

Colonial Continuities in Post-colonial India: Interrogation of Society, Culture and Individual in *English August*

- Hemang Desai

Abstract: Against the backdrop of a novel that marvelously chronicles the litter of socio-political, administrative, linguistic and cultural pathologies through which a nation toddled and dawdled its tortuous way from decolonization to the threshold of globalization, the preset paper seeks to interrogate whether the phenomenon of decolonization has been accomplished to any appreciable extent at various levels of human life lived in multi-lingual and multi-cultural India. The legacy of invidious colonial apparatus comprising the magnanimous discourse of development, politics of representation, cryptic forms of otherization, politics of language and education etc. has become a powerful tool in the hands of home-grown neo-imperialist, exploitative establishment due to which the nightmare of colonial woes and wretchedness has continued for the marginalized long after the nation awoke to life and freedom. In this paper, an effort has been made to pinpoint the locations where colonial binaries are highlighted or subverted in the novel. The paper also addresses the dire need to adapt individual, social and cultural identities to historical realities and internalize and celebrate the phenomenon of hybridity which can foreclose the colonial binarism, facilitate anti-monolithic cultural exchange and liberate and empower the colonial subject. Finally the paper seeks to examine the roles of individual, society and political establishment in effecting the unfinished revolution of cultural reorientation.

Keywords: Colonialism, Post-coloniality, Culture, Identity, Politics, Society, Hybridity

Using the restless and confused life of a city-bred, westernized, pot-smoking and young IAS trainee posted in extremely hot and dusty Madna as a springboard, *English, August* marvelously chronicles the litter of socio-political, administrative, linguistic and cultural pathologies through which a nation toddled its tortuous way from decolonization to the threshold of globalization. As it authentically captures the zeitgeist of one of the most turbulent decades in Indian history i.e. 1980s, the novel luminously problematizes the ambitious post-colonial phraseology of nation-building, national integration and inclusive development. As one races through a narrative that unfolds in an inimitably witty and racy style, one sullenly realizes that the idealism encapsulated in the discursive formulations surrounding multiple facets of decolonization sounds all too facile and hollow in a four-decade old country torn by

abysmal poverty and underdevelopment, raging communal animosity, glaring language divide, Machiavellian polity hand in glove with corrupt bureaucracy, social stratification and cultural erosion. Madna, “an eternally somnolent town”, evolves as a disturbing microcosm of a nation that awoke “at the stroke of the midnight hour...to life and freedom” and turned a mute spectator to the nightmare of Naxalism, communalism, internal separatism and sly colonialism of home-grown neo-imperialist powers. The end result has been that the phenomenon of decolonization has been accomplished, not even in letter let alone in spirit, at various levels of human life lived in multi-lingual and multi-cultural India. The legacy of invidious colonial apparatus comprising the magnanimous discourse of development, politics of representation, cryptic forms of otherization, metaphysics of cultural identity and civilization, politics of language and education etc. has become a powerful tool in the hands of home-grown neo-imperialist, exploitative establishment in postcolonial India to perpetuate the wretched condition of the colonized, the powerless or the underprivileged.

With Agastya Sen, who gets down at quintessential Indian hinterland of Madna, the reader starts off his journey through a virtual historiographical narrative with a distinct sense of déjà vu for the opening chapter of “*Freedom at Midnight*” (1975) by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre. Agastya evolves as a typical Indian counterpart of the young British officer of colonial ICS – which was Indianized as Indian Administrative Service (IAS) after independence – who got down at Victoria Station, Mumbai with a mix of disbelief and horror at the prospect of negotiating a scary and sorry landscape sullied with squalor and scorching heat, malaria and cholera, heathens and absolute anarchy, exotic culture and off-putting underdevelopment. Upamanyu Chatterjee brilliantly perspectivizes Agastya's urban sense of flinch and wince at Madna, “(a) shabby station where the train didn't stop...(with) incurious patient eyes and weather-beaten bicycles at a level crossing, muddy children and buffalo at a waterhole... names out of newspapers where floods and caste wars occurred and entire Harijan families were murdered, where some prime minister took his helicopter just after a calamity, or just before the elections.” (EA, 5)

