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Modernity and Its Margins: A Critique

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The above title contains four fairly loaded terms. These terms also look as if they are standing alone in isolation without making any coherent meaning. Still worse, they might look vague if we fail to forge connectivity between them. They need to be mediated into each other. Needless to say, I have chosen them with the intention to connect them to each other in a meaningful way. Therefore the first claim that I am making in this presentation is that these terms make complete sense only in association and not isolation. To put differently, these terms if left alone to them, there is every possibility that they would not only appear vague but they would turn even hostile to each other. For example, a certain notion of authenticity has the capacity to become completely hostile to modernity. It could be argued that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's life was more authentic for its simplicity, moral consistency and intellectual embodiment in Indian tradition. These three virtues would certainly fly into the face of 'modernity' that in certain sense celebrate the grand and glamorous life, permits an interplay of pragmatism, which is not always constrained by moral consistency. Tradition could also acquire authenticity in terms of basing itself purely on the Indian resources, and by implication therefore find any western intrusion as polluting. It is in this context that one could locate the tension between Gandhi and Ambedkar who arguably was a perfect modernist.

Here at this point of time, it would be sufficient to draw a quick distinction between the two terms by stressing on their essence. Authenticity in some sense could be defined in terms of the affirmation of the ordinary (life). As seen before, Gandhi's life would sustain this understanding of authenticity. Authenticity in modernity on the other hand, could be defined in terms of the assertion of the self. The assertion articulated through towering ambitions, the ambitions to conquer the world (*Kar Lo Duniya Muthi Me* - the Reliance advertisement), the life of glamour and third page. Authenticity is also modern in another sense as well. Taking cue from Weber it could be argued that an 'ideal type' could be quite authentic. To put differently, those who

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have depersonalized them selves, those who enter the modern institutions only with the reason and mind and not body which ridden with emotions could be called as more authentic than those whose love for caste, religion, region and gender seriously undermine the framework of rules and procedures. In the Indian context, the question has to be raised that how many of the Indian bureaucrats are authentic? How does one understand those bureaucrats who either join right wing parties or hold rabidly communal opinion after their retirement? Did they, therefore, not lead the tormented and therefore less authentic life during their service? It would not be unfair to conclude that their personality was far from being 'ideal type' or authentic. Finally authenticity of the simple or an ascetic forms into an identity which could be inward looking and hence self-effacing. For example, the identity of a Buddhist Bhiku or a Bairagi forms the Indian tradition. While the modern identity which is constituted of an authenticity of a strict bureaucrat or a police officer could be outward looking, it is as outward looking as an exemplar identity to be followed by others. This exemplar is authentic because he/she carries with his/ her moral merit. Moral merit is to be acquired through taking initiatives without waiting for others; leading from the front rather than remaining behind and being a free-rider. And moral merit is also to be extracted from the ability to postpone one's own liberation till the last person from the group is liberated. This idea of authenticity is associated with the Buddhist idea of "Thathagata". Some of the autobiographies like Gandhi's and Autobiographical notes by Ambedkar and arguably by some of the dalit women's autobiographies belong to this genre of authenticity. By this moral standard, the identities that feed on glamour, hedonism or page three images cannot be authentic. They could be called as spurious. Therefore, all the modern identities are not automatically authentic.

Secondly, the asymmetrical relationship between the two forms the constitutive part of identity. As we shall discuss in the following section, simple, ordinary and self-effacing life could be authentic and this would form an ascetic identity of a monk or a Bhikku. Thus, morally integrated personality could fundamentally foreground an ascetic identity. We have many leaders of this caliber in Gandhian, dalit and communist movements in the country. On the other hand, modern identity in certain sense particularly in a utilitarian or libertarian sense could be completely opposite to the ascetic identity in as much as the former would put premium on the hedonistic character of the self driven primarily by consumerist interests.

Modern identity could be authentic in the moral sense as well. For example, bureaucrats who are following the rules and procedures even by facing stiff opposition from the interested parties could be very much the part of the authentic identity which is different from the ascetics. It is at this level, the fourth terms- marginal gets implicated into the discussion. The marginal has to choose among the three identities- the ascetic, hedonistic and rational.

