

International seminar on 'India's critical tradition and Maulana Azad' and round-table on 'The spirit of critique, Azad, his contemporaries, and the present'

MAKAIAS, November 6 & 7, 2015

This was a period of great mental crisis for me. I was born into a family which was deeply imbued with religious traditions. All the conventions of traditional life were accepted without question and the family did not like the least deviation from orthodox ways. I could not reconcile myself with the prevailing customs and beliefs and my heart was full of a new sense of revolt. The ideas I had acquired from my family and early training could no longer satisfy me. I felt that I must find the truth for myself. Almost instinctively I began to move out of my family orbit and seek my own path.

Maulana Azad wrote the above in *India Wins Freedom*. He was referring to the changes that came over him as he learned English and expanded his reading beyond traditional Islamic texts. A critical intellect was born, that would reject religious dogma to embrace *ijtihad* or independent reasoning for the interpretation of Islam, and would dedicate itself to the anticolonial struggle, first with Bengal's revolutionaries and then with Gandhi. It can be said, perhaps, that it is this critical stance that transformed Abul Kalam Ghulam Muhiyuddin (the name he was given at birth) into Maulana Azad.

The Maulana, of course, was only one among many critical thinkers the country has seen in the modern era, starting with Raja Rammohan Roy. But the tradition of critique itself goes back to ancient times as Amartya Sen has shown in *The Argumentative Indian*. Religious and cultural texts, from the *Vedas* through the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, contain much argumentation that, one might venture to state, could seem radical to some Indians today. Emperor Ashoka encouraged debate and codified rules of civility in argumentation. Thus, it is not possible to understand ancient India without taking these disputes and contentions into account. The same can be said of the Buddhist and Jain traditions, which themselves are products of critical postures vis-a-vis certain aspects of Hinduism. Nor can an understanding of our past approach a measure of completeness without taking into account Dalit, Adivasi, early feminist, and other critiques from sections of the population relegated to the margins by the hegemonic social order.

As for the medieval era, Sen points out that “Ashoka's championing of public discussion [was echoed most strongly in] ... Akbar's sponsorship and support for dialogues between adherents of different faiths ... Akbar's overarching thesis that 'the pursuit of reason' rather than 'reliance on tradition' is the way to address difficult problems of social harmony included a robust celebration of reasoned dialogues.” Others have noted that this spirit endured in individuals like Dara Shuko.

The tradition of argumentation, Sen states, “shapes our social world and the nature of our culture. It has helped to make heterodoxy the natural state of affairs in India ... persistent arguments are an important part of our public life.” According to him, this tradition is responsible for the success of democracy in the post-colonial era unlike many other countries which slipped into authoritarianism and even military dictatorship. It has led to a flowering of creativity. Mira Reym Binford has noted that in the early 1980s, state patronage enabled critically acclaimed film-makers like Shyam Benegal to flourish on the world stage with their alternative cinema of social criticism.

However, much of the argumentation in ancient and medieval India cited by Sen can be said to belong to the domains of philosophy and theology. As Rao and Subrahmanyam¹ have noted, it is

¹ Rao, V. N., and Subrahmanyam, S. (2009, Jan.). Notes on political thought in medieval and early modern South India. *Modern Asian Studies*, 43(1), pp. 175-210. Cambridge University Press. Accessed June 15, 2015. Stable

possible to identify a domain of politics in a sense broader than the conventional Marxian one, in ancient and medieval India, and both Sanskrit and Islamic texts can be approached from this angle. Muhlberger and Paine (1993, pp.34-35)² note that ancient India did have a republican tradition, often mixed with the monarchic, in the sphere of governance. This means argumentation, hence critique, was an important part of political life in the traditional sense.

This seminar will examine continuities and discontinuities in the Indian tradition of critique from the ancient age to the present in multiple domains of social life, and situate Maulana Azad within it.

ROUND-TABLE ON 'THE SPIRIT OF CRITIQUE, AZAD, HIS CONTEMPORARIES, AND THE PRESENT'

- What was the nature of critique expressed through the discourses and actions of his contemporaries like Gandhi and Nehru?
- What has been the trajectory of the critical tradition in India since Azad's time?

URL: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20488076>>.

2 Muhlberger, S., and Paine, P. (1993, Spring). Democracy's place in world history. *Journal of World History*, 4(1), pp. 23-45. Published by: Accessed June 26, 2015. Stable URL: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078545>>.