Newer Thoughts on Poly-colonialism, Post-conflict Studies and Engaged Literature: A Conversation with Professor Dr. Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha, ILSR Kolkata

Abstract

This interview engages with Professor Dr. Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha's reflections on the contemporary crisis of postcolonial studies in an era marked by global warfare, authoritarianism, ecological devastation, and intensified forms of ethno-nationalism. Moving beyond inherited frameworks of postcolonialism, Purakayastha advances the concept of poly-colonialism to theorise the simultaneous and intersecting forms of domination operative in both the Global North and South, including contexts where former colonies reproduce colonial violence internally and regionally. The conversation foregrounds the limitations of Anglophone and elite academic paradigms, calling instead for an embedded, vernacular, and life-centred critical practice attentive to post-conflict studies, counterpublics, and people's literary archives. It critically interrogates the complicity of postcolonial academia with global capital, digital performativity, and institutional elitism, while questioning the efficacy of established dissenting templates. Emphasising micro-political interventions, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the recovery of marginalised vernacular traditions, the interview situates engaged literature and public humanities as crucial sites for rethinking emancipatory possibilities. Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, it advocates collective, self-reflexive thinking as an ethical and political necessity in confronting

contemporary necropolitical regimes and reimagining future utopian horizons.

PI: In the wake of the Israeli genocide in Gaza, the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, Armed interventions by the Trump administration of US, escalating belligerent rhetoric, including renewed production of nuclear weapons, where do you see the present and future of postcolonial studies?

ASP: First of all, thanks to you and your team for thinking of me for this conversation. Yes, we are living in bizarre times when all normative frames and usual perspectives are simply crumbling before our eyes. The unthinkable is the neo-normal today and these strange times perhaps need smart thinking as older axiomatic models may not serve us anymore. It is a challenging moment for all of us, doing literature and critical theory. However, all previous periods of crisis helped in the formation of new critical theoretical turns and this deteriorating transition phase in geo-politics calls for new coordinates. Cliched ideas will do us no favour, in fact, decades of dis-embedding in theorisation and political dogmatism have led to the current situation. All the references you gave did not happen over-night or on one fine morning. We watched it unfolding - these forces of violence and destruction and total insanity arrived in cavalcades and we in academia either were naïve about their arrival or colluded with it. Most of your references are in the Western world except Gaza but I would also include massive normalisation of violence, institutional belligerence and hate mongering in the Global South as well. Given this world-wide unfolding of violence and public hatred, I would prefer the use of "poly-colonialism" and newer fields like post-conflict studies rather than the hackneyed reiteration of postcolonialism. The postcolonial we learned and inherited is outdated, the field has to expand and needs to accommodate perspectival shifts, acknowledging auto-critical understanding of the limitations and growing elitism of the traditional field of postcolonial studies. Critical theory is self-vigilant and requires perennial evaluation of its own critical methods and signposts. Multiple full scale wars are going on at this moment in various corners, the Russia Ukraine war and the Gaza war are the biggest examples but apart from the two, there are other consistent cases of animosity and sabre rattling and postcolonial countries are making big budget movies to justify gory violence to antagonise the neighbouring country in the name of postcolonial patriotism. So, the first question for me would be which postcolonialism are we talking about today? Are there pluri-colonial contexts today in which former colonies are colonising and brutalising one another? How do we theorise this development? How do we evaluate dissent and the method of dissent in today`s context of terror and counter-terror ridden polity? Will our existing theoretic templates offer any help or we need to navigate thousand theoretic plateaus to understand the current crisis? This is not a time for prescriptive and ready answers. This is a time to think together, and drive out dogmas that continue to function as ideological and theoretic positions.

PI: Along with global challenges, there are a host of restrictions and fissures that are thronging the national scene, not just in India but across the world. What kind of interventions are we witnessing or can expect in this context from postcolonial literatures?

