working on this topic for a few years as repeatedly I find that in Contemporary India and particularly, in the field of Social Sciences, the colonial mindset not only survives but is extremely proactive in influencing the Indian academia. Even today, this is reflected in historical interpretation of the ancient times to contemporary social realities.

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Historical interpretation demands a regress investigation taking into account a variety of sources unlike the past justification of History by the dominating nations or groups or mere ideological observations. Unfortunately, the historical scenario in India remains dominated by ideologies undermining the historical facts. To give one example out of many, when under water excavations were started at Dwarka, many of our leading historians referred to the search for Dwarka as wastage of time and money as it is only mythology. They forgot that many aspects regarding myths have been proved to be reality. And now after the discoveries, they are silent. The same very historians had not a word of criticism when the Archaeological Survey of India under the instructions of PMO started excavating a site hunting for a treasure on the dream of some Sadhu baba. I leave it to the audience to conclude what such an approach to the history reflects.

And the advent of the colonial historiography in relation to Indian history cannot and should not be discarded as accidental for the apologists of colonialism, by inventing various concepts and terminologies even today, justify not only colonial domination but also their own interpretations and view-points related to the histories of the colonies that they had ruled over. Not only this, their interpretations arrived through the application of western concepts and models still continue to have their impact in the history writing not only in India but in many others nations also.

Last month only in an International Conference on Indian Diaspora at Hague, I was stunned on hearing a leading American anthropologist, Prof. Peter Von Veer who started his Keynote Address¹ on comparing Indian and Chinese Diaspora by stating that till 1947 India, and till 1949 China, were not nation-states – again using a western concept. I had to inform him that the Chinese State recruited their bureaucracy through written examinations more than 2000 years back, a period when the western civilizations, leave aside the western concepts, were not even born. As regards India, I questioned his familiarity with Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and state craft detailed in it or the *Mahabharat*, or *Ashoka's Empire*, the boundaries of which have been marked by the Western historians only. One had to assert that the White Man's Burden theories has been thrown out long back. I further questioned that why in 1857, Bahadur Shah Zafar, the Emperor of India, whose domains were confined to a few lanes of Delhi was accepted as the Emperor of India by even the most orthodox of the Hindu princes like Rani Jhasi, Kunwar Sahib, Nana Sahib, etc.? Why, when the British East India Company's Capital was Calcutta that every Indian moved towards Delhi? For these scholars, the German unification or Italian unification is building of nation-states as the idea of Germany or the idea of Italy existed. But when it comes to the orient these concepts and historical events are kept aside, particularly for a country like India - a country referred to as *Indica* in 6th B.C., a country which Alexander wanted to conquer, a country visited by Chinese's travellers, a Hindustan successively invaded by the conquerors and a country for which Columbus searched the route like a madman. Why

¹ Peter Von Veer : "Comparing India and Chinese Diaspora" presented at "A Global Conference on Diaspora Studies and Policies" held on October 5-7, 2017 at International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), at The Hague, The Netherlands

did India appear in the names of all the European Trading Companies – English East India Company, Dutch East India Company, French East India Company, Portuguese East India Company, etc.?

The ideological imprisonment of historians has pushed them to write, analyse and interpret history from the point of view of economic, social, political and cultural factors. Nothing wrong, but the most crucial aspect i.e. the psychological analysis of colonialism, enriched by the psyche to dominate, exploit, extort, rule and create new social orders as per the western concepts has been by and large ignored. And this ignorance had heavily contributed in not only undermining the Indian cultural traditions but has also encouraged distortions and misrepresentations. For example, the concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is a family) was preached thousands of years back before United Nations was created. So was the concept "*Sarva Dharma Sambhava*" (let all religions flourish). Is religion the right English translation of *Dharma* and if for those who say yes then India preached this thousands of years before the word 'Secularism' as it is used in the Indian context or even the English language was born.

