Countering The Legacy of Colonial Rule: The Role of the Environmental Activist and Activist Writer

Meenakshi Sharma

Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad

Abstract

In the nearly 200 years of the British presence in the Indian subcontinent, deep and long-lasting changes came about resulting in a complex intermeshing of commercial, administrative and legal, social, physical, and ecological issues that persisted way beyond Independence. I explore the way in which the distribution of privileges and concrete benefits tied to the selective induction into English education led to fissures between the privileged and powerful class – especially the decision makers and administrators – and others. This was especially pernicious for the economically and socially marginalised who bore the negative impact of certain decisions and policies that overlooked their interests and priorities. The concurrent alignment of different sections of society to quite different worldviews and mindset arose out of the differential access to Western learning and the associated privileges. Certain groups got the most benefits in terms of power and material gains while others aspired to the new learning as a necessary resource for social mobility in the new circumstances wherein almost everything was impacted by the new order. While a large section of the Indian population carried on with livelihoods and traditional ways of life, larger changes in the microenvironment that bore the imprint of the colonial encounter meant that they were also, directly or indirectly, touched by it as almost no area of life was left untouched by the new worldviews of the foreign rulers. I argue that this situation continued even after Independence because of the colonisation of the mind through English education and idealisation of the version of modernity into which the class of decision makers had been inducted during British rule. For a small fraction of the population comprising tribals, landless foragers, or those who largely subsisted on – or supplemented their means of subsistence with – forest resources, changes made by policymakers far removed from their realities and their worldview, continued to be particularly pernicious. These are people who Gadgil calls “ecosystem people” (Gadgil, 2023) – who are often turned into “ecological refugees” (Gadgil & Guha, 1995) – by being not only left out of the discourse of development and modernity but also displaced through the pressures of grand schemes that see them only as a problem to be easily solved by relocation. The long arm of colonialism works through its material as well as mental and sociocultural ramifications to impact these marginalized lives that seem to not matter in the larger scheme of things even after Independence when not only did their marginalisation get exacerbated by the march of

development and modernity, but they were also largely left out of the consciousness of the general public.

In this context, activist writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Sunderlal Bahuguna, and Vandana Shiva have played a crucial role in bringing to light the inequity and suffering of these groups that fall out of public consciousness and making the general public aware of intertwined environmental and social issues as well as exerting pressure on policymakers to heed to the needs of people directly and terribly affected by the policies. There is a continued need for such activist writers to bring issues to the public consciousness as the country moves ahead with its developmental imperatives.

Keywords: colonial and postcolonial India, environment, development and modernity, activist writers