

Post-Modernism In The Indian Context

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Abstract

There are four major trends of writing Indian history- Imperialist, Nationalist, Marxist and Subaltern. All these writing trends over the years have interpreted India's Past with different perspectives and set of thoughts. Except Subaltern trend all other trends have presented Indian history as a continuous process from ancient to modern times. They all have presented laws and generalizations to understand Indian history basically influenced by western concepts of Enlightenment, Liberty & Democracy and Communism. Though these perspectives have fundamental differences, still they all believed in an idea of progress from one stage to another in accordance with a social law of humankind. In the post world war era, postmodernism theory developed and rejected this very conception of continual progress. They saw history as unconnected, haphazard and unpredictable set of events. Therefore, in the wake of post world war and post colonial era a need to re look Indian history from this new perspective is felt, which can bring many hidden facts to the light. This article is an attempt towards this very direction.

Keywords: Enlightenment, Communism, Post-Modernism, Liberty, Democracy.

I. Introduction

Thinkers who became most concerned with the crisis of western civilization, basically gave 'Post-structural' or 'Postmodern theory'. The best known of these are Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard and Giddens. According to Arran Gare, "Postmodernism is marked by a loss of faith in modernity, Progress and Enlightenment rationality; it signifies people's awareness that it is just these conditions that are leading humanity to self destruction". It is a special condition in which the whole of modern civilization is being forced to adopt a critical attitude towards itself.¹

¹ (Sreedharan, 2004, p. 281)

‘Modernity’ a product of eighteenth century enlightenment, begun with a assumption that progress in reason, Knowledge, technology, the arts and economy ensured humanity’s cumulative advance towards a final state of perfection . This belief in continual progress received a shock in the two world wars each leaving the humanity with destruction , poverty and human degradation. Thus, in general terms, postmodernism reflects this loss of faith in modernity which till then had hopes of endless development.²

In this article the idea of Progress as a result of enlightenment period is discussed . Further after the two world wars in twentieth century how this idea was challenged by the twentieth century historians and philosophers is also discussed. Further the article throws light on the affect of this idea of progress in early trends of writing Indian history. Also an attempt has been made to look history of India from post-modern perspective.

II. Idea of Progress

Ever since man started thinking, primarily after Cognitive Revolution, ideas have ruled the world. Idea of Progress was one of the most important ideas especially after Renaissance in Europe in fifteenth century. The idea of Progress was best defined by Robert Nisbet as:

“Simply stated , the idea of progress holds that mankind has advanced in the past- from some aboriginal condition of primitiveness ,barbarism, or even nullity-is now advancing ,and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future.”³

Many philosophers time to time believed in the idea of Progress and gave their theories based upon it. Prominent ones are –Bernard de Fontenelle, Abbe de Saint Pierre, Marquis de Condorcet, Saint –Simon, Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Immanuel Kant and many more. The Belief on this idea is based on an interpretation of history which regards men as advancing in a definite and desirable direction, and infers that this progress will continue indefinitely.⁴

Bernard de Fontenelle, Secretary of the Academy of Sciences in Paris, was the first to formulate a theory of the progress of knowledge. His work, *Digressions on the Ancients and Moderns* (1688) contain the essential points of the doctrine of the Progress of Knowledge. He believed strongly in the ideas of Rene Descartes also known as Cartesianism. Cartesianism led to the improvements in the reasoning methods which influenced the work in Physics, Philosophy, Ethics and religion. Fontenelle believed that nations and civilizations may periodically suffer setbacks from wars, religion and tyrannies, but in time such civilization recover and once again the progress of intellectual growth resumes. He asserted beyond doubt that men will never degenerate, and there will be no end to the growth and development of human wisdom. Fontenelle’s theory of the

² (Sreedharan, 2004, pp. 281–282)

³ (Nisbet, 1980, pp. 4–5)

⁴ (Sreedharan, 2007, p. 312)

indefinite progress of Knowledge was to expand into a general theory of human progress.⁵His work became the base for the development of the concept of idea of Progress by later philosophers and thinkers.

