

PREMODERN SUPERSTITIONS—A COUNTER NORMATIVE APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

The smooth and even contours that demarcate the modern from the premodern are the conceptual creations of modernity motivated by a deep-rooted myth rather than the logic of objective analysis. In the postmodernist view, the divide actually emerges from the modernist tendency to historicism propped on distinctly marked out binary opposites like man / nature, mind / matter, male / female and so on. The following table delineates the premodern / modern divide as conceived in different disciplines:

	<i>Premodern</i>	<i>Modern</i>
Economics	primitive	progressive
Positivist Psychology	superstitious savage	rational citizen
Theology	paganistic–heathenish	monistic–absolutistic

An extensive study of the conceptual distinctions stated above will, no doubt, show that the extremities of the boxes in the table are not so rigid as it is given, and the attributes are very often interpenetrating. In terms of modernist preferences, the interpenetration occurs only vertically and not at all horizontally.

It is not much relevant to ask whether the genes of modernity are Baconian or Cartesian as both the pioneers had asserted that mind as the locus of knowledge/thought is the testimony to genuine existence. The ensuing propositions equating knowledge with power (Bacon)/truth with clear and distinct ideas (Descartes) entail the assumed derogatory status of 'the myth loving and superstitious savage'. While taking this inferior status imposed upon the premodern for granted, none normally asks what the premodern would have thought of this rigid distinction and of the norms

adopted for making it. This, at least with the reference to democratic values, which the modernist cannot do away with, is obviously unwarranted.

In the light of the emerging postmodernist critique of modernity, we are certainly in a position to develop and apply a set of *counternorms* to deconstruct the myth of modernity's self-image of its sham glory. Interestingly, this postmodernist venture to attack the vainglory of modernity has been initiated in the West itself. We cannot however forget the fact that the premodern / modern bifurcation had transcended its conceptual level to boost the morale of the colonial invaders from the West as it had been the case of America after Columbus had declared it discovered or that of India before independence.

The politicians, policy-makers and intelligentsia of India, if they cannot grasp and establish the fallacy of the premodern-modern divide, consciously or unconsciously commit themselves to the colonizers' logic of invasion and oppression. This is tantamount to our confession that all our premodern past is so worthless that we deserved and still deserve the domination of the modern West. Unfortunately, the tendency to the indiscriminate acceptance of the modernist paradigms of development and cultural excellence is *pro rata* very high in India.

THE POSTMODERNIST CRITIQUE

There are two propositional options to rule out this self-defeating acceptance of the alleged worthlessness of our premodern traditions and the consequent commitment to Western domination: -

- i) To prove that ours was not a premodern culture or
- ii) To prove that the premodern has its own intrinsic worth.

The first option is contrary to facts, and nevertheless it need not be maintained if the second one is true. So the focus of inquiry in this paper will be the prospects in working out a methodology to substantiate the second option stated above.

The *critical dimension* of such a methodology to inquire into the potential worth of the premodern is so much developed by postmodernist writers that we have many of the required tools in a ready-to-use condition. Hence we have the concepts like anti- foundationism, rejection of metanarratives, skepticism about the universal/global potentials of modernity and so on. Moreover, the emphasis on the incommensurability of cultures and belief-systems will be of much relevance in the normative

reevaluation of the premodern. Before rereading our ancient traditions, both dead and living, one must be conscious of the consequences of the modernist vision of a “monolithic world in which everything is subsumed under a universal principle” (McGowan 1991: 13).

The crux of the postmodernist critique is that “the social totality within which we live is a *constructed* whole that gains unity only through a process of exclusion” (ibid: 21–22). This leads to the creation of *the other*, which provides the dominator with the rationale for legitimizing his power over the other. Within the purview of this paper it is not easy and also not necessary to elaborate this critical dimension of a methodology to delineate the inherent values of the premodern as relevant materials are otherwise available in plenty.

REREADING THE PREMODERN TEXTS

So we can pass on to the question what we, at the receiving end of modernity’s sham glory, have to contribute to the inquiry into the unread value potentials of premodern cultures? The task is to diligently reread the texts of premodernity that include the various belief-systems, sense of the self, and institutions in relation to the respective communities that form their *terra firma*. Anyway, one should remember that heterogeneity is so pervasive in the premodern texts that we cannot be confident of a perusal.

