



NETAJI SUBHAS OPEN UNIVERSITY

School of Social Sciences

DD 26, Sector I, Salt Lake, Kolkata – 700064

Website: www.wbnsou.ac.in

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture Series

The School of Social Sciences (SoSS) of Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) has been organizing this prestigious annual lecture consistently since 2010, the members of the School are also engaged in publishing the lectures regularly at due time. The University authority has decided to organise Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture every year to pay its tribute to the great living legend dedicated for the freedom of the motherland from the colonial shackles, and entrusted it's largest academic unit at that time, the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, with the responsibility to conduct it in a rightful manner. Subsequently, however, the School was ramified and three Schools of Studies, viz School of Humanities, School of Social Sciences, and School of Professional Studies were formed in the year 2015. As such, the newly constituted School of Social Sciences, emerging from the erstwhile School of Humanities & Social Sciences, is now entrusted to hold the annual Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture on behalf of the University. Thus, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture has been initiated at NSOU as mark of respect to the undying spirit of "Netaji ", the great patriotic soul and an indomitable symbol of struggle against all the social oddities. Over the years, it has become one of the most prestigious and befitting annual event in the NSOU.

The Sixth Lecture was delivered by Professor Jayanta Sen Gupta on 20 January, 2016. Professor Subha Sankar Sarkar, Honorable Vice Chancellor of Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) presided over the occasion. The programme was organised by NSOU at the Conference Hall of its Headquarter at DD-26, Salt Lake City, Kolkata-64.

In a refreshing departure from the meta narratives on identity formation and politics, the sixth Netaji memorial lecture by Professor Jayanta Sengupta draws the reader's attention to the conscious marginalisation of Orissa, a poor coastal state of India, from mainstream Indian historiography. The reasons for this treatment have been examined at length and what surfaced in the process is the uncoordinated nature of the two major lines of enquiry, historical and political. The speaker did well to remind his listeners that apart from the substantive grounds of his choosing Orissa as the focal point of his talk, "this is a state that is integrally connected to the (early) life of the remarkable man in whose memory this lecture is being organised" (p.135). Even in later days when



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Subhas was standing tall in the national struggle under Congress fold, he had a considerable following in Orissa and the attraction was not only for his charisma but serious appreciation of his revolutionary ideas. To choose Orissa as a subject of study for the stated purpose need not be justified in terms simply of the “myriad cleavages” in Orissi society (after all which Indian society is not so) but principally because of the juxtaposed condition in which suzerainty of princely states and British ruled territory presented a picture of interesting contrast. Politics in this regional context both before and after independence revolved round deepening ethnolinguistic tensions.

The fact that despite its baffling diversities Orissa became the first linguistic state of India and that too during the British rule (in 1936) is certainly of profound political and historical significance. Championing of one single language among a number of smaller others must have required some extraordinary interaction among the contending regional forces. Professor Sengupta not only explores this extraordinary process spanning nearly seven decades (vide Nivedita Mohanty's work “Oriya Nationalism: Quest for a United Orissa 1866-1936) but also directs his enquiry to its lingering impact in contemporary India where Orissa is yet to get its due in terms of regional aspirations underfulfilled. In fact this very phenomenon of various locally constructed identities which had their respective shares of turmoil and sufferings in the national struggle poses a big question about the validity of a simple, pan-Indian construct of nationalism.

Sengupta's reservations about such “homogenised and aggregative “version do have a certain cogency that prompts him to take his own plunge in a “new regional history” as already tried by other historians in respect of Assam, Tamil Nadu or Maharashtra. Without trespassing into a domain that is pre-eminently a preserve of trained historians, I may only add here a rider from a purely political scientist's viewpoint. Nationalism in India germinated first on regional soil (Bengal in the lead, if Bankim is to be taken as having pioneered the thinking). While regionalised expression of national sentiment was being vented in different parts of the country, the need to have it expanded on to a macro dimension was felt and addressed not too late (if Vivekananda, Tagore or Nivedita are to be given their due). Aggregated nationalism manifests itself when its diverse local building blocks are well settled. And it would be a little misnomer to prejudge this macro development as an “imagined” affair altogether



