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Challenging Decolonisation and Postcolonialism in India and South Asia: Directions for Critical Psychology

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Abstract

Postcolonial studies is an established discipline, providing critiques of obscured and erased native knowledge. Decolonisation, a term that is increasingly being used, is associated with both activism and epistemic justice. Both of these positions promise the restoration of thought and identity lost under colonisation. With the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism in India, the call to 'decolonise' often comes with violence in the form of erasing religion, languages, cultures and even people. These claims have not gone unchallenged, as a form of cultural violence from dominant groups in Indian society. In trying to address trauma inflicted by colonialism, ethnonationalist ideas of restoring authentic culture have been reified.

This paper challenges and examines interrogates the cultural loss and trauma that has been implied in the work of postcolonial theory and the hegemonies implied in that restoration. This paper will take Dalit and minority perspectives on how postcolonial authors in the region have been addressing erasures in their work. The surprising overlap between postcolonial/decolonial thought and right-wing ideology in writing about the 'imagined nation' needs to be examined and interrogated. Dalit scholars point to their subjugation through apparently liberatory practices which compartmentalise Indian culture and seek to restore pre-colonial hegemonies. From a critical psychology perspective, it becomes important to examine the power structures underlying postcolonialist scholarly assumptions. An important question to ask is whose indigenous worldview is being restored, and who will be excluded, from this process of decolonisation.

Keywords: critical decolonisation, nationalism, interrogating trauma, Dalit studies, Dehrahamnisation

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Positioning Decolonisation

Decolonisation is term that is gaining public recognition. The use of the term across social media and university campaigns universities has meant that people are able to debate forms of knowledge that have been constructed as neutral and canonical. Social media posts and accounts have been using the term widely to discuss various aspects of social, cultural and political life that have been marginalised through by colonisation and its after effects. Similarly, movements such as 'decolonise my curriculum' have challenged the validity of certain texts and ideas in scholarly canons and suggested including diverse perspectives (Pimblott, 2019). Within academic circles, it has become a rallying cry to re-examine the ways in which the Global North continues to exert an influence over the ways in which we understand our world. For the discipline of psychology, philosophy and the social sciences decolonisation challenges the way in which colonialism shapes our thinking and social mores. By challenging the hegemony of the Global North in knowledge production, the movement seeks to shift focus to areas of the world that are sometimes deliberately ignored or silenced.

However, the term is not new in either academia or policy. The term emerged within the context of struggles of colonised nations seeking to reclaim agency and reject systems imposed upon them by colonial administrations. Gardinier (1967) defines decolonisation as political phenomena which began to include other elements encompassing the colonial experience: namely political, economic, cultural and psychological. Decades after independence, colonisation retains a cultural hold on now independent subjects, and it is precisely this relationship that decolonial thinkers seek to explore and deconstruct (Jansen and Osterhammel, 2017).

Both postcolonialism and decolonisation attempt to shift the structure of knowledge from the Global North to the Global South. Ideas and material culture produced in the Global North, along with their knowledge production, dominate discourse. Psychology is one such discipline in which American psychology, particularly from the 1950's, continues to be exported across the world (Igarashi, 2006 and Kayaoğlu, and Batur 2013). American psychology has been understood to be universal due to its positivist stance. Its popularity lies in appearance of cultural and historical objectivity. Decolonisation seeks to address epistemic imbalances and restore knowledge that has been lost or displaced. This has meant that questions about the universality of knowledge have been raised and debated.

Decolonisation cannot be a top-down process in which the Global South is handed down epistemic traditions, from the Global North. Rather, this process should look at

how knowledge can be both local and universal and applied across cultural divides. Conversations would need to move from North to South and also within the majority world. Additionally, this would require conversations amongst former colonial nations to find commonalities of experience and to address animosity. Knowledge produced in the Global South should not be treated as a monolith, nor should it only be applicable to the culture in which it is written.

However, it is important to ask whose culture is being restored and what form that process might take? Decolonisation is not a linear process, nor is it without contradiction and conflict. This paper attempts to problematise aspects of decolonisation and the manner in which some of the movement's arguments have found resonance with the far right.

