I could not agree more with Satya Mohanty, when he says, in his 2012 interview, that “Read through the lens of alternative modernities, literary texts open up new historical archives and suggest tantalizing perspectives on a past we thought we knew so well.” He does know it well, having “read“ the 16th-century Odia Lakshmi Purana “through the lens of alternative modernities.”\(^1\) He has rightly observed elsewhere, “Crucial features of modernity can be disaggregated; they can even be recombined in a number of different ways, shaped by differences in sociocultural context. So, if we can find modern values and ideas articulated in socioeconomic systems very different from eighteenth and nineteenth century European capitalism, part of the challenge for us as scholars is to trace the provenance of such values and ideas in the non-European contexts and to examine the alternative institutions and cultural forms that supported them.“\(^2\)

I came to the same realization through my study of Kabir (d. 1518 C.A.), a very powerful and influential poet, whom colonial historiography had turned into an “Indian Luther,” but one who had failed and had hence been marginalized. This was a part of the larger exercise undertaken by colonial power and the colonial episteme. The idea of India as a strange place with no “history“ (as we know it—unfolding through conflicts, interrogations and negotiations) was invented, and colonial literati were made to internalize it. This internalization was of course an exercise in collaboration. This invented India was termed as “eternal“ in polite idiom and “stagnant“ in the terms of academic historiography.

This is no place to go into the otherwise interesting history of this “invention.“ Suffice here to note its outcome, which has become part of the popular and even academic commonsense of a majority of Indians. Some people are quite convinced that India was a veritable paradise on earth before the British came. In this narrative, the foreigners are held solely responsible for all our ills and problems. That is to say, we cannot solve any of these problems because we are not even capable of creating problems of our own. On the other hand, some are equally convinced that the colonizers brought life and enlightenment to the stagnant, ahistorical and doomed Indian society.

As a matter of fact, Kabir’s was not a failed, marginalized voice, which somehow sprang up ahead of its times. He was one of the most important moral agents and historical actors – who were articulating India’s own modernity. He and many like him spoke in the vernaculars, and not in the “language of gods“ (Sanskrit) or in the language of lords (i.e. Persian). They were nonetheless respected and listened to, not only by the poor but also by powerful and influential segments of society,
particularly the merchants.

This truth about Kabir and others did not descend on me from the heavens, but came as a heartfelt realization during my long, painful and adventurous journey in search of my own relation with Kabir and his times.

This was also the search of the genealogy of modernity in India; and I now have some understanding of how what we call modern ideas – along with cultural forms and social institutions supporting them – functioned in pre-colonial India.

The relationship, which most of the “modern” scholarship has established with vernacular sources, not only in the context of Kabir but in general, brings to my mind a scene from the popular Hindi film Guide (1965), based on the novel by R. K. Narayan. One of the crucial scenes in the film goes much beyond the authorial intention of the director. The protagonist, Raju the guide, has earned the respect and reverence of the village-folks. The village priests feel threatened and are quite upset. In order to subvert Raju’s position, they implicitly challenge Raju to speak some Sanskrit, putting to him a question in that language. Obviously, Raju cannot take up the challenge—the priests are quite excited—“what can he say, has no Sanskrit.” Raju’s reputation is at stake, so he starts speaking in English. Now the priests are at a loss, while Raju is triumphant—“what can they say, have no English.”

“Modern” scholarship must realize that those with no command of Sanskrit, Persian or English do indeed have something to say. Listening to such people carefully, we can realize that Kabir was considered neither a failure nor as a marginal voice by his own society. We can also see that Kabir was not speaking to a decadent and stagnant community “waiting” [so to speak] for the advent of colonial modernity for deliverance. It was a society heading towards its own modernity, if you will, by interrogating and transforming its tradition. It is important to understand that Kabir’s was not a lonely, whimsical or out-of-place voice in this process. A little later than him, we find a most articulate expression of the modern idea of Man in the poetry of Mirabai—a remarkable woman, who gave voice to a new subjectivity, resisted the temptations of starting her own sampraday (designated group or collectivity around an individual or deity) and declined invitations to join one. In a nutshell, I propose on the basis of my researches that Kabir and Mira in north India and Tukaram in Maharashtra seem “like moderns” not because they were running ahead of their times, but because their times were witnessing the emergence of modernity in Indian history.