Cigarette-and-paan dhabas, disreputable food stalls lit by kerosene lamps, cattle and clanging rickshaws on road, hollering trucks and overflowing drains, horrible mosquitoes less civilized than those of Calcutta, “endemic jaundice and epidemic of cholera” and unbelievable food become points of distress for Agastya who feels “he was living someone else's life” (EA, 5) The writer's irreverent quip over the flippancy of the rhetoric of Indianness and Indianization that the officers at Madna so zealously mouth, comes in the form of marginal scribbling in R. P. Jhabhvala's *Heat and Dust* which Mr. Menon, the sub-divisional Magistrate of Rameri, has been reading and spoiling. Comments read as “Not necessary these days to wear sola topee. Relic of the Raj. The bureaucracy to be Indianized” and “An officer's wife *should* mix with others, but without jeopardizing the dignity of office.” (EA, 39)

Such a shallow and snobbish bureaucratic attitude echoes the codes of hypocritical respectability that even the wife of an ICS joint secretary so religiously observed in colonial times by not condescending to dine with someone of a lower rank than her husband. The frivolity of Menon's zeal for nativity is later laid bare when he smugly stoops his aesthetic standards over Rest House furniture in a tone that Madna can't aspire to anything better. He further reveals, "It's very good thing to join the Indian Administrative Service after a stint abroad. It's the best possible job, in the Indian context, you will realize that very soon and having been abroad gives you a better perspective." (p.51, EA) On the other hand, the power and pelf vicariously wielded by Mr. Srivastav, the Collector of Madna, ambitiously replicate the same that even a minor functionary of the East India Company so thoroughly enjoyed in the cantonments from where the British imperialism unleashed its reign of terror. An instructive way to study the cultural imperialism that Srivastav so unwittingly disseminates is to interrogate the contexts of power that gives to human interactions across cultural divides a recognizable body language. Srivastav's neo-imperial establishment sprawls in a twenty-acre compound – a bungalow with twenty-two rooms and a battery of servants "who were actually peons from the office" and "who prefer to clean the shit of the progeny of a collector than to shuttle files in an office" (EA, 57). The novelist deftly forges a subtle link between indigenous and exotic traditions of colonialism by saying that "their father and grandfathers had done much the same, but the skins of those Collectors had been red and the accent of their English alien." (EA, 57) Srivastav also flaunts certain imperial intellectual arrogance when he damns the work ethics of his colleague Bajaj stereotyping him as 'a promotee' i.e. one who acquired the office on grounds of experience and not thorough national Civil Service Examination. While he haughtily keeps his poor petitioners-subjects standing in his office, he can't but entertain the gossips of the district and the politicians' groupies who rightfully guzzle away his time. He damns his predecessor Antony's courtesy of offering tea to petitioners as "a silly populist measure" and sullenly deprecates "the *culture* of the place" when the same people, whom he intentionally keeps waiting for the ghazal concert to start by arriving late, don't get up from their chairs at his entry. Befitting this body language of superior culture, Srivastava plays down the culture of Madna when he warns Agastya "...to be careful of the company you keep in Madna. A small place, people talk a lot, they don't have much else to do." (EA, 80). Americanised Bhatia also becomes the unsuspecting spokesperson of the politics of representation when he decries, "Just notice the number of chemists in Madna. A clear sign of how unhealthy this place is." (EA, 79) Agastya's neo-imperial mindset is laid bare when he admits that "Gandhi's a very nice guy, but I wouldn't've dreamed of being friends with him in Delhi. I would've said, small-towner." (EA, 101) Such a milieu is a natural incubator for the notions of cultural, even moral, superiority and racial arrogance. The urban-rural divide consequent upon a long colonial rule in India recurs as a powerful motif

