Reflections on Language, Consciousness and Mass Media

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This paper investigates the interrelationship present in three constituents of discourse, namely, language, consciousness and mass media and then locates this entire question within the overarching framework of contemporary Indian reality. As this investigation is not possible unless a definitive, critical position is sought strictly with respect to the paradigmatic relationship of language and consciousness, an attempt shall be made to do so. Apparently, this in turn pre-supposes that the archaeology of the philosophic tradition be excavated so as to historicize this whole question. In the first section of this paper therefore, an attempt is made to hypothesize a philosophical position specific to this question of fundamental importance. In the second section, this relationship will be historicized by presenting a bird's-eye view of the different philosophical positions available to us. In the third section, the relationship between language and mass media shall be considered with special reference to some of the developments in India in recent times. And finally, we shall locate the ideological grids of both the English medium and vernacular newspapers so as to establish how as the purveyors of mass culture namely: newspapers, often indulge in linguistic distortions, resulting in grotesque portrayals of reality. Following this logic, the contradictions of mass culture and the dangerous ideological implications of this for both language and consciousness will be examined.

I

One of the epistemological questions that has frequently intrigued philosophers has to do with the way in which the relationship between 'consciousness' and 'language' is to be negotiated. Beyond doubt, though philosophers have repeatedly been engaged with this question,

somehow the result of their investigation has been less than satisfactory. There are several reasons for this. First, both consciousness and language are often mediated as absolutist, abstracted categories, constituting two distinct, well-differentiated discourses with only peripheral contact and/or intersection. Second, this tends to introduce a sense of essentialism into our understanding of these two categories, which comes in by way of binarism, even dualism, setting one category off against the other as an oppositional discourse. So long as the debate remains mired in one kind of binarism or the other, it is almost impossible to avoid the pitfalls of 'either-or' reasoning.

What is needed here is not the structural but the relational understanding of these two categories, in which each serves to delimit, define, demarcate and constitute the other. From this standpoint, the real question is not whether it is the language that precedes consciousness or vice-versa, but rather how and under what conditions the intersection or interpenetration of both language and consciousness becomes possible, if at all. Third, it leads the entire discussion into the most familiar trope of Western epistemology that aims at constituting or re-constituting hierarchical structures out of these two categories, often making it difficult, if not impossible, for us to perceive them in purely relational terms. (Hierarchy, to my mind, doesn't really help constitute a relationship; it simply deconstructs it.) Fourth, it pushes us deeper into that classic impasse (from where there is no escape perhaps), of whether it is consciousness that is *a priori* to language or it is the language that could be said to delimit the nature and function of consciousness. This question of *a priori-ness* further brings us up against the all-too-familiar epistemological impasse, sealing off the limits of the discourse, and blocking off all possibility of arriving at definitive positions.

II

My purpose in enumerating these epistemological problems in relation to both consciousness and language at the beginning is simply to underscore the problematic of this complex issue that we try to address, examine and perhaps interrogate in different situations. Now I shall proceed with a brief overview of Western philosophy in an effort to identify the shifting paradigms of this problematic relationship. However, my effort here would not be so much to initiate

an extended debate on each of these paradigms but merely to sketch out their outline or contours, as anything beyond that could easily take this essay off at a tangent.

We could start off by looking at the rationalist construction of consciousness, as has been put forward by Rene Descartes. For it was he who believed that nothing could really exist outside the mind or consciousness and went so far as to say that "*Cogito ergo sum*" i.e. "I think, therefore, I'm."[1] Not only did he over-valorize consciousness, but also assigned to it an all-enveloping, all-subsuming function. In his scheme of things, language is no more than a necessary adjunct to or an attribute of consciousness; it has no extensionality of its own and exists only to facilitate its multiple functions.

For John Locke, the English empiricist, more than the mind and/or consciousness, it was the idea of self-consciousness that was extremely important. His concept of mind, which he described as a kind of *tabula rasa,* emphasized not only its transparency but also its accessibility to the 'thinking subject.'[2] It is a well-known fact that Locke's model did not make any allowances for 'unconscious thinking,' (which could be said to carry the imprint of the language as well as culture), and which later had to be schematized and hypothesized by Freud in his writings some three centuries later. Despite the essential ontological and epistemological differences between the two ideological perspectives, the Locke's empiricist model appears to be as much a product of Euro-centric binarism as Descarte's model is.

