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The Reluctant Socialist: Understanding George Orwell's Philosophy and its Indian Relevance

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The Nineteenth century English writing is remarkably different from the previous centuries. The history of the British Empire and its empirical past and present lingers clearly over the writing of this period. There are many instances of both justification and criticism of the Empire. Nineteenth century is also the century when the inter-mingling of the native and colonial cultures. The influence of India and its rich philosophical traditions could be seen in as far of as the American continent. The East began making its presence felt in the literature of these times, and writers like T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats have been greatly influenced by Indian Philosophy. For a very long time the traditional "South" was excluded from the knowledge making processes as it was not considered serious enough for knowledge production. But it was only in the 19th century when the empire began to write back and claim its position in the canons of knowledge.

George Orwell was a man who was not born into a family of rebels, but rather in a family that was wedded to the service of the Queen and the Empire. He was a "sahib" though his father was a minor British official in the Indian Civil Service. He had certain privileges that marked his early childhood. Orwell had first hand experience of the British snobbery and superiority. Encyclopedia Britannica describes Orwell's parents' attitude and his observations thus, "Their attitudes were those of the 'landless gentry', as Orwell later called lower-middle-class people whose pretensions to social status had little relation to their income" (www.britannica.com). George Orwell too joined the Indian Imperial Police as an Officer and was posted in Burma. It must have been during the early years as well as during his short stint in the Indian Imperial service that his conscience began to take shape and he moved to become a humanist from being a colonialist. He was one of those thinkers who could not remain immune to the pains of the "others". He was one of those voices that could not be silenced. In his Sunday Book Review of New York Times Barry Gewen writes while reviewing *Diaries* Edited by Peter Davison:

Orwell was against abstractions of every kind: fascism, Communism, especially nationalism;

"Americanism," he once said, was a term that could easily be used for totalitarian ends. His socialism was pragmatic, anti-utopian, perhaps little more than an expression of his hope that the conditions of the poor and the powerless could be improved (Gerry 2012).

George Orwell's has been many things; one among them was being an anarchist and a communist. Orwell's personal beliefs are reflected in his writings. Communism with its humanistic overtones was more enticing for this young man compared to the oppressive practices of colonialism. Orwell was committed to the ideals of Democratic Socialism. Wikipedia defines Democratic Socialism as,

Democratic Socialism is a political ideology advocating political system alongside a socialist economic system... This may refer to extending principles of democracy in the economy (such as through cooperating or works place democracy), or may simply refer to trends of socialism that emphasize democratic principles as inalienable from their political one. It may be described as a multi party system, constitutionalism, freedom of speech, universal suffrage, with common ownership and planned economy (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Orwell).

Orwell was a thinker who loved to question and if the answers did not satisfy him then he would question his own belief system too. George Orwell moves from one belief to another not because he is not serious in his political views but rather it is his firm belief in the equality of all is much stronger than any political ideologies. He believed in the famous Greek saying "Speak truth to Power". The powers to which he wished to speak the truth range from the colonial powers to the totalitarian powers of the Communists. He is the classic crusader who waits for none to join his cause. Orwell falls back on his writing that seems to be the perfect medium of transporting his ideals onto his readers.

The first novel that Orwell wrote with Socialism as its defining philosophy was *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). It was a political novel written from his personal experience of living with the downtrodden. What he tried to see the world from the perspective of the less privileged. In fact he went and stayed with the unemployed miners to get a feel of their true circumstances. However there were some critics who dismissed these attempts as mere gimmicks by a man who himself was not an aristocrat to begin with so there was no need for him to actually go there and live with the poor. But keeping that aside one can safely conclude from the end sharp criticism of the socialist movement in England, that by 1937 Orwell was greatly disillusioned by socialism and felt that it had failed to adhere to the true ideals of Socialism. This is probably why he began to voice his displeasure in his works. The drawbacks of Socialism are for all of us to see. But to accept that one's beliefs have been misplaced is a big step in the spiritual evolution of a person. Orwell may not sound very convincing when he shifts his beliefs but there are so many people in India right now who would be easily able to identify with his transitory views. His need to seek and speak the truth is so much relevant to the contemporary times. His voice of dissent against the totalitarian control, which stifles the freedom of speech and the freedom to think, is also extremely relevant in today's

world when the basic human rights are being held for ransom by power centers as well as fundamentalist sections of our global society. Etienne Balibar writes in his article titled, 'Speak Truth to Power' thus:

It seems that there are a number of "powers" to whom it would be important or even vital to "speak truth" in today's world. The relevant questions involve collective life and death issues and fundamental issues of justice (Balibar 17).

Orwell was the man who has through his writing taught to see the fault lines in our collage of humanity. No state or society is above the squabbles of discrimination of one form or another. Our Indian society has in the recent times become much more regressive and oppressive. Globalization is changing the face of the world and at the same time it is also threatening the societal structure that relies heavily on control of its individuals, especially women. There are diktats being issued to women against the freedom being expressed through their clothing, education, profession etc. Young girls are being told to stay away from the western influence of the jeans and mobile phones, as they are the reigning symbols of evil. Individual freedom is under threat even for men who are trying to break away from traditional beliefs and conditioning. It is only when we read Orwell do we fully understand our predicament and the urgent need to mend our ways for a happy and healthy future.

Animal Farm (1944) shows the humorous side of this very serious writer. By this year it seems Orwell had come to believe that what cannot be changed should be endured or laughed at. This modern day fable is so very much relevant to our times that it has become a classic that needs to be revisited on a regular basis. In more ways than one the animals are emblematic of humans and their defining characteristics. The story is based on the Russian Revolution but it is the story that finds resemblance in the recent Arab Rising movement. In so many parts of our world there are identical uprising threatening the powers and displacing the powerful. *Animal Farm* is not only about a rebellion but also about the betrayal of its heroes. Joseph Stalin betrayed the trust laid upon him by his people and proved to be even worse than the Czars they overthrew. The pigs and their growing power are satirically prodded and the warning is clearly written on the walls. Rebellion is must but blind trust even on the leaders of the rebellion is not an advisable. The world is changing and due to the recent innovations in communication channels has really shrunk the world to the level of personal yet universal. One click and the world is connected and so political rebellions are becoming a constant reality. Even in India we have seen the power of the Internet in our last general elections. The other animals realize their folly but it is too late and the most interesting part is that they find their human masters comparatively more humane than their pig masters. The egalitarian society that they had dreamt of before their rebellion seems a far off reality because, though "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others". The promise that socialism especially democratic socialism gave to its followers and the non-adherence of the same promise by its leaders disillusioned even its intellectual and ardent followers like Orwell himself. The subversion that we see in this rebellion is something that happens in the best-intended rebellions

of the world. The warning that is hidden in full sight in *Animal Farm* is more than true in today's world of shifting loyalties and intensely capitalist world, where individual interest towers over societal good and selfishness is the motto gaining popularity every which way.

The world in which Orwell lived was full of oppositions. If there was colonialism then there was anti-colonial activities in almost all the colonies of the world, there was a gradual rise of capitalism on one side and on the other socialism was changing the world in unprecedented ways. Within England the class wars were becoming acutely prominent, which were defining the future of England as a nation and as a colony. The women's movement was also changing the face of the world as more and more women were joining the work force and protesting against the wage disparity and more. It was in this world that George Orwell's sensibilities were getting polished and sharpened. His basic revulsion towards power made him see and observe keenly the changes that would forebode the doom of the Empire. He was extremely critical of the ways in which the news was being managed. He knew that any government was capable of manipulating the public knowledge created by the mass media. With reference to India and the British stand on it he wrote on Sep. 15, 1942:

Ghastly feeling of impotence over the India business, Churchill's speeches, the evident intention of the blimps to have one more try at being what they consider tough and the impudent way in which the newspaper can misrepresent the whole issue, well knowing the public will never know enough or take enough interest to verify the facts. This last is the worst symptom of all- though actually our own apathy about India is not worse than the non-interest of Indian intellectuals in the struggle against fascism in Europe (Diaries 1942).