Who is Marginal? In a general sense, marginal is a state of being. To put it differently, the question, 'what it means to be a marginal' would help us in defining who is a marginal person. One can further decipher the meaning of marginal through locating a negative association with modernity. Modernity as a concept has been dealt with at different levels- the philosophical (the idea of self- self-discovery through argument), Scientific modernity (with stress on subject centered reason) Technical modernity (with emphasis on technological innovation), Cultural Modernity which articulates itself through social protocols that are embedded in new social relations on the one hand and on the other sustained by the technology of the self (dress codes etc.). Finally, cultural modernity could also be defined in terms of the practice of cultural justice. Cultural justice deals centrally with the idea of recognition. Although one needs to cast the relationship of authenticity and identity with Modernity in the much broader context of the latter, but it would not be possible to cover all the aspects of modernity. Hence, what I would do in this presentation is to focus only on the cultural aspects of modernity. I believe that it is this aspect of modernity that squarely foregrounds marginal's struggle for recognition of their enlarged identity (as human beings or citizens). Cultural modernity represents itself as totality of social power. Modernity in its cultural mode implicates the following parameters- training, self-confidence, towering and not subsidized ambition that needs to be achieved primarily through Market based competition. Thus, the pursuit of modernity particularly in a post-facto situation where the structures of inequalities are already in place is bound to produce different levels of inequalities among different sections in the society. To put it differently, asymmetry of a different kind is endemic to modernity. Thus, one need not find it difficult to answer the question, which is, who are modernity's marginal? Why do certain social sections continue to remain on the margin of modernity?

As mentioned above, since asymmetries of different kinds, difference and structures of inequalities are endemic modernity it is bound to create its own

margin. Modernity in a particular society, which is based on the principle of moral minimum and moderate scarcity, operates on the dynamics of competition. Since the competition is uneven, modernity cannot accommodate within its core the entire population. It is bound to push certain section on to its margin. In the Indian context, obviously these are Women, Dalits, Tribal men and the invisible. The dynamics of modernity produces and reproduces these margins through both the objective as well as subjective conditions. At the objective level, margins of modernity are produced at an elaborate configuration of conditions.

There are different conditions- political, social, material and cultural, which tend to reproduce the marginal. These are conditions that are basically based on a particular configuration of opportunity structures. Some structures facilitate a rising sense of aspiration among the elite sections of the society. These structures obviously are IT, Electronic media and management, just to name a few. Conditions also involve structures that are pacificatory in nature or they generate only the handicapped ambitions among the dalits. We will discuss these structures in greater detail in the following section. What is important to keep in mind is that these conditions need to be reproduced continuously so that the elite could enjoy their privileged existence in a singular, uncontaminated and 'authentic' modernity. In other words, the logic of the structures help the elite fulfill their dream, which is these elite do not want modernity to become a mass reality. This monopoly over modernity is retained through systematically producing the structures of handicapped ambitions and aspiration among the marginal.

At the subjective level, these conditions and the resultant structures tend to achieve a pacificatory impact on the marginal groups. This is evident from the following illustrations. Dalits for example, who have finished their Law degrees, end up working as the notaries rather than the dynamic and dashing lawyer who can defend his/her modernist claim by producing case winning argument in front of a judge. These notaries seem to be happy with their being notaries who sit not in the court room but on the pavement of the court premises. Similarly, the dalit advocates would be more on the margin of the court room doing the job as notaries rather than producing case winning argument in the court room.² Modernity based on argument, thus, takes place in the court room while notaries sitting on the pavement of the court building. Similarly, dalits are 'normalized' into accepting social science as

² My Own observation of some of the lower courts in Pune city in Maharashtra.

the best choice for their carries. It would be quite interesting to find out the sociological basis of the some of the academic disciplines like language, humanities and Social Science even in some of the leading universities in Kerala. My guess is that most of the dalit students opt for some of the courses that are treated as soft option.

One can also detect this margin even in spheres of modernity. For example, in spatial terms, the dalit locality provides the defining context for the *agrhara*. That is to say, *agrahara* cannot exist without the existence of *cherry*, *Hulgeri*, *Dhed wado* (Gujarat) *Maha Mangwada* (in Maharashtra,) *Chamrauti* (Uttar Pradesh). Similarly, the city's consciousness of itself as the metropolitan space is incomplete without the existence of the slum. In the network of public institutions, the importance of some ministries cannot be established without the existence of some public institutions like, child, tribal welfare and above all the presence of social justice ministry. Some institutions are treated as having intrinsic merit while the other like social justice has only relative merit but not the same as the finance ministry.