in the novel underscoring the grave socio-cultural implications of disparities in economic and non-economic spheres of human life. As per the Human Development Index which is a composite of variables capturing attainments in economic, educational and health sectors, the value for rural areas is 0.340 as against its urban counterpart which is as high as 0.511. The same is the situation in respect of the Human Poverty Index: rural 42.25 and urban 44.8 (Datta, 16) Chatterjee categorically chastises the bland policymakers who either don't have the resourcefulness to map out the inclusive and sustainable policies of development or are too invidious and maneuvering to grant the underdog the right to life and happiness. Thus Srivastav sheepishly complains about the unavailability of time to chalk out the most efficient way of setting priorities and spending money. On the other hand, the money pushed into Jompana for tribal welfare is directed by the politician to benefit the non-tribal population of the plains as a part of vote bank politics. Chatterjee astutely subverts the culture-vulture binary by trivializing Kumar, the SP of Madna, on Delhi station who "without his entourage looked like any other fat grubby traveler." Even Kumar unconsciously whines about the culture of North India which he so brazenly revered, "All of North India is so crude. I know it, I grew up in its cities. In Madna, didn't you notice, people are much more cultured, more soft." (EA, 145) At another occasion, while reflecting on Madna's indifference towards Mahatma Gandhi's precarious statue "with a rod coming out of his arse" (EA, p.21), Agastya muses that even in Delhi or Calcutta, he wouldn't have noticed it, that public apathy in India is almost a national religion, be it a village or a city.

Far from becoming a site for cultural clashes between the Eastern and the Western, modern and traditional, civilized and uncivilized, urban and rural, emotional and rational, the novel ingeniously depicts a chiaroscuro of forces that resist a neat categorization into either of the binaries in postcolonial Indian context. In fact, each character as an embodiment of value system and ideology, however subjective, becomes a representation of a cultural hybridity that shuttles conveniently between opposites in an endless game of power. Agastya evolves as the most acute and valid representative of this cultural hybridity which unfolds in his case at the levels of language, province, religion, lifestyle and value-system. He is born to a Bengali Hindu father who went out of his way to marry a vague Goanese Christian only to colonize her later to an early death and obscurity. Brought up in Delhi studying English literature, he reads Marcus Aurelius to slake his intellectual thirst but is positively confounded by his sporadic reading of *Bhagavad Gita* that Sathe gifts him. He enjoys listening to Ella Fitzgerald, Vivaldi, Keith Jarrett and Scott Joplin but is drawn towards Tagore and the *thumris* that his neighbor Shankar so passionately sings with even more intense and disarming fascination. He becomes self-conscious and scared over a faint realization of his being a dusty mirror-image of Bhatia, who "...would love to get AIDS just because it is raging in America." (EA, 76) For him, he loves Calcutta to a mad degree of fanaticism because the city "...just

sounded lovely, romantic, with a past” and has never felt a passion for going or settling abroad the way Bhatia did. Conversely, he visualizes “Europe and America as madly expensive, strange ... a passage through clean, beautiful places with faces looking through him.” (EA, 93) However, he has little knowledge about the richness of Indian cultural heritage and comes to Madna with extremely low and distorted imperial expectations. Mohan chides him, “Why’re you always being *surprised* by Madna, by this temple, by that statue of Gandhi in the town, by the beauty of the Forest colony?” (EA, 125)

Towards the end of the novel, he slips into deep turmoil and derangement over the identity crisis that thoroughly overwhelms him, “For Shankar there had been his thumris and ghazals, he could conjure up exquisite nose-rings and eyelashes for consolation, and Dhruvo, too, had ragtime and his fashionable jazz, but his own taste had no continuities – merely a sad mongrel hybridity.” (EA, 275)

Agastya has neither known the sufferance of colonial rule, the riots of Partition, pangs of dismemberment and dislocation borne by Dr. Multani's father nor has he been particularly inquisitive, let alone deeply concerned, about it like John Avery who arrives all the way from London feeling weirdly curious about the place where his grandfather was devoured by a tiger. With an overwhelming sense of deprivation and alienation, Agastya wonders what it would have felt like, “... to wander the streets of Calcutta and not be allowed entry into the Calcutta Club, Natives keep out” (EA, 230). Upamanyu Chatterjee dramatically traces Agastya's excruciating restlessness and sense of anchorlessness in Madna to his awakening to the ineluctable cultural hybridity of his generation, a race of “cultural cripples, in capable of appreciation”. Agastya's predicament is a painful corollary of what Sathe terms, “ignoring one-half of yourself”, of “living in a city and not knowing what the rest of India is like” as Tonic puts it, of being face-to-face with the other half of his cultural, historical and metaphysical identity. Christine, the American guest at Madan's house, becomes the author's mouthpiece when she scolds Madan for being blind to his own history and points out the pitfalls of cherishing bookish knowledge about the *other's* culture. Multani's father beautifully sums it all, “... your generation is what it is, just like the English we speak, it is inevitable.” (EA, 230)