Decolonisation and Indian Psychology

Decolonisation and postcolonialism provide a framework from which the formerly colonised subjects can recover their lost systems of knowledge. While the two may seem similar, Chakrabarty, (2005) distinguishes between the aims of postcolonialism and decolonisation. He points to the nuanced view postcolonialism takes on while decolonisation is invested in dismantling cultural artefacts and thinking processes from the formerly colonised nation.

However, this process is not free of contention. The positions adopted by decolonisation and postcolonial perspectives often romanticise local culture and ignore pre-colonial power structures. For example, political psychologist Ashis Nandy (1989 and 2007), in his analysis of communal violence in India, often attributes it to urban and colonial forces. The complex interplay of caste and gender tend to be missing from his work. Similarly, psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar's (1989) work reifies Brahimincal hegemony. Both authors are suspicious of modernity, which they contend has caused alienation and a loss of community in India. The simple dichotomies they propose of East-West or Global South and Global North erase power imbalances and centres of disenfranchisement that exist on both sides.

Oversimplified dichotomies erase class divisions and power structures that exist in the Global South and cast people as perpetual victims. At a time when the South Asian diaspora occupies several important positions in the UK, USA and Canada, these claims are dissonant with the complexities of lived experience. India is not a monolith, but a country made up of several religious, ethnic, and mixed groups. Multiple cultures and histories exist with diverse range of practises and lineages. Decolonisation often risks ignoring social stratification that existed before colonisation and continues after independence. The caste system is an obvious category of social stratification which has been a feature of Indian society for centuries.

CHALLENGING DECOLONISATION AND POSTCOLONIALISM IN INDIA AND SOUTH ASIA: DIRECTIONS FOR CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

The restoration of upper caste practises isn't limited to thinkers post-independence. Grinder Shekar Bose, the first Indian psychoanalyst relied heavily on Hindu religious texts and Pandits (Hindu priests) in his analysis, in order to understand the Sanskrit texts better (Hartnack, 1990). His academic counterpart Narendrenath Sengupta (Laskin, 2013) took a similar route. From its inception, psychology in India has been grappling with indigenisation of the discipline as well as decolonisation. This turn to ancient "Indian Wisdom" continues to influence indigenous psychology. By attempting to excavate psychological insights from ancient Hindu texts alone, these theorists have attempted to provide irrefutable proof of Indian knowledge systems being superior. This process of historical epistemic excavation is not limited to psychology: medicine, mathematics and the natural sciences are equally affected by this revivalism of Vedic era wisdom.

From its very inception, psychology in India has had investment in decolonising itself from its western counterparts. By relying on historical evidence and delving into Hindu scripture and mythology, it conveyed cultural superiority through spirituality. This trend is still evident in positive psychology and indigenous psychology textbooks and syllabi. In these, Indian tradition is conflated with Hindu tradition, often erasing all other perspectives.

In positioning indigenousness solely within a subset of the pre-colonial past, several issues arise. Firstly, the pre-colonial past is presented as a utopia, uncritical of the many power imbalances and oppressions that existed. Secondly, by positioning all things indigenous within the past, the present is often erased distorted and sanitised. Thirdly, in a country as vast and diverse as India, what constitutes 'indigenous', or whose version of indigenous is presented, needs to be critiqued. Lastly, a term as nebulous as indigenous can often be used as a means of creating a form of nostalgia, and thus enforcing homogeneity on people. In short, traditions and history become an invention for a greater political cause (Anderson, 1991).

Palmary and Barnes (2015) caution against seeing pre-colonial society as timeless and unchanging, and extrapolating those ideals into psychology. They contend that an indigenous African psychology has more to offer than 'ancient wisdom'. Applying this to Indian psychology, then, would mean opening the discipline to social, political and environmental issues of the present. This diversifies the ways in which psychology can engage with issues of its time, including critiquing imbalances in culture and history.

Sweeping generalisations about indigenous psychologies and cross-cultural psychologies have hindered genuine understanding of the complexities of the daily lives of people it attempts to study. This process has created a psychology that has fetishised the Global South though narratives of authenticity and homogeneity. This puts 'indigenous' or 'cross cultural' psychology at odds with critical psychology, which emphasises reflexivity and exploring power structures. This has made it difficult to critique psychologies that examine cultures in the Global South.

