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**THE BAKHTIN CIRCLE AND THE EAST  
(OR WHAT BAKHTINIAN IDEAS TELL US ABOUT  
“DECOLONISING THE CURRICULUM”)**

**Abstract.** The ideas of the Bakhtin Circle, specifically those of Bakhtin and Tubianskii are discussed with regard to the contemporary project to de-colonise the university curriculum. The anti-colonial aspects of the work of the circle, which are mainly implicit rather than explicitly stated, are emphasised in relation to the semantic palaeontology Bakhtin adopted and developed from scholars such as Marr, Frank-Kamenetskii and Freidenberg on the one hand and Tubianskii’s discussion of the ideas of Tagore on the other. Links with the early anti-caste movement and contemporary Soviet Indology are drawn and are contrasted with perspectives current in so-called “subaltern studies”. It is suggested that, suitably revised and developed, Bakhtinian ideas can contribute to combatting colonial bases within universities.

**Keywords:** colonialism; semantic palaeontology; Mikhail Bakhtin; Nikolai Marr; Mikhail Tubianskii.

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## **КРУГ БАХТИНА И ВОСТОК (ИЛИ ЧТО БАХТИНСКИЕ ИДЕИ ГОВОРЯТ НАМ О «ДЕКОЛОНИЗАЦИИ УЧЕБНОЙ ПРОГРАММЫ»)**

**Аннотация.** Идеи Бахтинского кружка, в частности, идеи Бахтина и Тубьянского, обсуждаются в связи с современным проектом по деколонизации университетской учебной программы. Антиколониальные аспекты работы кружка, которые в основном подразумеваются, а не прямо заявлены, подчеркиваются в связи с семантической палеонтологией, которую Бахтин перенял и развил у таких ученых, как Марр, Франк-Каменецкий и Фрейденберг, с одной стороны, и обсуждением Тубьянским идей Тагора – с другой. Прослеживаются связи с ранним антикастовым движением и современной советской индологией, контрастирующими с перспективами, что существуют в так называемых субальтерналистских исследованиях. Предполагается, что должным образом пересмотренные и развитые бахтинские идеи могут способствовать борьбе с колониальными базами в университетах.

**Ключевые слова:** колониализм; семантическая палеонтология; Михаил Бахтин; Николай Марр; Михаил Тубьянский.

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In recent years the encroachment of a monological bureaucratic rationality into universities has intensified in many countries of the world. Regulatory attempts to limit the autonomy of institutions, impose interpretive frameworks, proscribe forms of argument and critique, have now become commonplace in the neoliberal university. The place of the humanities in general has come under question from an institutional agenda dominated by employability and service to capital accumulation within a globally competitive environment. This has now converged with an ideological assault from the right, espousing cultural

conservatism, apologies for empire, and forms of chauvinism that have encompassed both West and East. Figures like Donald Trump and Boris Johnson now find easy accommodation with India's arch chauvinist Narendra Modi, illustrating how lazy dichotomies of East and West, which persist in some parts of postcolonial studies, have questionable validity.

Opposition to cultural conservatism, has focused on the demand to "decolonise of the curriculum", but this often amounts to no more than a tokenistic peppering of Eurocentric literary, cultural and intellectual programmes with some exotic seasoning. As Milinda Banerjee has recently argued, "decolonizing the curriculum cannot mean simply supplementing, or even substituting, in the classroom the study of elite white men with elite brown men, the teaching of canonical European texts with canonical South or East Asian texts" [7]. Simply ticking the "diversity box" by appointing a few elite-non-white academics to positions in literary studies, cultural and intellectual history is unlikely to change matters significantly as long as the old hierarchies of academic power remain intact. Similarly, while worthy areas of research and teaching, there is nothing "intrinsically emancipatory" about studying the literature of the Ottoman Empire, the culture of the Qing dynasty, or the intellectual history of the Tokugawa shogunate. Bakhtin can help us to understand the cultural dynamics of colonial domination by moving beyond such closed discursive models, to a conception in which culture has no internal territory but exists only on the boundaries between cultures. This includes recognising the forms of collaboration between coloniser and colonised, shifting relations of hegemony, as well as the emergent forms of resistance.

