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The Contrasting Political Landscapes of India in Pankaj Mishra's *Temptations of the West*

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Abstract— *Pankaj Mishra's Temptations of the West has some features that call for it to be identified as a work of travel writing. However, it goes beyond the usual conventions and offers a critical view of the political circumstances in the country. It covers incidents from his student days at Benares which expose him to the vagaries of student politics. His later journey to Allahabad exposes him to the emerging phenomenon of globalisation. At the same time, Allahabad also carried the marks of the colonial past. The place also reveals the presence of corrupt politicians of various hues. They practice a politics based on caste and religion, but their greed for power goes beyond such affiliations. Ayodhya reveals to Mishra a world where myth and history exist side by side. Nagpur offered a combination of grand colonial buildings and modern shopping complexes. Bombay on the other hand highlighted the parallel world of cinema. Mishra travelled further to experience the extremities of politics in Kashmir.*

Keywords— ***Colonial, globalisation, caste, nationalism, the West.***

Pankaj Mishra's journey across India is one that brings him into contact with a wide variety of experiences. He encounters the colonial past of the nation during his journey. At the same time, he is also greeted by the spectacle of globalisation. As Carl Thompson points out: " … travel writing is a genre especially reflective of,and responsive to, the modern condition. We live, after all, in an era of increasing globalisation, in which mobility, travel and cross-cultural contact are facts of life, and an everyday reality, for many people"(2). India is a country that has gone through these historical stages and hence offers an imposing picture to anyone who takes up the challenge of studying it. Mishra travels across this vast cultural landscape picking up a variety of details.

Mishra's journeys are in a way connected to his days as a student in a university in Benares in 1988. This seems to reflect an aspect of travel writing as pointed out by Carl Thompson: " Travel writing in this mode presents the journeys being undertaken as an important rites of passage and as processes of self-realization"(115) It was a Benares that still carried with it the charm of an India steeped in traditions. But that familiar world was about to undergo a great transformation at the onslaught of "the most garish symbols of the entrepreneurial energies " (4) that were released when the forces of liberalization affected the Indian economy. It was a change that was sweeping across India as could be understood from the fast-food outlets and video-game parlours that were cluttering and transforming the Indian landscape. As Mark Tully points out:" Anyone who lives in India cannot but be aware of the force of the ideology of globalisation and the direction from which it is coming"(193).

Caste and political rivalries dominated the atmosphere of the universities. Caste was the criteria by which students who dreamt of a political career organized themselves. The outcome of such differences erupted as spurts of violence. Edward Luce points out: " India, as V.S. Naipaul has said, has become a land of a million mutinies: some are mutinies of lower orders against the upper orders, but there are also mutinies of upper orders(and some lower orders) against Muslims, and mutinies of lower orders against each other and upper orders against each other"(115). The lower castes tended to be communist and the upper castes Hindu nationalist. But

often violence orginated out of a sense of despair and hopelessness. Mishra noticed a greater malaise in these events:" This itself was part of a larger crisis caused by the collapse of many Indian institutions, the increasingly close alliance between crime and politics, and the growth of state-organised corruption-processes…"(10-11).

Mishra encountered Rajesh in the midst of this chaos. Rajesh was a Brahmin but was not in a privileged position thereby representing the complexity of the social reality in India. Amartya Sen has pointed out:" India has a terrible record in social asymmetry, of which the caste system is only one reflection"(34), The traditional dominance of the Brahmins was beginning to collapse under the impact of the political assertiveness of the lower castes. Though Rajesh followed the Brahmin rituals, he had to

struggle in order to survive like the lower castes. Brahmin identity becomes relegated to "an overdeveloped sense of uncleanliness and contamination"(15).Rajesh has crossed some barriers inspite of his Brahmin pride and has done things not usually associated with a Brahmin. His identity has become rather unstable as is evident in his long unconnected monologues. What was more unsettling was the presence of a bag of crude pistols in his room. He represents an India at the crossroads of history where the new and the old, and the national and the international intersect. He spoke of "the bridges that were built only on paper, the roads that existed only in files"(17). In fact in his own life, Mishra was encountering "the many stages of drift and futility"(18). Mishra's observation should be studied in the light of what Thompson says:" … travel writing has frequently provided a medium in which writers can conduct an autobiographical project, exploring questions of identity and selfhood whilst simultaneously presenting to others a self-authored…account of themselves "(99).Thus the worlds of Mishra and Rajesh have certain things in common. The futility arising from destroyed hopes and unrealized ideals of a period of youth marks it. Mishra draws here a picture of India coloured by the perceptions of the West.

