

Imagining Alternatives: Or, a Post-Comparative Spin on Post-Truth

Ipsita Sengupta

Of truth and its keepers:

“Post-truth” ventriloquizes the register of alterities. As a category though, it remains entangled with truth, in meshes of defiance, derision or yes, even desire for the ersatz, colonizing clones, and there could be no eluding that enmeshment. Now “truth” – if we venture to enter its searing orbit of halo/power – oozes the seduction of the singular, the immaculate unitary original and bears the stamp of what Louis Dumont terms the “homo hierarchicus” in his 1970 title, although in context of the caste system in India. “Truth” inherits its empire-seeking, certainist sacred from the eighteenth-century cognitive infrastructure aligned with the European enlightenment, besides of course the earlier and co-eval accretions of legitimacy around various telos-hungering versions of theocracy, theodicy.

Truth then, as an operative within bastions of the allegedly rational and modern or on the outside of those bastions, tends to create its capital-hoarding commune of keepers. In its European enlightenment-endorsed version, for instance, “truth” reminds me of Dr. Samuel Johnson, the sage of the sad, broad, tormented, truth-scarred visage. And here, I hire some of my adjectives from Julian Barnes’s depiction of the actor who plays and later refuses any hide other than that of the trans-epochal presence of Dr. Johnson as a sullen, tourist-entertaining dining item in the simulated, infinitely plastic twenty first century nationalist theme park brandished “England, England” in Barnes’s eponymous dark satire. The melancholic misfit Dictionary Johnson, parsing truths and untruths, which for him were ethically contiguous with right and wrong, on all issues pitched at him by jousting wits in long addas through the boisterous, often bawdy, food-faddish London evenings, hovers as turmoiled totem of the term from late eighteenth century London. The issues pitched at him were as diverse as daughters crossing the love-lines, literature criticism, on upstarts and aliens, the remote and the metropolitan, propriety for women i.e. on the gender divide, hierarchy of the arts, Americans and the life of savages, patriotism and so on – the unending cornucopia of Johnsonian truth-trinkets shored and hoarded by James Boswell the assiduous, friend and aspiring memoirist, scribe of righteous epigrams and pieties, also self-confessed amoral drifter.

“Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel” (182), Johnson comfortingly concludes and positions himself against “extreme nationality” (170). He remains staunch proponent of the “homo hierarchicus” though, and denounces what he reads as the inequities of equality. Shakespeare’s *Othello* for him is also a morality play around not making an unequal match, and as to the “absurdity of the levelling doctrine” (113), he rails: “Why, Sir, I reconcile my principles very well, because mankind are happier in a state of inequality and subordination. Were they to be in this pretty state of equality, they would soon degenerate into brutes ... All intellectual improvement arises from leisure; all leisure arises from one working for another” (164). “There is a reciprocal pleasure in governing and being governed”, he observes. “Subordination is very necessary for society, and contentions for superiority very dangerous” (111). The exclusivist remained a vigilant against the slightest degrees of falsehood, limns Boswell, and prescribed a strict attention to truth in the minutest degree, truth that would brook no disputes. Yet this grammarian of relations between categories and communes, the arch dispenser of truths, would be regularly contested in his truth-dispensing, and then laughed at, by friends including the allegedly dotting disciple Boswell, or some of the women of charming conversation who were otherwise his patrons.

Conversation is a core value in the Johnsonian universe. When he comes heavy on the Americans as a nation of convicts, insisting “I am willing to love all mankind, except an American”, Miss Seward quietly adds, “Sir, this is an instance that we are always most violent against those whom we have injured” (247), alluding to the unfair tax regime imposed on that settler colony by the British around the time.

Truth, when posited as uber-intractable, sanitized and respectable, truth ensconced even in the Johnsonian universe, thus comes beset with competing versions, stitched as the shadow-narratives testing and teasing its limits and inventions, its coarsening and complicities. Competition brews in other, neighbouring domains as well. Who could be custodians of the truth, and how would they shift its shape? Such questions, and the impossibility of shouting them down with final solutions, riddled hegemony-seekers and truth-inflictors across tenses and myths, and not only from the First World emergent since the late eighteenth century.