Replacing the colonial agenda with a postcolonial nationalism, as in Shashi Tharoor's widely received book *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* [39], is also seriously inadequate and obfuscates matters further. While the British Empire was draining an estimated 45 trillion US dollars from India at today's value during the period 1765 to 1938, that is 17 times more than the total annual gross domestic product of the United Kingdom today [29], the majority of the British population lived in abject poverty and were subject to brutal forms of exploitation [18]. Moreover, in common with many postcolonial Asian, African, and Latin American states, the Indian elite simply took over the governmental-military machinery of the European power and

have since proceeded to use it to dispossess their poorer citizens, exterminate minorities, and degrade indigenous environments in the name of progress.

Here the very idea of what is meant by the “East” becomes significant. In 1918 the great Russian historian of Central Asia Vasilii Bartol’d outlined a cultural-geographical conception of the East, noting “the Russian historian of the ‘ancient East’ understands this term to mean the space from the Caucasus and Central Asia to the Indian Ocean and the countries of the African Lakes, from the borders between Iran and India to Gibraltar; the ancient history of this entire space ‘represents a *fully finalized whole*’” [11, pp. 4–5]<sup>1</sup>. In the early Soviet period, however, another sense came to the fore, based on economic geography. As Mikhail Pavlovich-Vel’tman put it, the East means “the entire world on whose exploitation the power of the capitalist society in Europe and the United States rests” – i.e. those societies subject to imperial domination of one form or another [30, p. 9]. Since this time, of course, direct colonial domination, which was always exercised through the collaboration of at least a section of the indigenous elite has become less common and in the aftermath of anti-colonial struggles has given way to forms of economic and political control in which the postcolonial elites have, like the Soviet bureaucracy before them, internalised the imperatives of capital accumulation and have become its agents. The results are widespread pauperisation, dispossession, and unprecedented environmental degradation resulting in, *inter alia*, the current pandemic.

A progressive politics, and any serious attempt to decolonise knowledge production, must entail two fundamental dimensions: Firstly, a critique of the state and capital and, secondly, the study of the “resistant consciousness of beings subalternized” by these forces [7]. These forms of consciousness include alternative conceptions of social organisation, property and communal ownership and custodianship of the land and other natural resources. It is here, I think, that the ideas of the Bakhtin Circle are a significant resource to help guide our approach to the second dimension of this project in particular, but it must never lose sight of the first dimension, with which it is integrated at a molecular level, so to speak. Of course, the Bakhtin Circle were unable

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<sup>1</sup> My emphasis. – C. B.

to integrate these two dimensions, largely because the predominant forms of Marxism to which they were exposed, certainly from the late 1920 s, were little more than a dogmatic positivist evolutionism that sought to place societies on a fixed timeline of social development modelled on a crudely understood European history.

Bakhtin's personal library holds a copy of the Russian edition of Engels's *Origin of the Family Private Property and the State*, annotated with evident care and rigor. This text, which is significant in several ways, such as analysing changing kinship relations, state formation and gender roles was actually something Engels compiled from parts of Marx's notebooks on reading ethnological material in his last years<sup>2</sup>. These were only published in full in the 1970 s, and were just the beginning of a vast number of notebooks that Marx wrote in his later years, including several about the relationship between capitalism and the natural environment, the metabolic rift between humans and nature that capitalism involved. It was Marx's studies in these varied areas, his dialogic engagement with others, that left him unable to complete *Das Kapital* – like most of his projects it remained unfinished, incomplete, unfinalized, as he critically reflected on materials about non-Western societies, non-capitalist forms of property, indigenous forms of knowledge and multilinear patterns of social development<sup>3</sup>. Most of the texts that achieved canonical status were the products of editorial intervention, and Marx remains the only 19<sup>th</sup> century thinker of such status without a satisfactory complete works having been completed [21]. This was clearly a very different Marx than Bakhtin and his generation were familiar with, but one we have no excuse in ignoring when looking at forms of consciousness among those subalternised by the state and capital.

In 1919 the young Jewish Indologist Mikhail Tubianskii, soon to become a member of the Bakhtin Circle, published his translation of Rabindranath Tagore's famous 1916 lecture at Keio Gijuku University in Tokyo where he argued the most dangerous thing for Japan, was "the acceptance of the motive force of the Western civilisation as her own. ...I can see her motto, taken from science, 'Survival of the Fittest', writ large at the entrance of her present-day history" [37, pp. 17–18]. Tagore

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<sup>2</sup>Some parts of the Morgan and Phear notes were published in Russian in 1923 and 1941. On Engels's own approach to the notes see [26, pp. 76–82].

