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## Interrogating Indian nationalism in the postcolonial context

### Abstract

Nationalism in India, as we see from the wheel in the centre of the flag, and as we know from the story of Gandhi, has been constructed partly on the economics and symbolism of textiles. Emma Tarlo has catalogued the development of 'national dress', and state governments in India enshrine certain kinds of textile production as national culture by propping up handloom co-operatives. This text of identity and cloth has become so accepted that Dipesh Chakrabarty now reports we can tell a politician on the make by his hypocritically rigorous adherence to khaddar wear. Such a national text/ile overlooks a different story of cloth in one non-British colony, India. Its politics reveal how, nationally, the symbolism of Gandhian homespun has masked the perpetuation of caste discrimination.

R. AZHAGARASAN

## Interrogating Indian Nationalism in the Postcolonial Context

I

Nationalism in India, as we see from the wheel in the centre of the flag, and as we know from the story of Gandhi, has been constructed partly on the economics and symbolism of textiles. Emma Tarlo has catalogued the development of 'national dress', and state governments in India enshrine certain kinds of textile production as national culture by propping up handloom co-operatives. This text of identity and cloth has become so accepted that Dipesh Chakrabarty now reports we can tell a politician on the make by his hypocritically rigorous adherence to *khaddar* wear. Such a national text/ile overlooks a different story of cloth in one non-British colony, India. Its politics reveal how, nationally, the symbolism of Gandhian homespun has masked the perpetuation of caste discrimination.

The histories of marginalised communities in India testify not only to their oppression at the hands of an alien imperial power but also to internal oppression and the continued struggle to survive. Postcolonial theory has worked mainly with nation frameworks and needs to respond to this double-colonisation in post-colonial societies. In the Indian context, the uprising of *dalits* (who include 'untouchables') informs us how different social, economic, political and religious institutions excluded them from the constructions of national identity according to traditional Hinduism. According to Gail Omvedt, this poses a major challenge to the way nationalism is constructed as Gandhian/Hindu and fails to be questioned even in Marxist contexts:

The theoretical challenge posed by the dalit and anti-caste movement was not simply concerned with replacing 'class' by 'caste'. It sought a revised methodology of exploitation, a combined class-caste analysis. (122)

The limits of the national story as a Gandhian anti-British movement are revealed if we consider the texts and textile work of French Pondicherry. The literature available on Pondicherry can be broadly classified as colonial and post-colonial. *The Diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai* (1736–1761), and V. Subbaiah's *Saga of the Freedom Movement: A Testament of my Life* (1973), constitute the colonial phase and the novels of Pirabajan (in Tamil) — *Vaanam Vasappadum* (1993) and *Kanneeraal Kaappomme* (1998) — belong to the post-colonial phase. Of the two texts in the colonial phase, the *Diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai* gives us a detailed picture of how the French handled caste and managed their textile trade.



This image was produced by the Dalit Media Network as part of its campaign against caste oppression and was displayed at the Durban conference against Discrimination

(Fundamentally, whereas the British prevented dalits from entering the army and civil services, the French sought to empower them. They did not, however, disturb the caste structure of textile production in Pondicherry, and so avoided anti-colonial unrest.) Subbaiah's autobiography gives an account of the industrialisation of the textile trade in Pondicherry, the birth and growth of trade unions, and their complex relationship with the union of India. Subbaiah's support for unionising mill workers left him unmoved by Gandhi's traditionalist cultural nationalism. Rather, he contacted the socialist leader Jawaharlal Nehru and at his suggestion went to Paris. There, he negotiated a ten-point plan for labour reform and Pondicherry had the honour of being the first state in Asia to have an eight-hour week with weekly holiday for its factory workers.

Despite the evident differences between Subbaiah's story and Congress *swaraj* history, Pirabhanjan in his novel, *Kanneeraal Kaappomme*, manages to represent Subbaiah as a hero in the national mould. This transformation was made possible by Subbaiah's pan-Indian connection on two levels: he maintained contact with the leaders of the Indian National Congress, and he shared the ideology of Indian communists. Also, due to his class-based attention to workers as a whole, he remained silent on issues of caste, thereby allowing his co-option into a Union of India, Gandhian history. It is only later, with Paavannan's *Citaralkal* (1990), that we find a critique of both colonial and national regimes grounded in the particular history of Pondicherry.<sup>1</sup> This history, as in the rest of India, is significantly shaped by the production and trade in textiles and by traditional Hindu strictures on caste.