The advent of Colonial historiography of India was a deliberate and intentional attempt on the part of the British not only to justify their rule but even to culturally established the European supremacy. It was a part of what I would like to term as the "**colonial-psyche**" and this colonial psyche worked in its most brutal forms to construct a colonial society. This they did by denying, denouncing and degrading the history, cultural heritage, religions, value systems, sciences, etc., of the subjugated. This psyche was a mix of Racism and the Western Supremacy assuming on itself what is described as White Man's Burden to civilise Pagans, jungles and the natives in the colonies. The practitioners of this psyche were the colonial merchants, administrators, stake-holders of the Empire, British Intellectuals, Missionaries and soldiers – many of whom, turned out to be historians. In case of India, they knew that it was a clash of cultures, and they were confronting not only a strong deep rooted culture but also a strong economy and I don't have to go into details of where the Indian economy stood before the advent of colonial rule and the industrial revolution. In order to rule, dominate and subjugate the tactics adopted were to loot, plunder and divide at the ground level whereas at the intellectual level everything that India had stood for was to be denounced and demolished. Hence, the propaganda included Indians as uncultured, incompetent to rule, no history, divided, obscurantist religions, no nation, stagnant society and economy, slavery and oriental despotism. One may argue here that there were different perceptions and ideas about India like those of orientalist, utilitarians, indologists, etc. Yes, there were but they were part and parcel to construct and strengthen the Colonial Psyche. From Charles Grant, James Mill and a host of others till 1947 what India suffered was the one sided biased and distorted interpretation of History.

This is best articulated in the words of John Strachey : "**This is the first and foremost thing to learn about India that there is not, and never was an India, or even any country of India possessing, according to European ideas, any sort of unity – physical,**

social and religious, no Indian nation, no ‘people of India’, of which we hear so much.”

Though, many may disagree but I have no hesitation in stating that the **great revolutionary thinker Karl Marx** was no exception in this regard as his entire analysis about India was based on British sources and information. Though opposed to colonialism and colonial exploitation his observations are no different from the colonial psyche for what he says is a repetition of British propaganda. Describing India as a “stagnant society” and this stagnation being broken by colonialism, he clearly spelt out his own psyche in relation to India.

His words from a write-up of July 22, 1853 reflect a clear picture of his thoughts: **“Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of the unresisting and unchanging society. The question, therefore, is not whether the English had a right to conquer India, but whether we are to prefer India conquered by the Turk, by the Persian, by the Russian, to India conquered by the Briton. England had to fulfill a double mission in India; one destructive, the other regenerating — the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.”**

Further his attributes to India include: **“passive existence, wild, aimless, unbounded forces of destruction, unresisting tools of superstitions, brutalizing worship, distinctions of caste and slavery, barbarian egotism, undignified, stagnant and vegetative life and never changing natural destiny”.**

So successful had been the Colonial psyche at work that this great revolutionary thinker went to the extent of writing; **“.....and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Hanuman, the monkey, and Sabbala, the cow.”**

And yet, because of political and ideological consideration, the Marxist thought became the basis for historical research and writing of history which was in tune with the negative understanding about India’s Past that was propagated through the colonial psyche. The **Dogmatic Marxists**, even today, tow this line though alternate models with varied interpretations and analysis have emerged within the Marxist School – a School whose leaders tactically moved to dominate the word of Indian history. Ideology, being the determining factor, led to the exclusion suppression of facts and the dictum “each generation writes its own history” was converted into “each party fabricates history and history writing is a political tool”. Again, one can cite many examples in this regard.

Many of our leading historians who claim to be following a scientific approach to the History, forgetting the principles of Science of experimentation and research continue to discard, Ancient Indian History as mythology. They intend to assess and interpret

Indian History in the same manner what the colonial historians did by studying through western concepts and terminologies rather than from the point of view of Indian realities. One may agree or criticize but these realities cannot be side tracked.