<sup>3</sup>Among the significant recent studies in this area see [2, 12, 31].

expanded on this in his short 1917 book *Nationalism*, the Russian translation of which Tubianskii published in 1922 [36]. When science and the perfection of organization reach a certain point the nation state enters into competition with other nation states until “it can stop no longer, for the competition grows keener, organization grows vaster, and selfishness attains supremacy. Trading on the greed and fear of man, it occupies more and more space in society, and at last becomes its ruling force” [38, p. 9]. This is the “immanent law” of technological development divorced from the “once-occurrent unity of life” that Bakhtin argues, in what we now call *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, becomes an “irresponsibly destructive and terrifying force” [3, pp. 11–12]. Tagore was arguing, like Bakhtin, in purely ethical terms, that the imperatives of capitalism encroach on all forms of social life. Tagore argues capitalism gives rise to the nation state and to imperialism, and in pursuing liberation from domination leaders needed to identify and draw upon alternative indigenous resources to combat these tendencies – this was a project that Himani Bannerji has called Tagore’s “pedagogy of decolonization” [8, pp. 674–75].

Tubianskii was here developing and going beyond a dominant trend in St. Petersburg Indology, led by Fedor Shcherbatskoi, who had aimed to show that Mahayana Buddhism contained a rigorous philosophy that rivalled the sophistication of post-Kantian European philosophy. Another prominent Indologist, and head of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR Sergei Ol’denburg had similarly sought to dispel the cloud of exoticism surrounding Indian culture, not least by promoting the publication of Indian literary texts in the early years after the Revolution. Both Ol’denburg and Shcherbatskoi nevertheless remained in thrall, as it were, to Sanskrit culture, with the former writing in a 1919 essay on Indian literature, that “Sanskrit literature... is the basis and essence of all Indian literature” and that modern Indian literatures provide but “pale glimpses of the beauty of ancient India” [28, pp. 8–9], Tubianskii was bringing Indology out of an exclusive concern with the Sanskrit-based cultures, whether the classical Vedic and post-Vedic forms that preoccupied British, French and German Indologists or the Sanskritized Buddhism of Mahayana that was dominant in late imperial Russia. Contemporary Indian thought, written in the vernacular, like the Bengali works of Tagore, now resonated with neo-Kantian and Marxist ideas while remaining rooted in Indian culture. Where

Shcherbatskoi had sought to render terms from Buddhist philosophy directly in the terms of Western thought, Tubianskii sought first to establish the *sui generis* significance of Buddhist and other Indian ideas before drawing such parallels.

The conventional dichotomy of East and West, so often correlated with the idea of a stagnant, mystical East encountering a dynamic, rational West, leaves no trace on Bakhtin's work, and to the limited extent that he ventures into these areas he appears to follow Nikolai Marr's contention that in the Soviet Union the "distinction" (*gran'*) between East and West as an economic and cultural reality, as well as an intellectual construct, was "melting away", to be replaced by a "distinction between social layers" [23, p. iv]. Consider, for instance, the following note from the 1960s:

From the immense world of literature, the scholarship [*nauka*] (and cultural consciousness) of the 19<sup>th</sup> century singled out only a little world (we have narrowed it still further). The East was almost completely not represented in this little world. The world of culture and literature is, in fact, as limitless as the universe. We are not talking about its geographical breadth (here it is limited), but about its semantic depths, which are as bottomless as the depths of matter [6, p. 399].

As for Marr, these "semantic depths" are simultaneously social and temporal depths extending into prehistory but never completely lost to the culture of the present. Bakhtin uses the term "popular" (*narodnyi*) in a sense reminiscent of the term "subaltern" in contemporary cultural theory, being counterposed and subordinate to the dominant or "official" social groups, but he does not seek to limit the structures of the worldviews of those so designated according to regional factors. In some notes of 1949–50, Bakhtin discusses the neglected but "profound" form of realism found in the "popular culture of laughter of the Middle Ages" which is based on images that seek to represent "the phenomena of life in its development, as incomplete metamorphosis, seeking to grasp both poles of becoming in one image" as opposed to the one-sided representations of the official culture. He further notes that "an analogous type of image is characteristic both of *popular* antiquity and of the *popular* culture of the East" [4, pp. 537–538].

