

Postmodern Abuse of Facts and History

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Abstract:

Postmodernism is a term often misconstrued to pursue unjustifiable agendas, political or non-political. In the present paper I intend to bring out the slippery nature of the postmodernism and attempt to expose some of the abusive methodologies associated with it. For the case study I have concentrated on history, not far removed from our context.

Key Words: Postmodernism, Godhra Riots, Capitalism, Hegemonic Discourse

We often encounter the term ‘Postmodernism’ or ‘*Utaradhunikta*’ in relation to paintings, architecture, critical precepts and literature that bear an uncategorised, inarticulate relation with reality. In academia it is loosely used in context of uncertainty, attempts to pronounce ambivalent nature and the state of being perpetually in doubt or in the flux of constant motion towards something that largely remains outside the postmodern discourse. If it is still considered in the formative stage then much water has passed under the bridge. More than four decades have elapsed since postmodernism came to foray in West. It began with the note on humanist agendum of forging liberal spaces for plurality, diversity and tolerance and narratives that seek no hegemony. Postmodernism appeared to east as the great liberating power—an instant dream of collaboration between East and West, rather a harmonious blending was anticipated. But how much of ‘it’ has got translated into reality? Well, we are not even supposed to posit that question. In the make-belief postmodern world

we are left with shards of reality. The demarcating lines that earlier was deployed to distinguish real from 'fabricated tales', by specious logic, are blurred. And the tall claims of postmodernists remain therefore unquestioned; true nature of reality can't be known. Postmodernism at every step is reinventing itself, becoming (very) different from what it was a moment ago. It is appropriate to invoke Ziauddin Sardar in this regard:

Postmodernism manufactures the absurd thesis that real is no longer real, the reality is but an illusion, that there is nothing but a perpetual and endless reconstruction of realities....

(Ziauddin Sardar 112)

Once the question of real/unreal is casted aside it becomes a hollow ritual to believe in any ideology, no matter what it stands for. And for whom are the options available as projected by Postmodernism? The idea of picking one's identity from plethora of availabilities; the notion of multiple realities and none being reliable enough seems farce in the face of gawking poverty, unemployment and add to all that, ethnic conflicts, communal riots. Do the 26 percent of people living below poverty line and 42 -67 percent lower middle class have the option of denying the immediate reality as available to them? They even lack the proper provision to bring their miserable state to notice. They are powerless---and that's the singular reality for them.

Postmodernism has attained gigantic dimensions vis-a-vis capitalism. One can say with some justification the changing nature of postmodernism is owing to the changing nature of market. It is feasible for postmodernism to be romantic and ambiguous. Its illusionistic tendency of syncretism shall be read as absorption of East in the western models; it has resulted in a rigid attitude of certain factions that look back at disotheque medieval set up in order to preserve traditions. Traditionalism, a word used by Sardar, is a reactionary stand on the part of people who can't mutely witness the erosion of 'I'.

Tradition is the summation of the absolute frame of reference provided by the values and axioms of a civilisation that remain enduringly relevant and traditionalism, on the other hand, is reflex-action, a response to external pressure.

(Ziauddin Sardar 118)

II

Gujarat 2002 riots, another inhuman chapter in the Indian history, cannot be denied. But there have been attempts to intensify or belittle the heinous pogrom that took away lives of more than two thousand, rendered many perpetually homeless and instilled a permanent sense of insecurity in Muslims, at least, of Gujarat. Media has kept the ghosts of Godhra riots alive in public conscious. *Tehelka* extensively covered the Godhra riots, even conducted an sting operation to uncover the political machinery behind the communal riot; it was established in the common parlance that 2002 was a state supported, if not funded, well organised onslaught on Muslims. *Tehelka* in its almost every issue has covered 2002 after the communal furore has settled down whether by publishing survivors' accounts or about victims' rehabilitation. The magazine has built much of its name by covering 2002. On the other hand *gujaratriots.com* (a web portal) questions the story of 2002 riots circulated by *Tehelka* and other media houses. The website at its homepage claims to tell the true story of Gujarat riots, which is contrary to the story in the public arena so far. The site/site owner is planning to release the findings in a book-form soon. There are specific headings such as 'Tehelka lies' and 'concocted lies and Myths of media' under which the facts, as came out of infamous sting operation conducted by *Tehelka*, are re-examined in a manner as to be read redundant. Babu Bajrangji was a Shiv Sena leader caught and tired for provoking communal riots and

actively partaking in the genocide. In the sting operation, he specifically names the present Prime minister of Indian and erstwhile chief minister of Gujarat for extending a supportive hand to all the criminals involved in 2002; bajrangi even discloses how the higher authorities intervened and bend the law to protect the victimiser. To quote from excerpts of the sting operation:

Bajrangi: Narendrabhai got me out of jail..... He kept on changing judges.... He set it up so as to ensure my release, otherwise I wouldn't have been out yet... The first judge was one Dholakiaji... He said Babu Bajrangi should be hanged — not once, but four-five times, and he flung the file aside... Then came another who stopped just short of saying I should be hanged... Then there was a third one... By then, four-and-a-half months had elapsed in jail; then Narendrabhai sent me a message... saying he would find a way out... Next he posted a judge named Akshay Mehta... He never even looked at the file or anything... He just said [bail was] granted... **(But those who know law even a bit will know that a Chief Minister cannot change judges!)** And we were all out... We were free..... For this, I believe in God... We are ready to die for Hindutva...”

