Exile in the homeland? Anti-colonialism, subaltern geographies and the politics of friendship in early 20th Century Pondicherry, India

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Abstract

The concept of exile remains overwhelmingly influenced by the writings of Edward Said, particularly in his development of the 'contrapuntal' as a key method in understanding how exile life is lived between the 'homeland' and the space of 'exile'. However, by drawing on feminist work which has critiqued the notion of 'home' in Said's work, together with work on subaltern geographies and the politics of friendship, this paper argues for a conception of exile that works in between dichotomies of 'exile' and 'home'. In order to make this case, the paper draws empirically on the example of the 'exile' of a number of Indian anti-colonial revolutionaries in the French-Indian enclave of Pondicherry, India between c.1908 and c.1918, focussing particularly on Subramania Bharati, a Tamil poet and anti-colonial nationalist. Whilst in exile, in his own 'homeland' Bharati drew upon, translated and reshaped existing discourses from both 'Western modernity' and South Asian culture to create his own particular arguments for a future independent India. This subaltern geography opens up ground for alternative spaces of exile to emerge that challenge dichotomies of home/exile.

Keywords

Exile, Anti-colonialism, Subalternity, Politics of Friendship, Pondicherry, India

Introduction

The study of exile is crucial to postcolonial studies, bound together as it is with processes of dislocation, rupture, loss, and resistance. Exile is also inherently spatial, involving a

movement across space and away from ones' 'home', and is often equated with enforced displacement away from one's place of origin. It is this notion of displacement from, and connection to, a homeland that makes exile important to a variety of conditions affected by colonialism, from the attachment to a distant metropolitan homeland of settler colonialists, through to the problematisation of 'home' thrown up by studies of postcolonial diasporas (Brah, 1996). However, in this uneasy and problematic dichotomy of exile/home, exile is often seen as unsettled, whereas home is a stable and knowable category. In this paper, I challenge this dichotomy by drawing on feminist critiques of Edward Said, and read these alongside recent scholarship on the subaltern in geography and anti-colonial politics more generally.

In particular, whilst Said's work on exile remains pre-eminent to scholars of exile, its tendency to place emphasis on a desire or longing for a 'homeland', and in contrast, to create exile as a space of dislocation or rupture reinforces this dichotomy. Instead, it is important to recognise that both homeland and exile are terms that are bound together in contingent and relational processes, and, as a result, this paper, whilst focussing on 'exile', argues that we should be more mindful of the various different experiences of exile that challenge dichotomous readings of exile/homeland. In this case, what does it mean when you are seen to be in exile in your own homeland? How does this unsettle these categories, and what alternative tools may we need which will work alongside Said to help understand them? I make a case for a reading of exile which, by utilising geographical work around the subaltern and its attempts to understand and reconfigure categories of elite/subaltern (Clayton, 2011; Jazeel, 2014), resists and challenges formulations of exile life along a binary spectrum of 'home/exile'. To do this, I draw empirically on the experiences of a number of

anti-colonial exiles in Southern India in the early 20th century, particularly the Tamil poet and writer Subramania Bharati.

For around a decade, between c.1908 and c.1918, the French-Tamil city of Pondicherry, on the southeast coast of India, formed an important hub in a transnational network of anti-colonial radicalism. As a French territory in British-dominated India, the city provided a number of key opportunities for political organisation, mainly smuggling seditious materials through the port and post office of the city (Hyslop, 2009; Suresh, 2010). Consequently, Pondicherry became home to a number of revolutionaries, some of whom passed through briefly, whilst others made the city their 'home'. From 1910, after the arrival of Aurobindo Ghose, at the time one of the most wanted men in British India, the city became of intense interest to revolutionaries and the colonial authorities. Numerous reports about what the members of the 'Pondicherry Gang' were doing circulated through official and unofficial correspondence. However, Pondicherry was also an unusual space in the colonial 'order of things' as a Francophone space of 'exile' in an Indian 'homeland' dominated by Anglophone colonialism. The particular form of exile experienced by the radicals in Pondicherry helps to understand the situated politics of place that shaped their material existence (in the hardships they faced whilst in exile) and their political worldview (in the politics they were exposed to through their transnational connections and which they produced during and after their exile). This stresses the intersubjectivity of the 'Pondicherry Gang' , from being crudely classified as 'anarchists' by the authorities, through to their own self-identification as freedom fighters, spiritualists or nationalists first and exiles second – partially as many saw themselves as still being in their 'homeland'.