## II

As Sabita Radhakrishna points out, the *Atharva Veda* personifies the day and night as two sisters weaving, with the warp symbolising darkness, and the woof, the light of day. One of the hymns in the *Atharva Veda* illustrates this:

The sacrifice drawn out with threads on every side stretched by a hundred sacred ministers and one. This do these Fathers weave who hitherward are come; they sit beside the warp and cry, weave forth, weave back. (7)

The vedic hymns give religious sanction not only to textile trade but also to makers of these textiles. For the master weavers, the production of fabrics is not a mechanical labour but an attempt to preserve their cultural/religious identity. The weavers of Orissa, in India, follow a custom of weaving 'the first verse of the "Gita Govinda" into a red tie-dye silk scarf, which forms the main ritual at the Jagnath Puri temple'. The weavers of Kanchipuram in South India claim 'descent from sage Markanda, believed to be the weaver's God who wove the first fabric from the lotus fibre' (Radhakrishna 8–9).

The use of textiles in religious rituals and the location of the weaving community around temple towns made the textile industry a birthright reserved for castes close to Brahmin priests. The right to weave cloth settled exclusively

on one community, the Kaikollars (also called Mudaliars). Introduction of special costumes in Madurai during the Vijayanagar empire, however, prompted the spread in Tamil Nadu of Sowrastrians and Kannada-speaking Devanka weavers. The Telugu-speaking Padma Saliyars also played a major part in the textile trade of Tamil Nadu, especially in Kanchipuram during the tenth century. Each community 'owned' specialist aspects of the industry such as preparing dyes, making fine quality cloth, and so on. Towns were geographically divided according to caste.<sup>2</sup> Lower castes were forbidden even to enter into the streets inhabited by these upper castes.

This exclusion continued even during the era of industrialisation. Vasant Moon, who edited Dr. Ambedkar's writings and speeches, in his autobiography, *Growing Up of an Untouchable* says, 'In Mumbai, Mahars (the untouchable castes) were not supposed to touch the thread. So they did not get employed in the weaving department' (79). However, he also notes that in other areas industrialisation did open up opportunities: 'Here [in Nagpur] weaving was a major occupation of our people [Mahars]. Because of this there was no ban on weaving work in the mills. The condition of our people improved because of the textile mills' (79). In Pondicherry, the Koliyur caste, regarded as untouchables, were involved in weaving cloth for everyday use. Despite this, they were not regarded as fit to mix with the rest of the society.

Whatever the regional differences, Dalit workers were increasingly excluded from trades as they became potential competitors with traditional occupations. In the case of the Mumbai mills, they were not appointed in the weaving department because the labourers may have had to use their saliva as paste to join frayed strands of thread. This threatened other workers with pollution, which is the religious basis of social divisions under brahmanic Hinduism.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Ambedkar fought against this kind of caste-based discrimination. When the Communist Party, headed by S.A. Dange, refused to join him, he broke his alliance with the party.

It is on this point that Dr. Ambedkar waged his first battle against Mahatma Gandhi. The caste system, he said, is not merely a division of labour, as Gandhi believed, 'It is also a division of labourers' (47); but Gandhi maintained that

Varna and religion are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of varna teaches us to earn bread by following the ancestral calling. It defines not our rights but our duties. (1990 108)

Here Gandhi's use of the words 'ancestral calling' and 'duties' shows his strong belief in the *chaturvarna* order. While he opposed imperialist expropriation of resources and trade based on Indian cotton, his spiritualised vision meant that he saw the growth of mill industry as a hindrance to his anti-colonial struggle. He claimed workers could 'establish in thousands of households the ancient and sacred handlooms and they can buy out cloth that may be thus woven' (2001 57). This anti-modernist stand had the effect of perpetuating class/caste hierarchies,

even though his ‘spinning wheel’ became the symbol of a democratising and modernising India.

### III

A different politics existed in the French-occupied territories. Unlike the British East India company, which focused exclusively on its military power and trade, the French East India Company focused on the five major spheres: colonial administration; finances in India; the administration of justice; relations with Indian rulers; and commercial activity. This shaped the colonial experience of French India, where ‘the formula most frequently applied was: much subjection, very little autonomy, a touch of assimilation’ (Grimal 60).

From an Indian point of view, foreign traders were expected to have their dealings only through the *qaspa*, the entrepot of the trading communities. In the South, the British played one group against another to challenge the Moghul monopoly of Indian trade. The French, on the other hand, did not disturb the *qaspa* system and respected the Hindu and Moghul kings of the princely states in order to protect their trade. They merged so well with the native political structure that the ‘prestige of the governor’ was high and the social fabric stable (Ramasrinivasan 35).