In *Mahabharata* and the puranas, “truth” seems to routinely sidle up to the goddish devas and their privileged cliques that would include a few heroic or devotional manavs and truce-seeking collaborators amidst the otherwise decimated nagas, though justice and equity lie with the asuras sometimes. Post the amrita-churning episode, for instance, the asuras are not only manipulated by the devas to absurdly give up on their claim over that allegedly death-defiant elixir despite equal labour in its synthesis and thus lose any future edge over their perennial rivals, they seem to have been dispossessed of the right to circulate their story as well. Their dissent and counter-narratives survive henceforth as stray, unravelled threads and hauntings through the texture of the carefully curated texts. In *Devi Bhagvat Purana*, the asura royal Prahlad is found chronicling the deceit and betrayals of the devas, forever the Amadeus to be patronised and privileged as truth-keepers, truth-seekers. “Jayanti chatubadashcha dharmabadah kshayang gatah” (Bhaduri 73), rendered as “Only those who use words to flatter and erode truth, are hailed and placated” [my translation] – he rues, unmasking the devas as amoral, unabashed oppressors and flatterers, their truth but a technology of violence for sealing hierarchies. As Bharata’s *Natyashastra* memorialises, the first performance onstage in Indic traditions had apparently been commissioned by Brahma to commemorate Indra’s destruction of asuras and danavas, a truth-projection disrupted by the vighnas, literally the disruptors (64-75). Natyaveda i.e., the performing arts had been created, calibrated to appease the gods by humiliating their close contenders and occasional collaborators, contests Virupaksha on behalf of the vighnas, rubric in the *Natyashastra* for the asuras and danavas.

Arrives Post truth:

Brahma now placates the vighnas with the promise of post i.e., plural and multi-nodal “truths” to be presented hitherto in performance that must “show good and bad actions and feelings of both the gods and yourselves” (I.98-129). After that first truth-performance, art in *Natyashastra* is publicized to have been liminally posited, receptive and waiting to segue across the littorals of truth and law. Of course, that publicized promise is made to be betrayed. But if we take this moment of conversation between the powers-that-be and the ruffled vighnas, around the healing space and hurtscape of art poised across thin red lines, as one of the nodal points for thinking about post-truth, then the term seems ripe to explode into creative, trans-tending possibilities.

Post-comparative philosophy, by the way, is my term for what Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber term “the spin . . . beyond comparative philosophy” in the introduction to their edited volume *Comparative Philosophy without Borders* (2016). It amounts to the borderless praxis of

“doing philosophy as one thinks fit for getting to the truth about an issue or set of issues, by appropriating elements from all philosophical views and traditions one knows of but making no claim of “correct exposition””. They envision such a “truly borderless” praxis to “spontaneously straddle geographical areas and cultures, temperaments and time-periods (mixing classical, medieval, modern, and postmodern), styles and subdisciplines of philosophy, as well as mix methods” in a globalized world (22). Though possibly at a rudimentary level, I attempt just such a post-comparative method, trans-infusing Indic terms, categories and theories in the conceptual matrix of this paper, while freely appropriating elements from the Western, metropolitan philosophical standpoints and traditions. I consider the boundary-breaking heteroglossic praxis to be an epistemological intervention, imagining that this might help reduce the wild asymmetries, to begin with the post/colonial epistemological asymmetries, of the globalized world we presently inhabit.

The Sanskrit temporal prefix “anu-” is proximate to “post-”, both etymologically denoting “after”, both invoking radioactive afterlives to an event, a phenomenon or an aesthetic, epistemological or ethical category. “Anuvad”, etymologically “saying after”, could be explored as a relatively autonomous category of re-creation/re-interpretation, even interrogation of extant texts and templates, skewing the scale and slant of truths that they have set in currency, as argued by Harish Trivedi and Susan Bassnett in the introduction to their edited volume *Post-Colonial Translation* (1999). “Post” could then perform the futuristic vector untethered to the past, unleashed even from the desire for a terminus, a country without a post-office or Agha Shahid Ali to mourn the absenting, where distance from the design of addresses and avowed originals gains valency. Going in this vein, the infinite plasticity of post-truth would launch us in the la-la land of the instant, epiphanic and alternative, unoppressed by truth and tense, as printable as erasable, and incorrigibly plural in its potency of proliferation and shape-shifting.