In order to understand this intersubjectivity, I argue that the Pondicherry Gang were part of a 'politics of friendship' (Gandhi, 2006) which was productive of a subaltern geography (Jazeel, 2014) of exile. Structurally, the paper begins by discussing the relationship between exile, space and the subaltern. This is developed through an engagement with recent ideas about the subaltern in geography, but also through an engagement with the politics of friendship, as developed in the work of Leela Gandhi. A bridging section introduces Pondicherry in more detail, before two empirical sections, one on the politics of friendship in Pondicherry, a second on the subaltern geographies of Subramania Bharati, draw out the potential of this reading for challenging our understandings of exile. The paper then concludes with a discussion of what the example of Subramania Bharati's life in Pondicherry can help to illuminate in future studies of the spaces of exile.

A subaltern spatiality of exile

Edward Said's understanding of exile has proved particularly durable yet is also derived, understandably, from his own subject position as a Palestinian in the United States. Said's positionality is most clearly articulated in *Between Worlds* (1998) and *Reflections on Exile* (2012 [1984]), which provide some core ideas about the nature of exile. Key amongst these is the sense that exiles are forced into a 'contrapuntal' understanding of the world, caught between a longing for a lost 'home' and a more cosmopolitan understanding of the world from the migrant/diasporic positionality they are forced to adopt in 'exile'. This is articulated most clearly in *Reflections on Exile*, where he states:

> "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that is … *contrapuntal*. For an exile, habits

> of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in an other environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. … Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew" (Said, 2012 [1984], page 186)

Whilst the idea of a monolithic culture Said uses here is problematic (Brah, 1996), this contrapuntal reading allows a sense of how sociospatial relations are both connected and fragmented at the same time, and this is particularly useful in stressing the plurality of knowledges that co-exist within dominant understandings of time and space (O'Callaghan, 2012). As a result, Said's particular strength is his ability to stress the sense of rupture that exile brings about, and in particular, the sense of belonging nowhere, between the home and abroad, due to the enforced hybridity that lies at the heart of many long term exiles' being.

Said's work has become near hegemonic in studies of exile, and many articles routinely draw on his framings to navigate the terrain between potentiality and dislocation that lies at the heart of the condition of exile (see, for example, Ranajit Guha's 2009 engagement with Said). However, Said's conception of exile has been usefully critiqued from a feminist perspective, particularly by Ling (2007), who rightly points out the tensions contained within his construction of 'home'. To Ling, Said's calling out to an imagined homeland of stability falls into a masculinist trap of creating both a) a uniform and enclosed home-space, which is distinct from exile, and lacks heterogeneity in its composition, and b) a false distinction between 'settled' and 'unsettled', where the home is unproblematically seen as stable,

whilst exile is liminal. In contrast, as Ling rightly points out, conditions of home and exile are rarely as clearly demarcated as Said would like. Whilst Saidian exile would seem to argue for a clear distinction between homeland and exile, especially as exile is usually seen as implying some form of coerced geographical movement away from the homeland, this does not mean that connections and circulation across and between spaces stops in exile. As a result,

> “Postcolonial feminists do not stay suspended ‘between worlds’ but take us to another place, another subjectivity. They celebrate the richness, resilience, and resonance of overlapping, interactive, mutually creating worlds.” (Ling, 2007, page 141)

Instead of creating a bipolar world of homeland/exile, this feminist and postcolonial critique of exile would tell us to explore the entangled relations of power/knowledge that occur within and across the condition. Thus, whilst Said’s work is still incredibly important in helping understand the actual and metaphysical effects of exile, this critique forces us to acknowledge the limits of his work, and as a result to challenge some of the tensions that are present within it.

