FROM SOCIALIST REALISM TO POSTMODERN SCEPTICISM: U.R. ANANTHAMURTHY'S CRITIQUE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines the intellectual evolution of Kannada writer U.R. Ananthamurthy, tracing his transition from the "Socialist Realist" optimism of the Pragatisheela movement to a "Postmodern Scepticism" regarding the Indian state and its civil society. Central to this critique is Ananthamurthy's portrayal of the "English-educated elite" as an administrative and secular vanguard that inadvertently perpetuates a "Colonial Consciousness". By analyzing the failure of the bureaucrat Satisha in Bara and the rationalist Jagannatha in Bharathipura, the study illustrates how top-down modernity often performs "epistemic violence" against the very subjects it seeks to liberate. Drawing on Ashis Nandy's theories of the "Intimate Enemy" and S.N. Balagangadhara's critique of Western categorical dominance, the article argues that Ananthamurthy moves toward a Linguistic Democracy. This model rejects the Upstairs language (Attada Mathu) of the state in favour of the pluralistic, Critical Insider perspective found within the vernacular worlds, suggesting that true democratic participation requires a recovery of the cultural self.

KEYWORDS:

Socialist Realism, Postmodern Scepticism, Colonial Consciousness, Epistemic Violence, Intimate Enemy, Linguistic Democracy

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Introduction: The Progressive Impulse and its Discontents

In the immediate post-independence decades, the Karnataka intellectual landscape was dominated by the Pragatisheela (Progressive) movement, which championed a rigorous commitment to Socialist Realism. For the young U.R. Ananthamurthy, literature was not merely an aesthetic pursuit but a vital vanguard for a burgeoning socialist civil society. This early phase was characterized by an optimistic will to reform, where the writer functioned as a secular missionary tasked with dismantling feudal structures and ushering in a rational, egalitarian modernity. However, URA's intellectual migration – marked by his doctoral research at the University of Birmingham and his leadership in the Navya

(Modernist) movement – introduced a foundational "critical doubt" that would eventually evolve into a full–scale Postmodern Scepticism.

As U.R. Ananthamurthy's thought matured, he began to perceive "civil society" in India not as a neutral space of democratic participation, but as a socio–linguistic enclosure occupied by the "English–educated elite". He critiqued this class for viewing the Indian masses as objects of reform to be managed, rather than subjects of history with their own valid cultural grammar.

The Failure of the Administrative Vanguard: Satisha and the Paradox of Sincerity in Bara

In the novel Bara, U.R. Ananthamurthy presents a scathing postmodern critique of the 'Administrative Vanguard' – the belief that a sincere, Western–educated bureaucracy can serve as the primary engine for democratic social justice. The protagonist, Satisha, a District Commissioner, embodies the transition from the Progressive (Pragatisheela) ideal of the heroic reformer to the Postmodern realization of institutional impotence. (Ananthamurthy 2021)

The Bureaucrat as a "Secular Missionary"

Satisha enters the drought–stricken district not merely as an official, but as a 'secular missionary'. His approach is defined by what Ashis Nandy describes as the "modernist hubris", where the administrator believes that objective data and rationalist interventions can override the irrational politics of the local life–world.

"What had seemed like the unspoken truths that Satish had encountered before now seemed very mediocre. No – he had never run around in any open space without being aware of anything he had seen that was lawless." (Ananthamurthy, 2021, p.351)

Satisha's commitment to 'the rules' and his refusal to engage with the corrupt local politician, Bhimoji, is seen by Ananthamurthy not as strength, but as a form of alienation. Here Nandy argues that such an administrator is a victim of the "Intimate Enemy" complex; he has internalized a colonial model of governance that views the 'masses' as inert objects waiting for state–led salvation (Nandy, 1983).

Nandy explains that victors in the colonial system are ultimately camouflaged victims, at an advanced stage of psychosocial decay.

"When they speak of victors, the victors are ultimately shown to be camouflaged victims, at an advanced stage of psychosocial decay." (Nandy, 1983, p.xvi)

He describes 'the second colonization, which colonizes minds in addition to bodies and releases forces that alter cultural priorities, turning the West into a "psychological category within the colonized"' (Nandy, 1983, p.xi).

Nandy characterizes modern oppression as a battle between the technologized bureaucrat and his reified victim, where the master's cognition must exclude the slave except as a thing.