ASP: I have already told you about my views regarding this crisis in my previous answer. What I can add is, in my views, there is a need to theoretically embed more, grounding literature more to life and living. Vernacular texts are more important in this context. You may call it vernacularism or engaged literature, emergency literature, whatever you like. Some years ago, we had a special issue of the PSAGS journal *Kairos* on "Emergency literature and emergency aesthetics" but that does not invoke a mere fashionable reference to the Anthropocene and degrowth, but also to what I have written in my recently published paper in the journal *Public Humanities* on "Literature and the Counter Publics". In that article I called for the need of restoring the lost archive of people`s literature written in the vernacular. Postcolonial literature`s long fascination with "Indian English writing" requires a rethink. In my paper I referred to Ngugi Wa Thiongo`s notion of "Europhonism" and this is not just Eurocentrism, it has a strong emphasis on language. Most postcolonial scholarship flourished through the English language, dealing with Indian English texts. This is a clear case of "Europhonism" or reification of the Anglophonic. We need more engagement and translation of vernacular texts and more critical reappraisal of the postcolonial. Instead of treating it as a literary and disciplinary buzzword and an academic fashion, the postcolonial corpus has to go back to the people and people`s literature and my own work on restoring the "archive of Sahajiya Sahitya" in the context of Bengal can offer us some clues on how to excavate new theoretic tools.

PI: One of the contentious issues within the domain of postcolonial studies has obviously been the relationship with capital. In terms of both theory and cultural representations, do you see a more robust critique of capital developing from within postcolonial studies?

ASP: This is another area where postcolonial scholars in the subcontinent have reiterated their views and there is no denying that today there is a complete subsumption of the life-world under global corporate capital. However, before I proceed further, I also need to remind you that we, postcolonial scholars are not economists and my idea about economics is very limited. This has not however deterred my colleagues in the postcolonial academy to parrot out words and phrases like "neo-liberal," "global capital," "consumer capital" and "financialisation," etc. in their familiar critique of the corporate economy. I am not suggesting that we stop critiquing capitalism and its total control of life as it unfolds today. But postcolonial scholars have also colluded with the system, they subscribe to this marketisation of academic practices, churning out meaningless tomes in the name of so called academic publications, month after month, making it an academic fashion to speak of dissent. In my view the postcolonial academia today has become a site of what I call fashionable sanctuary politics of verbal vandalism which participates in the same systemic circulation of global capital which they were supposed to critique.

There is a mushrooming of academic journals and postcolonial academics live in social media more than they live in actual life and that is why this embedding of postcolonial scholarship within the actual ground should be the priority. We critique capitalist consumerism but we are consciously complicit in this unabashed march of consumerist culture and social media driven culture of pathetic self-projection. Social media is the safe zone sanctuary space for academics and pseudo activists to launch their verbal battles; they know that that is their sanctuary to unleash political brickbats as that will lead to nothing. Capital therefore circulates in curious ways through our academic departments, in our everyday pedagogic models and evaluation process and also in our so called dissensual practices. The critique of capitalism and the critique of existing postcolonial templates are to be simultaneous.

PI: At a time when academic freedom is under threat, whether in India or in the US or elsewhere, how viable is it to institutionally foster the emancipatory potentialities associated with postcolonial studies?