Post-colonial discourse emphasizes the mutuality of the process of colonization i.e. distinctive aspects of the culture of the colonized resist obliteration even under the most potent colonial oppression and in turn become the integral part of the new formations ensuing cultural confrontation. Such cultural hybridity builds in immense positive value in as much as it forecloses pigeonholing into the old binary categories and realizes the possibility of anti-monolithic cultural exchange. Ultimately as he heads “to discover himself”, Agastya's journey through the novel evolves as nothing but an exposition of an apocalyptic process of unification of his split selves, of celebration of empowering hybridity.

The leitmotif of language in the novel forcefully foregrounds the

complexity of cultural identity in multilingual Indian context. The officialdom in Madna prefers to communicate both at office and home in English and irks at the idea of learning local language for communication with local people who, much to its chagrin, do not follow Hindi. Srivastav grumbles, “And now everything from the State Government comes in the regional language. They think, this'll increase administrative efficiency...Rubbish.” (EA, 16) Srivastav's tendency to install Hindi as a standard against Madna's local language which, in turn, is constituted as insufficiency and deviation distinctly smacks of a colonial process initiated for the purpose of cultural control. However, he is frank enough to admit that the English that babus speak is 'funny' and officialese at best and bland at worst. Agastya is amused that “No officer ever left, they always took his leave. None of them ever stayed a night somewhere, they always made night-halts.” (EA, 203) The 'Babu' English, fraught with stilted, archaic and bombastic idiom that Srivastav funnily mimics marks a far cry from the post-colonial call for Indianizing it by adapting the alien language to the exigencies of native grammar, syntax, vocabulary and turns of phrase. Alongside the agenda of Indianizing English, Upamanyu Chatterjee reaffirms the post-colonial resolve to give regional languages the respect due to them as a part of the unfinished project of decolonization. U. R. Ananthmurthy's quite pertinently says if we snap our inborn bond with our mother-tongues, “We are going to lose our memory. We need English, but not of the 'call-centre' sort. It is not a gateway to knowledge. We need to create in our own language. The English elite in India are not as cultured as the masses. English must be taught but children in schools need to create in their own languages, because we don't think in English. It's a received language.” (Ananthmurthy, *The Indian Express*) Srivastav, a student of Hindi-medium school in Azamganj, grumbles over the inevitability of English - an “unavoidable leftover” - for professional success. “That a young man in Azamganj should find it essential to study something as unnecessary as Hamlet, that's absurd, no, but also inevitable” (EA, 60). Srivastav here refers to the imperial policy of inevitability of knowledge of English Literature for entry into civil services and legal profession that has remained intact after decolonization, but is little inclined to wield the power of his office to subvert linguistic binary to decolonize the imagination of native subjects. In colonial context, education was a sinister process to achieve what Gramsci calls “domination by consent”, a process of manipulating the content and method of teaching and subsequently enmeshing of the educated subject into imperial machinery. Srivastav thus agrees to be a pawn in the game of post-colonial domination. Dilating upon the pathetically low standards of teaching in schools in small towns, he says “There's not a single good teacher in these schools...How can there be ...when they themselves pass out of such schools and colleges.” (EA, 59) On the other hand, like

all Collectors, he astutely ensures that his wife amasses degrees, not by the dint of academic acumen but by sheer force of his clout, from wherever he is posted and then returns “to those colleges to teach the rubbish they had learnt.”