Mishra goes on to describe a visit that he made to Allahabad years later. He wanted to analyse the emerging trends in Indian politics. He was experiencing the luxuries of a flight during the trip,but even then he felt that "an older India of caste and poverty "(32) may anytime make its appearance. It is an India that is still untouched by entrepreneurs and foreign investments. Soon Mishra experienced on board the terrible spectacle of the contrast that marks the everyday Indian reality. The pretty short-skirted stewardess who seemed to reflect the features of a European model had only contempt towards the dark-complexioned cleaners. Thus it was a site of the contrast that marks the Indian landscape.It offered an aerial view that was beautiful but the close-up was that of "rain-battered villages of mud and thatch"(33). For Mishra the trip was a reminder of the uneven economic development of India. Even the most superficial of the benefits of the globalization has not reached this part of India. Thompson points out: " … the need to meet touristic expectations…will often dramatically affect local landscapes, lifestyles and occupations. In this way, other peoples and places can in a sense be held hostage by the iconography that attaches to them in Western culture"(162). The plurality of India manifests in yet another way:" India, with its severe disparities of income, caste, and religion, is split into so many separate worlds"(33). Mark Tully has commented on the general nature of globalisation as it manifests in societies across the world," The defeat of socialism and the victory of the market have led to another economic imbalance: the triumph of globalisation, which turns the whole world into a market"(186).

The hotel where Mishra stayed had a luxury that was pointless in the sense that it catered to no local needs. It functioned as a sign of wealth and power in the middle of poverty and deprivation. Allahabad like many other Indian cities has a history of British rule and hence a "simple colonial geography" (35) was very much in evidence. During British rule certain parts of the city were meant primarily for the British and accessible only to Indians who either conformed to British standards or worked as servants there. As Tutun Mukherjee points out:"Though the era of high nineteenth-century Imperialism ended after the Second World War, the reality of the imperial past and of the historical experience of colonialism remain vivid as the shared memory of the ruler and ruled , and colour their expression and perception of culture, ideology and politics"(Mohanty 63).The railway tracks partitioned the" black town" from" the white town"(35). The place bears the colonial scars of the suppression of the mutiny. Many villages were confiscated and many Indians hanged to officially declare India a part of the Empire. Now there is a memorial to the peasants in the form of relief figures which is unsettling and ironic because it is in marked contrast to their actual condition when they lived. The diverse architectural styles of the buildings here dominate the landscape and signify the unchallenged power the British once wielded. But the distance between the rulers and the masses has not disappeared with independence. The hierarchy created by the British still held its sway over society. Mishra in his role as a journalist inquired to the people there about their living conditions. Their reply just revealed the extent of their deprivation. Electricity,

education and health facilities were available only to a limited extent. He visited another village where the facilities were only marginally better. The only quality worth mentioning was" the quality of its deprivation"(41).

Mishra has to admit a certain truth regarding Allahabad:" In Allahabad, a decaying city whose brief moment of glory belonged to the anticolonial struggle, you couldn't but feel distant from these celebrations of postcolonial nationalism and Third World solidarity"(47). Anand Bhavan, the family mansion of the Nehrus was the centre of a hedonistic lifestyle which was later tempered by the ascetic influence of Gandhi. The contrasting realities of that landscape played a role in the evolution of Nehru, who had an elitist education at Harrow and Cambridge. In feudal North India, the encounter between the East and West was not on an equal footing. The liberalism that Nehru inherited from England rather confused him in India. Mahatma Gandhi helped Nehru in the discovery of India and later India became a laboratory for Nehru's experiments of the ideas he had picked up from his readings and travels. Mishra's own travel is one that aims at experiencing the reality underlying India. Tutun Mukherjee points out: " The appeal to the colonial past to interpret the postcolonial present is not just an expedient strategy. It constitutes a revisionist inquiry into the enterprise of the empire that created structures and institutions to perpetuate colonialism and tried to incorporate within its disciplinary discourses , the land, the culture, and the history of the colony"(Mohanty 63-64). . Mishra points out that the remnants of the colonial rule were very much evident in India:" The vast complicated administrative network the British had set up to retain their hold on India had remained intact, except that the civil bureaucrats , the unaccountable rulers of India during the colonial times , had for the first time to accommodate he ambitions of elected politicians"(55).Corruption and inefficiency marked the new economy and the colonial practice of plundering the resources of India was taken over by the politically powerful Indians. A narrow concept of nationalism was created in whose realm "nuclear bombs, beauty queens, and information technology tycoons have, in recent years, become essential, if conflicting , components"(64).