ASP: This challenge has been there all through, but I agree that in the last one decade this has reached an all-time low. It is really menacing to see that we cannot write or speak freely today. Again, this climate of authoritarian regimentation did not happen in a day. The political spectrum is a manifestation of our own inner crisis and the festering began long ago, it calls for very tough self-questionings. We are passing through a phase of transition. Technology, cyber technology to be precise, obviously has changed everything, our reading habits, our ways of analysis and evaluation, our critical thoughts, etc. This overarching presence of what Derrida called tele-technology invokes newer modes of combats. But how do we unplug from this matrix of power? It is not enough to critique the political class, we academics also love power very much and we also nurture a system of hierarchy in our departments and regular academic practices. There are clear authoritarian tendencies within academia and within the quotidian spaces therefore, there is a correlation between the social and the political space. The famous Hollywood film, Matrix suggested this unplugging or the bugging of the overarching controlling system, but that was symbolic and aesthetic. How do we actualise it? Through violence? No, that will devastate further. What are the new critical methods then? After years of so-called revolutionary changes, we are back to square one, why? Have we examined that? What went wrong? Do we need more of what Deleuze and Guattari called micro-political steps for molecular changes rather than fashionable and normative planks of so called big revolutions? After decades of anti-colonial struggles, we are confronted with newer necropolitical frontiers within the postcolony. New draconian laws, prolonged imprisonment without trial, politicisation of judiciary, of the police force and the media and new forms of ethno-nationalism to otherise minorities, how does postcolonial scholarship address these challenges? The emancipatory potentialities do not lie in churning out meaningless journal articles in flagship platforms but by embedding postcolonial theory with actual life and living. In a postcolonial country with a population of billions, we continue our thoughtless flaunting and glorification of a handful of so-called high-profile universities and research centres! This is pathetic and speak volumes of our complete rejection of the thought making process.

Few years ago, I along with my sociologist friend Dr. Subhendra Bhowmick, wrote a piece on what is popularly called "provincial universities." We inquired in that article what we mean by this term "provincial university." In my recent article published in the journal *Public Humanities*, I have also critiqued Judith Butler`s view that Humanities education across the world is declining because of massive corporatisation and financialisation of STEM (science, technology and management based subjects) disciplines. Butler`s urge for public humanities is well grounded but the wall between the university and the people is not just because of corporatisation but also because of decades of wrong pedagogic models and academic elitism which led to the lionisation of few elite institutes and the peripheralisation of so called "provincial" academies - an eco-system which postcolonial scholars did not question but colluded with. In a country of billions of people, we only talk about three or four so called elite universities? Is it not a shame that postcolonial scholars did not question this colonisation of the academic life world by few elite voices and elite institutes? Europhonism, Anglophonism and fashionable flaunting of academic theory led to further reinforcement of this decline. Theory never dis-embeds, it always emerged from a direct engagement with the ground but postcolonial scholarship of late has perhaps completely reified the theoretic task. This micro-critique may lead to some small immanent steps of emancipation.

PI: The Rohingyas, the Sudanese and many other displaced populations are under increasing threat and the international framework seems rather handicapped. How can postcolonial studies intervene in this scenario of xenophobia and apathy?

ASP: Again, I would give the same reply, the solution lies more by embedding more with the ground. The Rohingyas have been completely otherised and this culture and politics of otherisation have been nurtured over the years. To get back to the micro-contexts, we otherise at our home, on the street, at the bus stop, in the class room and in the department, in many other places of the everyday space. The predicament of the Rohingyas and the Sudanese and the countless migrant workers who are being killed on the basis of language and religion are manifestations of the sustained process of normalising otherisation. It is a highly polarised world and ethnic differences are being re-walled. Postcolonial scholars should interrogate on what happened to years of radical, revolutionary political thoughts? Why did they fail? Can we explain this ugly rise of ethno-nationalism and religious polarisation and its popular support by normative planks of postcolonial theory? Let us THINK, instead of dashing off with ready-made predictable answers. I am looking for answers too, I have no quick serving dish-able answers.

PI: Salman Rushdie had long ago talked about authors being antagonists to the state. Arguably, a lot of postcolonial authors have done that in the past. Are they still able to perform such roles? If so, which authors stand out, in your opinion?

ASP: This is the need of the hour when the nation-state is proving to be tyrannical in the global scenario. I am sure there is still many critical minds countering authoritarian tendencies in various ways. We need to widen the frame and should not look for only celebrity authors. My emphasis on vernacular authors, small town authors and artists stems from that perspective.

PI: Ecology, capital and coloniality are being extensively investigated these days. Are postcolonial studies able to extract new insights in relation to indigenous communities and their relationship with nature?

