

Postmodernism and Its Influences on Indian History Writings

- 1. Professor A .V Kaur, Department of History, C. C. S. University, Meerut.**
- 2. Ruby PhD Scholar, Department of History, C. C. S. University, Meerut.**

Postmodernism can be seen as the reaction against modernity. That's why it is named as anti- modernity. But in terms of binary equation it is not simply anti modern. Its development has been done through a long process of critical engagement resulting in to modernity. The ideology of postmodernism has been criticized and attacked the philosophy, culture and politics which were generated by theory of modernity. Postmodernism has positioned itself with regard to the theory of modernism.

The term postmodernism was in use from 1930 onward to define a style in particular a turnaway from the sleek lines of the formally dominant international style in architecture. Sociologist like Deniel Bell, in his book "The coming of postindustrial society" writes about the arrival of a new kind of society representing a break from the earlier industrial society. He says the new society passed from the goods producing stage to a service society. Wright Mill defined the idea of post modernism in his special way. He says the postmodernism age is leading to restrictions of freedom and a robot like post modernism intervention. ¹ In the post second world war period, Arnold Tonybee used this form to show a transformation in the European society and culture from around 1857. He describes this „postmodern age“ as a break from the earlier modern age which followed the middle ages. In his view this phase of western history could be characterized by revolutions wars and socio-political upheavals.²

Very much like theories of modernity, there is no unified theory of postmodernism. If anything, the situation is even more diffuse and chaotic. The range is vast and it covers the whole spectrum from mild critique of modernity to total nihilism but although postmodernism derives its definition from many sources, the one common thread running through them is the critique of modernity. The major ideology whose works constitute the corpus from which post modernism is formulated are Foucault, Delcuze, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Deleuzu, Guattari, White etc.

¹ Michael Roberts, 'Postmodernism and the Linguistic Turn', in Peter Harvest and Phillip Scholfield edited, "Making History: An Introduction to the History on Practices of a Discipline", 2008),

pp-227² Ibid , pp-229

Post modernism questions the claims of the enlightenment philosophies for universal knowledge. It also criticized the search for foundation of knowledge. Modernity gave rise to Grand narratives that is over reaching theories purporting to explain everything within its compass. Post modernism rejects the very ideas of such Grand narratives and attacks the all-encompassing, over reaching ideologies.³

There were many writers who discussed the idea of post modernism. Let's take up the idea of some of the most important thinkers for discussion. Michel Foucault (1926-1984), a French philosopher was one of the most important thinker in this field. He was a complex thinker whose thoughts encompass various themes and multiple ideas. He is considered as a postmodern thinker because of his trenchant criticism of the enlightenment ideas and modernity. His writings still continue to exert tremendous influence in humanities and social sciences. His critiques are famous on various social institutions which he considered products of European modernity. Foucault expressed his ideas through a series of important books- *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *The Order of Things* (1966), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* (1975), and *The History of Sexuality* (1976-1986).⁴ Though his writings are mostly set in historical context, he discourages the notion of totality and continuity in history. He promoted the idea of discontinuity. His idea about history and society progressed from the concept of archaeology to that of genealogy. All his works stressed on the idea of difference. He rejects the enlightenment idea that the rule of reason can be equated with emancipation force, the knowledge centres on power and helps in creating forms, the knowledge centers on power and helps in creating new forms of domination in modern times. He criticized the attempts to separate knowledge and power and emphasized that the pursuit of knowledge, particularly in modern times, is indissolubly associated with pursuit of power and quest for domination. He focused on the idea that history or the society is not unifocal but is de-centred. For his subject was not the originator of discourse but discourse constituted the subject, which itself

³ Peter Bassy, 'Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory' (New Delhi: VivaBooks, 2010), pp- 82-87

⁴ Hayden Whit , "The content of the form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation", Baltimore and London, , 1987, pp-113

was originated from institutional practices. He considered that knowledge is not neutral but is intricately connected with modes of power and domination.⁵

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) was another important writer in this field. This French philosopher proved crucial to the development of the post modern theory, particularly the linguistic turn.⁶ The basic contribution of Derrida was to the development of the poststructuralist and post modernist theories in his theory of deconstruction. He views all written text as product of complex cultural processes. These texts can only be defined in relation to other texts and conventions of writings. He claims that human knowledge is limited to texts and reality is constituted by language. The knowledge of reality is not beyond language and its rules of existence. Another point he discussed is related to deconstruction. He gave the idea of difference which states that meaning of anything is ascertained only through difference from other thing. So any text is conceivable only in relation to difference to other text. He also emphasized on unity of unity of opposites. As without unity there is no opposite. Unity and opposition are alternate to each other. Deconstruction emphasizes on the instability and multiplicity of meaning.

The word postmodernism was made famous by another French writer Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998). In his book „The postmodern condition“ which was published in French in 1979, he used this term. Later this book was also published in English in 1989. He defined the term as “simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives“. These meta-narratives are grand narratives such as „the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth“. Lyotard was doubtful about all these. For his all these theories and discourse were concealed narratives. According to him these were near fictional accounts though these accounts claimed to be universal. He criticized the modernist theories which tend to totalise and universalise ideas which are basically modern European product. He also rejected the idea of foundationalism.