Though Husserl is often recognized as one of the main proponents of modern phenomenology, another name for the science of consciousness, it was Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* that kick-started investigations in this field as early as 1807.[3] Conceiving reality as a living, evolving and a dynamic process, Hegel sought to identify logic with metaphysics or ontology, thus emphasizing both the differentiated as well as unified nature of both thought and being, subject and object. In a manner of speaking, it was Hegel's 'phenomenological model' that offered a real possibility, which had long eluded the Western thought, of overriding the ever-present dualism and seeking a relational, synthesized understanding of language, consciousness and reality. However, what really stood in the way of its realization was Hegel's own ontological position that posited that 'essence is the appearance' or 'God *is* the universe.' By thus absolutizing the transcendental reality, he created another

binarism in terms of spiritual and material reality, without actually
providing the apparatus for working out their mutual symbiosis or
dialectics. And that possibility had to await realization until Karl
Marx appeared on the scene with his 'materialist model of
consciousness.'

I would like to sketch out this particular model in a somewhat
detailed fashion as I intend following it up to comprehend the precise
nature of connectivity in all the three categories, viz., language,
consciousness and social reality. The materialist view perceives
consciousness as "a sum total of mental processes that participate in
man's understanding of the objective world and of his personal
being."[4] This view obviously postulates that it is man's attitude to
the world, reflected in his understanding and knowledge of the objects
that constitutes his consciousness. Moreover, this model offers a
real possibility of connecting language and consciousness, as apart
from being historically constituted, both are perceived as instruments
of collective social and psychological transformation.

If I have been somewhat partial to this materialist understanding
of consciousness, it is not because I take it to be the final statement
on the subject, but only because I find its functionalism extremely
serviceable, even efficacious for my own analysis. Somewhere when
we do reflect upon this relationship of language with consciousness,
we have an unstated expectation that the transformative power of
each in relation to the other should not only be recognized but tapped
as well. The materialist model does not just posit language as an
extension or an attribute of consciousness but as a separate sub-
system that has the potential to transform consciousness as much as
it could effectively be transformed by consciousness in turn.[5] In
this kind of schematic conceptualization, language, consciousness
and social reality truly become relational categories, intersecting,
interpenetrating, defining, delimiting and demarcating the boundaries
of each other. Language becomes an intermediate category,
mediating between consciousnesses on the one hand and social reality
on the other. Once this intermediate quality of the language is realized,
it is possible then for us to start exploring the middle ground, which
makes a reasonable plea, should I say, no, not for self-limiting 'either-
or' but more inclusive and encompassing 'both-and' logic?

Though Husserl's model has not quite figured in this discussion,
it might be interesting to point out that his reflections on
phenomenology appeared when Germany was passing through an
unprecedented internal crisis.[6] It was the growing influence of

fascism upon the popular mind that had split the German society almost vertically. Though it might be somewhat difficult to look upon Husserl's phenomenology as a potent weapon of resistance or a strategy of overturning the existing patterns of thought, it could certainly be perceived as the refuge of those tormented in consciousness or as the mainstay of bruised intellects. Perhaps reflections on language and consciousness become absolutely necessary, when our consciousness is as much under an assault as are our powers of thought, expression or language?

III

By its very nature, mass media makes egregious concessions to the prejudices, biases, bigotry and stereotypical ideas of the masses. To put it in another way, the mass media plays a conformist and not a critical function in shaping or determining the consciousness of the people it purports or claims to serve. If mass media were to assume the critical function and seek to interrogate, attack or overturn the established opinions of people, it would perhaps cease to be a tool of communication and instead would become a purveyor of selective, critical information. This, in turn, would impose severe limitations upon the media especially in terms of its wider acceptability among the people. For any mass media to circumscribe itself would be nothing short of *hara-kiri* or suicide. Therefore, mass media can never afford to run against the grain of the popular opinions and prejudices, most of which need to be corrected or critiqued.

It is no coincidence that in the post-liberalized economy, newspapers in India suddenly went through a frenzied shift, not necessarily in terms of redefining their role or function but, in assuming a brand-like quality. If we look at the way in which newspapers like *The Times of India* and *The Hindustan Times* have undergone a radical face-lift, it becomes apparent that large scale concessions are being made to the overruling, overarching logic of market forces. For some inexplicable reason, it was believed that this was the only way in which newspapers could have possibly survived in a consumerist culture with its ever-shifting gaze and a fragmentary, spliced up reality reducible into a million splintered micro images. It was this basic Darwinian impulse for survival in the market that has brought newspapers in line with other disposable consumer products such as tooth pastes, hamburgers and cokes. What makes the matters worse is that this has put a big question

mark over the credibility of the newspapers and the news being purveyed by them. Under such circumstances, newspapers are almost compelled to give a sense of legitimacy to the uncritical, conformist, standardized language for purveying or communicating whatever information has to be given.

To give a concrete example of this—in any newspaper or magazine writing on fundamentalism, terrorism or communal riots, one rarely reads an analysis in which attempt is made either to go into the history of fundamentalism, terrorism or communal riots or to define the terms of reference. More often than not, the conceptual framework of ideas is left undefined in the hope that such terms are so deeply embedded in popular consciousness that they need no further investigation or critique. I cannot recall having read even a single article in which a systematic attempt was made to differentiate between such terms as *Hinduism* and *Hindutva*, an all-important distinction that ought to be made, as each constitutes a different discourse.