To explore some of these tensions further, exile is often seen as a spatial dislocation – removing people from one place to another *across* space, whether as refugees or more-or-less coerced forms of movement (as a part of a diaspora, for example). However, colonialism also forms a matrix of a more epistemological exile, predicated as it is on colonised subjects being told that their knowledge systems are inadequate and inferior (see, for example, Viswanathan's (1989) Gramscian analysis of the use of the English Language to

coerce and maintain hegemony in colonial British India)[1]. Whilst all colonised subjects could therefore be argued to be epistemically dislocated, anti-colonial exiles like the ones in Pondicherry therefore faced a struggle against a double dislocation, one spatial, and one epistemological, in their political activities to try to create a more just world order. Uma Kothari's (2011) work is important here, as she draws out the grounded and relational aspects of the condition of colonial exile. Examining political prisoners from across the British Empire who were incarcerated in the Seychelles, Kothari exposes the strategies of political resistance that were produced within the space of exile as the prisoners encountered each other and their different struggles, and how these encounters in the relatively remote space of the Seychelles were important parts of transnational anti-colonialisms. On the one hand, this shows how strategies of colonial governance and discipline were uneven (see Legg, 2014, for more here), but more importantly it reworks systems of colonial knowledge production and politics, placing the colonised's resistance at the heart of global networks that force us to reassess Western-dominated narratives of history. In this, it is instructive to read Kothari's work alongside Ramnath's (2011b) study of the Ghadar Movement, a group of Indian anti-colonialists whose transnational networks were productive of diverse political formations as their various radicalisms intersected.

Kothari's work is significant for the spatiality of colonial practices of exile and exiling. However, the subaltern cosmopolitan spaces which were produced through exile in the Seychelles were predicated upon practices of spatial dislocation, with the colonial regime seeking to remove individuals from their 'homes' to a different territory, where it was imagined that they could be more easily controlled and surveilled. What, though, does the

[1] It is important to note here that Said's work on exilic consciousness or the exile intellectual (Said, 1993) reflects this double-dislocation as well.

spatial context of Pondicherry, as a distinct colonial territory that was nonetheless socially and culturally similar to the neighbouring areas of the Madras Presidency and clearly a part of the South Asian subcontinent, add to these knowledges of how forms of exile were productive of subaltern forms of anti-colonialism? In short, how did the experience of being in 'exile' in one's 'homeland' shape the anti-colonial politics that emerged from this space? It is also important here to recognise the diverse and multiple ways in which Indian nationalism was under construction during this period, and many of the exiles who found themselves living in Pondicherry were involved in producing different ideas about what a free India should look like. It is therefore important, in destabilising the dichotomy of exile/homeland, to recognise here that the idea of 'the homeland' of India was an ongoing construction, and was often bound together within, as well as against, colonial modernity (Goswami, 2004). Thus, whilst many of the exiles in Pondicherry undoubtedly saw it as a space of a wider 'homeland' given its spatial and cultural proximity to British-governed India, it is important to note that this was not a uniform, or universal, conception of a distinct subcontinental territory. This ongoing production of India as homeland during this era is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to recognise the provisional and partial nature of the Indian 'nation' as it was imagined by anti-colonialists at this time, and the importance of this in challenging accounts that presuppose the subcontinent as 'home'.

In order to work through these challenges, I turn towards the idea of the subaltern as a method for challenging established categorisations. The category of the subaltern as it is understood today is influenced particularly by the writings of the Subaltern Studies Collective, who challenged established Indian, and indeed colonial, historiographies. Seeing colonial historiography in India as overwhelmingly elitist, the Collective initially utilised

Gramsci's (1971) concept of the subaltern to argue that colonial archives created by those in power could be read 'against the grain' in order to recover histories of the marginalised in order to understand how colonialism was resisted. The impact of Subaltern Studies since then has been enormous, and, despite numerous evolutions in the Collective's thought since its beginnings, the core concepts of the group have proved remarkable in their ability to provoke debate[2]. The resultant impact of the subaltern on spatial and geographical thought has played out in numerous ways (Clayton, 2011). For example, Joanne Sharp has made a number of important interventions into geopolitical debates by using the subaltern as a method to call forth marginal and precarious accounts of geopolitical activity. Importantly here, utilising the subaltern allows Sharp to understand the uneasy ways in which political identities and representations often exist both inside and outside the state at once. This calls into question the 'western/other' and 'state/non-state' dichotomies that suffuse the majority of geopolitical studies (Sharp, 2011), but also recognises attempts to rework and contest dominant forms of geopolitical knowledge construction. This stretching of what is deemed 'political' across and beyond state boundaries is complementary to the aims of this paper, but still sits within a geopolitical framework that is still state-centric, even in its emphasis on the subaltern spaces of knowledge production created by the likes of Julius Nyerere in Tanzania (Sharp, 2013). In thinking through the diverse 'politics of friendship' formed through anti-colonialism, this paper exposes how such overtly political subjects as the freedom of India were intertwined with the more-than-political subjectivities of the exiles in Pondicherry.