The most crucial of the “features of modernity” that can be “disaggregated”—and can be, “recombined in a number of different ways”—is the emergence of a new subjectivity which speaks through a re-definition of the individual’s relation with society and cosmos. Historically speaking, the emergence of a social constituency...
responding to, and participating in such a re-definition is very important to any process of modernization. A radical break from tradition or from the immediate past is not a pre-condition of the emergence of modernity either in Europe or elsewhere.

To think in terms of alternative modernities is to recognize that the pre-colonial past of non-European societies was not rigidly determined by prescriptive forces of depersonalized systems of “civilizations,” “cultures” and “religious beliefs” or in case of India by compulsive caste identities. It was also being made by self-conscious men and women whose subjectivities were acquiring the status of individual and collective historical actors. Talking of modernity either as a trend or as a period, it is more appropriate to think in terms of dialogue between various cultures, practices and traditions instead of diffusion from one place to the other. It is also useful to remember that in the history of both state and other forms of social organization, even diffusion, worked in “both ... directions,” as C. A. Bayly points out in the specific context of state and government in modern period.3

Let me (here agreeing with Mohanty) underline my categorical rejection of the cultural and moral relativism of the post-modernist variety. All said and done, humankind cannot do without a trans-cultural notion of human values and a set of minimum expectations rooted in the same. Such a trans-cultural universalism can be imagined and articulated only when we explore the trajectory of interactions between various cultures and traditions instead of attributing all yearnings of universal human values to European enlightenment and its export to other societies through colonization. To recall the apt metaphor employed by Sanjay Subrahmanyan:

...modernity is historically a global and conjunctural phenomenon, not a virus that spreads from one place to another. It is located in a series of historical processes that brought hitherto relatively isolated societies into contact, and we must seek its roots in a set of diverse phenomena– the Mongol dream of world conquest, European voyages of exploration, activities of Indian textile traders in the diaspora, the “globalization of microbes“ that historians of the 1960s were fond of discussing and so on.4

Questioning the Euro-centric paradigm of modernity in the same vein, and rightly noting that, “post-modernity is just the latest moment of European modernity,“ the Mexican historian Enrique Dussel proposes to explore the dynamics of “trans“-modernity. Such an exploration demands a “whole new interpretation of modernity in order to include moments that were never incorporated in the European version.“5

It is also useful to remember that, even in Europe, the modernization of ideas and attitudes, the “enlightened“ interrogation of “traditional“ ideas and practices preceded industrialization and not vice-versa. Dussel reminds his readers of Max
Weber’s “intuition“ that “if Europe [had] not been the region most prepared to carry out the Industrial Revolution, it would have been China or Hindustan.“6

Another relevant question is that of similarity and difference. To think in terms of non-European or alternative modernities is not to look for mirror- images of the apparatus of the European modernity. Discarding the mirage of mirror images on one hand, and the fallacy of “absolute“ difference on the other, the idea is to look for the processes– indigenous as well as between various societies–that went into the making of modernity in many parts of the world simultaneously. It is useful to remind ourselves that, with all the differences amongst human groups and their cultural traditions, there are some similarities as well, and of course, similar and same are not one and the same thing.

Curiously, post-modernist discourse, with all its rhetoric of de-centering reaffirms the idea of European uniqueness and superiority, by arguing that the episteme of science and ideas of universal human values were uniquely (that is, without any significant inputs from the non-Europe) generated by the European Enlightenment and hence are both unavailable to and unsuitable for other cultures. In the context of historiography of colonialism, this post-modernist stance implies the eager acceptance of the same representation of non-Europe, which was so crucial to imperialism’s self-imagery. Unfortunately, this arbitrary prejudice is not confined to historiography alone or to a particular strand of Western social, philosophical and historical thought. Though being interrogated of late, this prejudice is still quite prevalent. Achille Mbembe sums up the situation quite succinctly:

