

WHAT MIGHT COME NEXT: A POSTCOLONIAL RESPONSE

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In my response, I want to experiment with both a creative form and a critical discussion. I begin with my creative piece which is a micro-tale of a speculative “After Oil” future in India. In my speculative experiment, India is a solar-reliant nation and is completely oil free. Balu, a boy from a fringe village, strays into a solar park that is a part of India’s next corporate energy sector.

Balu hid behind a tall bush surreptitiously. The villagers were not allowed near the sacred land of the white panels. Mungri, his cow, had however reached the other side of the fence that once used to be her favourite grazing land. Balu remembers the days when he would laze on this land for hours, while Mungri grazed in the distance. This was before the excavators claimed the open grazing lands as their own, calling them as wastelands. “The kindly companies will make these barren lands into temples of the sun god”, Balu remembers the great leader announcing, “together we march towards a bright solar future”. Ever since, the “bright solar future” has claimed more than their lands—the only river near their village has been fenced too to endlessly supply water for the sun god’s spotlessly clean temples.

Balu spotted Mungri around the corner. He tried to whistle in vain. Mungri drifted farther away, weaving her slow gait amidst the shiny panels that proudly proclaimed “Exon solar energy”. Rows of dazzling whiteness blinded Balu as he held on to the fence to regain balance, setting off the angry alarms. Two guards immediately came running:

“Stand still” proclaimed one in a mechanical voice.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” roared the other.

Balu immediately panicked “Forgive me sir, I did not mean to come here. Mungri my cow has wandered off in your land, just bring her back and I will leave”. This was indeed the last place Balu wanted to be around now—it was already time; he was getting late.

“You are from the village, aren’t you?” the mechanical voice suddenly recognised.

“Aha!” quipped the other one. “They say strange things about your village...how come you don’t use the solar grids? How do you live? What runs your houses and machines and cars? Come on tell us the secret of your energy²” laughed the other one. There was a myth that their village magically produced their own fuel--they never used the solar grids that the government had generously set up all over the land, though at the cost of exorbitant taxes. Some said they had their own secret devices to trap sunlight, or maybe even moonlight too!

Before he knew, Balu was taken to a dark room and searched naked. Hours of interrogation and examination led to no new discovery of a magical device—the guard was exhausted. He let Balu go with a warning--“This is the sacred land of the sun god “the punya suryabhoomi”. Lowlifes like you are forbidden to defile the sun god’s temple. Wait in your houses--we will bring the sun god’s blessings to you. Receive them with open hands”. Balu walked out quickly with Mungri. The winter solstice was setting in. It was time for him to hibernate for the coming months. They do not need solar grids, not at least for now.

Contextualizing oil in India:

My creative response is informed by the postcolonial context of the question of what comes next. As we ponder over the questions of transition and a viable future, one needs to contextualize the discourse of post-petroleum to the specific geo-cultural dynamics of the global South. Though I somewhat endorse Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “climate universalism” in conceptualizing the global breadth of fossil fuel issues, looking at smaller pictures might lead to a

¹ The sun is worshipped as *suryadev* or the sun god in Hinduism

² Echoing a popular Indian energy drink commercial of the 90s that saw the Indian cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar announcing “Boost is the secret of my energy”

more informed, specific praxis. So the question I ask is what does “After Oil” mean for South Asian countries like India? What do we stand to gain or lose through a transition to other alternatives?

India’s engagement with oil is certainly distinct from the contexts of the Global North. We might be the third largest global consumers of petroleum, but patterns of our oil use reveal disparities of access and consumption. 99.6% of petroleum is consumed in the transport sector, of which the majority consumption is accounted for by private vehicles, owned by less than 40% of the population. For the larger part of the population, oil seeps in their lives indirectly, as the economy steadfastly moves from a mixed one to a decidedly neoliberal one. Disparities also entail the gendered use of oil, for petroleum use in the transport sector in India is decidedly male-dominated. Oil also facilitates a large migrant workforce constituting the invisible petro-labour of the huge swathes of undocumented, unskilled *kafala* labourers from South Asia migrating from the margins of global economies to UAE, Oman, Kuwait and other the Gulf nations, whose routes are drawn along imperial histories of human migration.