Among the French governors, it was Legoux de Flair who first identified the great variety of fine Indian textiles and enabled François Martin to build the textile trade in Pondicherry. Besides giving a detailed account of the use of indigo and the procedures for treating textiles, Legoux made an important observation about the organdy textiles, famous in Pondicherry. In his book, *Historical, Geographical and Political Essay on Hindustan, with a Description of its Trade* (1897), he says:

The Indian way of holding the weaving combs between the hands of the weaver and the warp of the weave, as the thread unwound itself from the cylinder of the loom, resulted in cloth that was more smooth and evenly woven than the cloth on European looms. (qtd in D’Souza 322)

Trading officials were not satisfied merely with the technical details of textile production. In his *Memoirs*, Vol. I, Martin says: ‘To work with the French East India Company, efficiency alone is not enough. One must have thorough knowledge in all social and cultural sides’ (qtd in Sebastian 34). Hence he describes the caste-based textile trade, mentioning that there were 30,000 weavers living in Pondicherry and they all belonged to the Kaikollar caste.

It was Governor Dupleix (in office 1742–1754) who established the French empire in India and provided a model for the British. Ananda Ranga Pillai’s diary gives us details regarding the state of trade, economy, religion and so on during his regime. He said that society was divided into right and left hand castes. The merchant caste, Chetti, belonged to the left, whereas the castes associated with weaving, Mudali and Pillai, belonged to the right. The Pariahs

(untouchables) lived in segregated colonies (iv 340–41). Kaikollar weavers lived in large numbers at Tiruvadigai, Panruti and Bahur, and Governor Dupleix told the company officials to bring all the weaving castes to Pondicherry. He inspected the sites and built houses for them, and gave them money besides supplying tax-free yarn, for two years. Dupleix himself was involved in private trade with the weavers (Pillai 157).

Although the French actively supported the welfare of Pariahs (when there was a rice shortage, for example, soldiers would shoot horses and distribute the meat amongst the community), there was little interference with traditional social practices. Within the European cultural frame, the French did take measures to eradicate untouchability. Father Lourdeu was shocked to see a wall separating untouchables from other caste Hindus inside the church. He persuaded Governor Dupleix to have it removed. Another priest, Fr. Kollas, who took a special interest in the upliftment of untouchables, was named after an untouchable community, ‘para Kollas’.<sup>4</sup>

Outside direct cultural control, social reform was limited by the need to maintain the colonial economy. The weaving community was very influential at that time. When the governor decided to demolish the Vedapuriswarar temple as part of his protective measures against possible British attack, weavers decided to leave the town. The governor interrupted them on their way and brought them back with an assurance that the temple would be protected (Divyan 25). During the period of Dubois, caste councils were formed to administer local economic and religious matters and to safeguard traditional Indian customs. It is this complex mix of the French policy of assimilation and its practice of non-intervention that poses a challenge to uniform stories of anti-colonial struggle.

According to Pillai, Dupleix was aware that Chettis sometimes cheated the Company in the cloth dyeing industry and in the sale of cloths in which they had a share. Otherwise the textile trade was well regulated. Blue piece goods were sold at 50 per cent profit; coarse cloths, striped and ordinary, at 20 per cent; Bandar cloths and fine Chennai chintz at 20–25 per cent; and chintzes of Pondicherry at a loss. Contracts with native merchants and middle-men were entered into every year. When they were signed guns were fired and some yards of red-cloth was presented to the merchant as a gift in accordance with custom. Villages were leased out to textile workers by landlords of the Reddi caste.<sup>5</sup>

Remarkable changes occurred after 1783. The French were not ready for any more battles with the British. Panic-stricken trading communities and the upper classes departed with their families to Venkatapettai, Cuddalore, Porto Nova and other places. This created a vacuum in the textile trade. As a result, Gaebele Mills (now Bharathi mills) was established in 1892 and the Rodier mills (the Anglo-French Textiles Ltd., now known as Pondicherry National Textiles Corporation) in 1898. The remaining weavers and farmers left their traditional labour and became mill workers. Since the mills also freed weavers from the



series of payments to agents for supply and purchase from the trading community, and since they were given a salary in advance because of the demand to maintain export production, they were generally quite happy to become factory workers (Raja 80-81).

