GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Readers of the Impossible Present

By Drishadwati Bargi | May 19, 2023

Despite falling into disrepute, due to the two infamous totalitarianisms of the century, recovery of a utopianism without a utopia or a utopian impulse has long been one of the crucial projects of contemporary critical theorists, located in the department of humanities and cultural studies (Jameson 2007). This is not least due to the fact that political theorists have diagnosed the present in terms of its anti-utopianism, lack of futurity and cynical reactions against movements and knowledge-systems that have attempted to conceive the world otherwise (Brown 2019). This cynicism of the present is equally directed at the Liberal arts and the Humanities as much as it is directed at democratic movements. Perhaps the latter is an understated context of Daniel J. Elam's postcolonial project of recovery and restitution of the impossible politics of anticolonial praxis of philology or reading. In this conjuncture, to recuperate philology as an anticolonial and anti-authoritative praxis is also to recuperate the humanities, as an essential mode of democratic co/existence.

The readers that Elam's project recuperates are however, for historical reasons almost always at a tangent from the securities of institutional protection, state-patronage, and recognition. They are Frantz Fanon, Bhagat Singh, B.R Ambedkar, M.K Gandhi, and Lala Har Dayal. Frantz Fanon's condition as an exiled black intellectual on the run and on the verge of death is the general condition of possibility for such a readerly project. This is a condition of intellectual engagement that on the one hand precludes certainty and full knowledge of the future and on the other hand inhabits a present that is gnawed by the sense of an ending. The project's pessimistic optimism is derived from the death-bound nature of their respective present. As Aishwary Kumar's *Radical Equality* has shown, the clearest interpreter of such a mortalist optimism is B.R Ambedkar, who, as Reader of Buddhist philosophy, formulates this through the concept of "sunnyata" and the phrase "being is becoming." The inherent impermanence of all compound matters, including human beings; is the condition through which change becomes possible. The experience of death is not something those sentient beings encounter only at the end of life, instead it is what interpenetrates life, interrupting it continuously (Ambedkar [1957] 2011, 130). To this extent, Elam's thematization of readerly praxis on the verge of death is but a recognition of this condition of finitude as not just the ground but also the mode of utopianism of Ambedkar or Fanon's political-intellectual projects.

As a praxis, reading is fundamentally a de-idealizing experience, something that leads to the immersion of the self in the ephemeral, the contingent and the uncertainties of the present. The chapter on Bhagat Singh's jail-notebooks makes this clear by foregrounding the constitutive inconsequentiality of reading a few days before one's certain death. It so happened that when Singh was in prison and waiting to be hanged, he made a demand on the jailors that he be regularly supplied with books and newspapers, as behoves the dignity of a political prisoner. But this right to read as a political prisoner was in essence useless, or

inconsequential given Singh was about to be dead in a few days. Elam writes that this demand to be supplied with books and newspapers attest to a commitment to a present that refuses the "status quo of the future" (Elam 94). From these books came Singh's curated collection of notes, observations, and quotations from contemporary authors like Upton Sinclair, Emma Goldman, Rabindranath Tagore, and Lenin. Elam reads these as "commonplace notebooks," created to perform self-cultivation and self-mastery, by a figure who was about to be put to death in a few days. Therefore, this was a kind of self-discipline without a goal or telos, an aesthetics of the self, on the brink of death. We can of course ask if the concept of dignity that Singh evokes even on the verge of dying can be measured via inconsequentiality at all, and the fact that dignity immediately brings to mind a series of prohibitions related to status, caste, gender, and humanity. For instance, what does Singh's insistence on the division between political and non-political prisoners say about his revolutionary virtue? Don't we perceive here a lingering shadow of the notion of *maryada* that limited Gandhi's politics of egalitarianism, despite Singh's critique of Gandhi's insufficient anti-authoritarianism (Kumar 2015, 303)? This doubt however is put to rest by Elams's interpretation of Singh's desire for self-cultivation as something that defies mastery and authorship. In Singh's endless collection of notes, Elam reads a sign of the former's reluctance to demystify the chaos of the present via the organizing and systematizing power of knowledge. When Singh cites Prudhon and Mazzini as a justification for his terrorist attack, it is his authorial voice that he eschews and opens a readerly collective with unfamiliar others. These self-effacing gestures make him a bearer of revolutionary virtue, a practice that is not different from sacrificial love. Through refusal of appropriation of the present via knowledge, Singh makes way for the future.

A similar reading for self-effacement and renunciation is traced in Lala Har Dayal's *Hints of Self Culture*, and his essays like "The Indian Peasant," the philosopher, sanskritist and freedom fighter, founder of the *Ghadr* (Mutiny) party in California, United States. Through his selective reading of William Morris and Herbert Spencer, Har Dayal created an "anticolonial utopian imagination for his world-state." This utopian vision is enabled by a self-effacing, futural critique, in Har Dayal's assertion that the multitudes of India "do not have a voice" and that their epic "remains to be written." Har Dayal himself refrains from offering this voice and it is this gesture that opens the Indian literary tradition for another kind of writing. His *Hints of Self Culture,* written as a self-help manual for young people, similarly gestures towards the future while simultaneously renouncing authorial control. The philosophers he engages with move across time, ignoring the demands of linearity, and imagination and fiction take over the presentation of facts.