Decolonizing energy:

My envisioning of an “After Oil” scenario is thus informed by questions of unequal access and exploitation in a postcolonial nation like India, for a simple transition to another energy form will not make much of a difference. My creative piece engages with such a possible scenario of a solar future in a society deeply entrenched in social hierarchies. Corporatized solar panels, cordoned off lands based on the dispossession of marginal communities, unsustainable modes of water supply, restricted access, and a complicit government increasingly moving towards a neoliberal state model will corrupt possibilities of a just solar future. Again, while decolonizing the fossil fuel regime is a necessity, a reinstatement of pre-colonial solid and bio fuels in the current model of growth is unsustainable and environmentally hazardous. The problem with imagining a post-oil future for the postcolonial state thus lies in the basic inability to think beyond already established templates of progress. In India, the government rhetoric for renewables is invariably tied to the grand narratives of sustainable development, decontextualized to mimic global climate initiatives, particularly from the Global North. The Global “North-South divide” in the discourse of climate change—also understood as the classic distinction between “environmentalism of the rich” vs the “environmentalism of the poor”—is frequently invoked when looking for native alternatives. The question that we need to ask from a postcolonial position is that what can be a native alternative to the cliched rhetoric of renewables, which are nevertheless to be used for capitalistic growth?

Stasis/Inaction/Idleness: A Postcolonial Solution?

What happens if we do not look for solutions at all? Is “doing nothing” the best form of doing something? Can we propose an “After Oil” praxis based on inaction? The European colonial assessment of postcolonial cultures was often one of inactivity and unproductivity—the native lands were “wastelands”, the native people were “lazy”, the native climate was “lethargic”, the native cities were “unplanned” and native work culture was “season bound”. The discourse of “transition” also invokes (maybe problematically) the rhetoric of action—as does the central question of the prompt: “How to get from here and now to there and next?”. I believe we are stuck in an impasse of forms of “getting there” without critically questioning the act of “getting there” itself. Oil is essentially attached to the discourse of mobility, and mobility in the postcolonial context has a painful history of dislocation. Migration and mobility has rarely been empowering in the Indian subcontinent’s history: from indentured labour, to famine refugees, to partition refugees in the Raj, to countless dispossessions, land evictions, and the vagrancy of the

migrant labour travelling within the nation and beyond in post-Independence India—“getting there” is often synonymous with precarity and violent uprooting. In contrast, to be in a state of stasis, though often seen as debilitating in dominant cultural narratives, has also been conceptualized as a privilege of a fulfilling rootedness. From the Dutch concept of “niksen”, to the Greek concepts of “otium” and “accidia”, to the Sanskrit concept to *sthibiti*, to Jenny Odell’s impassioned plea for “How to do Nothing”, inaction has been deemed ‘productive’. *Stasis* has already been explored as a political strategy in social movements of commoning especially in occupy movements (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013; Douzinas, 2013; Tsilimpounidi, 2016). I draw from Nicole Loraux’s conceptualization of stasis as “movement at rest” and Georgina Christou’s assertion that “*stasis* constitutes a key form of resistance to modern forms of power by pausing the circulation of capitalism and scheduled time and subverting the production of subjectivities that support such circulation” to propose a postcolonial, or specifically Indian, paradigm of stasis that is not just degrowth but also a rooted, deep state of *sthibiti* as a contented living. It draws from Gandhi’s concept of Swaraj or the self-sufficient village in its emphasis of local resources but does not seek to strive for betterment and progress, particularly through “secondary schools in which industrial education will be the central fact”. Instead, let there be a cooling down, stepping off the grid, a meaningful hibernation that is content with whatever is available for the least effort. If the Calvinist work ethic was decidedly a colonial import, native idleness and ‘unproductivity’ might be the postcolonial antidote.