[2] See, for example, the debate surrounding the publication of Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013).

This intersubjective politics questions the idea that the independent post-colonial nation-state was the 'ideal' outcome of a freedom struggle. As Richard Iton (2008, page 198) has argued in relation to Black political struggles, what is remarkable "from a historical perspective, is not the end of colonialism but rather the antiquation and abandonment of anti-colonial struggle. It is against [a background of transnational and diverse anti-colonial organising] that a substantive postcoloniality would seem to require if not a committed resistance to the existence of the state, at least an anarchist-inflected imagination, a pragmatic understanding of the constraints and limitations of this category of institutions, and a disinvestment in the conception of the state." Thinking through an anti-colonial politics in this way means we must continue to call into question the assumed and taken for granted categorisations of political behaviour that continue to act as markers which privilege certain forms of knowledge and power at the expense of others.

To question some of these categorisations, I follow the argument of Jazeel (2014) for a subaltern spatiality which attempts to recognise the hegemonic dominance of 'western' theory. Taking Gayatri Spivak's (2010 [1988]) feminist, deconstructivist engagement with the subaltern, together with geographical work utilising subaltern approaches (Featherstone, 2009; Gidwani, 2006), Jazeel argues that spatialities (and geographies more broadly) remain governed by 'western', predominantly Eurocentric, knowledges (and importantly, their representations), and as a result there needs to be an increased focus on how we can create alternative theories of subaltern spaces in their stead. Jazeel argues that, instead of reifying the 'postcolonial' as another concept-metaphor or theoretical object, instead, we must think strategically through the contingent and situated knowledges produced in any particular spatiality. Unsurprisingly, given the influence of Spivak, this

involves deconstructing the terms of any argument to show how it occludes and obscures difference.

The technique of producing and thinking through these subaltern geographies entails a process of questioning the learnt assumptions that we possess as academics and scholars, and embracing the hybrid and liminal nature of the singularities which we examine in our work, which, for Jazeel, involves the hard work of dealing with uncertainty, and developing a sense of how hegemonic knowledges are translated into new knowledges. Jazeel draws on his own, extensive, work on Sri Lanka here (Jazeel, 2012, 2013) to show how concept-metaphors such as 'nature' and 'religion' are bound together with Sinhalese understandings of society and space. Thus, creating 'subaltern' geographies requires an attention to detail which a reliance on overarching concepts often obscures. This gives the potential for the recovery of alternate spatialities which are effaced by the epistemic violence of modernity (Vázquez, 2011). These subaltern geographies are, then, "a method for first revealing the ideological constitution and dissimulation of quite other spatialities, and second, for embarking on the (im)possible task of eliciting those quite other geographies on terms true to the singularity of their differences" (Jazeel, 2014, page 100).

Jazeel's call is resolutely Sri Lankan in context, and there is a need to see how other categories like the (anti)colonial, the national and exile were actualised, performed and reproduced, creating other subaltern spatialities in other contexts. Exile could be seen as an archetypal 'subaltern' space, where those who occupy it are marginalised. However, this simplifies the complex nature of exile as it is experienced by those who occupy its spaces. Instead, following Jazeel, we should see Said's notion of exile as only one, dominant, framing of exile's spaces, and instead ask questions about how other exiles are constituted

and territorialised. Thus, rather than trying to craft a universalist concept of 'exile', instead we should be thinking about the variegation in how exile is experienced in subaltern ways which often complicate the binaries of exile as it is often understood. In this case, I want to argue through the rest of this paper that Jazeel's work, together with feminist critiques of Saidian notions of exile, offer us useful pathways to move beyond the often stereotypical readings of exile as either loss or space of potential.