What Bakhtin adopts from Marrism is the idea that beneath literary texts, one can discern folkloric plots and images, and beneath these one may discern primordial myths that everywhere have the same basic

features. The semantic "clusters" or "nests" (*puchki*) that make up mythical thought do not disappear but are incorporated and repurposed at each historical stage. Marr had adopted the idea of "wandering plots", according to which a basic narrative scheme migrates from one people to another and at each stage is filled with a new content, from one of his teachers, the great Russian philologist Aleksandr Veselovskii. Veselovskii held such schemes could disappear from view for prolonged periods before reappearing, often unexpectedly, replete with new content. Veselovskii held the origins of these were obscure, but likely derived from a primordial syncretism in which primitive peoples engaged in coordinated song and dance. Drawing on the monist philosopher Ludwig Noiré (1829–1889), Marr reworked the idea to argue that a (distinctly Schopenhauerian) collective will impels coordinated labour activities that give rise both to the basic elements of speech and the semantic clusters that constitute the basic scheme of plots. Izrail' Frank-Kamenetskii and Ol'ga Freidenberg developed this idea both philosophically (with particular reference to Cassirer's account of mythical thinking in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*) and philologically (with particular reference to Veselovskii, Biblical and classical scholarship), to identify the primal mythical elements underlying folkloric and literary plots. This semantic palaeontology becomes particularly important for Bakhtin in the late 1930s, playing an important role in shaping both his discussion of the chronotope and the idea of carnival, and it retains its importance in Bakhtin's analysis at least through to the middle of the 1960s. Thus, in both versions of the Rabelais study (1940 and 1965), and in the second Dostoevsky book of 1963, Bakhtin identifies folk memories of pre-class society that remained embedded in semantic material, at certain times returning to prominence, as in the festive cultures of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, and then in European literary culture. In the novel they become something like a permanent serio-comical reminder of the impermanence, conditionality and historicity of the ruling structures and the ossified worldview of its custodians. Modern culture becomes a field of force in which attempts by the ruling class to present its own rule and perspectives, in a mythical fashion, as superior and having universal validity, are countered by demotic forces that reveal their incompleteness, interestedness, and pretentiousness.

Here I stress, as Bakhtin does not, that these forms are not specific to Europe, but constitute a shared Afro-Eurasian substratum of semantic material, the periodic re-emergence of which relativizes the particular social and cultural hierarchies that have become established in particular regions. Marr and his colleagues had developed this analysis particularly with relation to the mediaeval French poem *Tristan and Isolda*, in which the heroine was shown to share a common source with Iranian, Celtic, Biblical, Mordvinian and various other folkloric figures in the archetypal figure of the goddess Ishtar<sup>4</sup>. Rather than search for an *Ur-text* for the various variations on the plot, Marr held that “the primary source of all of them is the prehistoric population of the Mediterranean in general or, perhaps more accurately, Afro-Eurasia” [24, p. 350].

Thus, while Bakhtin’s focus in his work on carnival is European literature, his own area of specialism, this is not Eurocentric in the sense of viewing European history and values as “normal” and superior to others, thereby helping to produce and justify Europe’s dominant position within the global capitalist world system.

In both his 1940 on Rabelais and in the revised 1965 monograph, Bakhtin identifies one of the most important sources of the grotesque image of the body in the literature of the European Renaissance to lie in Indian mythology. Borrowing heavily from Georges Lote’s 1938 monograph *La vie et l’oeuvre de François Rabelais* [*Life and Work of François Rabelais*], Bakhtin records how accounts of “Indian wonders” [*indiiskie chudesas*], fantastic, hybrid humans and beasts, were collected and circulated in Europe, and achieved popularity at the time Rabelais was writing. This material was combined with sources from Irish legends of sea beasts and European antiquity, which Rabelais was held to have synthesised<sup>5</sup>. Where Lote stresses the value of Rabelais’s comic assimilation of the sources of the grotesque, in the 1965 book, Bakhtin briefly comments that Hegel’s discussion of the grotesque in connection with Indian art in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* is one-sidedly gloomy.