Another hindrance that we have to get rid of while investigating the premodern is the long-drawn-out understanding of history as macrohistory. Feminists always frown at history as *His-story*. Then from the premodern’s point of view it is quite warranted to look at history as *Hi-story*. It is analogous to Hi-tech contrasted with alternative technologies. History as Hi-story necessarily entails the bifurcation between a *hypertext* and a *hypotext*, and the former is normally linked with the glorious and the latter with the ignoble. So the history that emerges in the course of rereading premodern traditions will be a mosaic composed of microscopic instances and other contextualized narrations synthesized or often sandwiched without recourse to universal paradigms and/or metanarratives. In the Indian context it is a confusing mosaic of often distinguished and often interpenetrating units of tribal and rural culture.

Study of the premodern is always expected to result in *histories* rather than a history, and even the findings about a microlevel phenomenon, for instance a festival or an agricultural practice, will the analyst further into an infinite array of subhistories. Macrohistorical method is bound by the *centripetal dynamics* of the components and hence it is practically

incompatible with the study of a polycentric phenomenon like the premodern. This misapplication of macrohistorical method has been largely responsible for neglecting the *ecological continuity* in our premodern culture. An ecological history of India would have accommodated the otherwise diverse cultures of premodernity. Some pioneering works in this area have already appeared.¹ There are also works concentrating on local history with the ecological dimension in focus.² These works are in general marked by the advantages of synthesizing the insider approach with scientific method. This is essential for any analyst who wants to avoid the pitfalls of macrohistorical conditioning that may prompt him/her to look down on the premodern categories given. In the Indian context, the categories are composed mainly of the *gotracaras* or tribal conventions and *desacaras* or rural conventions.

THE TRIBAL AND RURAL STREAMS

In any analysis of the Indian premodernity, we must necessarily take into account the *dialectical coefficients* of cultural transmission and cultural conflict pertaining to the tribal and rural streams. The elements of conflict can be substantiated with reference to their worship patterns. The unique feature of tribal social life is explained thus:

(. . .) they impute sacred qualities to a number of landscape elements, plants and animals in their own immediate surroundings. Indeed their world is a community of beings: rocks, rivers, trees, birds and beasts with whom the humans are linked in a variety of ways. (Gadgil & Berkes 1991:129(3))

Tribals perform rites normally in an open grove in the midst of wilderness with huge trees and thick greenery forming the backdrop. So the place of worship is an *unsystematized* whole that accommodates the trees, gods and the worshippers alike. It does not have a distinct walled structure or a distinct hierarchy regulating the worship. A festival or *puja* is just an occasion for community gathering in which all the members eat, sing and dance together. In short, the worship pattern as a whole is *open* and *even*, and it reflects the tribal worldview.

The rural tradition is distinctly marked by the presence of *gramaksetras* with well-arranged temple buildings.³ The position of the sanctum sanctorum and subsidiary temples is as prescribed in a well-defined *vastu satra*. There is a distinct priestly class privileged to enter the temples and to perform rituals. All non-Brahmin castes are allowed to worship the gods from outside the temple walls. It is all *structured* architecturally as well as socially. So the rules of social distance correspond to a caste's spatial distance from the divine points in a temple.

Notwithstanding the aforesaid distinction between the unstructured tribal worship pattern and the structured one in the rural tradition there are certain elements of cultural transmission between the two. It can be measured well in terms of *ecological continuity*. Hence the two distinct but interconnected streams of India's premodern tradition serve our purpose of explicating its inherent values in the form of a set of ecofriendly customs, beliefs, and practices. In order to analyze them in the proper perspective neither a prejudiced view of the premodern as primitive nor a mere descriptive study will help.

THE TRANSCENDENTAL METHOD

A better and more proper method of analysis should incorporate a *transcendental dimension* into the study. Hence it is necessary to go beyond what is given in order to seek the unread and even unintended dimensions of the actual text. This approach is to be stressed further in the light of the fact that the premodern units are characteristically unconcerned with a rationale to support any social custom. The transcendental analysis may focus either on some widely adopted belief systems or on some localized belief systems. The former is represented by the conceptual frameworks like the vision of nature as *theophany* or divine revelations (see Versluis, 1992:94) and the concept of nature as *mother goddess*, which is 'almost a universal phenomenon in primitive cultures' (Mahapatra, 1992, p.65). Such widely adopted concepts have been elaborated in many works dealing with the social anthropology of primitive religions.⁴

The transcendental analysis of localized systems is more difficult as they are too many and too various to facilitate any kind of elaborate and exhaustive study; even so the nature and goal of this work permit and moreover necessitate the presentation of one or two instances in order to demonstrate the concealed worth of our premodern customs in terms of their ecological import.