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(in the Andersonian fashion followed by Partha Chatterjee and others). Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lectures Series (Vol. I) 31 The 'nation' as a whole does not get consolidated overnight and it is perfectly possible to think of a spill over continuing long after the attainment of freedom. For its consummation nationalism awaits nation building, a post facto politico-economic endeavour by the newly independent political authority. So, therefore, instead of treating nations as mere "imagined" entities, it stands to reason to regard nationalism not as being but as becoming. Viewed thus, the story of nationalism should be seen as unfolding itself through trial and error and any possibility of the subaltern voice(s) getting drowned under the loud enunciations of elite origin would still stand every chance of getting detected, corrected and respectfully incorporated but certainly not blown out of proportion. The former is a process requiring careful political nurturing whereas the latter calls for historical vigilance all the way. Assertion of the Oriya identity, incidentally, meant some internally managed aggregation, i.e. creation of a sense of unity among the original inhabitants of the land who for various reasons had to remain scattered in other adjoining provinces, the main compulsion being paucity at home of earning opportunities and lack of appropriate skill formation. Deprivation arose also from the predominant presence of non-Oriya elite in administration and other lucrative professions.

A political consequence of this vacuum was insignificant presence of Oriya elite in decision making forums including the National Congress, which was predominantly in the grip of metropolitan educated middle class. Now the question arises: could this be only a necessary cause or also a sufficient cause for the Oriya-speaking people to feel the compulsion to get united? The main causative factors in Sengupta's arguments are attributed to linguistic nationalism as an "affirmation of some primordial ties of cultural affinity". Aspirations of the Oriya elite for a larger share "in the opportunity structure of the British Raj" are also mentioned in the same breath.(p.139) These two, however, are not of the same category and needed simultaneous weaving together. The sense of "peripherality" had to be pronounced and pervasive enough to "cut across cleavages of class and caste"—an idea Sengupta wants to drive home.

Yet when this angst of peripherality is manipulated by the leading groups, whether against the colonial or the post colonial dispensations, the outcome is



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not an unqualified reversal of resource denial but only skewed release of held up resources such as would serve the “class interests of the Oriya educated elite”. This is the fate commonly experienced by the deprived masses when they are made to unite under elite banner anywhere. But then it needs some more plausible explanation why it should be possible for “the plight of the poor” and the dissatisfaction of “a distraught regional elite” to be “fashioned together” (“fastened” if you may). Resort to the rhetoric of “a collective, imagined community of suffering Oriyas” just leaves many things unspecified. What the established line of historical thinking assumes might have happened, namely the combined appeal of “race and language” impinging on the nation-making process (p.140), does not clearly differentiate the multiple factors adduced, i.e, sense of deprivation, elite discontent, linguistic aspirations, racial envy etc. as though they all got rolled into one by providential stroke. At the end of the analysis therefore the reader finds himself in confusion about the actual origin of cultural nationalism of Oriya people.

Again, if the genesis of all this has to be traced as far back as 16th century to also include successive racial inroads from outside, a phenomenon occurring much, much earlier than the perceived Bengali or Tamil transgression of the colonial era, one needs to be satisfied that the collective memory of what had been happening in the distant past also happened to coalesce finally with the relatively recent experiences of discrimination and marginalisation. Professor Sengupta has justifiably recorded his parting with the “Orissa wrong”- thesis on the very cogent ground that “cultural identity never became the organizing principle for popular political mobilization in pre-1947 provincial politics” (p.142). He would rather reframe the question by asking why the Oriya people smarting under so many historical grievances did not deny the Congress party the requisite support even though the Congress allegedly cold shouldered their movement for provincial autonomy. He traces this significant turnaround by the Congress to “mostly local as distinct from regional political issues” i.e the agrarian discontent. The Congress did well by attacking “the very landlords and princes who had lent themselves to the (emotive) Oriya cause” (p.143).

Although critics may not agree with him in his castigation of the politics of cultural identity as “a tool of political opportunism” on the part of Oriya elite, he seems to have come to grips with the stark reality when he points to the unmistakable breaches in the “continuity thesis” and prefers to treat Orissa's



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present day plight in terms of a new core-periphery tension where the hinterland poor is exploited by the coastal affluent. It is also in keeping with a realistic assessment of post independence politics to point to the rising demands of the backward regions for more extensive, if not entirely equitable, benefit packages doled out by the state in the name of poverty alleviation programmes. In Orissa today any reality check would have to examine how state-led development agenda and market-led effects of globalization are becoming complementary.

- All citations taken from *Debnarayan Modak and Chandan Basu Edited Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lectures Series A Compilation (Volume I), Published by The Registrar, Netaji Subhas Open University DD-26, Sector I, Salt Lake City, Kolkata - 700 064 & Alphabet Books 5/1, Ramanath Majumdar Street, Kolkata - 700 009, 2017.*
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