Drawing on Cassirer (characteristically without direct reference), in the *Rabelais* studies Bakhtin refers to the Aryan creation myth in the

<sup>4</sup> This conception was outlined in two works by Marr and his colleagues, including Freidenberg and Frank-Kamenetskii [24, 25].

<sup>5</sup> The extent to which the summary found its way into the book is revealed in [4, pp. 860–866]. The relevant passage of the book is [5, pp. 369–73].

*Rig Veda*, where Purusha, the androgynous primal human, is dismembered as the sacrificial victim of the gods [4, p. 354 n. 178; 5, p. 377, n. 1]<sup>6</sup>. The sacrifice creates all cosmic bodies and life forms including the separate castes of human beings: Brahmans were made from Purusha's mouth, the Ksatriya (warrior caste) from his arms, the Vaisyas (merchant caste) from his thighs, and the Shudras (labourers) from his feet. Most likely drawing on an article by Frank-Kamenetskii, which was also developing an idea from Cassirer, Bakhtin draws an explicit parallel with the legend of the Biblical Adam, whose body is composed of various parts of the universe [19]. Though the "oldest monument" of the "widespread mythical concept of the origin of various social groups from various parts of a god's body" [4, p. 357; 5, p. 377], Bakhtin does not present the *Rig Veda* as the source of such conceptions in European verbal culture as one might expect in Indo-European philology. Rather, it is treated merely a particularly ancient monument of a shared conception arising in distinct stages of social development.

This myth was employed by Indian Brahmans to naturalise and sanctify the caste system, fixing categories of people into inherited social roles consolidated by endogamy. In Bakhtin's account, which does not specify the way in which the myth and its functioning within Indian society was bound up with historically changing social and cultural institutions, carnival momentarily reconstitutes the primordial body of the people and in doing so rationalises the myth: the social body is no longer a metaphor of cosmic forces, but those forces a metaphor of the social body. Revisiting the myth in new conditions and in a new spirit facilitates ideology critique.

In Marr's widely received work Europe had experienced something akin to the Aryan invasion, that European Indologists argued had led to the formation of Indian society and culture, including the caste system. Recent research has largely replaced the idea of invasion with several waves of Aryan migration, assimilation and intermittent conflict having occurred. Marr similarly argued that Aryans had subjugated the earlier Japhetic peoples that inhabited Europe, creating languages and cultures that were stratified in the same way. Opportunistically, he called this the "class-nature of language", but, given the nature of his

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<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin's extensive summary relevant text by Cassirer is published in [4, pp. 785–728], the passage in question is [4, p. 799].

conceptualisation, it was probably more accurate to term it the “caste nature” of language. In any case a noble, or princely culture had overlain and subordinated an earlier, egalitarian culture, which Marr regarded as particularly visible in the Armenian language. Indo-European philology was complicit with, and legitimised this colonial project, naturalising and mythologizing the resulting class societies and marginalising cultures that did not fit its grand-narrative. Marr’s own theory was avowedly an anticolonial, a decolonising project, to reveal the reality of the rich Japhetic substratum and in doing so achieve a new, fully articulated and self-conscious unity. Bakhtin’s work never explicitly invokes this background, but it is nevertheless important because it shows that a decolonising agenda lies behind the ideas with which he was working, however selectively. It also suggests ways in which Bakhtin’s ideas might be developed in studying non-European cultures and its relationship to a postcolonial critique.

The above account has some similarities with the culturalist critique of postcolonial studies developed by advocates of “subaltern studies”, but departs from it in crucial ways<sup>7</sup>. In the latter, pre-colonial and colonial cultures are essentialised and radically counterposed, while “subaltern” consciousness is disarticulated from social relations and made the manifestation of an organic, precolonial tradition, primarily Brahmanical forms of religion, as opposed to Western power-knowledge. Operating on the paradigm of tradition or pre-modernity and modernity, understood predominantly in a Foucauldian fashion, pre-modernity has increasingly been identified within subaltern studies as characteristic of the colonised, and it is generally argued this needs to be recovered in order to “imagine” the nation. Yet what is understood by tradition in most cases relates to Brahmanical Hinduism, along with its casteism, sexism and adherence to private property, and lines of continuity are drawn to the Bengali middle class. This move is presented in radical terms derived from Antonio Gramsci’s discussions of those subordinate social groups subject to the hegemony of the ruling class, while the conclusions diverge sharply from anything Gramsci might have contemplated<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Among the many works of the subaltern studies movement see [15, 16, 20]

<sup>8</sup> For recent critical perspectives on subaltern studies see, *inter alia*, [9, 14, 17, 22].

