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Old Words, New Worlds: Revisiting the Modernity of Tradition

ANANYA VAJPEYI

In the Hindi film Raincoat (2004), Rituparno Ghosh presents a short story by O Henry in an Indian milieu. The place is contemporary middle class Kolkata; the main actors, drawn from Bollywood, are at home in the present. Most of the conversation between various characters revolves around cell phones, TV channels, soap operas, air-conditioning and automated teller machines, leaving us in no doubt as to the setting. But given that the story is somewhat slow, and the acting by the female lead, Aishwarya Rai indifferent at best, what gives the film its shadowed mood is its beautiful music, and the director’s obvious love for Kolkata. Both these elements, strangely, are at odds with the historical moment sought to be represented. Ghosh himself has written the film’s theme song, rendered in soaring notes by the Hindustani vocalist Shubha Mudgal. It clearly displays the influence on him of the medieval Bengali Vaishnava poets Caitanya, Jayadeva, and others who wrote about the love of Krishna and Radha. The city where the story unfolds is a still-colonial Calcutta, with rickshaws pulled by men on their feet, pouring rain, slatted wooden window-blinds and heavy 19th century teak furniture straight out of Satyajit Ray, bridges over the Hooghly river, a train chugging across a flat blue-green landscape, and the haunting silhouette of the Victoria Memorial. The background refrain, in rustic Hindi and a monsoon-appropriate raga, asks of a tormented homesick Krishna:

Mathurā nāgar-patī
Kāhe y tum Gokul jāo?
O Prince of Mathura,
Why would you go back to Gokul?

The director’s vaunted talent lies not in his ability to get a decent performance out of Rai (in this he fails – Ajay Devgan’s acting is not overwhelming either), nor in his updating and Indianising O Henry’s tale, but in his simultaneous reference to post-colonial, colonial and pre-colonial Bengali culture, and thus to a dense underbelly of significance that gives weight to an otherwise trivial story. Calcutta’s status as a big city, its urban decrepitude, its faded imperial grandeur and grinding poverty, these we already compute; so too the pathos of Radha and Krishna’s separation and the impossibility of their reunion, which is nothing other than the universal impossibility of returning to childhood. Ghosh is clever, then, not in successfully adapting a piece of American fiction for an Indian audience, but in attaching these other, rich registers of meaning to the slender narrative he has chosen. Calcutta’s modernist decay, as well as the eternal pain of the divine lovers Radha and Krishna become grafted on to the protagonists’ thwarted love for each other, and on to their consciousness of time irretrievably lost, slipping away like their stolen afternoon together. As the plot, the music and the images mesh with one another, we lose track of the temporal context in which the events are supposedly embedded. We cannot really say what time we are in: mythic time (Mathura-Gokul), the deep past (Jayadeva), the medium past (British Raj), the near past (Mannu and Neeru’s youth in Bhagalpur, conveyed through flashbacks), or the present (the long day of the story, in 21st century Kolkata). Here, in this synaesthetic synchronic confusion of worlds, the sign of art.

Indian cinema’s current Wunderkind is not the only one to rest his oeuvre on a layered and complex aesthetic tradition. If we begin to look, Kalidasa and Krishna, Vyasa and Valmiki are everywhere in the art and literature of modern India, as are many other authors, characters, tropes and narratives that invariably appear to us as familiar, yet differently relevant in different contexts. They require no introduction for any given audience, yet at each new site where they turn up, as it were, there is the interpretive space to figure out what exactly makes them pertinent on this occasion. Thus the work of writing and reading is always ongoing, always inter-textual, always citational, and unfolds within a framework that blurs rather than entrenches the boundary between the traditional and the modern. Kalidasa counts as an ancient in one reckoning, as the greatest poet of the Gupta imperium; he is thoroughly modern if we read him via, say, Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali literature or Mohan Rakesh in Hindi literature; he is also, through other archives and genres, quite medieval, called and recalled throughout the vernacular millennium. Many literary texts and their key protagonists have this sort of a life, across times, spaces, languages, genres and political contexts in the Indic world. The Mahābhārata, the Rāmāyaṇa, the life of the Buddha, the Bhagavad Gītā, the life of Aśoka – these come immediately to mind (examples could be multiplied). On the one hand, these are perceived as “classical”; on the other hand, we cannot understand India’s literary modernity without them because they are constantly being made present to us – precisely “re-presented”. This is a paradox that critics and historians are only just beginning to grasp.