Needless to say, our English newspapers do not in the least suffer from the burden of "anxiety of influence"[7] and often tend to view Indian reality in exactly the same way in which either *The Guardian* or *The New York Times* would view it. Not many self-conscious attempts are made to see how the burden of the language could also, in certain cases, become the burden of the ideology and, therefore, of representation. No wonder, often enough, our newspapers begin to perceive our domestic situations and events through the eyes of foreign correspondents. Once I remember having read a front-page, four-column news item in *The Herald Tribune* about how, on the demise of Mother Teresa, Sister Nirmala had been appointed as the head of the Sisters of Charity Mission. What indeed shocked me about this report was the way in which it had tried, very painstakingly, to privilege and foreground the fact that Sister Nirmala was essentially a Hindu, who had later converted to Christianity and was now being installed as a head of a Christian mission. I wonder how many of us would actually be bothered with the religious identity of Sister Nirmala! I'm not suggesting that this kind of 'divisive consciousness' about religious identity is the creation of the mass media. All I'm saying is that the Orientalist project of (mis) representation that started during the colonial rule has still not ended in the academies and institutions of the West.[8] And further that they continue to create stereotypical structures of knowledge and consciousness about us, that too, in a language, whose dominance over our own languages is unquestionable.

What is worse, oblivious of its ideological implications, our newsmen, especially in the English media, through their refusal to critique such representations, often end up showing complicity with this project. This is how the Euro-centric view of India as a primitive, undeveloped society, still struggling with its archival combination of violence, bigotry and religious identity gains both popularity and legitimacy, eclipsing and obscuring in the process its multifarious economic successes and development activities.

If our English language media has failed to liberate itself from the hegemonic influence of the ideology of the language in which it operates, our media of the regional languages has largely been hegemonized by our English language media. One of the marketing strategies that *Dainik Bhaskar,* a Hindi daily that claims to have a readership close to 15 million, adopted during its launch in the Punjab region (in September 2000) was to emphasize that it offers everything that a good English newspaper can, plus it is in Hindi. It was as if apologetic of being a regional newspaper, *Dainik Bhaskar* suffered from some anxiety of donning a national identity, not by competing with the best of Hindi dailies, but rather with the best of English dailies available in the market. Is it not, once again, a case of internalizing the ideological burden and thus indulging in self-'inferiorization', rather than self-promotion?

One might turn around and say that it is not for the mass media to interrogate and critique the inferiorization of both language and representation. Rather, its function is to give legitimacy and sanction to it. After all, why should it be left to the mass media to make an all-important distinction in terms of a great literary work by Shakespeare or Kalidasa and a popular brand of cigarette? As far as it goes, both are to be understood as two manifestations of a "classic." This kind of anachronism, I dare say, is built into the very nature of mass media and all other organs of mass culture as well. Not only does it trivialize the serious but it also vulgarizes it, sanctifying at the same time, something that only deserves little or perhaps no notice or attention. This is how the mass culture ends up giving a covert sense of legitimacy to what Shestakov, a Russian literary critic, very appropriately, chooses to describe as the 'aesthetics of the trivial.'[9]

Another anachronism that the mass culture first brings into play and then legitimizes has to do with the overturning of the classic dualism of 'quality' versus 'quantity.' The strongest impulse of mass culture is to make more and more goods and products available for the consumption of more and more people. As mass culture is a

quantity-oriented system, quantifying goods, products and people
with the same kind of eagerness and urgency, often it becomes a
pre-text for the 'commodification' of people and 'humanization' of
lifeless objects such as computers, television sets and other
appurtenances of consumerist *haute coutre*. It is the result of this
kind of quantification that human beings are often denied a sense of
reality and subjectivity, and thus fall easy prey to the multiple
processes of objectification.

In such a situation, gender often does not matter as both men and
women are as readily subjected to the processes of objectification as
goods and objects intrinsically are. And when attempts at
objectification become overbearing or overwhelming, the threatened
subjectivity often re-orders its strategies of survival by escaping into
the self-structured worlds of fantasy, mythology, narcotic pleasure
or narcissistic contemplation of the self. This aspect of the mass
culture has been very convincingly analysed by the American writer
Christopher Lasch in his book *The Culture of Narcissism*.[10] Analysing
all the aspects of contemporary culture–politics, art, literature, sports,
advertising and education–he comes to the conclusion that each of
them is characterized by the phenomenon of narcissism. All of this,
in his view, is linked with the appearance of a new type of an
individual for whom the world is nothing but a mirror in which he is
reflected. "Narcissism remains at its most precise a metaphor, and
nothing more, that describes a state of mind in which the world
appears as a mirror of the self."[11] Needless to add, that this kind of
'narcissistic self,' living as it does in a perpetual state of flight from
the reality, is certainly exposed to a greater danger than anyone else
to the multiple processes of self-mutilation, self-destruction and
gradual dissolution of being. Although Christopher Lasch has
essentially made the American mass culture of 1960s the target of
his attack, his analysis assumes an alarming significance for our
understanding of contemporary Indian society.

