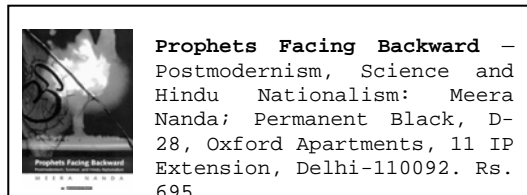

Paradigm Shift

Ranjit Hoskote



This book is a thoughtful and provocative examination of the stratum of thought and belief that underlies the intolerant hyper-nationalism of the Hindu Right. What distinguishes Meera Nanda's book, however, is her courageous and uncompromising demonstration, from a modernist and Leftist viewpoint, of the unfortunate ideological overlap that conjoins Hindutva with some elements of the postmodernist Left, especially in its eco-feminist form.

In doing so, Nanda delineates both what she terms the "reactionary modernism" of the Hindu Right, as well as the knee-jerk rejection of the supposedly colonialist and patriarchal premises of the enlightenment that has led many postmodernists to throw the babies of science and rationality out with the bathwater of European modernity.

Ideological overlap

A scrupulous scholar, the author does not make sweeping generalisations that could blur the differences between right-wing and left-wing post-colonialism.

She makes a specific distinction between the "cruder varieties of gender and Third Worldist essentialism in the writings of some postcolonial

Paradigm Shift, *Ranjit Hoskote*, The Hindu, Tuesday, May 03, 2005.

<http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/br/2005/05/03/stories/2005050300281600.htm> [C.ELDOC. 0602/DD1-5review-Paradigm-shift.html]

theorists" and the more carefully nuanced constructions of subalternity, marginality or resistance subjectivity as outcomes of specific confrontations between consciousness and circumstances, rather than hereditary or native identities.

That said, Nanda argues convincingly that the rampant relativism of the postmodernist – in which every society is seen to have its own rules of rationality, its own logic of historical progression and conception of truth – is not so different from the grounds that the proponents of Hindutva adduce in support of their own project.

Both the postmodernist and the Hindutva proponent dismiss the possibility of universal measures of judgment for truth, justice, compassion and advancement. Thus, relativism cloaks the most arbitrary, unreasonable and violent impositions in a postcolonial context; because the absence of any common point of reference allows the most belligerent discourse to lay down the rules, justifying them with the scripture of "de-colonisation".

Paradigm of modernity

This situation is complicated, as Nanda points out, because Hindutva's champions have always been obsessed with validating their absurdities by reference to modern science. Since science, with its rationality, method and verifiability, formed the key paradigm of modernity, the Hindu Right has felt obliged either to challenge or subsume it. Thus, Hindutva imagines modernity as an incorporated past

discovered afresh after centuries of enforced amnesia, while dismissing actual modernity as evidence of alienation, Westernisation or undesirable urbanisation.

It might be argued, of course, that such an attitude also grew out of the injured pride of a colonised people, who then claimed that all the fruits of modernity had been available to them in the dim past. Hence the frequently heard assertion that nuclear weapons, advanced mathematics and aerodynamic transport systems were known in Vedic times.

Such popular delusions were encouraged both by mystical nationalist movements like the Arya Samaj and by alternative religiosities like those of the syncretistic and utopian Theosophical Society. Nanda draws a line of descent connecting both the Hindu Right and the more unnuanced forms of environmental resistance and feminist rhetoric with the various

identitarian, racist or authenticist movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which arose out of the anxieties of runaway industrialisation, sprawling urban growth and the alienation of the self from the protocols of labour and governance.



Perils of 'retrievalism'

The book is a compelling account of the perils of what may be called retrievalism, the attempt to fabricate a new world on the basis of seemingly relevant elements from a lost time.

Nanda's meticulously textured study invites us to consider what the future of such alternative futures can be, when they rest on dangerously inflammable assumptions. Can feminism, predicated as it is on the autonomy of the female subject from the structure of restrictions built up over the centuries, usefully adapt forms and values from peasant histories of messianic resistance that, however emancipatory they may have been for men, were oppressive to women? Can ecological activists romanticise the subaltern past merely because it is subaltern, glorious in its naive pre-modernity?

The desire to retrieve the efficacies of "local knowledge" can lead to ambivalent results. It results in an excess of political correctness on the postmodernist Left, as when the virtues of specific ethnohistories are celebrated over the homogenising effects of modern science. It also permits the Right to elevate mantic practices to the level of academic disciplines, without bothering with empirical demonstration. At their extreme, some varieties of environmental and feminist activism become conflatable with some of Hindutva's social mobilisations.

Plea for critical sensibility

The book is a passionately argued plea for the preservation of the critical sensibility. Such a sensibility must defend itself from the expected quarters, the Right, but also secure itself against (un)friendly fire from the Left. Through her exploration of Dr. Ambedkar's project of combining a socially oriented Buddhism with the optimistic pragmatism of Dewey, Nanda also draws attention to a crucial but overlooked path to an Indian modernity.

Ambedkar is often narrowly viewed as a Dalit messiah; in truth, his emancipatory vision embraced the totality of the Indian experience, and stands solidly as an alternative to the Gandhian, Nehruvian and Tagorean visions. Unfortunately, his vision has also been betrayed by Dalit activists who confine themselves to idealising Dalit "difference" as an end in itself, rather than as the beginning of a self-transformative process.

Nanda does not despair of science as a mode that articulates such a self-transformative process. She demonstrates the fatuity of treating European rationality and modern science as irredeemable instruments of repression in themselves, merely



because they were institutionalised in the colonies by a repressive colonial regime. Surely a more reflective and constructive critique of their instrumentalisation is called for, rather than a dismissal tout court? Her

book reminds us that such a dismissal would leave us at the mercy of the demons of repression, while denying us the liberal and liberating energies of a self-reflexive and non-dogmatic scientific approach.