Let us say that in the evolution of literary-critical discourse, eventually it would be worked out that modern Marathi literature, say, is deeply engaged with its own past, with that of Sanskrit and Persian, and perhaps also with that of other geographically
adjacent and linguistically related languages, dead (like Maharashtrī Prakrit) or living (like Kannada). Such a working out would also take place for Hindi, Bengali, the southern languages, etc. What interrupts this imagined course of literary criticism and literary history, especially in the minds of secular intellectuals like Simona Sawhney (and before her, G N Devy), is the rude barging-in of politics to the university, the library, and the consciousness of the studious individual. Pankaj Mishra images this interruption very memorably in the thuggish right wing student leaders images this interruption very memorably of the studious individual.2 Pankaj Mishra

...the rude barging-in of politics to the university, the library, and the consciousness of secular intellectuals like Simona Sawhney...
traditions, whether premodern or modern. I could not build an epistemology on the ruins of the Babri Masjid and the ashes of Gujarat, nor do I believe that the threat of Hindu nationalism needs to define and delimit the epistemological or ethical stance of our generation of Indian scholars, whether we belong to the English language academy or the bhāṣā institutions. To me this is as absurd as if the contemporary critic James Wood were to constituteively relate his enterprise of reading great fiction to the political project of the Democratic Party, or even worse, to orient all of his critical practice to denouncing the Republicans. He may very well have certain political convictions we consider to be enlightened, and these may inform and energise his work, but his business is not to support Obama or criticise the Bush administration: his business is to read the texts. An agenda of critiquing American imperialism cannot predetermine his reading of texts new or old, and if it does, he will stop being the stellar literary critic that he is and become just another ideologue. Thus, even as I identify closely and sympathise deeply with Sawhney's work – with its trajectory, objects, method, style and politics – something about its avowed motivations leaves me cold.

**Political Readings of Sanskrit Epics**

Let me explain, for I am sure many will share my discomfort – even as there must be many who would agree with Sawhney's premises. Everyone who now works on India has worried about Hindutva in some fashion, and I am simply continuing a wider public conversation here on these pages, with Sawhney as our chosen interlocutor. My point is that secular intellectuals have precisely reduced themselves to mere ideologues, and thereby stopped being critical readers. Sawhney herself is too fine a reader to fall into this trap, but many are sure to get the wrong idea from her, and waste their energies charging at the windmills of Hindutva instead of tackling the real issue that she, also, identifies: the disappearing practice of historically grounded, linguistically adept and critically astute reading. This practice is receding because the conditions for its possibility and reproduction are under attack.

Hindutva may distort and misuse Hanuman and Shivaji, Ayodhya and Dwarka, and such appropriations may make us want to fight back and reclaim what we hold dear, for our own – presumably ethical – purposes. But Hindutva is not to blame for us abandoning our textual traditions, forgetting our vernaculars, neglecting our knowledge systems, and destroying our institutions of cultural literacy. Those are crimes for which we are all, left and right, secular and communal, equally responsible. “Kaṇ kaṅ mein vyāpey hain Rām”, is the Bharatiya Janata Party's slogan. If there were such vyāpti, if Rama really pervaded our imagination as he did in the past, he could not have been so easily taken from us – our thoughtful, slender-limbed, dark-skinned, lotus-eyed god, our ideal son, husband, brother and king, our prince in exile and lover in despair, perfection personified to half the civilised world for hundreds of years – and turned into a Muslim-hating mass murderer. To paraphrase Gandhi, the enemy is not the Englishman; we ourselves are our own enemy. Perhaps the time has come to acknowledge that Hindutva is the symptom, not the disease: that we have to take responsibility for our communalisation as we had to, in Gandhi's view, for our colonisation.

Sawhney's discussions of the character of Krishna, especially as he reveals himself in the course the Bhagavad Gītā, though competent, could have benefited from some reference to Sudipta Kaviraj's masterful treatment of Krishna in Jayadeva's Gītā Govinda and the Bengali Vaishnava traditions, and also in Bankimchandra's 19th century opus, the Kṛṣṇa-caritra. His book, *The Unhappy Consciousness* set a very high bar almost two decades ago. Not only is Kaviraj a superbly gifted critic, but his reading would have especially relevant to Sawhney because it foregrounds precisely the status of Krishna as a "classical" versus a “popular” figure, a warrior-statesman in one form and a playful lover in another. Interestingly, it is Krishna's modern reader, Bankim, who wishes to classicise him, as Tagore notices before Kaviraj, and Sawhney would have done well to consider what this might mean for Bengali/Indian literary modernity.