The kind of eyewash that the power centers indulge in is not an alien concept in the contemporary world. We know that the news that reaches us are filtered by various agencies and most of the times we don't even get the 'real' news. And the current love for banning that we see in India is reminiscent of the totalitarian governments who are notorious for banning anything and everything. The fear that intellectuals and even common people have is that if this trend continues than the values of democracy that we as a country so much adhere to will be lost and freedom as we know will be threatened. In his article titled "The Importance of Being Orwell" published in *Vanity Fair*, Christopher Hitchens writes:

It was from his time making wartime broadcasts to India for the BBC that Orwell began to concentrate on the idea of history and falsification. He could see events before his very eyes, even in the information headquarters of an ostensible democracy. Thus, in the summer of 1942, when the British authorities resorted to massive force in order to put down demonstrations and riots in India, he noticed that the hitherto respectable name of Nehru- once the British favorite for the Indian leadership- had somehow become blacklisted. ... (Hitchens 2012).

This is when we remember Orwell and hail for procrastinating a future so very precisely in his most famous work *1984* (1949).

The perfect dystopian novel of all times, *1984* is as much pertinent today as it was when it was written. The protagonist Winston Smith resembles so many of us with his small rebellions and the desire to seek liberation. Apart from Smith there are so many elements in *1984* that we can relate to, like the 'Thought Police' and the 'Big Brother'. The distortion techniques employed by 'Newspeak' seems like some contemporary government controlled media gagging program. We are all too familiar with the concept of rewriting history and the changes being envisioned for our future generation of students. Hitchens goes on to write,

This is a slight but definite prefiguration of the scenes in the Ministry of Truth in Nineteen Eighty Four, where certain political figures are suddenly deemed to be "unperson" and where rapid changes of wartime allegiance necessitate the hectic rewriting of recent history (Hitchens 2012).

There are many elements in *Nineteen Eighty Four* that are too familiar to the recent times. The kind of frenzied madness we see all around us in the form of terrorist organizations and the fundamentalist propaganda that we are a witness to takes us back to the program of Two minutes Hate as remarkably described by Orwell in 1984:

The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but that it was impossible to avoid joining in. Within thirty seconds any pretense was always unnecessary. A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledge-hammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current, turning one even against one's will into a grimacing, screaming lunatic. And yet the rage that one felt was an abstract, undirected emotion which could be switched from one object to another like the flame of a blowlamp. Thus, at one moment Winston's hatred was not turned against Goldstein at all, but, on the contrary, against Big Brother, the Party, and the Thought Police and at such moments his heart went out to the lonely, derided heretic on the screen, sole guardian of truth and sanity in a world of lies (*1984* 14).

The rage and the madness that the protagonist feels here is something that normal humans feel in such moments- this is a transferred phenomenon. It is popularly known as the "Mob" mentality. The dangers of totalitarianism can be seen and identified in these instances. When you are forced to "think", "behave" and "react" alike then there is no scope for individual freedom, and the only consequence would be a nation of zombies and robots. The targeted rage is also so very confining that one is not free to even hate individually. Yet the silver lining in the cloud is that though William is supposed to target the dissenter Goldstein, he feels intense hatred towards the Big Brother and its controlling powers. Amidst the complete breakdown of individual freedom and space there is a hope that they will not be able to stop the thought process of an individual, even after monitoring an individual 24x7, there will be a time when the individual will think and think differently. This is a very frightening thought for the people who try to control our lives through various legislations and laws. The Power centers survive only through the mute participation and acceptance by the people

they control. If the people protest then the power centers' hegemony can also be challenged and overthrown. However, interestingly though the totalitarian governments have come to the center by displacing earlier oppressive regimes. They have come as a hope for change; change for the better, but the power corrupts them too. The popular idiom "Power Corrupts, Absoluter Power Corrupts Absolutely" aptly justifies the transformation of the new "ideal" regimes.