"It is a battle between dehumanized self and the objectified enemy, the technologized bureaucrat and his reified victim, pseudo-rulers and their fearsome other selves projected on to their 'subjects'." (Nandy, 1983, p.xvi)

The "Colonial Consciousness" of Administrative Logic

Satisha's failure to mitigate the drought is rooted in what S.N. Balagangadhara identifies as the 'violence of categories'. Satisha treats the drought as a technical and logistical problem that can be solved through the 'Socialist Realist' framework of efficient distribution. While Satisha obsesses over reports and files, the local politicians and the starving populace are engaged in a different cultural grammar of survival and patronage.

Balagangadhara notes that the colonial consciousness makes the intellectual 'blind to the social reality of their own culture', causing them to implement policies that are 'conceptually alien to the people'.

"Either way, the Asian culture stagnated: our intellectuals had lost a world they never had and grew up in one they never knew. And we, their heirs and legatees, have to struggle to make an alien world our own whilst our own becomes alien." (Balagangadhara, 2022, p.8).

Satisha's sincerity becomes a source of paralysis. His insistence on bureaucratic purity in the face of absolute human suffering illustrates Ananthamurthy's scepticism of the state as a moral agent.

Balagangadhara argues that Western theoretical explanations act as a distorting glass that prevents the colonized from accessing or reflecting on their own experiences. He notes that the colonized "propagate and

sustain a framework which prevents them from accessing their own experiences". He further states that colonialism "replaces [the Indian experience] with frameworks that are rationally unjustified and unjustifiable," rendering them conceptually alien to the people's lived reality. He concludes that this process makes the colonized "aliens to themselves" by preventing any description of their culture except in terms defined by the colonizers. (Balagangadhara 2012)

The Collapse of the Progressive Hero

The climax of Bara – where Satisha realizes that even his most "progressive" acts are being co–opted by the local elite – marks his shift toward Postmodern Scepticism. He discovers that he is not the vanguard of change but a cog in a 'fascist state' of administrative indifference.

Satisha's reliance on the 'Upstairs language' (Attada Mathu) of policy and English–mediated governance isolates him from the 'Street language' (Beedi Mathu) of the suffering farmers.

"The administrator who cannot speak the language of the people's pain ends up speaking only to his own shadow" (Ananthamurthy 2014, 85).

The Epistemic Wall: Jagannatha's Failure and the Limits of Secular Rationalism in Bharathipura

In Bharathipura, U.R. Ananthamurthy moves from the bureaucratic critique seen in Bara to a deeper, more existential investigation of what he terms the "Epistemic Wall". The protagonist, Jagannatha, represents the ultimate 'Progressive Hero' – a man who returns from England armed with Enlightenment rationalism, determined to cleanse his ancestral town of the filth of caste and superstition. However, his failure to democratize Bharathipura serves as Ananthamurthy's most potent postmodern critique of the Violence of Secularism.

The Secular Missionary and the Intimate Enemy

Jagannatha's mission to force the Dalits to enter the temple and touch the Saligrama (the sacred stone) is framed not as an act of empathy, but as an act of demystification. He views the deity as a social construct that sustains oppression.

Sir, I have decided to take some untouchables into the Manjunatha temple. I think the Old Moon Festival[1] is the best time for this, because

on that day, devotees from all over India will be here. If we can prove that those untouchables who enter this temple will not vomit blood and die, I believe that it would be the start of a new natural thought pattern. I appeal to all progressive people to support me. (Sd) Jagannatha, Bharathipura. (Ananthamurthy, 1996, p.27)

Jagannatha operates as what Ashis Nandy describes as the 'Intimate Enemy'. He has internalized the colonizer's gaze, viewing his own culture's sacred symbols as 'primitive' artefacts that must be destroyed to achieve modernity.

Nandy argues that the modern reformer often suffers from a loss of self, where 'the secularist becomes a missionary who hates the very people he seeks to save for their 'irrationality'' (Nandy 1983).

It is part of Nandy's analysis of how colonial ideology used a homology between childhood and the state of being colonized to justify its 'civilizing mission'. He provides a table titled "The childlike Indian" vs "The childish Indian" to summarize this theory of progress. He argues that modern colonialism was not just about material gain but was a psychological project that categorized subject societies as 'primitive' or 'infantile' (Nandy, 1983, p.16). The secularists, liberals, and modernists who carried this ideology viewed themselves as helpful instruments of history. However, because they viewed traditional Indian culture as a form of 'debilitating senility' or 'sinfulness', they developed a missionary–like zeal to save the people.

"Like a sinful man Indian culture was living through a particularly debilitating senility" (Nandy, 1983, p.18).