Within Indian scholarship, critiques of indigenous theories exist, emerging from Dalit studies and Dalit activism. From a Dalit perspective, the exclusion of non-Hindu groups and caste seems deliberate. The Indian cultural industry has promoted the country's spiritual superiority in order to normalise or erase caste oppression. Ambedkar (2014), in his seminal book Annihilation of Caste, critiques Indian nostalgia as 'futile imitation of the past'. His vision of post- independent India relied on addressing issues of caste that survived colonialism, dividing and stratifying Indian society. Apart from drafting the Indian constitution, Ambedkar's writing remains influential in Dalit communities for its potential to transform Dalit people's lives. Jabbar (2011) examines Ambedkar's critiques of nostalgia around Indian history and how they continue to provide a radical means of transformation, even in the present.

Unlikely Alliances

In present day India, as in other parts of the world as nationalist governments gain power, voices of dissent have become more vital in challenging hegemony and violence. Unfortunately, this has come at a price, with scholars, activist and' journalists facing the ire of mobs or being imprisoned. Female scholars in these situations end up bearing the brunt of violence, with added threats of sexual violence. (Ali 2017). The call for a restoration of India's ancient territorial boundaries, religion and social systems has meant that several communities have been deemed 'anti-national' and 'products of empires'. Christians are seen as products of the British Empire, while Muslims are seen as products of Islamic invasions. Similarly, Buddhists and Sikhs have also been labelled anti-national and separatists in recent times. In effect, religious nationalism strips away any form of national identity from minorities through a narrow definition of citizenship (Hill, 2012) Dalit people across all religious groups have been affected by escalating violence. Additionally, refugee communities are being portrayed as terrorists infiltrating the nation at worst and stealing resources. The language of authenticity and pre-colonial restoration in this political climate is not just misplaced, but downright dangerous. Noted scholar/activist Braj Ranjan Mani (2005) in his analysis of Debrahminising history, alerts us to the manner in which postcolonial perspectives have actively erased histories of marginalised communities and promoted an upper caste history. Similarly, the work of Dalit rights activist Kancha Ilaya Sheppard (2004). challenges notions of a harmonious nation with 'foreign powers' disrupting the peace. Histories providing evidence of rebellion against caste dominance have been reinterpreted as collusion with colonial powers rather than opposition to caste oppression. For instance, the Shannar Rebellion (1813 to 1859) is written about as interference from British missionaries and governance, rather than upper castes opposing the rights of Dalit women to cover their bodies and not pay a degrading breast tax (Binu and Manoharan, 2021). Mani terms these revisionist narratives as 'postcolonial folklore'. These ideas often have little or no basis in reality, but fuel anger and simplify

complex histories. Ubale (2018) goes further in his challenge of postcolonial narratives.

> Post colonial thinkers, deliberately and conveniently turn their focus on the consequences of the colonialism. British rule is often held responsible for the poverty and wretched condition of the masses. This is the 'scholarly strategy' invented by Indian post colonial thinkers to divert the attention and distort and subvert the popular protest and, revolutionary movements and rebellion. (Ubale, 2018: p. 79).

These 'scholarly strategies' mirror themselves in the calls to change place names, stop religious conversions, stop inter-religious marriages, stop meat consumption, and reject the English language. Postcolonialism in India has in many ways become an ally of the right, one that speaks a sophisticated language of loss, exile and trauma. It provides 'irrefutable' proof of these erasures through academic papers and even in misinformation campaigns. Nanda (2017) points out how history has been transformed to suit particular political purposes.

> Fabrication of heritage is, thus, a process of domesticating the past, turning it into stories that serve our purposes today. (Nanda, 2017: p. 71)

The rewriting and politicising of history of history creates narratives of victimhood, ones that keep present day social tensions alive by fuelling anger. For those of us who belong to minority communities being 'Decolonised' the threat of life and safety aren't conjectures but an ongoing reality. At the time of writing, several incidents of violence against minorities are taking place.