Agastya's cousin Tonic launches into a passionate and realistic tirade against the linguistic woes of education system in India. As a proprietor of a publishing house, he condemns his lot for having to publish a below-average book on E. M. Foster written in question-answer form by a Dr. Prem Kishan of Meerut University for professional reasons. He asks some pertinent and unsettling questions to Agastya: “Why is some Jat teenager in Meerut reading Jane Austen? Why does a place like Meerut have course in English at all? Only because the Prem Kishans of the country need a place where they can teach this rubbish?” (EA, 170) “Education is perhaps the most insidious and in some ways the most cryptic of colonialist survivals, older systems now passing, sometimes imperceptibly, into neo-colonialist configurations.” (Ashcroft eds., 425) Chatterjee strongly condemns the fact that the conditions of production and consumption of education and its technologies have not changed the unequal power relations between the educational producers and the peripheral consumers. Tonic gives Agastya a dressing down for toying with the idea of leaving IAS while he is in a position to take on the challenge of reforming education in India. In Nehru's words, Srivastav and his ilk belong to that new caste or class created by the British, the English-educated class which lived in a world of its own, cut off from the masses of the population (Nehru, 23) and in Sathe's words “whose vision so far has been circumscribed by the smog of Calcutta”. (EA, 46) The novelist seems to underscore the fact that English in India has become a potent tool with serious colonial implications, an apparatus that has created and deepened the chasm between the educated and politically minded classes and the masses. (Gandhi, 16) It has become, as it is not in Brazil or China, the language of respect. An Indian who speaks only Indian languages will face inferior treatment in his own society.

Quite impressively, Upamanyu Chatterjee conceptualizes the ideas of colonization, representation, otherization and neo-imperialism by situating the binary opposites in mutual hierarchical relationships. Thus the principle of privilege fluctuates from one to another in tandem with the shifts in standpoints. The cartoonist Sathe puts things in bitter-true perspective when he scoffs at the hollow post-colonial ire at imperial exploitation by saying, “But you are a Bengali –and, no doubt, in keeping with your race, your father did to your poor mother what all of you did to Assam, but we only began to whine when the British did it to us-” (EA, 83). It's very interesting to note that Madna which Agastya so much loathes for not being Delhi becomes a metaphor, even a euphemism, for his generation that bypassed “all that had made history and news”. Though in different contexts, both Agastya and Madna have been

impervious to the colonial realities of patriotism and bloodletting, to the *past* Agastya so gloriously romanticizes, and feels queerly nostalgic about, the past clutching which Dr. Multani's father wandered as a refugee after partition. While both Agastya and Madna feel the pangs of deprivation and the sense of being left-out, in the former's case the pain is self-inflicted while it is the result of apathy and egotism of a maneuvering neo-colonial establishment in the latter's case. Historically, Madna was established by an eponymous eighteenth century tribal king and the relics of the crumbling fort sing paeans to the glory of the kingdom in its heyday. Agastya's oblique narrative about Madna that "seemed to have bypassed by all that made history and news, had remained impervious to the Mughals and 1857 and Bande Mataram and the midcentury travails of megalopolitan India" (EA, 45-6) insinuates towards the normative language of otherization in which the British typically played down the past and the cultural heritage of the Indian subjects. In his unconscious dehistoricization of Madna, Agastya indulges into what the British tendentiously and maliciously deployed ie. the politics of representation designed to capture the non-European subject within European frameworks which read his or her alterity as *terror* or *lack*. (Ashcroft eds., 85). A similar lop-sided ontology undergirds Bajaj's explanation for the skewed development of the tribal belt of Jompana when he denigrates nomadic way of tribal life as a major stumbling block in the way of their development. "So we say, here, if you group these villages together... then we'll help to develop the area, build their houses." (EA, 242)

To a certain extent, the establishment in the novel seems to justify the pathetic living condition of the tribals in and surrounding Madna as a suitable compensation for their obstinacy in not coming out of their primitive and pseudo cultural cocoons. Chatterjee cleverly draws a parallel between the colonial hoax of "white man's burden" and post-colonial projects of development to expose the sordid underbelly of imperial gospel of liberalism and rationalism that legitimized colonization and acculturation of natives as inevitability. Bajaj, very much like John Locke and J S Mill, "divide human societies into 'civilized' and 'primitive', and treat each category as homogeneous and undifferentiated." (Parekh, 95) He views tribal ways of life with contempt and makes no effort to understand it from within. But as Agastya later muses, Jompana turns out to be an "Indian oblivion" where development far from being even a superifice as it was in Madna's "skyline of a thermal power station, in the dead sapling edging the road", is just a word lost in government files which travel "from desk to desk, gathering around it, like flesh around a kernel, comment and counter-comment and irrelevant comment, till it was fat enough to be offal for the rats in the office cupboards." (EA, 252) A tragic antithesis to the perverted logic and apathy of the administration is reflected in the horrifying portrayal of destitute of tribal life at Rameri where mothers tie