On key matters, the Hegelian, post-Hegelian and Weberian traditions, philosophies of action and philosophies of de- construction derived from Nietzsche or Heidegger, share the representation of distinction between the west and other historical human forms as, largely, the way the individual in the west has gradually freed her/himself from the sway of traditions and attained an autonomous capacity to conceive, in the here and now, the definition of norms and their free formulation by individual wills. These traditions also share, to varying degrees, the assumption that, compared to west, other societies are primitive, simple, or traditional in that, in them, the weight of past predetermines individual behavior and limits the areas of choice– as it were a priori. The formulation of norms in these latter societies has nothing to do with reasoned public deliberation, since the setting of norms by a process of argument is a specific invention of modern Europe.7

Along with interrogating this “shared representation of distinction," we also need to examine the idea of one-way diffusion of modernity (from west to the rest of the globe) and such an idea needs to be replaced by a dia- logue-oriented concept of the dynamics of modernity. Admittedly, as noted by D. A. Washbrook, “the application of ’dialogics’ is in its early stage," but he notes:

In religion, philosophy and even history too, much which ’Europeans’ (and the critical theorists of their discourse) have held to reflect a distinctive racial or cultural ’genius’ no
longer appears so singular: other cultures had concepts (fore) shadowing the ’individual’, ’nation’ and ’religion’ as well. In shattering Europe’s monolithic conceits, dialogics may come to offer a more far-reaching critique of European world-centrality and dominance than discourse theory ever managed.8

As a matter of fact, even the history of colonial consolidation is also the history of a dialogue of sorts between indigenous and colonial differentials of power. The ideas, practices, values, spaces and concepts similar (as distinct from ’same’) to those of European Enlightenment were evolving in non-European societies as well. A dialogic concept of the evolution of modernity as opposed to the diffusion-based or derivative one is extremely helpful in charting the trajectories of the ’modern’ concepts, ideas and practices in various societies. It is also crucial to evolve a really shared sense of universal human values.

Keeping this in mind, I have been trying to explore the process or concept of “(fore-) shadowing“ Public Sphere. Can we really think of the Public Sphere of Bhakti (roughly translated as devotion)?

When I answered this question in the affirmative in my study of Kabir’s poetry and times9 (Akath Kahani Prem ki: Kabir ki Kavita aur un ka Samay ) and employed the category of Public Sphere to better understand the dynamics of Bhakti sensibility, its social implications and fall-outs, there was some enthusiasm as well as some skepticism. I was asked: is not the Habermasian category of Public Sphere specific to the historical context of Europe? Can we really employ a “foreign“ category of analysis even while arguing for the existence of an indigenous, vernacular or alternative modernity? It is interesting to note that this objection against the use of “-etic“ categories, and insistence on using only the “-emic“ notions to analyze the indigenous phenomena comes not only from the nativist and post-modernist quarters but also from certain Marxist quarters as well, forgetting their own “-etic“ status and at the same time reminding us of the validity of Mbembe’s observation cited earlier. Obviously the objection is not confined to Public Sphere alone. Velchuru Narayana Rao and Sanjay Subrahmanyam note:

...it is claimed often enough now that no fit whatsoever existed between these and other ’-etic’ categories of the humanities and social sciences ( with their uniquely Western origins and genealogy) and the highly varied ’-emic’ notions that may be found in different locales and times in the world of the past: a claim that is a source of anxiety for some, a source of indifference for others, and a ground for rejoicing for still others who see a positive value in ’incommensurability’, which they perhaps view as akin to a (necessarily virtuous) claim for species diversity.10

I confess, I am one of those who feel very anxious when told by some theoreticians that hardly any fit exists between ’-etic’ categories and ’-emic’ notions. The suitability of any category of analysis does not flow from its geographical
provenance but from its capacity to illuminate the phenomenon under examination. Such an illumination has to be sensitive to both similarity and difference of various practices, values and organizations. Many interesting and thought-provoking tools of analysis are more or less capable of being disentangled from the programmatic strand or the specific social context of their own evolution; otherwise no dialogue across the civilizations could have been possible. In case of public sphere also, more important than the issue of etic and emic is its potential of illuminating the phenomenon under examination. Incidentally, René Guenon, who is credited with developing the

Traditionalist critique of the modern world, and had a great influence on Ananda Coomaraswamy, used the Hindu notion of Kaliyuga as an analytical category to explain the “decay” of the Western “modern world” and proposed Sufi Islam as an antidote to this decay.11 Kaliyuga in Hindu tradition is not just a temporal category indicating the fourth stage of the time-cycle; it also refers to an all-round moral decay.