This self imposed marginalization by dalits in India has a tragic side to it. Some of the political leaders and so called social activists from among the dalit community, have a vested interest in remaining confined to these ministries, which are considered as something which should exist only with the courtesy of daring ministries and not on its own merit. In fact they fight among themselves rather ferociously to retain the hold of this institutional margin.³ It is interesting to note that the margin rotates only horizontally. Thus one dalit officer is replaced by another in the same social welfare department for several years. The rotation is horizontal in double sense- institutional and social. At the institutional level, dalits move from one position to another in the institutions with the same caliber.⁴ At the social level, one dalit from a particular sub-caste is replaced by a dalit from another caste, institution, however, remaining the same. Let me give another example which is very close to my field of activities. A dalit student hops from one dalit teacher to another mostly of similar caliber, only time and space differs. Now, horizontal rotation among dalit is global phenomenon. This is not to suggest that there is no vertical rotation, Yes there is, but very slow and sluggish. Mostly it is out of turn and exception. The most recent

³ The dalit political leaders from Maharashtra often fought with each other for getting the hold of social justice ministry.

⁴ From one social welfare department to another only cities differe. The expansion of social welfare university or expansion of Ambedkar Universties opens up space for this horizontal rotation.

example of such rotation is the election of a dalit person to the post of Lok sabha speaker. As we know this person was the minister for social justice for the last five years in the UPA ministry. There is a comic side to this rotation as well. These dalits have to perform in front of the party bosses so as to extract the favor. Thus, remaining on the margin involves a huge social/moral cost.

Reproduction of marginality as the condition basically defines itself in opposition to the principle of radical rotation. Ironically, radical rotation which happens outside the narrow contours of parochialism of a different kind is the hall mark of authentic or more genuine modernity. For example, the dalit medical graduates are forced to join the medical colleges as their professional career. Very few of them would be interested in independent medical practice. This is not to suggest that, the public spaces are devoid of authentic modernity. In fact, these public spaces are vibrant modernity. That is to say that, dalit women and now tribal people as well, are announcing their modernist arrival only through these public spaces. This expression, however, is always met with stiff and violent opposition from the upper castes. Khairlanjee tragedy in Maharashtra is symptomatic of this opposition. In modernity a person tends to establish his or her control over both time and space. This was not the case in the 19th century India.⁵ Of course in some parts of the country there still exists the 19th century India. Thus, marginality is a condition which on the one hand assigns only the spurious modernity to dalit and tribal, but on the other it also acknowledges the superiority of the upper caste modernity. Thus, marginalization suggests a horizontal movement of dalits who move from one margin to another even in the age of globalization.

In this regard, let me cite the predicament of a dalit woman from Chennai. This woman was a rag picker but was treated almost as a 'walking carcass' by the urban middle class. She in order to escape this deep sense of humiliation, decided to give up rag picking and take up a more decent looking job of a maid. But she was still seen in the same image by the middle class household from the urban locality. She was denied the right to appear differently in different spheres of opportunities. The civil society denied her generic identity appear in the public sphere without the sense of shame. This reminds one of the similar predicaments that a scavenger's boy

⁵ Remember, how dalits were treated during the Peshwa period in 19th century Pune.

faces in Thakazhi Shivaahankara Pillai's very powerful novel- the Scavenger's Boy".

The novel, 'Scavenger's boy' brings it (denial) out quite clearly. The master refuses to recognize the boy outside scavenging. It is after the boy takes over his father's job that the master recognizes him. Then only he makes the payment of to the boy. This narrative is similar to the concern expressed by Toni Morrison, the African American Noble prize winner, who said, the blacks never grow in the eyes of the white. Similarly, the dalit never grows even today in the eyes of the upper caste. They always appear in the public with the tag of the previous identity- dalit president, dalit intellectual. Interestingly the adversarial 'other' finds his/her pre-modern identity absolutely useful for staying important in the public space and hence they have no reason to give up the old. On the other hand, dalit identity becomes much more oppressive in the context where the dalit internalize their inferior identity. This internalization becomes evident from the fact that the dalit wants to move from one margin to another. This internalization of caste based identity gets perpetuated when the dalits ask the government to go for the identification parade for the verification of caste certificate.⁶ Thus, dalit also found it unnecessary to shade off his identity.

It has been suggested by the philosophers in the modern times that one of the ways to get out of these condition is to make the other to recognize the difference.⁷ The other and perhaps more radical position has been taken by Foucault.⁸ According to whom, in order to fight essentialization of a particular identity as inferior or put it more crudely, to ghettoize it (through musemizing it or freezing it is a stale image, we need to disinvest ourselves from the power that a particular constellation of meaning once held over us. For example, the *Paraya*, *Anteja*, *Harijan* and the depressed classes (the scheduled caste state driven identity does not emerge from the caste vocabulary) in order to free our self from the savage identity we distance our self from the authority or to liberate us from essentialization. We need to liberate ourselves from certain forms of subjection. We need to practice a genealogical critique of our experience.