To do this, I draw on Leela Gandhi, whose work's emphasis on negotiating these 'in-between' and minor spaces of encounter (Gandhi, 2014) intersects with the ideas above. Gandhi (2006), pays attention to what Derrida (2005 [1997]) termed the politics of friendship; that is, the ways in which the political can be re-evaluated by seeing friendship as an alternative, open, community of political engagement, rather than seeing formalised politics and an engagement with the state as the only 'true' political arena. 'Friendship' therefore offers a potentially less exclusionary politics, and thus a broader set of radical connections shaping postcolonial transnational encounter. Gandhi traces connections between coloniser and colonised during the *fin-de-siècle* which co-produced utopian and anti-colonial ideas about a possible future of equality and tolerance. Utilising Nancy's (1991) concept of compearance, Gandhi sees the utopianism prevalent in anti-colonial thought as a space to craft new political forms that exist beyond singular communitarian identities, similar to Jazeel's call for more variegated, subaltern, geographies.

It is this radical openness and resistance to authoritarian categorisations into particular communities that lies at the heart of Gandhi's claim that compearance 'exposes … the meditative and antirelational operatives at the heart of modern imperial and totalitarian governmentality' (Gandhi, 2006, p. 20) and this drives anti-colonialism's core imperative to

restructure the rigid and authoritarian grids established by colonialism. To Gandhi, then, the mechanism of friendship as a mode of creating compearance, as opening up political categories, forms a key aspect of how transnational anti-colonialism and its connections to social utopianism functioned during this period, creating hybrid political forms as a result. This crucially links back to ideas about the subaltern. It is through the particular crafting of friendship/compearance/being-in-common that subaltern acts of cosmopolitan alliance are created. Following Jazeel, the work here is to translate the seemingly non-political acts of subaltern friendship conducted by the Pondicherry exiles (and in similar ways, Kothari's exiles in the Seychelles) into an account of postcolonial politics that is not determined by the coloniser's accounts of what counts as appropriately 'political' behaviour, and what does not.

Whilst this form of politics then has significant overlaps with the contrapuntalism of Said, it goes further in examining the intersections between what is and is not 'political' activity and this is particularly useful in understanding anti-colonial exile. Rather than thinking in terms of the binary between exile and homeland, the postcolonial politics of friendship as developed by Gandhi offers up a useful tool for thinking through a more open-ended politics of transnational connection. Resisting the temptation to rely on traditional categorisations such as race, nationality, colonial status or ethnicity when thinking through the exiled politics of friendship constructed in Pondicherry illuminates the dynamic and transnational nature of anti-colonialism.

It will become clear that those revolutionaries who lived in exile in Pondicherry cannot be adequately understood in terms of any one subjective category. Indeed, the diversity and trajectory of political lives during the period has implications for wider geographical

understandings of subaltern politics. For instance, in his discussion of Chilean exiles and Scottish Trade Unionists in the 1970s and 80s (2012), David Featherstone shows how connections and friendships between left wing activists forged new political solidarities which cut across the power blocs of the Cold War, disrupting the seemingly stable binaries that structured formal political discourses at the time. Important here are the domestic practices of being in exile, as Scottish activists and Chilean exiles were forced to live together and come to terms with each other in mundane, everyday settings. However, whilst this is clearly useful to understand how political solidarity is forged in exile situations, Gandhi's formulation of the politics of friendship pushes us beyond 'formal' political identities, and instead urges us to think through the relations created through a number of different subjectivities that are produced within spaces of (post)colonial encounter. Thus, taking seriously Jazeel's call for a truly subaltern geography, together with Gandhi's call for a heterodox politics of anti-colonial friendship, allows for a more postcolonial, intersubjective study of exile and its relation to (anti-colonial) politics. In order to do this, for the purpose of this paper it is important to think through what exactly exile meant for the revolutionaries who formed the 'Pondicherry Gang'. Thus, the next section of the paper provides a brief contextual background to the city, before the paper turns to a more empirically focussed discussion.