The rise of Dalit Studies, which has crystallised since the early 1990s has, however, focused attention on another, sharply divergent account which identifies not a single tradition but competing traditions and a sharply divided pre-colonial society. This was first given a systematic exposition by the anti-caste movement and associated intellectuals in India at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Consideration of myths such as that of Purusha, and the wider narratives in which it occurs, allows Dalit intellectuals to develop the same type of ideology critique as we find in Marxism and in Bakhtin, and which is arguably closer to that of Gramsci than we find among advocates of subaltern studies [40]. Moving beyond the Sanskrit texts to consider the polyglossia (*mnogiazhychie*) of vernacular culture, written and oral, whether the Prakrits in which early Buddhism was circulated, or the emerging modern Indian languages, many of which had no genetic relationship to Sanskrit, cast a new light on the myths. Here I will mention two significant contributions.

The Marathi reformer Jotirao Phule (1827–1890) sought to extricate the Aryan myths from the clutches of brahman ideologues and render them in the vernacular, allowing the true history of annexation and usurpation concealed within them to be recovered and revealed [13]. This required that attention be paid to the surviving rituals and oral tales of "folk Hinduism". Embedded in folk culture were the survivals of the collective memory of the pre-Aryan Golden Age and its loss personified by the rule of the benevolent King Bali and his ignominious defeat at the hands of the treacherous brahman dwarf, Vamana. Phule reads the legend of King Bali (an antithetical peasant double of the orthodox, noble, Vedantic figure of Ram) as a survival from pre-class society, and whose celebration at the Diwali festival anticipates the return of the Golden Age. Reinterpretation of the myths allowed the deconstruction of the metaphysical foundations of brahman rule, in concepts such as *karma*, *daiva* (fate) and *prarabdha* (predestination). For Phule, those Brahmanical intellectuals who were claiming leadership in the struggle against British colonialism were themselves earlier colonialists who had subjugated the indigenous population, and the traces of this are discernible in the texts themselves once approached from below, as it were.

Phule's reading of the Vedas as historically developed and semantically stratified texts, which should be understood in the light of

folk narratives and rituals was not unique. Even more developed in this area was Iyothee Thass (1845–1914), the Tamil Dalit intellectual, from the Pariah caste (subject to the stigma of untouchability). Drawing on studies of Vedic myths and texts from Tamil literature, Thass developed a palaeontological critique of the way in which the influence of Sanskrit had changed the meaning of Tamil words. One particularly important contention was that words denoting “occupations and activities of individuals and groups were now transformed into appellations of ascriptive communities that is ‘castes’” [1, p. 139]. The people categorized as Pariahs were viewed as India’s original inhabitants and Buddhism as the pre-Vedic indigenous religion. The original rulers were disenfranchised, their histories Aryanized (brahmanized), the indigenous people subordinated and the “stigma of outcaste” inflicted on them [27, pp. 185–86]. While in reality Buddhism, the original anti-caste movement in India, was a response to Brahmanism and so Thass’s historical narrative cannot literally be upheld, his main point is that to be a Buddhist is to reject Brahmanical deities and cultural values in favour of an earlier system of values rooted in popular egalitarianism. Recent research suggests early Buddhist social philosophy derived from the tribal peoples facing expropriation at the hands of the Brahmanical system [34]. Shcherbatskoi himself had noted that when comparing early Buddhism with the Sanskritised Mahayana, “the history of religions has scarcely witnessed such a break between the new and old within the pale of what nevertheless continues to claim common descent from the same religious founder” [35, p. 42]. These ideas were to become an intrinsic part of Dalit Buddhism – the revival of Buddhist ideas among the lowest parts of the caste system, and which sought to re-establish what they understood as the original ideals of Buddhism before its absorption into the structures of ruling dynasties, such as that of Ashoka. These ideas perhaps reached its full development in the so-called Navayana Buddhism of B.R. Ambedkar.