The convergence of Bhagat Singh, Lala Har Dayal on the one hand and B.R Ambedkar on the other is possible because Elam puts Ambedkar's democracy in a specific mode. It is no longer to be conceived in terms of republicanism, with an active citizenry's desire for the rule. Rather, this is a democracy that privileges co-existence, cooperation, and renunciation, as in the case of Lala Har Dayal, the deliberate antipolitical nature of his *Hints of Self Culture* lets him focus on friendship, fugitive egalitarianism, and self-care. Here individuals actively eschew mastery, both ethical and epistemological, for the sake of a creative or cultivated collective. This is where Ambedkar's reading of John Dewey and their utilization of the Bergsonian concept of social endosmosis may become more significant than it appears in Elam's interpretation.

A biological term to describe the diffusion of substance caused by "push" from outside the membrane to the inside of the membrane, Bergson used it to describe the relationship between the external world and the mind, and the latter's permeability. The Ambedkarite term "Social endosmosis" would therefore refer to a condition of correspondence, contagion, and contamination among the denizens of the social world (Elam 59). This notion of contamination and permeability of minds and matters once again makes Ambedkar an ally of Fanon, who ended his *Black Skin White Masks* with the evocation of *lysis*, the disintegration of the cell, by the rupture of its boundaries (Elam 65). This alliance or constellation of Fanon and the Bergsonian Ambedkar point at the fact that far from positing a notion of a pacified or harmonious social, the concept of endosmosis contains within itself the possibility of dissolution and disintegration of the social. While the desire for rule that radical democracy is constitutive of is surely supplanted with a more horizontal understanding of power, the possibility of a complete dissolution is taken to the heart of the social through this concept. It is this desire for the dissolution of the social that is perhaps at the core of Ambedkar's burning of Manusmriti or solving the *riddles* of Hinduism. Representative of transcendent power or law, Ambedkar's democracy is rendered possible only through the latter's dissolution or annihilation. Therefore, to Elam's argument that the burning of Manusmriti is an act of destruction of sovereignty, I would add that this burning is essentially an act of violence that unites Ambedkar with Fanon and reveals their shared desire for a world outside the confinements of colonialism and caste. Reading for Ambedkar then exists in continuity with resistance against sovereignty as well a desire for dissolution, forceful contagion, and collective action like public conversion out of Hinduism.

These thinkers wrote during anticolonial times, but it is precisely their reticence towards a full-fledged (political) authorship that makes them relevant for postcolonial politics. Their ethical abdication of political authorship in their present paradoxically render them politically useful in their future, the postcolonial present characterized by authoritarianism and violence by supposedly independent nation-states. Once included in such a project, where they are regarded as readers in and not authors of their world, these indispensable figures of postcolonial anti-authoritarian politics undergo radical depersonalization and deindividualization. As a result, the oeuvre of BR Ambedkar or Bhagat Singh, very much like the unformed forms of Lala Har Dayal's notebooks may no longer be treated as complete and concluded entities but fragmentary and heterodox receptacles of divergent political imagination, conflicts, and desires. If they are to be read as reticent authors of politics, self-effacing and heteronomous, then their texts begin to function as relays or passages between the present and the future, or the self and the society, their readerly praxis fundamentally relativising the grip of the present day cynicism of the postcolonial experience over its denizen's imagination.

There is a recuperative desire at work in Elam's project, a recuperation no doubt triggered by the pessimistic or cynical present characterized by a marked reaction against movements and imagination that have attempted to create alternative worlds and lives. This is a recuperation of the unfinished, ignored, deliberately ignorant and politically weaker, and arguably the redundant aspects of anticolonial visionaries like Ambedkar or Fanon. What is at stake in such a recuperation of the chosen readers' renunciation of authorship and knowledge, something that leads to the specifically banal and redundant forms their readings take? A self-effacing readerly ethics makes space for love for the unknown, the unfamiliar,

and the youthful; and consequently, opens the present for a future. Elam's interpretation of these unauthorized fragments on self-care, interlaced with Fanon and Ambedkar's critique of the social and historical conditions of possibility of such practices, render prominent a significant aspect of self/care; the fact that care can contain within itself the impossibility of its realizability, and that an investment in self/care can bring up experiences of violence and dissolution, sacrifice and annihilation, and hence of failure and hope. Fredric Jameson writes about the institutionalized genre of science fiction, and the way it formally dramatizes utopia's desire to imagine the impossible and the impermissible. Elam's work is a rejoinder to Jameson in that it foregrounds that the extremely banal practices of writing self-care manuals or demanding newspapers from the prison authorities can contain within them moments of impossibility, and excess, through their sheer lack of instrumentality and effectiveness. In short, the necessary, and repetitive practices of care can contain within them moments of freedom and dissolution, and that care can be political.

For a person like me, who has been researching care in the context of Ambedkarite politics and culture, this utopianization of self/care remains one of the most provocative aspects of Elam's beautifully experimental work.

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