Pondicherry

The city of Pondicherry (now Puducherry), situated about one hundred miles south of Madras (now Chennai), was the administrative capital of the *Établissements Français dans l'Inde*, five small French *comptoirs* or territories dotted across South Asia. Pondicherry was acquired by the French in 1674, but after French imperial ambitions in South Asia collapsed

during the Napoleonic Wars, these small territories lingered on, even managing to outlast British imperialism in India, not being incorporated into the Republic of India until 1954. Life in the city was Francophone, with a number of significant cultural and political markers being deployed by the French authorities, from the built architecture of the city, through to the republican ideals of French colonial government that allowed for a degree of democratic activity for its citizens, which was still limited and corrupt, but much greater than Indian citizens of British India were allowed (Chopra, 1992). The city, beyond the core of the French *Ville Blanche* was also distinctly Indian, with orthodox Tamil Hindu Brahminism forming a key marker of colonial differentiation. Thus, the city formed a space of liminality compared to British-governed India, being the territory of a 'minor' colonial power in the imperial geopolitics of South Asia, yet still colonial, and distinctly (South) Indian.

The French *comptoirs* themselves remained backwaters, and even Pondicherry's role as the administrative centre did not mean the city was vibrant: later in his life Aurobindo recalled that he felt the city was "absolutely dead" when he arrived in 1910 (cited in Heehs, 2008, page 218). Yet, whilst Pondicherry was a relative backwater, Madras Presidency (the British-Indian jurisdiction which surrounded Pondicherry) was between 1900 and 1920 undergoing its most intensive period of anti-colonial activity (Rajendran, 1994). This was driven by a number of developments including: the *Swadeshi* movement for self-sufficiency; the increased nationalist agitation caused by the Partition of Bengal in 1905; the activities of a number of Tamil revolutionaries who had been active in Tinnevelly (Tirunelveli) district in the far south of Madras Presidency, and; a worldwide network of activists who were involved in developing transnational forms of anti-colonialism. This is reflective of a broader changes in the landscape of Indian nationalism at the time (Goswami, 1998, 2004), but to

classify this backdrop as 'nationalist' is to simplify the range and scope of anti-colonial activities that took place during this time. For instance, Ramnath (2011a) has argued that anarchist-inflected thought which was inherently suspicious of nationalism permeated many of the anti-colonial movements that emerged throughout this time. This was true of a number of individuals linked to Pondicherry, not least MPT Acharya who passed through Pondicherry before travelling through radical circles across Europe, and who remained in regular correspondence with radicals based in Pondicherry (GO 1014, Tamil Nadu Archives) .

This context meant that, from 1908 – c.1914 Pondicherry became a node in a global network of anti-colonial agitation. A number of revolutionaries were based in the city, the most important and/or notorious being: Aurobindo Ghose, who was wanted for his role in *Swadeshi* activity in Bengal, who arrived in 1910 to escape imminent arrest in Bengal; Subramania Bharati, a Tamil poet and writer who ran away from Madras to Pondicherry in 1908 when the proxy-editor of his newspaper *India* was arrested, and; VVS Aiyar, a Tamil radical who arrived in Pondicherry in 1910 with hopes to start a revolution following a period of involvement in revolutionary anti-colonial movements in the UK and France. These were followed by a number of other activists and revolutionaries up until the outbreak of the First World War and its resultant thawing of Franco-British relations. These activists were drawn by the revolutionary possibilities offered by Pondicherry as a safe haven, but also, at least in the case of Aurobindo, by his status as one of the most wanted men in India when he arrived in exile. It was not surprising then, that the Government of India looked with interest at Pondicherry - a British Criminal Investigation Office note to the Government states that by 1910, international revolutionaries saw the town as their "most important agency" in India (Foreign and Political Department, 1914 General (Confidential) Series B, No

2). Indeed, when a British colonial official, Inspector Robert Ashe, the Collector of Tinnevelly district of Madras presidency, was assassinated in 1911, the blame was laid squarely (and probably truthfully) at VVS Aiyar, who had probably trained the assassin in the use of the revolver in Pondicherry (Foreign and Political Department 1914 General (Confidential) Series B, No. 2; Rowlatt Report, 1918; Venkatachalapathy, 2010). However, focussing on political violence excludes the broader politics of friendship that were of equal importance to the formation of the revolutionaries identities during this time, as we shall see below.