Yet shadows wait to gather around the moveable feast of “post-”, as Bob Hodge and Vijay Misra posit in their 2005 paper “What was Postcolonialism?”. “Post”, they contend, could represent a fissured complex capable of much cunning and both oppositional and complicit possibilities, that they choose to navigate in the context of the post-colonial. “Post” could exude subversion, resistance as much as secret collusions with structures and epistemes supposedly supplanted. The “-” in post-truth gestates the distance and defiance traversed since singularist truth and its keepers in collusion, yet could also belong to the seduction of singularism haunting the hide of alterities. Let us then briefly look at a satire set in the postal world by Julian Barnes.

Post-truth translated to the universe of Julian Barnes’ England, England (1998)

Jack Pitman, corporate titan at play in the zen of a postal world, is set to launch a theme-park/project – or jackpot if you will – titled “England, England” in the Isle of Wight, which he reads as “a location dying for makeover and upgrade” (76). The project performs a post-national patriotic version of England cured, curated and simulated for the top dollar and the long yen; it replicates fifty Quintessences of Englishness, identified through market research, and assortments simulacra of icons, myths, memorials and memorialized moments and menus plucked and time-warped at random from a marketable, mostly invented British past. The inventory includes Robin Hood, a robin in the snow, Shakespeare, thatched cottages, Wembley Stadium, shopping, Dr. Johnson and so on. Bright and new pro-active patriots from the island wave Pitco-sponsored flags and their repositioned patriotism proud in its new insularity (202), when invited by the corporate don that is also called his team. In this spectacular amoral world of replicas given to commodity

fetish, speed and empty signifiers, everything and everyone is either a recruit or an exile. It has no prisons nor hospitals, no margins, no others. Misfits are translated to refugeeed boat-people, the old and the sick or the credit-unworthy are promptly ferried across to France by the next trip. The contract is the linchpin, history is market research, to be bowdlerized, reinvented and excised when inconvenient, and humans? Mere material, caught and trashed in the cycle of insistent updates or obsolescence.

The phantom web of accretive de-materialisation in *England, England* is driven by the logic of free market and ironic, infinite materiality. It thrives on paid news and “soft-handed skill with the truth” (35). With its absurd highlights, radical expulsions and simulated transparency for the spectacle-guzzlers, the project hurtles into dizzying reductions and the unrested proliferation of stereotypes. Simulation becomes the thing itself, and architectures of reality and authenticity appropriated, reinvented, copied and coarsened into triumphalist post-truth kitsch ready to be “possessed, colonised, reordered and destroyed” at will, to quote the French intellectual on Pitman’s team (55). Yet all this dismantling, for the sake of uber-conformity – to currents of commerce and the corporate business of entertainment, to reduce to redundancy the older slower place i.e., England and annihilate any possible competition.

Or to India Today:

“Post-truth”, emergent from a hunger for alterities, could have rehabilitated or at least engaged with shadow-narratives absented and unhoused from successive regimes and regiments of truth and power. And how does it shape in contemporary India or elsewhere, given the glocal condition of compulsive uniformities in producing spectacles and icons for consumption and wild asymmetries in the mobilities of capital and labour? Through clinical certitudes and coarsening summations, circulated in proudly insular bubbles of fake news or propaganda/paid news hooded as alternative facts, and published and proliferated through unabashed technologies of instantaneity. On Aug 25 2015, the Registrar General and Census Commissioner released a terse and clipped elect factoid from the 2011 census, that the proportion of Muslim population in India had increased by 0.8 percentage points, in comparison to the declining proportion of Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists, validating the worst fears of a majoritarian electorate. *The Hindu* reported it as “Muslim population growth slows”, but matrices of context and co-text were beside the point and utterly dispensable for intended consumers. Facts get fissured, divested of context, elected and invisibilised in a lethal striptease, till dictates in ethics and politics are processed, packaged as unitary factoids removed from the causative complex of facts, simulating noir images in currency amidst its targeted sippers and browsers.