It is not just that decolonisation has flaws, but that aspects of it can be co-opted, and mirror the discourse used by the political right. Táíwò (2019) points to several areas of contention within the discourse of decolonisation. One is that is a catch-all phrase with scant regard to the complexity of life under colonialism; and the second is what it aims to achieve. This is perhaps where the contention begins: what constitutes decolonisation, and what forms it can take, are open to interpretation. Táíwò, critiques the term has become associated with performing 'morality' or 'authenticity.

In attempting to restore culture before colonialism, he argues that the search for a pure precolonial culture is not only futile, but also makes many decolonial thinkers wary of modernity. This wariness can be seen in the works of Ashis Nandy and several other social scientific discourses that hanker for a culture that they believe once existed. This discourse is not limited to academia, but exists in everyday policies, trickling into state sponsored violence.

Basu (2018) argues that Indian historical writing is a product of 'fractured allegiances' when it comes to cultural memory and identity. Cultural memories illuminate a more complex history of India, that cannot be extricated from the

implications they present. In the imagined nation of left-leaning intellectuals such as Ashish Nandy, Sudhir Kakar is at a loss due to modernity. Their postcolonial vision does little to address marginalised and hybrid communities, whose existence has been delegitimised in the eyes of religious nationalists. The discourse found in their works runs parallel to religious nationalism, which leans heavily on notions of authenticity and anti-modernity. The wider call to decolonise academia in India has led to the creation of psychologies of exclusion and nationalism.

These build upon nostalgic constructs to conceptualise the Indian subject.

Chow critiques Asian cultures and the dichotomy in which they find themselves.

> "Most interpretations of Asian cultures still linger around themes of tradition versus modernity, and ethnic versus nationalism. Such interpretations have the tendency to cast local cultural activities ultimately in a nostalgic mode, a quest for identity." (Chow, 1992: p. 163)

In her discussion of how Asian society positions itself, Chow highlights the dangers of romanticising the past as a means of reclaiming loss under colonialism. Chow uses this framing to discuss the constantly evolving hybrid identities in Hong Kong (extending to other parts of Asia).

Interrogating Nostalgia

Against this background it has become essential to interrogate the way in which India is ideologically framed, and how the national myths and nostalgia governing everyday life remain unchallenged by psychology. At a time when terms such as decolonisation, epistemic injustice and indigenisation have become commonplace in academic writing, it has become imperative to investigate their exchanges between and alignments with right-wing populism.

Decolonisation is not Debhraminisation - this is a vital distinction. While both approaches attempt to dismantle oppressive structures, they differ in the object of their focus. Decolonisation attempts to present itself as more-or-less universal, Debhraminisation is specific to South Asian communities and their diasporas. Decolonisation can also revel in the most extreme aspects of cultural authenticity, thereby erasing all nuance and plurality of experience. Nostalgia for pre-colonial India has erased histories of diverse lives and resistance, especially for Dalit theorists. This effectively misinforms academic and non-academic communities into accepting a deeply nationalistic history of India. Dalit scholars point to different injustices that have governed Indian society. It is clear, from the writers discussed here, that decolonisation approaches erase various histories and struggles. Decolonial claims become interwoven with nationalistic claims in the way they reimagine the nation through nostalgia.

Critical Psychology's Role

Critical psychology often alerts us to the power imbalances in mainstream psychology. Parker (2007) discusses the role of critical psychology in resisting easy narratives and 'programs of normalisation'. This normalisation can be seen in Indian psychology, which focuses on the individual to the exclusion of all else. Psychology as a discipline emerged in pre-Independence India, but from the 1950's it has been dominated by psychology produced in America. Igarashi (2006) points out the extent of this hegemony. American psychology has not just provided concepts, but also cultures in which psychology takes a particular form. Critical psychologists term this – the proliferation of psychological explanations for everyday behaviour – as psychologisation (De Vos, 2012). However, it should not be assumed that these psychologies have not found resonance in adapted into the vernacular language of everyday life. In many ways these psychologies have reified neoliberal ideas about the family and individual distress, and have joined pre-existing biases. Psychology in India is thriving in schools, universities, workplaces and even on social media. Forming part of a larger industry of pseudo-spiritual knowledge, through self help and feel good techniques, psychological explanations of distress have found an attentive audience.