Mishra's encounter with people of Allahabad revealed worries about the uncollected garbage, the lack of drainage, the pot-holed roads and the power and water breakdowns. But what really intimidated them was the crime and corruption in the city. The rise of mafia dons created a general atmosphere of nsecurity. Their bourgeois anxieties sometimes lead to the fear of the loss of life. Mishra perceives a colonial aspect here:" This subdued fear and foreboding was a curious fate for the middle class which, created during colonial times , had inherited the British instinct for law and order"(65). On the other hand, some considered democratic politics as being unsuitable to India. What the British did to expose the Indians to European culture and institutions now looks like a "freakish episode"(65). Tutun Mukherjee points out: " That the basis of social life remains deeply infected by ideas of difference and division even in the absence of foreign rule, is a sobering postcolonial realization"(Mohanty 64). The colonial institutions did not evolve to meet the Indian reality. Mishra cites the university he attended in Allahabad as an example of the failure of the colonial institution. By creating students with useless degrees, it contributed to the army of the unemployed who will join the politics of crime. Raja Bhaiyya , a feudal lord with several cases of murder, kidnapping, extortion and gun-running; had become a politician and won the election through booth-capturing, which is a practice that makes a mockery of democracy. Atiq Ahmed became a politician after stealing tar from construction sites, and a series of strategic murders. While RaJ Bhaiyya joined the Hindu nationalists, Atiq Ahmed stylized himself as a protector of Muslims. The influence of such politicians was threatening even to those who lived in areas like the Civil Lines reserved for the privileged classes . A job with the colonial bureaucracy was a way to acquire what were supposed to be safe havens in the postcolonial India. But these avenues of colonial nostalgia are also threatened by the new landscape. It is this landscape that Mishra has taken pains to represent. Travel books approach nations and communities from the territories of the author'mind.

Mishra perceives the end of an India of colonial privilege.This is the inevitable fate of a country that had failed to create an egalitarian society. It is forced to accommodate criminal politicians who used power in arbitrary and violent ways. Ironically this is a part of the process of "The reclaiming of India by Indians"(76). The politics of the Dalits seeks to destabilize those of the Brahmins. This accounts for the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party , and a leader like Rama Dular Singh Patel. Patel spoke about the strategies for a balance of power against Brahmaniacal forces. Duplicitous Brahmin forces of all sorts of political hues have been cheating the Dalits all these years of independence. At the same time, the rise of Hindu nationalism is seen in leaders like Murli Manohar Joshi. The Hindu nationalists had a confusing idea as to how to create a self-sufficient Hindu nation. Thus the various political fronts survived by creating a notion of the enemy. At the time that India got freedom, political parties dealt with the various classes and communities that formed the cultural and political landscape of the country as a whole. But the passage of time has made it clear that

this political unity brought in by independence is on the wane:" India had now reverted to being a nation of many minorities, each with their own grievances"(83).

Mr.Patel, the candidate of the Bahujan Samaj Party, explained the politics of instability to Mishra. Phrases like "Brahmanical forces" and "Dalit assertion" had attained a neutral status because of the corrupt politics underlying them. The mathematical equations underlying elections have deprived many words of their meanings. Power that lacks any motivation is seen in societies degraded by colonialism. The topics that mark Indian politics like caste, religion, defection, betrayal, intrigue,and collapse all point towards a greed for power. Mishra sees a recurring pattern in "the endless drama of politics in India"(96). These professional politicians are marked by "a contempt for the electorate"(96). Mr.Joshi is an MP who builds up a national identity using cows and nuclear bombs. Outwardly the election projects a picture of people in long queues, but the inner reality was one of caste loyalties, feudal power and sheer physical violence. Mr.Patel of the Dalit party complained to Mishra that Brahmanical forces had subverted democracy. Paradoxically he wanted the Brahmanical parties to come to power since this would foster the instability and disorder that is needed for his party to carry out its plans.