Fontenelle's theory conceived of the endless progress of knowledge, not of the general progress of the society. Abbe de Saint Pierre another philosopher from France, has his thought oriented entirely towards social perfection. He devoted his life to the formulation of schemes for increasing human happiness. Abbe's conception of civilization progressing towards the goal of human happiness found expression in a special work published in 1737, The Observation on the Continuous Progress of Universal Reason. Abbe proposed the formation of a Political Academy of Science. The Political Academy would act as an advisory body to the rulers on all questions of public welfare ,and the golden age would no longer be delayed. Abbe was very hopeful with regard to development of Science . He believed that, Science has added much to the pleasure of the people and will add more, thus making people's life easier.⁶

Further, Marquis de Condorcet an ardent supporter of French Revolution gave an excellent description of the idea of Progress in his work Sketch of a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind. In this book Condorcet showed the successive stages of "the advance of the human species towards truth or happiness. Condorcet gives a ten stage theory to show the progress of civilization over time. These ten stages were- Primitive Societies, the pastoral and the agricultural ages, the invention of alphabetic writing in Greece, the history of Greek thought, the definite division of sciences in the time of Aristotle, the progress of Knowledge and its obscuration under Roman rule, the dark age, the invention of printing and the vast consequences of this invention ,the scientific revolution effected by Descartes and the creation of the French Republic.⁷He was quite hopeful that- a time will come when scientific laws would train and control human nature, crime would be eradicated and men would become moral, women would be freed from subjection to men, slaves from their masters, there will be no subjection of people, no war.⁸

Saint Simon, another French political, economic and social theorist and philosopher brought religion along with Science, ethics and Politics in the idea of Progress. Religion according to him was a combination of technology and sociology. This religion was the base according to him for a progressive time to come which he called the age of New Christianity. This New Christianity rests not upon religion but upon science, technology and industrialism. St. Simon's New Christianity vests supreme power in an entirely new type of parliament, one composed of three distinct houses. The first would be a "house of invention" composed of scientists, inventors, architects, novelists and poets. This house was vested with the power of introducing laws and takes care of the demands of the subjects. The second house will be the house of "examination", physicists and

⁵ (Sreedharan, 2007, pp. 316–317)

⁶ (Sreedharan, 2007, p. 318)

⁷ (Sreedharan, 2007, p. 319)

⁸ (Sreedharan, 2007, p. 320)

mathematicians and also generalists with substantial powers of critical examination would be members of this house. The third house of Parliament would be related to execution of laws and projects initiated by the first house and examined and approved by the second, it would be largely composed by businessman, bankers and industrialists. These steps, he believes will surely take the mankind to a stage of near perfection.⁹

August Comte had received his intellectual stimulus from St.Simon, and what was common for the two was faith in progress. Comte set out to determine the social law behind Progress. The law that Comte thus discovered came to be known as the law of the Three Stages. He mentioned these three stages of progress of human mind in his work Positive Philosophy (1830-42). The three stages of development of the human mind according to him was- In the first stage the mind invents but explains natural phenomenon in terms of imaginary deities, in the second, it seeks to interpret them in terms of abstract spirits, in the third, it submits itself to positive facts, based on scientific knowledge and rational facts.¹⁰ A mathematician by profession, Comte tried to introduce into the study of society the same method of the natural sciences like physics and chemistry i.e. firstly, ascertaining facts and secondly framing laws. Comte also formulated the law of three stages. The law states that the history of all human societies and branch of experiences must pass through three stages ,the theological –military(ancient),the metaphysical –legalistic(medieval),and the positive scientific-industrial(modern).He tries to formulate the science of human society, i.e. scientific sociology just like other sciences like Physics and Biology. Comte coined the term ‘Positivism’ which means knowledge derived by the application of scientific methods of inquiry, as in natural sciences. He tried to apply same method in the study of history and society. Thus Comte tried to trace the path of human development or progress and gave the laws by which a highly progressive society can be formed .¹¹

The man who contributed the most in developing an approach to history and tried to discover the laws of human progress over time was Karl Marx. He is one of the greatest Philosopher of all time. He argued that History has unfolded through various stages. He divided different times in history on the basis of ‘Mode of Production’ theory. He proposed four distinct modes of production in human history. These were- Primitive Communism, Slave mode, Feudal mode and Capitalist mode of production. Marx wrote his ideas in his all time great work-The communist Manifesto, Critique of Political Economy, The German ideology and The Holy family. The motive force for the development from stage to stage is the ever present class struggle or class war. He hoped that a stage will reach in the human history where Capitalist class will be overthrown by the Proletariat and abolishes the Private property. Karl Marx was hopeful of the formation of a Utopia in which

⁹ (Sreedharan, 2007, pp. 32–322)

¹⁰ (Sreedharan, 2007, p. 323)

¹¹ (Sreedharan, 2004, p. 190)

the state will be comprised of a classless society in which each will contribute to the Social wealth according to his capacity and take from it what it needs.¹²

Another great Philosopher who believed in the ideas of Progress was Immanuel Kant. He was the product of Enlightenment Period and gave the concept of 'Humanism'. Kant had thought that the law of Progress, the Progressive character of history, would take man, despite his natural tendency to evil, toward a perfect, free civil society.¹³