The British also created new social categories in India like 'criminal castes', 'criminal tribes', and 'Martial Races': again another tool of domination which is often ignored by historians. Who were these? Those who fought and rebelled against the British were put into the categories of 'Criminals', while loyalists were termed as 'Martial races'. In fact, the very application of the term 'caste' in relation to the Indian social order is a misnomer, for the origin of the word is Latin and later used by the Spanish/Portuguese where the word '*Casta*' meant 'Race' or 'breed': terms brandied about by both powers during their colonial empire building to subjugate the ethnicities of the New World. Both meanings are discriminatory and were in turn used by the British during their empire building in India, to describe the entire Indian social order. There has never been a term in India to refer to different professions as a different race. This again is a deliberate manipulation in the English language for describing Indian society and creating divisions to restrict unity. All references in *Mahabharat or Purans* that *Jati* was from *karma* and not from birth are conveniently ignored. Teli, Nai, Kumar, etc. were all professional communities not caste prior to the introduction of British Census system in India.

And our historians continued with this terminology picking up selectively from the ancient texts as per their contemporary ideological convenience. Very recently, a Professor from JNU read a paper on "Scavenging" and used the choicest words to criticize the Ancient Indian scriptures and social order being responsible for it. I casually asked her when was it introduced in India because toilets are not ancient Indian culture. She reacted by saying Indus Valley; I corrected her, there are baths and not toilets and further told her that the Kamod was introduced in India by the Turks and there are evidences that people were given the option either to convert or will be made to become scavengers and many preferred the last option. Further it was the need of the British administrators and in British Cantonments and residences.

The entire policy of the British in India was based on the experience of 1857 whereas inspite of even Karl Marx and P.C. Joshi describing it as First War of Independence, our progressive historians discouraged historical research on it referring it as a feudal revolt – the result not a single Ph.D. on 1857 from JNU or AMU the citadel of Left historiography in the country and only one from University of Delhi that too in the government declared 1857 as the First War of Independence. Similarly, how much space is given to the role of Azad Hind Fauj and Netaji Subhash Chander Bose who fought for a United India in the History textbooks or historical research? How many mentions that no soldiers of Azad Hind Fauj was reinducted in Indian Army? How many text books mention the way Nehru became President of Congress and then the Prime Ministers? How many mention the Role of Maulana Azad or how Badshah Gaffar Khan was betrayed?

Before, I come to the Indian response of resistance to the colonial psyche I would like to mention here that the colonial psyche operated in dominating Indian society that had a cultural history enriched with every aspect of human development for thousands of years. Hence, the primary task was two folds i.e. to demolish its past and to reconstruct a loyal submissive society for achieving their aims. We are all familiar with the tactics, tools and methodologies that colonial masters adopted in this regard. However, in the plantation colonies, the task was much easier for them as here they were creating a new social order as per their whims and fancies.

First slavery and then indentured labour – the new form of slavery, established in plantation colonies largely through Indian labour is an important example that can be cited here.

For this too, many distortions and myths were created and it is very recently that what I call the suppressed realities² that are coming to the fore. One can cite many examples in this regard but let me pick up this falsification that the “indenture labour came willingly after signing the agreements, hence there was no coercion involved in the process and today the colonial apologists have termed it as willing migration and mobility.”

The literal meaning of an agreement is that both parties willingly and knowingly entering into an understanding agreeing upon the conditions laid down in the document of which each party should be aware and agreeable to.³ And here, the colonial apologists forget that those who were made to sign, or in other cases, put a thumb impression, either were unfamiliar with English, or were signing documents which falsely advertised indentureship conditions. The whole agreement was a mockery and no agreement mentioned the social, cultural, religious, political or legal conditions under which a labourer had to serve in the overseas colonies. Even these so-called agreements were altered as per the planters needs: from 3 years to 5 years, then to 10 years; even changing the free return passage to retain the labour. Many questions are to be raised as regards these one-sided agreements, like:

- Did any agreement mention that the Indians would not be allowed to cremate their dead? (The author has himself seen the Hindu graveyards in Guyana and Trinidad.)