Mishra encounters in Ayodhya a world where myth and history exist side by side. In the nineteenth century the British tried to win over a section of the population constituting of the Hindu elites by projecting colonial rule as a humanitarian intervention to save the Hindus from Muslim rule. Mishra takes a critical look at the fictions of the imperialists that tried to deny the multiple forces that were at play in the centuries of Muslim rule. Tutun Mukherjee points out:" One is aware of … the fashioning by the West of the categories of difference and the backwardness to describe the people of the non-West – thus essentialized and othered , producing what is now termed as alterity—and justify the domination of the West"(Mohanty 64).Mishra does not conceive of the diversity of people that inhabited India before the eleventh century as a nation or community. On the other hand he perceives a number of folk and elite cultures, religious sects, and philosophical sects that characterise the Hindu community. But now the political ideal was to merge the communal identity with the corporate identity. Mishra's attempts to interview some of the Hindutva leaders did not bear fruit since he was perceived as an anti-Hindu writer. The West looks upon India as a democracy with a large consumer market. Hence it is not much concerned about the rise of forces advocating cultural nationalism. Tutun Mukherjee points out:" Colonialism also connotes a state of mind or social consciousness that often persists in the political and social practices of the postcolonial state" (Mohanty 78).These forces project one face to the outside world and another to the nation. Tarun Vijay the editor of a weekly that propagated Hindu nationalism and who represented the modern face of this ideology told Mishra that he was skeptical of the foreign media and left-wing intellectuals. He tried to explain his liberal outlook: " My wife wears jeans, and she wears her hair short, we eat meat at Muslim homes, we go to church on Christmas Day "(134). At the same time he complained about the tendency of the leftist intellectuals to see people like him as anti-Muslim and anti-Christian. Mishra sees an Ayodhya that is waiting for new connections to the global economy. The politicians are now striving to promote the modernity of religious nationalism. He sees in the rhetoric of the Hindu nationalists an obsessive desire to beat the West at its own game. They do not reject western modernity but instead seeks an alternative way to attain it. Ironically they receive funding from the Indians settled in the West. Modern science and technology are seen as a means of attaining national strength.

Mishra made a visit to Nagpur, and there he saw a combination of grand colonial buildings and modern shopping complexes. The rich Indians in the West who were eager for cultural and economic ties with their ancestral land helped the growth of the new combination of nationalism and globalisation. The culture of fashion shows, coffee bars, exotic cuisines and international brands has begun to invade Indian cities. Mishra discerns here the scenario of a government that assumes "that the free market can usurp the role of the state"(149). Mishra explains further :" A decade of pro-globalization policies has created a new aggressive middle class…."(151). The affluent upper-class people Indians living abroad uses their money power to support the new concept of nationalism.

Mishra encountered the parallel landscape of cinema during his trip to Bombay. He met the

Director Mahesh Bhatt was who was opposed to the new type of nationalism on the rise in India. He was one with a vision of the ""harder reality" beneath the" glossy surface" of Bollywood. Mahesh's own father had been a producer and director who had a Hindu wife and a Muslim mistress who was Mahesh's mother. Mishra saw in Bollywood fims posters men displaying a very aggressive masculine and women a very seductive femininity. His parents loved films of an earlier era where love was gentle and easily defeated, and worldly success was an illusion. But Mishra was attracted towards the " angry young man" image created by Amitabh Bachchan. It was a character that reflected the discontent of the postcolonial era. There was much to be angry about in the 1970s and 1980s. Freedom