ropes to their small children and lower them into nearly dried-out wells so that they can bring up buckets of muddy water. Srivastav gives revealing insight into the post-colonial farce of development in India when he narrates the history of Madna to Agastya, "Once it was just another district, very rich forests and made to feel proud of its tribal traditions...Then they found coal here, mica, limestone, one the country's richest industrial belts, now oil too. Factories soon surrounded this town, new ones come up almost every day...there must be something wrong with development if it creates places like Madna." (EA, 20) Here Chatterjee visibly squares up in an oppositional stance against neo-colonialist exploitative power bases that have further colonized, historicized and reduced the peripheral other to cultural diminutives by trumpeting the mythical and hypothetical discourse of development that is manipulated to mean primarily growth, evolution and increase. Nirmal Selvamony sheds revealing light on this entire myth of development publicized by the colonizer. "Considering the negative development of the colonies, we might say that the unity of the families is imperiled, their histories and memories are obliterated by forces such as urbanization, employment abroad, expatriation and dislocation. Economic development is negative when man is isolated from his communitarian bonding with other men, nature and supernatural powers and seen as an individual with infinite potential and wants." (Selvamony, 62) The episode in which a group of tribals cut Mohan's hands for molesting his tribal cook symbolically serves to collapse the rhetoric of development masquerading molestation. As an efficient native alternative to the colonial model of development, Chatterjee projects Baba Ramanna's Rehabilitation Home for Lepers which not only provides emotional and medical support to the lepers but also empowers them by making them self-sufficient financially. Agastya literally staggers at the sheer monstrosity, nobility and virtue of Baba Ramanna's enterprise which carves fields, orchards and wells out of bareness.

The whole novel can, in fact, be seen as an attempt to subvert the colonial binaries operating at social, linguistic, cultural and even metaphysical levels in post-colonial India. At spiritual level, Chatterjee intensifies Agastya's spiritual despair to contextualize the disparity between the Eastern and Western epistemes about human nature and consequent ways of life. Agastya reads Marcus Aurelius and strives to derive solace out of his faith in human reason. Almost in Lockean vein, he wants his reason, not even his intuition, to tell him the implications of his act before he committed it. But his blind adherence to rationality fails to answer overwhelming metaphysical questions about inexplicable things happening in the world. Shankar's world, on the other hand, makes sense to him because he has transcended his reason and resigned himself to providence to the will of Jagadamba. Agastya's passage to spiritual equilibrium towards the end of the novel should be traced to his brand

new knowledge that considering monistic vision of human nature or existence universal, as did Locke to justify English colonization of American Indians in seventeenth century, is fallacious at best and political at worst. What soothes him finally is his will to cope his paramount sense of reason with the alternative view upholding feelings and passion as spiritual anchors of human life. Shankar symbolically digs it into his head that he dislikes the frog in his room only because he has never encountered one in his flat in Delhi before. So reason brands the unexpected as bad. But “A frog is a good animal, and wait and see, it'll eat up some of the mosquitoes in your room.” (EA, 98) His tendency to assimilate the other or what the post-colonial theory so passionately celebrates, the *difference* restores him to a sense of self-fulfillment, of hybridity.

References :

- Ananthmurthy, U. R. in the Sumitra Chishti Memorial Lecture delivered in New Delhi on March 2, 2009 and reported in *The Indian Express* on March 3, 2009.
- Ashcroft Bill, Griffiths Gareth, Tiffin Helen (eds). *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995.
- Datta, Prabhat. “The Great Indian Divide”, *Frontline*, Volume 21 - Issue 14, Jul. 03 2004.
- Gandhi, Mahatma, “Constructive Programme”, *Navjivan*, 1944.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. *An Autobiography*, Bodley Head, 1936.
- Parekh, Bhikhu. “Liberalism and Colonialism: a critique of Locke and Mill” in Pieterse JN & Parekh, Bhikhu (eds.) *The Decolonization of Imagination*, OUP, 1995.
- Selvamony, Nirmal. “Post-Coloniality and the Discourse of Development”, in *Post-Coloniality: Reading Literature*, eds. C.T. Indra, Meenakshi Shivram, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1999, p. 62