Exile Life and the Politics of Friendship

A number of individuals in 'exile' within the Pondicherry were originally from Tamil-speaking areas of British India. For them, the disjuncture between French and British colonialism was seemingly the major difference as they moved into exile. However, for other radicals, most notably Bengalis travelling with Aurobindo, the transition into Tamil society was different. This led in some cases to a degree of confusion for those unfamiliar with the strict orthodoxies of Tamil Brahmin culture. One of Aurobindo's associates, Suresh Chakravarti, recalled the moment he, with Srinivasacharya, an orthodox Tamil Brahmin exiled in Pondicherry, received Aurobindo on board the ship in which he arrived in Pondicherry. When rowed out to the ship the men were served tea and "fish-shaped" biscuits on board, something which, due to the restrictions of caste[3], Chakravarti described as not Srinivasacharya's "cup of tea" (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2010, 6). The cultural confusion in this case likely cut both ways, with the strict orthodoxies of some of the Tamils overlapping with the cultural importance of fish in Bengali culture. Small incidents like this

[3] In this case, Srinivasacharya's specific objections are unclear, but are likely to include eating outside of one's household, as well as the zoomorphism of the biscuits. Being at sea was also a likely cause for some discomfort, given orthodox Hinduism's concerns about losing caste by travelling overseas by boat/oceanic travel.

emphasise the practice and experience of compearance, as the various exiles in Pondicherry made sense of each other's individuality within a wider anti-colonialist politics of friendship. Srinivasacharya was amongst the more orthodox of the Tamil contingent in Pondicherry, and the initial lack of understanding, together with the ability to turn this into a source of shared humour was crucial to the creation of a shared sense of communal solidarity amongst the exiles.

These differences were continually worked through a variety of domestic and quotidian relationships built within exile. The exiles occupied different buildings within the city, but would often eat and work together. There was also an important ethics of care and hospitality at work. Chakravarty's reminiscences explain how Shankara Chettiar, the owner of the house that Aurobindo lived in for the first 6 months of his stay, was important in taking care of the group of Bengalis, visiting them often and arranging for a local to look after them domestically. In Pondicherry, Aurobindo largely remained in spiritually-driven seclusion and only met with his associates from Bengal or the small number of exiles already in Pondicherry who were deemed trustworthy. However, those associates who lived with Aurobindo regularly promenaded along the beach in the evening, and CID reports detail how the exiles attended the theatre, noting that when suitably seditious lines occurred they were "obviously spoken at the extremists, who openly acknowledge them" (GO 1335, Tamil Nadu Archives).

These small domestic and public acts of friendship, hospitality and solidarity stress the levels of commitment between strangers that helped to forge the open politics the Pondicherry radicals – cultural and social acts were crucial to cementing a more-than-political allegiance to one another. This was obviously partially built on an emergent notion of Indian identity,

but the practise of these domesticated activities was crucially productive of political trust between individuals. The continued process of compearance between the radicals was worked through a shared solidarity of exile, spatial confinement within the small city, and a shared sense of pan-Indian identity. This compearance facilitated the emergence of a broader politics of friendship in exile that was always becoming. The activity conducted in domestic circles allowed not only the radicals in Pondicherry to encounter and learn from each other, but also allowed a differential sense of commitment between individuals to be established. This could range from Chettiar's willingness to house Aurobindo and his associates, through to the more precarious compearance that the radicals had with the French authorities – Nolini Kanta Gupta, another Bengali associate of Aurobindo, stated in his memoirs that:

> "[t]he French Government had not been against us, indeed they helped us as far as they could. We were looked upon as their guests and as political refugees, it was a matter of honour for them to give us their protection" (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2010, page 13).

Whilst this undoubtedly overemphasises the difficulties faced by the radical exiles, at the same time, British authorities noted in August 1912 that:

> "Of course there can be no doubt that the aim of the extremists is against the French just as much as the British and I fancy M. Duprat [the Governor of French India] realises that quite well, but the 'Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite' idea suits them quite well for the present" (GO 1335, Tamil Nadu Archives).

Thus, the politics of friendship shaped by the practices of compearance performed by the exiles in Pondicherry extended from more-or-less cordial relations with the French authorities, through to the more domestic tolerances constructed between individuals as they lived together, and included the antagonistic relations towards British colonialism and its representatives. It is through the intersection of these varied trajectories that the 'Pondicherry Gang' forged their sense of political and social commitment to each other, despite the hardships that they faced. These acts are crucial in thinking about how subaltern spaces of anticolonialism in Pondicherry were a product of aspects of exile and homeland at the same time. Resisting a dichotomy of longing for a monolithic homeland from a distance, and instead reworking this as a longing for a free, emergent, homeland in a doubly-dislocated space like Pondicherry, challenges the simple binary of home/exile and recognise the "overlapping, interactive, mutually creating worlds" (Ling, 2007, page 141) which the Pondicherry exiles actually experienced.