² See, Kapil Kumar & Sandili Maharaj Ramdial, “Challenging the Myths and Distortions of Indenture History: The Suppressed Realities” Paper presented at “A Global Conference on Diaspora Studies and Policies” held on October 5-7, 2017 at International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), at The Hague, The Netherlands; Kapil Kumar, “Colonial Exploitation, Resistance and Forced Migrations: The Indian Scenario in the Era of Indenture Labour” in Hassan Khan, et. al. (Ed.) *Resistance and Indian Indentured Experience*, Delhi 2014; Kapil Kumar, *Peasants and Revolts*, Manohar, New Delhi 1984.

³ Hira Singh, “How Indian Indenture Civilised England” Paper presented at a Conference on Global Indian Diaspora-- Charting New Frontiers, March 17 – 20, 2017, Trinidad. No doubt, indenture labour saved the plantation economy.

- Did any agreement mention that Hindu and Muslim marriages would not be recognized? (In Trinidad until around 1935 for Muslim marriages and up to 1945 Hindu marriages were not legally recognized.)
- Did the agreement tell them that child born to them would, on the birth certificate be called an illegitimate child? Literally meaning *haramzada*, a word which inflicts humiliation on the child by stating he/she does not know who the father is, and insultively suggests sexual debauchery of the mother? It is the worst abuse used in Indian society.
- Did the agreements mention the whipping and punishments at estates?
- Did the agreement say they would be confined to their specific plantation estates and would require permits to go even in search of medical treatment?
- Did the agreement say they would have to convert to educate their children?
- Did the agreement say that they would stay in the same barracks of the ex-slaves and endure similar working conditions of the ex-slaves? Conditions which even British humanitarians had already argued were so inhumane that they had resulted in the abolition of slavery.
- Did the agreement spell out their legal rights?
- Did the agreement say that the families would be separated to different estates?
- Did the agreement say that the sick could be thrown from the ships into the sea? (Nelson Inland Episodes based on interviews in Trinidad. Else what were the methods adopted to cremate those who died on ships?)
- Did the agreements talk of any compensation of deaths on the ships or in plantations to dependents at home? As files after files in the National Archives of India talk of such deaths conveniently referred to as mortality on ships.

For example in 1866-67, out of a total of 4527 to 180; 1867-68, out of a total of 3021 to 109, 1868-69 : out of a total of 5059 to 186; 1869-70 : out of a total of 6721 to 323 and further 1870-71 – 81; 1871-72 – 84 and 1872-73 – 92 Indian coolies died in the plantation estates in Jamaica, and this happened in the very first year on their arrival.⁴ Similarly, 45 out of 533 died on the ship *Sussex*, going to British Guiana and among them 2/3rd were children and infants. 24 died on another ship sent to British Guiana, but no responsibility was fixed as the file states, “*No blame is attributable to Sergeant Superintendent or to the Master or officers of the ships in the performance of their*

⁴ Emigration Proceedings Nos. 11 and 12, Department of Revenue Agriculture and Commerce, January 1875, NAI.

duties."⁵ The excuses given are that they were in bad health at depots before boarding the ships. If so, then why were they allowed to board? Records show that even those nearly blind were sent on Board, simply to allow British paid recruiters extra earnings.⁶

In 1873, 223 out of 2368 that is nearly 10 percent had died on 17 Estates in Suriname. In one Estate, Catherina Sophia, 48 out of the 110 indentured immigrants had died though the Governor maintained that medical attendance was excellent.⁷ Between 1856 and 1867, 40% of Indian immigrant labourers had died and by 1874, 792 had returned back to India from French Guiana.⁸ Most tragic in terms of deaths of what the colonial literature refers to as mortality at the ships is the account by Mrs. Swinton's *Journal of the Voyage* from Calcutta, only 199 out of 324 had survived, an account so well known.⁹ Leave aside compensations for such deaths, the families back home even would not know about the deaths of their loved one. Such were the agreements imposed by the "civilised" and cannot be termed as "**willing migrations**" as done by the advocates of the colonialism. At best they can be termed as "forced migrations, imposed migrations, fraudulent migrations and exile punishments and forced exiles to punishment. Researches are being carried out by young scholars in India on the role of *arkatia's*, deceptions, allurements and life in the depots to unearth the realities.