ASP: This is important but it runs the risk of becoming yet another field of fashionable practice, indigenous world views are the views of the people on the ground and that was always important and it is good that postcolonial scholars are listening to people but why did it take so much time for them to realise that listening to people`s ways is important? It is better late than never though and I welcome it but indigeneity should not be viewed as a museum entity. I remember here the *Convivialist Manifesto*, both the original and the newer edition of it and it elaborated on the indigenous world views and there have been numerous writings on this subject of late. Vernacular literature talked about indigeneity much earlier and when I say vernacular, I include the indigenous within that larger rubric. It is a battle between different world views, one of extraction and combustion (corporate view) versus the view of conviviality and plant philosophy and post-humanity studies. In India, I think we are still in early days in newer domains such as critical animal studies and Energy Humanities. I will narrate an experience here, Indian reviewers working on what they fashionably call post-humanities studies, are clueless about the new field Energy Humanities, by this they only think of petro-fiction. But there are larger philosophical dimensions involved in it and there are scopes for more interdisciplinary research on this subject. Humanities scholarship in the Indian subcontinent are yet to embrace the idea of team work or collaborative work. In the science and technology disciplines, working together and writing scientific papers as a team effort is very common but in humanities, we still follow the solo-author model, but is it possible to navigate all the complex issues unfolding before us through a singular approach, or do we need a team model of interdisciplinary scholarship? Every year, all science related Nobel prizes are divided among two or three scientists, in humanities scholarship, we are loners. Can there be a time of literature Nobel being awarded to a team? The recent Booker prizes to both the vernacular author as well as to the translator is a very good development. Greater interdisciplinary scholarship requires team discussion rather than the be-all-know-all solo academic whose individual sovereignty leads to foreclosures of knowledge and academic arrogance.

PI: Are there signs of new counterpublics that might challenge hegemonic structures? If so, how?

ASP: I have written about this extensively in my new paper published in December 2025 of the Cambridge journal *Public Humanities* and the best option would be to read that to find answer to this question. I am providing the doi of that journal article and it is open access https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10072

PI: Utopian thought, both derided and celebrated, is also associated with postcolonial studies. Are new utopias being imagined? What are their features?

ASP: That depends on us, but utopias too require transformative shifts in their vision. Earlier forms of utopias are perhaps powerless to inspire. We need norm deviant imaginaries and newer promptings (to use AI related terminologies). We cannot wish away the reality to usher in a pre-capitalist pastoral world in this urban jungle of "smart cities" in which we all live, drive our cars and buy or luxury flats and farm houses! How do we queerise the reigning political economy and social relationship sector? That is the challenge. Utopias are needed, but they are to be liberated from their old baggage and ideological dogmas.

PI: What would your advice be to budding postcolonial scholars, especially those from the Third World?

ASP: I am still a learner and a practitioner. I am certainly not in a position to advise others. That would be too hubristic on my part to advise. I consciously discard this position of a know-all persona who has all the answers. I am a co-fighter in this battle. We all have to find answer through direct everyday engagement with life, without subscribing to pre-given ideologies and complicity with the system.

PI: Finally, a few words about the journal – *Postcolonial Interventions*. How do you see this platform developing in the coming years?

ASP: Yes, platforms like this journal can play a big role, as all sincere efforts to bring together thinking minds can deliver. My request will be that journals like this can become sites for newer ideas and newer voices instead of reiterating old narratives and ideas. Can you think of a special section in every issue on vernacular literary voices from India or the Global South at large? That would be a great move. Two Booker prizes to translated vernacular texts from India is indicative of the fact that our vernacular wisdom is at par with global standards and postcolonial scholarly journals should take the lead to promote these writers. Your journal is doing great and to set new benchmarks, you can have a good team to set new higher standards of flawless production and I am sure with newer efforts this journal can become a very good platform of new postcolonial studies in the years to come.

New theories will emerge through vernacular writings and vernacular literature and not through the English department which toes the line of Europhonism and reify existing academic hierarchies. I wish the journal all the best and I once again thank you and your team for this conversation.