This salvation required the colonized to be reformed through Westernization and modernization. When the people resisted these 'conceptually alien' frameworks, the reformer – driven by an internalised colonial model – began to hate the very 'irrationality' they were purportedly trying to cure.

The Saligrama Episode: A Failure of Translation

The climax of Bharathipura, the touching of the Saligrama, is the moment where Jagannatha hits the "Epistemic Wall". He treats the ritual not as a lived experience, but as a theological proposition to be disproven. In doing so, he performs what Balagangadhara (2012) identifies as the primary act of Colonial Consciousness: the forced translation of Indian

traditions into Western religious categories.

Jagannatha views the Saligrama through the lens of Secular Rationalism, categorizing it as a "false god" or an "idol" that sustains a superstition. He expects that once the physical act of touching the stone occurs without divine retribution, the Dalits will be emancipated by the truth of his logic. However, he fails to realize that for the community, the Saligrama is not a belief that can be proven true or false; it is a cultural praxis – a living presence within their world–view.

As Nandy (1983) suggests, Jagannatha acts as the "Intimate Enemy", hating the irrationality of the people he intends to save. When the Dalits touch the stone and encounter only a terrifying silence, they do not feel liberated; they feel a "loss of self". Jagannatha has not destroyed their oppression; he has only destroyed the cultural grammar they used to navigate their existence. He leaves them in an existential vacuum, proving that a democracy built on the "epistemic violence" of the reformer is merely another form of colonization.

The Postmodern Realization: The Persistence of Myth

Jagannatha's failure demonstrates that democracy cannot be engineered by stripping people of their myths. When the Dalits touch the stone, Jagannatha realizes that he hasn't freed them; he has only increased their existential terror. This marks Ananthamurthy's shift toward Postmodern Scepticism. He suggests that the 'Grand Narrative' of Secularism is just as coercive as the tradition it seeks to replace if it is not rooted in a 'Critical Insider' perspective.

As U.R. Ananthamurthy reflects on this failure, he writes:

"The enlightened man who tries to enlighten others often ends up destroying the very cultural grammar that makes equality possible... he leaves behind a vacuum, not a revolution" (Ananthamurthy, 2014, p.89).

Linguistic Democracy: A Postmodern Model for Decentralized Governance

In the final phase of his intellectual journey, U.R. Ananthamurthy moved away from the "Grand Narratives" of state–led secularism and toward a framework of Linguistic Democracy. This model proposes that a truly decentralized civil society can only be built through the Bhasha (local language) worlds, which serve as the primary site for political and

social participation.

The Critique of the English–Mediated State as a Fascist Structure

Ananthamurthy identifies the dominance of English in Indian governance not merely as a communication barrier, but as a fascist institutional tool that creates a new, exclusionary caste system. From a political science perspective, this "Upstairs language" (Attada Mathu) creates an epistemic wall between the administrative elite and the citizenry, leading to a crisis of representation.

Institutional Alienation: When state administration and higher education are conducted in a language severed from the masses, the state becomes fascist by effectively disenfranchising those who live in their mother tongues.

Colonial Consciousness in Policy: This linguistic divide forces Indian social realities into Western conceptual categories, as identified by S.N. Balagangadhara, resulting in policies that are conceptually alien to the people's lived reality.

The languages as Sites of Postmodern Political Composition

Unlike the perceived sterility of globalized English, Ananthamurthy argues that Indian languages are inherently postmodern and pluralistic. They allow for a Critical Insider approach to governance, where democratic dissent is formulated in indigenous terms rather than imported frameworks.

Ashis Nandy supports this "recovery of the self" by suggesting that local vernaculars have survived the homogenizing violence of state–led modernity. Resistance under this model does not require adopting the victor's language of dissent; instead, it utilizes the cunning of the weak and the intelligence of the soil to maintain political authenticity (Nandy, 1983, p.10–18).

Conclusion

U.R. Ananthamurthy's intellectual trajectory reveals the "Epistemic Wall" created when secular rationalism views the Indian masses as objects of reform rather than subjects of history. Through the failures of Satisha and Jagannatha, U.R. Ananthamurthy demonstrates that a modernity demanding a "loss of self" only succeeds in alienating the reformer. Synthesizing Nandy's "Intimate Enemy" and Balagangadhara's "Colonial Consciousness", Ananthamurthy moves toward a Linguistic Democracy –

a model where the Bhasha world serves as a site of organic resistance against the "Upstairs language" of the elite. Ultimately, he advocates for the intellectual to transition from a "secular missionary" to a "critical insider", grounding democracy in a living conversation that respects local myths and the intelligence of the soil.

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