Another indentureship myth taught in the former plantation colonies, meant both to deter Indians from leaving plantation labour and returning to India, and also to degrade Hindus, is that, '*In Hinduism whosoever crosses the Kala Pani (Bay of Bengal) loses his religion and caste.*' There is nothing in Hindu religion in any Hindu scripture which mentions this. On the contrary, the Hindus believe in *Samudra Manthan* (churning of the sea). If this refers to religion, then religiously speaking didn't Lord Rama, Lakshman, Sita Devi and Hanuman, in fact with an entire army, not cross the sea, and that too back and forth? Didn't they all returned to Ayodhya? Why is it so that even today, the elderly descendents mentioned that the period of indenture was compared with Ram going to the forest for specific period? And even today, the song "*Sakhi re sakhi re kaun tumara desh*" (Oh friend, Oh friend, which is your country?).¹⁰

Furthermore, given that Ayodhya is in Uttar Pradesh: the origin of most of the Indian immigrants, and the *Ramayana* is the most popular Hindu epic among Hindus worldwide and especially in the indentureship era Diaspora, then how can this myth ever have been true?

⁵ Confidential Report into the Treatment of Emigrants in British Guiana, 1872, Emigration Proceeding No. 5, Department of Revenue Agriculture and Commerce, June 1872, NAI.

⁶ Proceedings Nos. 5 to 9, Department of Revenue Agriculture and Commerce, Sept. 1875, NAI. The treacheries of recruitments are well known. You are going to Shri Ram Desh, Chini Desh and in many cases even the destinations were not declared.

⁷ Proceeding No. 527, Department of Revenue Agriculture and Commerce, February 1875, NAI.

⁸ Proceedings Nos. 8 to 13, Department of Revenue Agriculture and Commerce, August 1875, and Nos. 4 to 24, March 1875, NAI.

⁹ Swinton, "Journal of Voyage with Coolie Emigrants from Calcutta to Trinidad", in Ron Ramdin (Ed.) *The Other Middle Passage*, 1859

¹⁰ A popular Chatni song today in Trinidad.

Such derogatory attributes also relegate to the background the brave Indians who went to South East Asian countries as far as Bali almost a 1000 years ago, including the trading communities throughout coastal India from Gujarat, to Kerala to Bengal. No one has ever tried to explore where, when and most importantly, why this saying started. This, in fact, came into existence in certain parts of India only after English East India Company started sending its Indian soldiers in Burma wars or to curb the uprisings in China. Though, the exact origin and usage, at the moment, cannot be dated what is absolutely clear is that this was a saying that emerged under specific conditions in Eighteenth Century to check military recruitment by the East India Company. Obviously the aim was to check conversion which was one of the reasons of the struggle of 1857.

Another myth has been about the freedom Indian indenture had about their religious practices. If so then why attempts to convert? Why was the conversion propagated as a blessing for Indians to improve their lot? The Indians could build their temples only on the lands they had purchased and the strongest evidence to contradict this myth is the story of the Temple by the Sea in Trinidad where an indenture labourer was imprisoned on the behest of the planter's complaint for having built a small temple in his barrack without the permission of the planter. Besides, better facilities and opening for school children in the missionary schools were to be there only when converted or adopting Christian names. How many history books in India talks of indenture?