Two anti-caste Buddhist scholars, Dharmanand Kosambi (1876–1947) and Rahul Sankrityayan (1893–1963) traveled to Leningrad at the end of the 1920s and in the early 30s to work with Soviet Indologists. In a lecture in London in 1932 Sankrityayan noted that Buriat and Mongol monks in Lhasa had told him of the “tremendous reform going on amongst the people” since the Revolution. Agvan Dorzhiev (1854–1938), the Dalai Lama’s emissary in the USSR and

leader of the "renovationist" (*obnovlencheskii*) movement among Buriat Buddhists, was able, after the Revolution, "to busy himself and his band of co-workers in putting Buddhism into its primitive form, which has no friction with atheism, communal ownership of property etc of Marxism. In reality, my informant said, Buddha and Marx are not antagonistic, but complementary to one another" [32, pp. 126–127]. In Stalin's Russia, where the Buriat Buddhists were subject to considerable repression, these ideas were hardly welcomed, but they probably had an important influence on consolidating the new forms of Indology developing under the leadership of Aleksei Barannikov (1890–1952) at the Oriental Institute in Leningrad. Here the interaction between Brahmanical literature in Sanskrit and the vernacular literatures of the mediaeval and modern period, which were sometimes militantly anti-Brahmanical, but which always bore the perspectives of the lower castes in one way or another, took centre stage.

Indeed, there are some significant points of continuity between some of this work and those now emerging in the field of Dalit studies. Barannikov, along with Tubianskii, shifted the centre of Soviet Indology to the consideration of texts in modern Indian languages, especially Hindi, Marathi and Bengali, revealing the ways in which the legends of Rama and especially Krishna were reworked and reinterpreted in each new rendering, corresponding to the particular relations between author and audience in given social conditions. Barannikov shows, for instance, how tales of Krishna the lower-caste shepherd who routs the deities of Brahmanism coexist uneasily with canonical versions in which Krishna as the Ksatriya prince performs actions that are purely allegorical and ultimately reinforce the hegemony of Brahmanism within the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hindi text *Prem Sagar* [10]. For Barannikov, reliance on Brahman pandits with their reverence of Sanskrit culture and denigration of vernacular culture that questioned the authority of Brahmanism, blinded Indo-European philologists to the riches and historical significance of vernacular culture. Philologists were not merely imposing European paradigms, but assimilating the paradigms and prejudices of the pre-colonial Brahmans who championed the scholastic texts and, regardless of evidence to the contrary, treated other languages as tainted derivations from Sanskrit. Convergent interests shared by the colonial and indigenous elites underlay the accommodation of the latter within the hegemonic formation

governed by the former, even as the latter sought to position itself as the leadership in the coming struggle for independence. Bakhtin's subtle typology of forms of discursive interaction offers much for the further development of such analysis, but would need significant revision in the case of India since we are not dealing with a single, national language arising from varied dialects, but a plurality of regional languages coexisting first with Sanskrit, then Persian and finally English.

One way to develop Bakhtin's ideas in this context would be to investigate whether the worldviews of social groups subalternized by the encroachment of capital have typological features in common with each other across geographical and political space. We might, for instance, look for commonalities between the resistant forms of thinking embedded in the culture of peasants facing losing their land at the beginning of the British Industrial Revolution and tribal peoples resisting being driven from the land in contemporary Brazil or India. Whether or not one fully accepts the paradigm of a Japhetic people, a single mythical thinking, based on semantic clusters dating back to pre-class society, the social, economic and environmental consequences of the domination of international capital makes the search for alternatives increasingly urgent. The non-capitalist systems of values, conceptions of nature and social organisation of indigenous social groups that are incompatible with the supremacy of capital accumulation are important resources. Decolonising the curriculum means taking those alternative perspectives seriously, not in a sentimentalised, romantic spirit, but as subalternised perspectives that need to be given full rights to participate in the social dialogues needed to establish an emancipated society and a sustainable planet. In this we, as educators should not look for alibis. We need to play the role of Bakhtin's novelist, giving voice to subalternised perspectives, bringing the various voices into dialogue, facilitating the critique of dominant perspectives, exposing their assumptions, ideological bases and imbrication with structures of power. Inevitably that will mean a constant struggle with our administrations and wider structures of power – it is a difficult and uncomfortable position for us to be in – but who said education, or culture in general, should be comfortable?

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