Guenon’s proposal ought to be critiqued on the basis of its capacity to illuminate the phenomenon under consideration or lack of it, not on the basis of the notion of Kaliyuga and the practice and ideology of Sufism not being native to Europe. A category of analysis needs to be context-sensitive and not necessarily context-specific. Valid questions would be: does Kaliyuga as a category for analyzing the ’decay ’ meet the requirement of context-sensitivity? Can it be suitably modified to fit the notions and practices native to Europe and does it help us better understand the dynamics of the perceived crisis of Western civilization?

So far, “the bulk of discussion of ’public sphere’ in South Asia has concentrated on the colonial period and has had as its implicit (and occasionally explicit) assumption that both the thing itself and reflection on the question were introduced by the British.”12 Naturally therefore, what to talk of the public sphere of Bhakti, any uses of the terms like public sphere, information order and ecumene in the context of pre-colonial India, are met with skepticism.13

To talk of the public sphere of Bhakti is not to talk of a “public sphere“ of exactly and strictly the European variety. In other words, public opinion and sentiments can be articulated and formed at places other than coffee-houses. Instead of looking for the replica of the bourgeois public sphere and the processes causing its structural transformation, we should explore the dynamics of ideas, institutions and practices that made the perceptible change in attitudes and practices in the 15th-16th century India possible. Such an exploration is mandated by the simple fact of poet-practitioners of Bhakti not being the self-contained sadhakas (i.e. spiritual practitioners) – indifferent to society around them. They indulged in sustained debates and sharp polemics and thus sought, as it were, to win friends
and influence people. The founders of the two main competitive branches of the Kabirpanth (collectivity of the followers of Kabir) are not recognized as significant poets in the history of literature, but their “own” people greatly revere them for organizing a collectivity dedicated to the teachings of Kabir. Similar collectivities—panths and sampradays—were constructed around other major figures, deities or the themes of Bhakti. And one of these, the Pushti-Marg founded by Vallabhacharya, is well-known for its systematic attempts to win over the support of influential political figures of the time. Sri Sankaradeva in the far eastern state of Assam is credited with establishing the institution of Naam-ghar (house of the Name) which has played and continues, till today, to

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play a crucial role in the social and political history of Assam. Leaving aside the objection to public sphere being an etic category and not an emic one, other serious questions could be: did Bhakti really help create a set of social spaces distinct from private ones and autonomous from the state? And did such spaces really communicate the public sentiments to the state apparatus and in some way influenced the same? Exploring these questions does not depend on finding a mirror image of the bourgeois public sphere analyzed by Habermas. Even in the context of Europe, Mahmood Mamdani points out, “critics of Habermas have tried to disentangle the analytical from the programmatic strands in his argument by relocating this movement in its historical context.” Thus disentangled, public sphere can be seen primarily as “the place of voice rather than of authority,” denoting the “existence of arenas that not only are autonomous from the public order but are also public in the sense that they are accessible to different sectors of society,” and which tend to develop the dynamics, “which while closely related to that of the political arena, are not co-terminus with it and are not governed by the dynamics of the latter.”

Any student of Bhakti would testify that Bhakti, in early modernity of India, was from the very outset an arena of contested meanings. This contest manifested itself not only in poetic compositions but in organized activities, institutions and practices as well. The point is that diverse attempts to propagate the conflicting ideas regarding social practices were being conducted in a shared idiom of Bhakti, wherein there was a lot of contest around terms, categories and meanings—the name Ram being the most keenly contested signifier of conflicting notions of social and spiritual ideas.