(Courtesy: The official website of Tehelka for all the interview texts)

(The interpolated line in bold with a smiley is by gujaratriots.com to dodge off the greater facts that emerge out of the sting operation)

A constitutional fact that Chief minister of a state do not possess the power to interfere in the judiciary or in the transference of case from one to other judge is cited by ‘Gujaratriots.com’ to brush aside the statement of Bajrangi and dub him as a loudmouthed, ill-informed evidence. The evidence that came out of sting operation was termed as shoddy and untrustworthy. For a long time the debate over the validity of the findings of any sting operation was ripe, but judiciary has recently turned soft corner towards it. They in future might be given status of ‘concrete evidence’. The site even compares 2002 with anti-sikh riots of 1984 in terms of data. One can't determine this stance of clarifying on the ‘myths circulated by media about 2002’ and on the other hand comparison of 2002 with 1984 to say that riots even happened post-independence in the regime congress and give away a reduced stature of 2002 in contrast to 1984. But the questions that emerge out of the different versions of Godhra riots, be that of Tehelka or that of gujaratriots.com, are of importance to us. Do there exist multiple versions of reality out in open? Or the singular reality is prone to manipulations fuelled with varied ideological instances?

What comes first: facts or statements? Facts can be manipulated to strengthen a political ideology or for that matter a secular one. And even statement can have facts embedded or stand as facts. In his book *What is History?*, E H Carr says, “History is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.” The history no doubt is based on concrete facts: archaeological sites, manuscripts, ethnography; in the postmodern turn of history emphasis is even laid on oral narratives. But the facts embittered in the oral narratives are prone to abuse in the wake of postmodernism.

Gujaratriots.com takes the manipulation of facts to the set limits of Postmodernism; in the sense it plays havoc on the facts and writes an alternate version of history. Do we, who grant the postmodern baggage which defies reason and categorisation, allow the alternate version of Godhra 2002 to settle? Or do we allow ourselves to question the postmodern multi avatars of reality and history? Or better still find the middle ground to tread between singular authoritative ‘grand narrative’ of history and amorphous ‘meta narratives’?

In 2013 Muzaffarnagar, a district in western Uttar Pradesh, was hit by communal riots which took the lives of 62 and rendered 50000 homeless. The homeless people had no choice but to live in relief camps settled by various NGOs in collaboration with State government. In wake of post-riot displacement and subsequent atmosphere of insecurity, Mulayam Singh Yadav issued a statement, "...there are no victims in relief camps, but hooligans" (courtesy NDTV) The statement comes in the face of District magistrates' report of 23000 riot victims living in the camps at Shamli and Muzaffarnagar. There is no way by which moral character of the victims forced to live in various relief camps be established. The reports of various agencies of human rights violation in the camps, of the deaths due to severe cold, lack of proper medication and no evident scheme of rehabilitation of the riot victims were brushed aside by Uttar Pradesh government. Does it befit to say the reality of riot victims is merely one of the multiple realities that exist? Or do we tread the other way and look for reason-driven answers?

The phenomenon of Dinanath has overwhelmingly taken over the school books, and is slowly making its bizarre presence felt in University academics, at least in Gujarat. The attempts to study myths and legend tales under the rubric of history can lead to the limits of fantasy. Dinanath Batra's many books on Indian culture and history are now in the supplementary reading list of school curriculum. Dinanath writes in one of his books that claim to deal with ancient Indian history about a royal couple who were blessed with gift of parenthood only after they dedicated themselves to cow-worship. Less to say about his *bhartikaran* (Induanisation) of school text books, the absurdity of interpolating myths with history merely lays astray the subject's field of study. Romila Thapar, an authority on ancient Indian history, slams Dinanath, "this is not history, but fantasy" (Outlook)

III

If postmodernism doesn't abuse history, than surely facilitates its abuse. The ideological stand of shunning the rationale and laying bare the faculty of reason to vulnerability, of being perpetually manufacturing the lopsided thesis of no reality, and incoherent meta-narratives bring to notice the inherent lapses in Postmodernism. And after Sokal affair it increasingly becomes difficult to allow any advantage to the theoretical precepts of postmodernism. Coming to the question of abuse of facts and history: postmodernism lets an incessant, unrestrained interaction between the facts and the historian which allows the emergence of multiple histories (with small h), even if we grant the simultaneous existence of these multiple histories and facts then how to make sense of the reality existing out there? Or do we suspend the judgement till postmodernism comes to articulate its definition and purpose of multiple contingent histories? And above all, for how long to suspend any judgement and serve what purpose in the meantime?

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