American psychology and indigenous psychology are placed in the Indian context as a binary, establishing a false dichotomy. While it is easy to see how American psychology displaces local knowledge, indigenous psychology is often more difficult to critique - as it is assumed to be native knowledge. By relying on spiritual texts and upper caste knowledge, caste hegemonies have been reinforced as natural and 'Indian' leaving little space for disagreement. Locating psychology in the past does scholars, working to dismantle the past's hegemonic grasp on Indian academia and public discourse, a great disservice. Not all psychologies produced in the Global South are emancipatory in nature: some align themselves with violent political forces. Decolonisation, then, needs to critically discern its political stance. Americanised psychology, so often critiqued, is no less political than indigenous psychology. Its neoliberal assumptions of tracing social problems within the individual and treating social problems as individual pathologies has prevented it from addressing the rise of the right in India. Critical psychology has a role in challenging 'culturally embedded concepts' thereby resisting psychological hegemony (Teo, 2009).

For critical psychologists, writing and documenting social change and the rise of ethno-nationalism has become a means of resistance. By writing the psychologies of marginalised groups, we are challenging the narrative of a unified India with a single unbroken, peaceful history. The inclusion of perspectives, be they Dalit or queer, has meant that there are psychologies that don't accept indigenous perspectives as a monolith. However, it should be remembered that these resistances are occurring during troubled times when scholarly freedoms are being limited.

Challenging dominant forms of knowledge is neither easy nor safe. For many scholars, activists and journalists this has come with a heavy price: one of death, imprisonment, violence or losing one's job.

Critical psychology is rarely in the mainstream. Despite the chilling effect of threats and violence, this violence only amplifies the urgency with which we must speak out.

While writing this paper a few points have struck me:

- Emerging discourses have the potential to change the course of a zeitgeist, even if they cannot fully explain all social phenomena.
- History can be experienced and recorded in countless ways, which can never be reconciled with a single theory.
- Critical psychology is not allied to any one particular movement. It might write about social issues using methodologies and theories that ally themselves with critical psychology, but no methodology, theory, or movement is beyond interrogation

Social and political issues in psychology tend to be addressed in a manner that depoliticises them. This has meant that the discipline's engagement with such issues has been superficial at best, and collusive at worst. As Serdar Değirmencioğlu has pointed out, at the (Afro-Asian Critical Psychology Conference, 2022) psychology rarely engages with issues of suffering at a societal level.

Theories of decolonisation, post colonialism and indigenisation are not critical by themselves, they require careful contextualisation.

Decolonisation isn't a unified theory: its aims vary across disciplines and cultures. Some claims look at dismantling oppressive intellectual practises, while others look at cultural practises.

The nature of decolonisation and its claims vary across cultures, because colonisation was not a uniform process. In the case of India, postcolonialism and decolonisation have found resonance in cultural nostalgia which serves nationalist interests.

Conclusion

Decolonisation is a term that has gained public recognition the past few years. It is a standpoint that aims to provide justice to people who have lived through colonisation and live with its after effects. However, it is can be a double-edged sword. By analysing sources of power and allyship between the political right and arguments put forward by decolonisation theorists it is clear how violence has been justified in the guise of creating a decolonised culture.

While there is no doubt that decolonial and postcolonial approaches have strengthened causes of liberation, it is equally important to critique decolonisation and practices that align themselves with ethnonationalist groups and practices. Bogaerts and Raben (2012) illustrate ambiguities, richness, contradiction and nuance in the daily life of the colonial subject which make it difficult to disentangle oneself from rewards of decolonisation. It is imperative, not only because of this ambiguity, to rethink the revisionism that threatens to erase cultural hybridity and people.

Critical studies and critical psychology in India (and much of the Global South) is emerging in response to the growing silence on the rise of the right and neoliberalism within academic disciplines. It is important to be constantly vigilant about the direction these ideas take with regard to creating new hegemonies.

Critical psychology not a mere criticism of psychology: it provides language and methodologies to articulate psychologies that are explicitly political and committed to justice. Critical psychology does not have a universal solution for psychology, nor is its' criticism a one-off event. Rather, it is process of continuously analysing the power and politics of psychology. A constant state of reflexivity allows critical psychology to be, and remain, socially relevant.

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