This contest is related with the contradiction between normative injunctions and real everyday practices in matters of caste and other things. Due to the rise in commerce and consequent social mobility the theoretical framework of the fourfold Varna order was under constant, ever increasing stress. As a matter of fact, the Varna order has always been just a theoretical framework; not an empirical reality. It is only in the era of Orientalist scholarship and its construction
of a highly textual notion of Hindu tradition that the idea of the Varna system being an eternal, empirical reality gained ground. Such an invention of a-historical India naturally distorted the reality. In reality, the self-conscious people were acquiring the status of individual and collective historical actors through their interactions with each other. Raymond Schwab, the French scholar and writer had reminded his readers, way back in 1950, “Unlike a unique model, India had always the same problems but had not approached them in the same way.”

“No in the same way”–the difference lies in the dialogic traditions of the argumentative Indian. In early modern India, these traditions were being reinforced and also further articulated in the idiom and public sphere of bhakti. Not only the traditionally available names like Ram were being given a new meaning, but also new, interrogative versions of available Puranic – i.e. historical-mythological – narratives were being created and propagated. The various puranas are usually supposed to have appropriated the subaltern voices into the Brahminical hegemony, but the “Lakshmi-Purana” composed by the 16th century Odia poet Balaramdasa is clearly a counter-hegemonic text – as Satya Mohanty’s reading underlines.

Similarly, Pipa, a junior contemporary and a great admirer of Kabir gives a counter hegemonic twist to the notion of Kaliyuga when he brackets the four Vedas with the “ways of the world“ and the evil force of Kaliyuga and credits Kabir with saving bhakti from sure destruction.

Such contests and debates around the concepts and practices were being conducted from Assam to Rajasthan through the medium of satsangas (congregations), and Mathas (monasteries). Leading bhaktas and sampradays competed with each other to win over ordinary people and powerful persons. The competition sometimes turned bitter, even violent. The bhaktas and their sampradays may not have had a well-defined common goal, but they certainly shared a common idiom, and practices and institutions in which they sought to validate their respective ideas and positions. The practice was to propose a new reading of the spiritual and social experience in the shared idiom of bhakti. Banarasidas- a wealthy, Jain merchant and the author of Ardhakathanak (Half a Narrative) – an autobiography– also established a new panth in the idiom of bhakti. The most important aspect of his life and work is a clear indication of the emergence of the notion of the individual, just as is the case with Kabir and so many others.

The texts and practices of bhakti clearly indicate the emergence of the individual as distinct from the type, but you can notice this and other such significant processes only if you look carefully at the vernacular expressions of Indian modernity. In fact, vernacular (i.e. “Deshaj” in Hindi) is the most apt expression for the pre-colonial modernity that we see emerging through the public sphere of
bhakti– a space of many voices, a space that is distinct from the private space and autonomous from but not indifferent to the political arena.

I cannot think of a better way of concluding this note than to quote from Jaishankar Prasad– who is not much known outside Hindi literary circles and who was a great scholar, poet and playwright, and a great connoisseur of arts, a New Age Renaissance man – if you please. He was active during the colonial period (in the first four decades of the twentieth century) and acutely sensitive to the pressures caused by the colonial situation. While discussing the Indian and western notions of art and poetry, Prasad observed:

The different taxonomies of knowledge in the east and the west are due to the differences in cultural preferences. The prevalent education system has coloured our thinking with western influences and has compelled us to assess our own cultural semiotics on western parameters. But let us not overplay the role of compulsion here; the presence of the new media of the exchange of ideas has made it impossible for anybody to remain untouched by the ideas in international circulation. In fact, we must go back to our own semiotics with this awareness, as our own knowledge systems and signs are not any weaker.“

Notes


6 Ibid. p. 170.


8 D. A. Washbrook, Orients and Occidents: Colonial Discourse Theory and the Historiography of the British Empire in the Oxford History of British Empire, volume V,


13 See for example Partha Chatterjee, Introduction, History in the Vernacular eds. Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2008, p. 3.


18 Recently some scholars have tried to locate Banarasidas in the context of merchant life and the notion of individual. The essays by Vasudha Dalmia, “Merchant Tales and the Emergence of Novel in Hindi” (Economic and Political Weekly,

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23 August, 2008, pp. 43-60) and Rajkumar ( in Hindi), Atm aur Atmcharit (Tadbhav- 20, July, 2009, pp. 134–149) are important in this regard.