Post-truth then morphs into an affect on the ad-financed la-la-land of infinite choice, contoured and curated by securitist angst and the economy of attention feeding off that angst. It mutates into a wrath-making machine, building a case for the annihilation of opponents, upstarts and aliens or even variants, for any diversity or departure is coded as a threat and rendered illegitimate. In its deluge of affect as information, words such as dream and democracy inhabit a cloud of empty signifiers, or pet appendix waiting to be hijacked to the cause, nay project, of corporates and oligarchs. Simulated mirror worlds “mediated by economics, manicured by aesthetes, and monitored by the state”, as Keerthik Sasidharan puts it in his column *Serendipities*, regress its tribe of followers to the familiar and comforting, welding imagined communities on the basis of radical expulsions of various others. Reeking of the singularist obsession and empire-dreams aligned with the norm of truth, such plural, post-truthed new normals prescribe the pure

and extort absolutes, with little use for crossovers, admixtures or liminal spaces. They speak past each other and unlike in Johnson's truth-ridden zone, counter-narratives seem unspeakable inside of each bubble. The truths of those living myriad margins are routinely morphed to their inverse, even as metaphors caged in pages, such as Kafka's or those brewing in Kashmir, in relation to the absurdities, absurd brutality of people in power are executed in gore and glory all across. At times, the insular echo chambers shrilled across media stoke with the addictive look-back at what Zygmunt Bauman terms "retrotopia" in his 2017 title, this being the lure of a perfected, menacing outsider-inhibited nationalist past as final solution for the absurdly afflicted in a late capitalist world. One remembers declamations from the platform of the 2019 Indian Science Congress around technologically anomalous breakthroughs in India from a mythic past, even as ISRO was preparing to launch Chandrayaan 2 in the lunar orbit.

Imagining Alternatives:

Where from the securitist syndrome of such much-marketed contemporary post-truths, their freefall into dizzying reductions around immaculate self and the polluting other, and exhortations to righteous exorcising of these others? Perhaps also from the dizzying speed with which various tribes and others are processed and packaged to bombard the browser. To which infantile transparency, insularity and instant, scurried refuge in tribes, uniformities and stereotypes provide the programmed response. In his article "India's post-truth society" (Sept. 07, 2018), Swaraj Paul Barooah terms this "censorship by obfuscation", where information is remade and unleashed – as para-truths, proxy-truths² – to overwhelm, distract and drown out the resonant-relevant in induced amnesia.

How then to return post-truth to the excess and transgress of the plural and the multi-nodal, the promise of the trans-, from the pulver of atomized "bare survival" post pandemic? By returning words to the slowness and artfulness of metaphors, rid of the obsession with truth and its betrayals. Finally, is "truth" even a viable epistemological or ethical category for performance or arguments, including in the postal avatar? In performance and arts, I think we could do with metaphors and objective correlatives, which demands the labored, imagined participation of a *rasika*, according to Bharata's *Natyashastra* the connoisseur who in the act of "tasting", co-creates a work of art, rather than the amnesiac complicity of the browser. In discourse, how about displacing truth, its various mutants and certainist trail with limns of liminality, rendered in a term like "tarkasamsara", a category coined by 11th century Kashmiri aesthete and thinker Abhinavagupta (c. 960-1020 CE) in his *Vivrti Vimarshini* (CE 1020)? As an epistemological category, "tarka" provokes conversations and churning between divergent positions and schools of thought accepting their asymmetries; it speaks too to the hunger for alternative realities. "Samsara", etymologically denoting "that which shifts or departs", rests on transits, unsettlement and unfinishedness. Compounded, they could conjure a weave always in the un/making, and threaded in dialogue, empathy and unfinished engagement with various others, instead of an extreme, e-seeming studio-craft of relativism currently outsourced to post-truth.

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