Coming back to the situation at home, I would state that in response to the Colonial psyche of domination, from day one, there emerged the "Indian psyche of resistance". Wherever and whenever the British attempted to expand their political power they were resisted. And the first resistance was from this very land of Bengal, the great Sanyasi and Fakir rebellion of 1770's. In fact I term it as the first war of Independence wherein Sanyasis, Fakirs, peasants, the small zamindars, weavers, artisans, all combined to challenge the English – a war from where emerged the nationalist slogan of Vande Mantram, the war cry of the sanyasis and Vande Matrang of the Fakirs, the first united struggle against the British. And then, in any region, where the British expanded, they were faced with resistance, the Poligars in the South, the Santhals, the Mundas or the wars with the princely states and ultimately 1857.¹¹

Much before the Indian historians emerged on the scene, the challenges to the imposition of the British colonial psyche came from the social reformers, rural intelligentsia, writers and poets, - a fact very often under played by the professional historians who attribute the emergence of Indian nationalism to the advent of Indian National Congress. It was because of the psyche of resistance that there emerged different streams of nationalism – revolutionaries, moderates, socio-religious, peasants movement, cultural, etc. Baring a few exceptions one had to wait for a long time for the nationalist historiography to emerge besides Leftist's interpretations and paradigm shifts of 1970s and 1980s towards micro-histories, subaltern histories, inter-

¹¹ Mostly they won because of traitors and isn't it time to have an Encyclopedia of traitors?

disciplinary approaches and moving to new areas like history of science and technology, gender issues, history of medicine, etc.

The trends that emerged included Emphasis on Micro Studies, Local Histories, Regional Histories with Micro-Macro linkages from the point of view of the common people and their perceptions of Colonialism and Nationalism. Redefining cultural identities and interpretations along with the role played by the popular cultures re-examining the role of religion in political mobilization and challenging communal stereotypes of the violent divide and partition.

Different interpretations and critique were offered of the National Movement and the Anti-Colonial struggle with the “eminent” historians like Bipin Chandra propounding theories like “**pressure compromise pressure**” and “**struggle truce struggle**” as conscious strategies adopted by Gandhi and the Congress based on an understanding of primary and secondary contradictions- Colonialism as primary and all else as secondary. Such theoretical hypotheses of Neo-nationalists were **immediately put to challenge** by questioning: whether it was **class adjustment or submission?**

The paradigm shift that was developing from the mid 1970’s got an impetus with the reinventing of the Indian Psyche of resistance **as perceived and demonstrated by the down trodden and marginalized social groups**. This placed their struggles **in a meaningful historical process, ushered in fresh historical debates and a new enthusiasm in historical research**. Of course, the history from below has its own critique as no history can be studied in isolation. The history of the dominated has to take into account the history of those who dominate in order to understand both the dynamics of domination and the resistance to domination.

And so continues the march of history. A big question today is; **Have we completed the circle of challenging the Colonial Psyche and Colonial historiography? Are we in the mid way? Or, are we getting trapped and falling prey to the webs of Neo Colonialism** that is trying to **dominate once again in the name of globalization governed by the ideology of Marketism?** To what extent is the Colonial Psyche of supremacy of the 19th century Europe **re-emerging** under the garb of **globalization?** Have we entered an age of “mental Slavery” of controlling or brainwashing the minds? Are the historians taking note of this imposing paradigm or just interested in their own fellowships and foreign assignments? It is time to address these questions.

Of course, we should not live in the past or live with the past, but at the same time we have to analyze the past and use that experience for contemporary and future developments. There is a big onus on the historian to **analyze the past, compare it with the present and pass this analysis for future planning and development. History is not a dead subject; not a study of the dead** for such investigations no doubt are leading to the **emergence of alternate models of development that are based on the local historical experiences and environment rather than a blind imposition of the European/Colonial Psyche in its new forms.**

Let me end by giving one example. You pick up any history text book, of any shade, but when we talk of 1946-47 we talk violence, rape, murder, communal divide. This happened but if many such cases were there then were also instances where neighbours saved neighbours at the cost of their lives. This is also history but how many history books carry it? The task of the historian is to wedge the gap rather than increase it why can't the historian pass a judgement that the violence of 1946-47 was barbarism and the saving of neighbours by neighbours humanity. And today, we need humanity for development not barbarism that is invading us once again. I also appeal to the historians to stand as a body demanding declassification of all such historical records that have been kept away from the scholars.

Jai Hind