⁵ Hayden White , “The content of the form: narrative discourse and historical representation”, Baltimore and London, 1987, pg-130

⁶ Peter Bassy, “Beginning theory: an introduction to literary and culture theory”, New Delhi, 2010, pp-64-65

This foundationalism was the base of all knowledge on secure theoretical foundations. He attacked the meta-theories, articulated through what he called the masculinist meta-language, which supported the domination of various sorts – of one class over another, of men over women, of majority over minority. Instead, he advocated the ideas of difference and plurality, of radical uncertainty, and possibility of alternatives.

Jean Baudrillard was also a French thinker. He worked on the idea of post modernism and represented a particular extreme form of it.⁷ He presented highly influential ideas in the field of media and arts. He stressed that now we are part of post modernism. He described how modernity is different from postmodernism. According to his modern society was based on production while postmodern society was based on consumption. While modern society was based on the idea that ideas represent society, in postmodern society simulation took precedence where there was no reality and where the meaning dissolves. He explained that there was exchange of goods in modern society but in postmodern society there was symbolic exchange. Baudrillard also defined the postmodern world as one of implosion where the traditional boundaries of classes, groups and genders were collapsing. This postmodern world had no meaning, no rhyme and no reason. There was no anchor and no hope. It was a world of nihilism.

In India the postmodernism theory can be traced in the subaltern studies. Many historians played an important role in its studies. In 1993, during Latin American subaltern studies collective, Ranjit Guha said "our object belongs to our time. It made its debut at a time of turbulence marked by the difficulties that faced India's new nation state by acute civil disturbances which threatened occasionally to tear it apart, by a common anxiety in which the frustration of the midnight's children born since independence blended with disillusionment of older generations to produce an explosive discontent..."⁸ There were new effects on intellectual formation between the periods 1960 to early 1980 as the whole system went through a churning process. In 2009 Ranjit Guha added that to his earlier theory that this time of subaltern studies was also "thoroughly over determined by global temporalities."

⁷ Ibid, pp- 83-86

⁸ Partha Chatterjee, "After subaltern studies", EPW, sep.1 2012, vol-XLVII no. 35 , pp-44

In recent times Chakrabarty is doing some fabulous work in this field. In 2011 he started a discussion of the "unintended but generative mistakes" of subaltern studies. That is based on the particulars of the heavily structural depiction of the rebel consciousness by Rajit Guha in his publication "*elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India*" (1983).⁹ Historians criticized this article for its insistence on a singular structural form. To construct "a genealogy of the mass political subject in india", Chakrabarty uses the portrayal of the peasants rebel in the early subaltern studies which emphasized the presence of the archaic in modern India. These crowds had a distinct political presence, whether it been in the electoral wave of post independent India or in organized demonstration or riots. It had distinct traces of collective practices which were much older than the Indian constitution. Chakrabarty in his studies of subaltern studies shows some of the most persuasive demonstrations of that at the time of colonial and post colonial modernity. He shows their heterogeneous character. How they were hybrids and how they played an important role in the construction of modern India.

Ranjit Guha also was not in the favor of the radical social historians of France and Britain for drawing the face of the crowd. He insisted that thought insurgent peasants of colonial india was political but that was not in the sense of individual bourgeois people of liberal democracy. He suggested that the rationality of these mass political subjects can be sought in the collective life of the peasant community. His answer was based on the structure of rebel consciousness which was located by him in the structure of the peasant community.¹⁰ In last two decades the quality of mass politics in India has transformed a lot. The location of state and ruling authorities, which were outside the bounds of peasant community, played a crucial element in the structure of rebel consciousness during colonial India. Several features of negativity that can be characterized by the action of insurgent peasants were explained by this structural element of externality. But in recent times the activities of the government have penetrated deep into the lives of the rural people. It affects there every day life like supply of water to their fields, subsidized food grains etc. thus we can say that even the mass political action will no longer be characterized principally by the mark of negation which was explained by Guha in his classical work. This transformation is actually visible in the recent mass politics of India's chaotic democracy. There are two aspects of mass

⁹ Op cit, Partha Chatterjee, pp-46

¹⁰ Ibid, pp-47

Indian politics and contemporary Indian democracy. One involves a contest over sovereignty with Indian state and other makes claims on governmental authorities over services and benefits.

Sumit Sarkar like many other writers like Partha Chaterjee, Depesh Chakrabarti and Gyanendra Pandey sees subaltern studies as the major locus for postmodernism. In his work tried to touch post-modernism's impact on the historian's craft. He remarks that criticism of modern history writings has been one of the more ubiquitous elements in anti modernism. So to answer them one must distinguish the various strands more precisely. He gives example of subaltern studies group member Tejaswini Niranjana. Who said "reality is seen as something unproblematic, 'out there'; knowledge involves a representation of this reality."¹¹ He suggests that there are two forms of postmodernist critiques. The first one is based on relative study of redevelopment by deconstructionist questioning while the other is charged of the accusation of being altered by the enlightenment rationalism and colonial discourse. Though he disagrees with the bulk of work on postmodernism, he acknowledged the way it has influenced his historical practice. Postmodernism through its critique of over simple unilinear and technological models is helping historical practices.

Thus we see that postmodern theorists question the very basis on which the discipline of history has been based. They do not believe in the disciplinary boundaries in academics, such as those between history and literature, or between economics and anthropology and so on. They also question the existence of facts and events apart from what the historians make them out to be. In their view, linguistic representation becomes the essence of the past and the core of history.

¹¹ Sarkar Sumit, "Beyond nationalist frames: relocating postmodernism, hindutva, history", Delhi, Permanent black, 2002 , pp- 162

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