IV

In my modest opinion, in the first decade of the 21st century, we in
India are definitely in the vice-like grip of the psychological, cultural
crisis that had assailed America and its people in 1960s. If we do go
along with this proposition, then in our consumerist culture, mass
media has only one consideration and one function namely, its
growing concern to stay in the market, its losing battle of survival,

its narcissistic pre-occupation with its own fantasies and mythologies. As its propensity to perceive the world in terms of its own struggles and survival has increased manifold, mass media's potential to become a mirror to the society has proportionately diminished and decreased. Only a media free from the clutches of the market forces can possibly serve the cause of democracy; not a media whose ideology is already underwritten by the multiple grids of various forces, economic, social and political. Media that is obsessed with its own angularities and distortions cannot afford to take upon itself the onerous task of reflecting, mediating or analysing the angularities or distortions of the society it operates within.

With the exception of two newspapers in India, one located in the northern and the other in the southern region, which are run by a public trust, and a family owned trust respectively; all other big, small and marginal newspapers in India owe their existence either to the corporate houses, business barons or the political parties. For business barons, the motive of profit maximization or power brokering clearly supercedes all altruistic considerations of objectivity and neutrality. Whereas such a laudable aim does not even appear on the agenda of those ideologically inclined newspapers that unabashedly serve as the organs of various political parties.

Where does it all lead to us, ultimately? Perhaps, nowhere. As we stand at this crucial juncture of history, and look at this mish-mash of language, consciousness and mass media, all thoughts of their individual or collective redemptive powers seem to desert us. Perhaps, for us, there is nothing more than this long, extended sigh of despair or these puzzling reflections, which may not leave us any wiser, after all.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. In his famous work, *Discourse on the Method* (1637) Rene Descartes initially developed this notion of the non-corporeal, non-material nature of the 'thinking self.' It's another matter that the term 'consciousness' was used in his writings only implicitly and indirectly. According to him, 'thought' was not only restricted to cognitive activities but included everything we often attribute to 'consciousness.' This idea, which otherwise constitutes the core of the Cartesian system, became the foundation of his epistemology, as it postulated a neat division between mind and body, thereby giving rise to the problem of mind-body dualism. However, Descartes propounded the notion of 'Cogito Ergo Sum' in his *Meditations* (1641), wherein he clearly emphasized the primacy of

consciousness. His views on language did not emerge until he wrote his *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), wherein he described language as non-material nature of the 'thinking self.' Since my understanding of these ideas is derived largely from my readings of different works of Descartes, no specific reference is being made here.

2.   My understanding of the 'empirical model' of the relationship between the 'language' and 'consciousness' is essentially based upon John Locke's famous work *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Ed., John W. Yolton, London: Dent, 1961. In this work he also develops the idea of human mind as *'tabula rasa'*.

3.   For detailed discussion, please refer to G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, Ed., J. B. Baillie, (2nd rev. edition), London: Allen & Unwin, 1995.

4.   I. Frolov, Ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984, p. 81.

5.   Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, Ed., C. J. Arthur, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, pp. 47-51.

6.   For detailed exposition, please refer to *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Ed., Ted Honderich, Oxford. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995 or *Husseil*, Ed., D. Bell, London: Methuen, 1991.

7.   This phrase is derived from the title of Harold Bloom's book *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). In this particular work, Bloom has interpreted the whole process of creativity in Freudian terms. According to him, the creative process is a way of overcoming the anxiety that literary influences create in the mind of the creative writer. The process of writing is, therefore, a process of outgrowing one's influences, and often involves the 'ritualistic killing of the father principle' (with its specific Oedipal overtones) and is seen as the only way of coming to terms with this 'anxiety.' What is significant about Bloom's conceptualization is that he places this paradigm specifically within the matrix of Western history, thought and philosophy.

8.   This is the main thrust of Edward Said's argument in his now all-too-famous book *Orientalism*, New York, London: Penguin Books, 1995.

9.   Vyacheslav Sheshtov, "The Aesthetic of the Trivial" in *Aesthetics, Art, Life: A Collection of Articles*, Ed., A. Zis, trans. by Sergei Syrovatkin, Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1988, pp. 212-216.

10. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York: Norton, 1979, p. 75.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 75.