- i) The socioreligious taboo on fishing in the temple ponds or *ciras* of Kerala is well known. This is to be linked with the absence of any such taboo on fishing beyond the temple premises. As the fishes in the *cira* adjoining the village shrine are left forever untouched, the prospect of their free breeding is ensured. As a result the whole system works as a natural hatchery of a variety of indigenous Pisces. This is indeed an otherwise unread positive value inherent in the 'superstition' that prompts the believers to maintain the *cira* as a sacred site. It is indeed an ecologically beneficial practice in terms of

biodiversity conservation especially in these days of unruly predation of natural resources.

- ii) A *desacara* linked with the famous *Andalur Kavu* temple in Dharmadam Panchayat of kannur district is noteworthy. Every temple in Kerala has a vivid backdrop of oral history relating the *desacaras* to some divine incarnation. Hence the *theyyam*⁵ performances in this *gramakshetra* are said to represent the *vanavasa* story in the *Ramayana*. The interesting fact about this *kavu* is that it is the only one in northern Kerala with the *theyyam* performance of Rama and Lakshmana as we have in all other *grama kshetras* the performances representing only non-sanskritic gods. Among the set of rituals in *Andalur Kavu* we here focus on the one termed *chakka kothu*, which in a poor translation is the ritual of cutting the jackfruit in devotion to the *davivathar* who is the very incarnation of Lord Rama.

This ritual is followed by a strict *desacara* according to which the local people abstain from reaping and eating jackfruits, which is a domestic favorite of Keralites. This taboo is strictly observed for about four months from *tulam* 10th to *kumbham* 2nd, the day of the ritual. The venerable sources of oral history in the village relate this customary and seasonal taboo to the story of Rama's exile in the forest where the lord and his companions had to depend upon the fruits in the forest for subsistence. May be the villagers wanted to leave their fruits of great relish for the free use of their beloved gods.

By carefully reading the aforementioned custom, we can delineate an ecological finger post therein. The taboo on using the fruit is valid from *thulam* 10th *kumbham* 2nd which roughly corresponds to the period from mid-October to the end of February. Actually this is the season for jackfruit trees to blossom and bear fruits. So the customary taboo that prompts the villagers to abstain from using the fruits will certainly let a large number of them withstand reaping, and as a result a sufficient number of jackfruit seeds will attain maturity for germination within the taboo period.

The significance of this unread and sometimes unintended dimension of the given taboo is to be understood in the light of the fact that jack fruit tree is considered to be the best suitable for making wooden support and furniture for houses. This makes jack fruit trees a much-sought out favourite of wood industry in Kerala and consequently the trees are being cut indiscriminately.

In the preceding analysis of a few instances of localized customs we have found only the tip of the iceberg; there are many other dimensions and yet still many other icebergs. Anyway, one thing that we have to note

in this kind of transcendental analysis of premodern categories is the fact that each one of them is characteristically *localized* and therefore the analysis must be *contextualized*. So an analyst requires not only a distancing from the macrohistorical canons and expectations but also a diligent insider involvement in the given text.

POSTSCRIPT

One necessary conclusion derived either by means of scientific deduction or in the form of emotional presupposition is that the so-called superstitions of the premodern are not at all worthless. Many such customs have an intrinsic ecofriendly dimension, but only thing is that it must be reevaluated in the light of the mounting environmental disasters around us. Then the emerging environmental ethics with its antimodern prescriptions like biodiversity conservation and biospherical egalitarianism will be supported and enriched by the premodern traditions all over the world. So we listen again to Chief Seattle saying: *Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people*. And so every tradition of the premodern world is sacred and valuable.

NOTES

1. A pioneering work is M. Gadgil and R. Guha, *The Fissured Land – An Ecological History of India* (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 1992).
2. For instance see Kusum Misra Panigrahi, *Festivals of Biodiversity* (Navadanya: New Delhi, 1999) and E. Unnikrishnan, *The Sacred Groves of North Kerala* (Samskriti: Kannur, 1997) in Malayalam.
3. An elaborate study can be found in S. Jayashanker, *Temples of Kerala* (Directorate of Census Operations: Kerala, 1997).
4. For instance see Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds. *Hinduism and Ecology* (OUP: New Delhi, 2001).
5. For a brief account of this unique performing art see Jayashanker, S., Op. cit., p.358.

WORKS CITED

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Versluis, A. 1992. *Sacred Earth – The Spiritual Landscape of Native America*, Vermont: Inner Traditions International.

Note: In addition to the works cited above I have depended much on the narrations by many insiders representing the tribal and rural streams of Kerala culture.