This changed when salaries and jobs were cut back. Cotton used in Pondicherry mills was purchased from Switzerland and production costs increased. The French administration adopted regressive methods to put down the protesting mill workers. In the firing ordered on July 30, 1934, twelve mill workers were killed, which resulted in an intensified agitation by trade unions. It was regarded as the beginning of the freedom movement in Pondicherry. Nonetheless, this was primarily a matter of labour rights and not of anti-colonial hostility. Later, during the period of Governor Fernand Levecque, Indian nationalists like Aurobindo, poet Subramania Bharathi, V.V.S. Aiyar and V. Ramasami Iyengar were given political asylum from the British Raj. As exiles in French India, these activists mounted no local protests. However, their activities against the British led indirectly to the formation in Pondicherry of a French India National Congress, the French India Students' Congress and the Students' Federation. The followers of these groups opposed communists and later supported merger with the rest of India.

#### IV

It is only with the emergence of dalit movements in India that we realise how the colonial powers handled internal colonisation in order to expand their trade and empire. These intersecting histories — of weavers, of textile trade and of colonial Pondicherry — show us how Indian nationalism as constructed in Anglocentric colonial history and postcolonial theory obscure the condition of dalits. This helped construct a narrow nationalism as can be seen in the post-colonial literature on Pondicherry, especially in Pirabhanjan's *Kanneeraal Kaappome*. In the preface, Pirabhanjan makes a bold claim that the French colonial masters are worse than the British:

Just as the British ruled India, our Pondicherry was occupied by the French. Our state includes, Puducherry (now called Pondicherry), Mahe, Yanam, Karaikal and Chandranagore. The French were in no way less imperial than the British. Even worse than the British.

We had to spend at least 75 years to free our holy land from the French. Many warriors had to shed their sweat and blood to win our freedom. (6 my trans)

It is in this context that he tells the story of Subbaiah, disregarding his opposition to union with India and converting his proletarian battle against the capitalists into a nationalist struggle. In the process, it is forgotten that dalit subjectivity could neither identify itself with the mill management nor with the trade unions, as both came out of the colonial preservation of traditional caste communities centred on the textile industry.

Unlike Pirabjan's *Kanneeraal Kaappome*, Paavannan's novel *Citaralkal* was not influenced by any urge to identify itself with Indian nationalism. If the former is concerned about colonial capitalists, the latter is about a crisis that occurred due to the global economy. In *Citaralkal*, the narrative expresses the problem faced by the workers when Anglo-French Textiles was closed in the early 1980s. The book highlights the humane approach of the French in contrast to the Pondicherry Textile Corporation controlled by the native government. It thus echoes the anti-merger sentiments of the trade unions articulated by Subbaiah and resists the possibility of being read within the framework of Congress nationalism.

In a way, both Pirabjan's nationalist *Kanneeraal Kaappome* and the regionalist narrative of Paavannan's *Citaralkal* remain conservative from the point of view of dalit oppression. They share the nationalists' accusation that dalits were pro-British — based partly on Dr. Ambedkar's avoidance of state containment when he said to Gandhi, 'I have no homeland' (qtd in Keer 166). As the dalit intellectual Chandrabhan Prasad said, for dalits the civil society is more oppressive than the state, so they cannot share the anti-colonial ideology of caste Hindus. Dr. Ambedkar, who understood this problem, was 'practically hankering after a nation without having to insult his own, his community's humanity' (Nanda 23). He seems to ask: Is it possible to talk of Indian national identity and colonial experience without addressing the caste question? A focused history of text and textile such as this suggests it is not.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> General historical information is also available from Sinnappah Arasarathanam, *Merchants, Companies and Commerce on the Coromandel Coast. 1650-1740*; R. Champakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology and Urbanisation: South India. 300 B.C-A.D. 1300*; H. Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient*; Ajit Neogy, *Decolonization of French India: Liberation Movement and Indo-French Relations: 1947-54*; Asiya Siddiqi, *Trade and Finance in Colonial India: 1750-1860*.
- <sup>2</sup> Chaturvarna order is the Vedic theory of the origin of castes — the fourfold division of society in Hinduism. According to this, Brahmins were supposed to have been born out of God's head; Kshatriya, rulers, from God's chest; Vaishyas, merchants, from thighs, and Shudras from the feet. Dalits do not constitute part of this structure.
- <sup>3</sup> The term, 'Brahmanic Hinduism', was first used by Swami Dharma Deertha in his book, *History of Hindu Imperialism*.
- <sup>4</sup> Pirabjan's novel, *Vaanam Vasappadam* provides these details in pp. 350-2. His contributions to various other fields can be seen in Jean Lafrenez Mep's *History of Pondicherry*.
- <sup>5</sup> Pillai, Vol. XI, p.168; III, p.27; I, pp.33-34, 385; III, p.245.

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