⁶ Dalits in Maharashtra actually demand the state government in government for such verification of caste certificate. Ironically, they have to struggle for such verification.

⁷ Iris Marrison Yound, politics of difference and Justice

⁸ Michael Clifford, Political Genealogy After Foucault, Routledge, New York, London, 2001, p. 133.

There are some scholars who are suggesting the notion of contingent as the sure way of liberation from the essentialization. Foucault on the other hand, would suggest the rejection and resistance of this imposed identity through developing counter –memory.⁹ Taking the cue from Foucault, some other scholars would suggest the notion of Contingent to fight this essentialization.¹⁰ It works through the series of identities and not one fixed/frozen identity. According to this understanding, one cannot fix another person in one stale identity. Since essentialization leads to exclusion of some and hegemony of others, it is important that those who are hegemonised could refuse to be essentialised in the universal. This prescription might look attractive to some dalits, for they are essentialized into an identity, which is degraded and has been considered as repulsive. The ideology of purity-pollution essentializes dalits through fixing and freezing the latter into an inferior identity, while it generalizes the twice born identity as socially superior. The essentialization of this identity is achieved through the continuous denial of recognition to dalits as universal subject. It is this denial that has led some of the dalit poets to argue in their literary imagination for the birth of birds. Birds do not have caste, discrimination and they are not untouchables. Ideally, what was expected was both the dalit and its adversarial other grow together into a new identity thus shading off their pre-modern identity? Thus modernity and marginality are antithetical to each other. Should the dalit and other Marginal therefore throw the baby (modernity) along with bath water? Should they follow, Foucault and Judith Butler just to name the few from the vast *biradar* of post -structuralist's network? In my opinion, one cannot take either /or position. One needs to accommodate modernity of a kind in the struggle for recognition.

Modernity, as a dream keeps motivating the marginal to struggle against the conditions of marginality. The struggle therefore suggests the need to control these conditions and transcend them through the different enabling process of modernization may be. It is this struggle to get out of the marginality through arresting the growth of multiple processes of marginalization. Modern identity is formed through equal recognition of worth, as citizens through open dialogue. This new subject could emerge only through the culture of authenticity. What is authenticity? It is defined in terms of the autonomy and moral control a person has on his/her. Given identity,

⁹ *ibid*

⁹Contingency, Hegemony and Universality, Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, Verso, London and New York, 2000

imitation of somebody's image, basking in somebody's glory all these are against the authentic. Right to commit mistake is an important right which defines authenticity. Thus, authenticity to take lead in the light of the insight that necessarily leads to self-discovery. One necessarily discovers oneself through challenging the given. The struggle led by Ambedkar, Ayyankali and Ayyoth Thassa was the collective struggle for self discovery. All the three doubt their own cozy and comfortable situation. Walk out from the cozy and comfortable situation which they found in '*Jajmani system*' the found Jhootan as the handy source to survive. How does one discover the self? One quick answer could be it is through critical education the self discovery becomes a possibility. The transformative content, it could further be argued, of education is not text bookish but it is much more moral in substance. Radical notion of education, therefore would involve a notion of self-evaluation. As suggested earlier, self- evaluation is internal to the ideas of Ambedkar, ayyankali and Ayothi Thassa. Self-evaluation has two dimensions- strong and the weak. The radical person would always adopt a strong evaluation of the self and not the weak. This is because the later variety makes concession to moral consistence. For example, the strong evaluation would demand on the part of the agency to move from the emotional to rational, from mere distributive to discursive from identity to ideas and argument. He /she has the ability to test the tenacity of his her argument not in the familiar circles but in much more unfamiliar. Because it is the unfamiliar, who is a problem? In the institutional life as well, the dalit has to work out more stringent t standards both for the institutional as well has personal dignity and well being. This is necessary for the very survival of these institutions. Those who fail to go for strong evaluation put their self respect at risk and make the institutions vulnerable to the process of decay. It would be interesting to find out what has happened to dalit educational institution in Maharashtra. Modernity, in order to be authentic, has to recommend strong evaluation as an initial condition for the rupture in the continuity of the process involving a movement from margin to margin. Modernity as an initial condition does help a person to achieve a control over marginality and empower the agency to transcend the condition of marginality.