III. Criticism of Idea of Progress

From the time of Enlightenment, the idea of progress had become a theory; it was believed that it is the general law of history and future of humanity. But after the two world wars, fought within a short span of time in twentieth century rose serious doubt towards the concept of idea of Progress.¹⁴In 1921, Post first world war, Austin Freeman published his Social Democracy and Degeneration . Freeman declared that far from progressing ,the West was regressing at an increasingly higher rate, chiefly because of industrialism and its technology and the destructive effects of these upon earth, air and sea and above all upon the very nature of man.¹⁵

It was in the wake of the two world wars that Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, both philosophers of history wrote their masterpieces respectively, *The Decline of the West* and *A Study of History*. Both challenged the idea of endless progress in their works. Spengler in his work outright rejected the idea of Progress. Based upon their observation they argued, Europe in 1918 was a heap of ruins. The Brutality of the war (1914-18) came as a shock to the optimism of the nineteenth century. It got proved that endless human progress was an illusion. Spengler believed that birth, growth and decline determine the history of cultures. The only truth according to him was decadence . Spengler was quite sure that western civilization is on the course of decline.¹⁶ Following Spengler Arnold Toynbee challenged the idea of Progress in a far greater magnitude. Toynbee charts the rise and fall of twenty-one civilizations or societies in six thousand years, of which some are dead other are on the way to death, while some other are still alive.¹⁷In all that Spengler and Toynbee wrote, there is not a word for endless linear progress but much for disintegration, decay and death.¹⁸

The renowned physical scientist Dr. Robert L. Sinsheimer, thinks that science may be able to go well beyond present levels of knowledge, but such growth will be detrimental to the human race. He points out three major areas of scientific research which may prove to be harmful. 1. Continuation of research in isotope fractionation which only helps to simplify the process of

¹² (Marx & Engels, 2021, pp. 31–91)

¹³ (Sreedharan, 2004, p. 283)

¹⁴ (Sreedharan, 2007, p. 327)

¹⁵ (Sreedharan, 2007, p. 329)

¹⁶ (Sreedharan, 2007, p. 330)

¹⁷ (Sreedharan, 2007, p. 330)

¹⁸ (Sreedharan, 2007, pp. 330–331)

manufacturing of nuclear bombs and magnify the reign of terror.2.The search for making contact with the people of other planet ,if in near future such contacts can be established ,he argued that we are most likely less advanced in terms of technology with our counterparts of another planet, the impact of more advanced cultures upon less advanced ones has always been disastrous to the latter.3.Research in the ageing process is equally dangerous. Sinshemier thinks that a world in which the aged far outnumbered the young would mean an intellectual and spiritual decadence.¹⁹

Thus it got proved that advancement in Science, technology, medicine in general what we call knowledge will not necessarily do good to the human race.

The greatest Criticism of the idea of Progress came from the thinkers who gave Postmodernism and Poststructuralism Philosophy. A profound thinker and a central figure in French Philosophy Michel Foucault is the key person who gave Postmodernism theory its shape. The belief that progress in reason, knowledge, technology, the arts and economy ensured humanity's cumulative advance towards a final state of perfection received a traumatic shock in the two world wars, each leaving behind destruction, poverty, environmental pollution and human degradation.²⁰ Derrida and Foucault threw dialectics and the progressive character of history and saw themselves at the end of history where dying and decadence is the only truth. To Postmodernist historical thought, the progressive story of man told by philosophers is simply a fiction nothing else. The Progress is that knowledge produced are not better forms of knowledge and that accumulation of knowledge cannot be equated with progress. Thus these Twentieth century thinkers clearly rejected the philosophical ideas of Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx and Hegel.²¹

Foucault also criticized August Comte's philosophy of Positivism and argued that human behavior cannot be wholly understood in law, but it is quite discontinuous, haphazard and unpredictable.²² He also criticized Kant's Philosophy of Humanism that "Science progress, Knowledge grows and we know better than our predecessors". Foucault argued that " The knowledge produced are not better forms of Knowledge, and that accumulation of knowledge cannot be equated with progress. The central theme of Foucault's philosophy of history is-

- a) It has no constant human subject which enables us to identify a coherent or constant human condition
- b) Cannot show any rational development i.e. gradual victory of human rationality over human nature.
- c) Cannot be generalized or given a law for successive development as Marx, August Comte or Immanuel Kant supposed.