Similarly, at many points in the book, Sawhney's failure to refer to the work of Sheldon Pollock is puzzling, given she has reinvented herself as a Sanskritist since the early 1990s. (A minor point: *The Modernity of Sanskrit* needs a Bibliography, because its sample of references is somewhat idiosyncratic.) Just two glaring omissions by way of example: Pollock's hugely provocative essay on the Rāmāyaṇa and political imagination, in the aftermath of Hindu-Muslim conflict Ayodhya and Bombay, that Sawhney takes to be the turning point of her own intellectual project, and his recent discussion of the origins of poetry in Sanskrit literary theory, through a myth of the meeting of Poetry Man (kāvyapurūṣa) and Poetics Woman (śāhityavīdāyī). Sawhney's treatment of the relationship between poetry (kāvyā) and art (kalā) as reframed by modern Hindi literary theorists cannot really afford to ignore Pollock's comprehensive revamping of our understanding of Sanskrit literary and aesthetic categories (kāvyā, alamkāra, dhvani, rasa, etc) in both his books, of 2003 and 2006. This is quite apart from his consistent and monumental contribution to the contemporary debate about the narrative, structure, language and history of both the Sanskrit epics, texts that are central to Sawhney's book (at the very least, she must have some awareness of Pollock's important analysis of the intrinsic humanity-cum-divinity of Rama).
smooth handling of U R Ananthamurthy’s novel, Sanskāra, with her problematic analysis of Gandhi on the Gītā.44 Gandhi’s views on caste (varṇa) and non-violence (ahimsā) are notoriously complex, and must be deciphered through a wide range of both his writings and his political actions, as also through a by-now robust, highly variegated and fast expanding body of Gandhi scholarship spanning three quarters of a century.

The triangulation of compassion (karunā), empathic experience through the modality of literature (karuṇa rasa), and non-violence (ahimsā) made possible by reading, simultaneously, ancient texts like the Buddhist canon and the Mahābhārata, and moderns like Tagore and Gandhi, could be enormously suggestive in terms of developing or demonstrating a perturbing connection between ethics and aesthetics in Indian thought. More attention to Gandhi over time could get Sawhney there. For now she is brave to take on the Mahatma, but seems out of her depth in the immense subtlety and unprecedented radicalism of his thinking. Gandhi’s genius lay producing, from his intimacy with the tradition, a genuinely novel set of political and ethical categories, whose nomenclature is as classical-seeming as their content is unexpectedly modern (or even, according to the Rudolphs, postmodern!).45 Gandhi is deeply religious but utterly unorthodox, apparently comfortable with a Sanskritic past but really belonging to a future that is yet to come about. He is as enigmatic as his Krishna, full of contradictions and play, as aware of the tragic dimensions of history as he is hopeful of its radical potential. To give Gandhi his due, Sawhney will have to write another book. But given how brilliant and beautiful this book is, that is a promise we are eager for her to keep.

Thanks as ever to Pratap Mehta, who (arguably) is not responsible for my views, but definitely acted as the agent provocateur! Thanks also to Ajay Skaria.

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NOTES
1 Let us think of the work of the contemporary Marathi intellectual Sadanand More, for example.


4 Most of the best literary criticism I could think of is written in English. India’s then-prime minister, K. R. Narayanan, later to be President of India, was a fierce critic of Hindu fundamentalism, a position that put him at odds with the higher echelons of the Hindu nationalist movement.


7 As I write this piece, India’s general elections have just concluded and the BJP has suffered a massive setback. It appears the Indian electorate takes Indian culture more seriously than most secularists had feared. The Gandhi I am recalling is to be found in his Hind Swaroj (1929).

8 Sudipta Kaviraj, The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chatteraj and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India (OUP India), 1995. See especially chapter 3, “The Myth of Praxis: Construction of the Figure of Kṛṣṇa in Kṛṣṇacaritra”, pp 72-106.


13 See Prachanda Banerjee, “The Work of Imagination: Temporality and Nationhood in Colonial Bengal” in Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History: Subaltern Studies XII, edited by Shail Mayaram, M S S Pandian and Ajay Skaria (Permanent Black and Ravi Dayal), 2005, chapter 8, pp 280-322. I recently heard an anecdote I want to share with readers: The Sanskritkrit James Fitzgerald, currently editor of the massive University of Chicago Press Mahābhārata translation project (originally overseen by the late J A B Van Buijtenen), recounted to me a few weeks ago Susanne Rudolph’s opening lecture in a South Asian Civilisations class at the University of Chicago in the early 1970s. Fitzgerald recalls more than 30 years after the fact that his then-teacher, a young professor of political science, began her course on modern south Asia with a (characteristically brilliant) lecture about Yudhishthira, the Pandava prince and the son of Dharma who is in one sense the main character of the Mahābhārata. I cite this recollection as a perfect example of the very thesis about the relationship between tradition and modernity that the Rudolphs, Susanne and her husband Lloyd, introduced into the discourse of south Asian studies back in the 1960s.

14 I would have loved to see Sawhney read Rani Siva Sankara Sarma’s The Last Brahman: Life and Reflections of a Modern-day Sanskrit Pandit, D Venkat Rao trans from the Telugu (Permanent Black), 2007. This fascinating fictional memoir straddles the line between criticism and history, addressing many of the same themes as Sawhney’s book.


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