

Old Anthropology Library renaming ceremony

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During the town hall meeting last year exactly one year ago – a wonderful if fraught occasion when faculty and students from all degrees gathered together to discuss our views on decolonisation - I recall reminding everyone at the start of the discussion of the deeply international nature of LSE, the institution to which we so proudly belong. We talked of Arthur Lewis, a black Caribbean economist who was professor here and won the Nobel Prize, of Bhimrao Ambedkar who grew up an untouchable in India and went on to get a PhD from LSE and Columbia and chaired India's Constitution Drafting Committee, and of Clement Attlee whose first job, at LSE, was funded by a grant from the Tatas in India and who went on to become the British PM.

The point I had wished to make through these three examples were the following:

- Much of the process of decolonisation begins with paying attention to history and to the encoding of power and violence in the manner in which it is told. This enables us to understand the present, of where LSE is today and yes, last year we did therefore talk about Brexit as a logical conclusion to Britain's sense of what the Irish writer Fintan O'Toole calls 'a heroic failure'.
- Secondly, the process of decolonisation has to begin at home. It is in our own spaces, our own minds and our own institutions where we need to begin.

So please allow me a short diversion to thinking about my own trajectory.

I started my study of social anthropology after a first degree in English Literature. I had studied Plato and Plautus, read *The Odyssey* and *Gilgamesh*, Chaucer and Beckett and loved them all passionately. This mind you, was in New Delhi and I had never been to Britain. So I recited lines from Wordsworth's immortal poem without having ever seen a daffodil, read Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* without having been to Canterbury and read Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* never having eaten a boiled egg. This did not however dilute, for one minute, my utter absorption and enjoyment of the texts I read and mastered for I could inhabit the world of Hardy or Milton through my imagination.

I moved to studying Sociology (as social anthropology is in the Global South) to address the disquiet I had gathered nevertheless, to understand more of the social context within which texts are produced. The department in the Delhi School of Economics at the time was the best in India, and it would rank as one of the best in the world. JPS Uberoi, Veena Das, T N Madan, Andre Beteille, among others were on the faculty and a multitude of brilliant scholars in History, Philosophy, Politics, Economics and other related disciplines also taught in the same university, came to give guest lectures in our department, went on the same demos as us, regularly published in newspapers, and watered in the famous D School coffee house where as students we learnt to make one coffee last for hours to be a part of the penumbra of these stars. The stars of the Subaltern History movement that shook the paradigms of global historiography, were regular visitors.

Anthropology was taught in two distinct and occasionally overlapping trajectories. First was a set of texts that will be familiar to all of you here, that formed the basis of our basic training. We also read sociological theory of Weber, Marx and Durkheim of course but also Parsons and Shils and Goffman among others. The second strand was what was called the Sociology of India – and while this was dominated by work done by Indians such as M N Srinivas, it was certainly not exclusively so.

So the take-aways from such a degree were the following:

- The classics were important not because they were written by Europeans but when they were rich ethnographic accounts. So for example, the works of Malinowski were classic because it allowed productive re-readings such as Uberoi's *Politics of the Kula Ring*.
- The sociology of India made the vital point that one did not need to travel overseas to be an anthropologist. This was also possible because of India's rich diversity but students were expected to learn a new language and work in a part of the country that was unfamiliar. This also made stark the enormous privilege that anyone with an English language education has in India and how utterly different the lived reality of the rest of the 99% was.
- The sociology of India also made the hugely important point that the sociology of India did not have to be written only by Indians. While Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* was severely criticised, but never because he was French and not Indian. This vitally important point of anti-essentialism was formative and made possible my own work among elderly, Muslim Pashtun men for my PhD that came later.
- For me therefore decolonisation of a curriculum is not about the colour of the skin of the anthropologist, but the colour of their intellectual lens.

But this is not to regard the colonial project through rose tinted glasses in any way and for this we have to thank another genuinely original thinker Ashis Nandy. In a seminal essay *The Intimate Enemy* (1983), Nandy presents the roles ascribed to groups in colonial political ideology. Colonial ideology used the idea that colonised peoples should be seen as non-adults, with combined characteristics of simplicity and sub-rationalism. British authors also saw the general Indian response to their domination as being 'effeminate' and the centre of Nandy's thesis is that Indian intellectuals until the twentieth century generally absorbed colonial self-definitions sufficiently deeply to reproduce these in their own ideas.

The radical rupture came with Gandhi's refusal to speak to colonial ideology on its terms, to fight it on its own terrain, through his ability for an intransigent 'non-modernity' to force his terms on his cultural enemy. The analysis brings out two fundamental features of Gandhi's life: the ability to preserve the wholeness of a non-modern vision, which is not aggressive or apologetic, but simply and irreducibly different. The colonial response to this was incoherent.

These debates were very much twentieth century ones, within decades of political decolonisation. But as we now endeavour to decolonise our histories, our disciplines, our spaces, our attitudes the intellectual leadership for these may in fact come from the Global South and from figures such as Gandhi who did not simply ape or oppose the coloniser but presented a critique, and alternative idea of the modern, that required individual practice and integrity along with organised political opposition.

It is therefore a real pleasure that we are able to mark today as the start of this process. The many discussions, arguments, meetings and seminars last year have resulted in a concrete first step – we have paid careful attention to history and we before critiquing others, have begun at home. We now ‘orient’ new students to Anthropology through the history of our discipline and encourage them to explore the colonial legacy of British history inscribed in buildings and statues within a mile’s radius of the LSE itself. The new images in this historic anthropology library in which debate and study have taken place for over a hundred years, is now a much better reflection of our intellectual antecedents and our renewed commitment to them.

And perhaps most importantly as with every major crisis in the world, the impetus and sense of urgency has come from students and it was no different in our department.

This in itself is worth a toast.