from British rule has benefitted only a small minority of the country's population like the politicians, the big businessmen and civil servants. Mishra says that they are " people who plundered the state-controlled economy, and protected their power and privilege almost as fiercely as the British had once dealt with the challenges from the natives"(167). Bachchan's rise to fame coincided with the period of emergency. The emergency was aimed at suppressing the mass political movement against corruption. Bachchan in a way represents the cynicism of this generation on the screen. His characters carry out the revenge of the unemployed, lower-middle class youth on the screen. The cinema audience greeted with exhilaration the angry young man's exploits on the screen. Mishra had experienced this catharsis during his student days in the violent campus. Thus the film posters become evocative of a postcolonial landscape that reflects on the explosion of violence on the silver screen. *LOC Kargil* was another movie that celebrated with jingoistic pride the victory of India in an encounter with Pakistan. But this was largely a myth perpetuated by the Hindu nationalists. Mishra found it difficult to sit through this heady mixture of patriotic songs and profanities. Mishra read the Khalid Mohammed's review of the movie in which he criticises the religious and political prejudices portrayed in it.met the director J.P. Dutta who was dejected because of the film's failure at the box office. He spoke about the degeneration of values and disappearance of idealism related to independence. He said that the movie was a tribute to the Indian soldiers . He was apparently stressing that it was not a product meant to be marketed in the metro. Mishra also met Tishu who had made an innovative and at the same time successful film about student politics at Allahabad University. Tishu pointed out that the majority of films were failing at the box office because the filmmakers had no idea of the India outside Bombay or even about the ordinary people in Bombay. Aditya Bhattacharya, another filmmaker, told Mishra about Bollywood's passivity towards communal issues like the 1993 and how it was unabashedly accepting the dominance of the Shiv Sena. Mishra also focuses on Karan Johar who made films for the upper middle class of the larger Indian cities as well as abroad. His *Kal Ho Na Ho* was entirely set in New York city and its characters were almost all Indian-Americans. But it did not delve deep into the dilemmas of people living between cultures. The India of these characters has little connection to the reality. In the film, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* Karan Johar portrays an Indian child who manages to make white British people listen to the Indian National anthem. This becomes a vivid manifestation of a postcolonial cultural encounter. The years of economic liberalization has created a small category of affluent Indians. Meanwhile the Indians settled abroad have begun to see their ancestral country as a place for investment. They have also supported the rise of Hindu nationalism. The type of Bollywood movies made by Johar caters to this new breed of Indians. "India is shining" became the New nationalist slogan. This idea got reflected in the Bollywood landscape:"Many of the new Bollywood films increasingly came out of, and stroked, the same Indian fantasy of wealth, political power, and cultural confidence"(187). The consumer economy has grown but at the expense of widening the divide between the social groups. Bollywood posters and "India Shining" ads project identical images. Giant posters featuring Bollywood superstars promoting Swedish cellphones and American colas dominate the landscape.

Mishra had spent some days in Kashmir during which he heard news of gun battles between Indian Security forces and guerrillas. The situation was such that anything could happen. At the village , he met Sikhs who had survived the massacre at Chitiinghpura of the night before. Mishra encountered the dead bodies in the village. Thirty-five people had been killed. Some of the Sikhs were raising slogans against Pakistan. A minister's car was stoned and his bodyguards let loose a few rounds in the air. Mishra perceives in this incident the media's need for drama. He points out that" the media, slicker but also much coarser after ten years of economic liberalisation , had brought about a general intoxication with war in millions of middle-class Indian homes"(207). Mishra saw buses being stopped and passengers interrogated. He observed in the surroundings " a multitude of localized crackdowns"(207). The questions as to why the guerrillas would kill the Sikhs troubled Mishra. The news on TV was focusing on Bill Clinton's state visit to India and his condemnation of the massacre and praise of Indian democracy. These comments were received with great enthusiasm by the middle class. Mishra perceives here the paradoxical nature of the Third World middle class that is nationalistic but cares a lot for the political opinions of the West. The media was concentrating on the American position on Kashmir. India's national security adviser was considering the Pakistan-based guerrilla outfits Hizbul Mujahideen and Lashkar-e-Toiba as being responsible for the Pakistan. At the same time, these organisations were denying any involvement contrary to their usual stand of glorifying violence to attain their ends. On television the debate was on whether Clinton would criticise Pakistan in this issue. The journalists from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* were not accepting the Indian version. To conduct a massacre just before the American President's visit seemed to a foolish thing to do. Soon the news came out that the five men allegedly responsible for

the Sikh killings were killed in an "encounter" with the police and the army. They were "foreign mercenaries " dressed in army fatigues.

Mishra's journey traversed a geographical space but the implications of this journey are ideological and political. It is one in which he experiences the intersection of the past and the present. It ultimately paves way for the creation for a critical understanding of India in relation to the West. Mishra's intellectual endeavors helps him to reconcile the contrasting experiences that represent the various facets of a country that can be termed inexhaustible in relation to its size and diversity.

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