¹⁹ (Sreedharan, 2007, pp. 333–334)

²⁰ (Sreedharan, 2007, p. 331)

²¹ (Sreedharan, 2007, p. 331)

²² (Merquior, 1991, pp. 26–82)

d) Being without any constants²³

Foucault further argued that a progressive view of past leading up to the peak of the present is an imagined, invented one. What Foucault sees in man's past is not order, but haphazard conflicts, not general agreements but incessant struggle. According to him the reality of past, presents itself in the form of individuals, disparate, autonomous events or pieces of happenings- which renders any idea of unity or continuity in history thoroughly meaningless. Thus ultimately, we can conclude that according to Foucault history unfolds itself in the form of irruptions and events, and not in the form of stable structures. History is necessarily discontinuous.²⁴

IV. Indian history from a Post-Modernist view

History writing in India was started by Orientalist like William Jones and later contributed by Utilitarian's like James Mill. Their history traces the path of Indian civilization from ancient times and are full of sweeping generalizations like that of Aryan race, concept of 'Oriental despotism' which ultimately lead to the theory of 'Asiatic mode of production'.²⁵ Both of them, though having different set of thoughts and ideology provided theories to understand Indian history as a continuous process from past to present. In this context post modern belief in discontinuity can open a series of debates and discussions on different events in Indian history.

Orientalists and Utilitarians were both the product of enlightenment considers themselves rational, progressive in this view they regarded British as superior race and on a civilizing mission in India (particularly according to Utilitarians). They consider themselves as an agent of change in this Barbaric civilization and termed it as white-man's burden. But, on the contrary though their rule lasted for nearly 200 years, this civilizing force or race had left India with poverty, illiteracy, human destruction and a GDP share of 2% in the world economy.²⁶

Thus Postmodernism claim in disregarding rationality, progress also fits in Indian context as these people the product of eighteenth century European enlightenment who believed in an un-ending idea of Progress led India to underdevelopment. The biggest irony here is the world's largest empire ever was run by a democracy (British) and not by a monarchy.²⁷ Thus, the Progressive character of a democracy, ideals of liberty, equality gets exposed at very first place.

Post independence historiography in India is basically led by Marxist Historians like D.D. Kosambi, R.S. Sharma, Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib, Bipan Chandra, etc. The very basic definition of history by Kosambi comes under the preview of question according to Postmodernism approach. Kosambi defined history as, "the presentation, in chronological order, of successive

²³ (Sreedharan, 2004, pp. 284–285)

²⁴ (Sreedharan, 2004, pp. 284–288)

²⁵ (Thapar, 1987, pp. 6–7)

²⁶ (Ahir, 2017, pp. 607–619)

²⁷ (Harari, 2014, p. 213)

development in the means and relations of production”.²⁸But according to Postmodern belief, history is discontinuous full of spontaneous events and successive developments from one phase to another is a myth. There are several incidents in Indian history where historical discourse can not be understood by the generalization of successive development, to quote a few- Prosperity during Mauryan and post Mauryan phase and prosperity vanished during post Gupta period. The coming of Babur (Mughals), his victory over Ibrahim Lodi despite his smaller force than the later, loss of Maratha in the third battle of Panipat etc..

If we look from the perspective of European thinkers of Enlightenment period, their idea of Progress don't fit in Indian context too. The growth of Science, Politics, Trade by the British all led to the further oppression of Indian subjects. Scientific developments like railways led to the increasing exploitation of natural resources for supplying raw materials to England. Firearms led to a lot of war and increasing casualties. The development of criminology, justice, law are basically became the tools to control and dominate the subjects. So we can see that there is not overall progress but the only criteria to truth is might, or we can say it with a proverb, “Might is right”.

The theory of Postmodernism led to the Paradigm shift in the trends of writing Indian history. Postmodernist view influenced the writing of Indian history and led to the evolution of highly influential Subaltern Studies movement, launched in Calcutta in 1982. This movement led to the restoration of voices of those classes of India's non-elite “subalterns”- peasants, industrial workers, women and tribal, among others-that have been excluded from previous historiographical traditions.²⁹ As, discussed above postmodernist view don't believe in continuity rather than haphazard events Subaltern historiography too is not a continuous writing of history from ancient to modern, but it is a set of diverse unconnected topics. There one common theme, though is the lower classes.

IV. Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that postmodernism approach can bring altogether a new era in the writing of Indian history. This can bring the reality of the Indian past, in the form of Individual, disparate, autonomous events or pieces of happenings- which renders any idea of unity or continuity in history thoroughly meaningless.

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²⁸ (Kosambi, 1985, p. 1)

²⁹ (Eaton, 2000)

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