The acts of friendship and companionship discussed above were always ranged against the particularities of life in exile whilst in one's homeland. Thus, 'exile' life in Pondicherry did not involve dislocation from a homeland *per se*, rather it was an exile of spatial confinement with others of similar background within a small city and its immediate hinterland. Domestic arrangements and the ability to live comfortably within the city were determined by both the exiles' ability to come to a shared politics of friendship, but also by the surveillance of the British colonial authorities, particularly those of the Madras Presidency Criminal Investigation Department (CID). Thus, shortly after the exiles arrived, groups of British Indian police officers arrived within the city, beginning in October 1911, and remained a presence (although in decreasing numbers) until the 1930s (Arnold, 1986). The arrival of

these police officers was of some note in Pondicherry - The Standard newspaper in Madras reported in 1912 on how the officers had “enliven[ed] the humour of the dull, prosaic and monotonous life in this city”, whilst at the same time being “as a rule, ill-clad and uncouth to a degree” and “roam[ing] about behind the “suspects” aimlessly without any effort to secure useful intelligence to their superior officers” (GO1335, Tamil Nadu Archives). This makes light of the hardships faced by the exiles as the colonial authorities attempted to restrict their lives, especially as these police arrived in the aftermath of assassination of Robert Ashe in 1911 mentioned above. Thus, the two competing colonial authorities and the exiles lived in Pondicherry in a finely balanced co-existence, one which, for the exiles, was fraught with difficulties. The most notable case here involved two disreputable informers, Mayoresan and Devanayagam being involved in a plot to plant seditious documents in the well of VVS Aiyar’s house and informing the French authorities of their presence. This plot was foiled by Aiyar discovering the documents before his house could be searched, but the Madras CID report on this event gives a sense of the situation in Pondicherry, and how this intruded into the domestic and everyday spaces of the exiles:

> [Following the tip off, t]he houses of the extremists were searched but the day before VVS Aiyar’s house was searched, he sent for the Magistrate and asked for his well to be searched; this was done and … documents, which he alleged had been put in the well, were found. The enquiry was very confidential and the net result was that warrants for perjury were issued against Mayoresan and Devanayagam and they have fled from Pondicherry … The episode has however shaken the extremists a good deal - they did not expect the French Government to take so prompt and definite a line (GO1335, Tamil Nadu Archives).

The picture that emerges here is of Pondicherry as a disruptive space, where, far from the colonial backwater Aurobindo imagined, it was a space which was generative of counter-currents to the (British) colonial order of Southern India. Wary of informers and under constant surveillance, the exiles in Pondicherry had constantly to reassess, or compear, their politics of friendship, judging who was trustworthy or whether they could rely on the French authorities to prolong their stay. Yet, at the same time, this subaltern space of exile was an immensely productive space. For those exiles who were still committed to formally 'political' activity to free India from British rule, Pondicherry and the friendships constructed there were important to continue developing ideas about a future India. To understand how these subaltern political geographies played out, in the next section, I turn towards a focus on one of the individuals, Subramania Bharati.

The subaltern geographies of Subramania Bharati

Bharati, a Tamil writer and poet who was born in the far south of Madras Presidency, arrived in Pondicherry in late-August 1908 after the Tamil newspaper *India* which he edited with Srinivasacharya in Madras was deemed seditious. Together, they attempted to continue producing the newspaper in Pondicherry and smuggle copies of it across the border. This was difficult at best, with mail directed to the *India's* office in Pondicherry being intercepted almost from the outset of their arrival (Home Political (Branch A) September 1909, No. 35) and was halted almost entirely by the Indian Press Act of 1910, which attempted to stop seditious material being spread throughout British India, and in September 1911, the Madras Government began specifically intercepting Bharati's mail (GO1541, Tamil Nadu Archives). These acts left Bharati without an income – a Madras Presidency CID report in 1912 (GO1335, Tamil Nadu Archives) describes how he could not

afford the “reasonable” rates charged by a press in Pondicherry. Thus, Bharati’s exile was particularly inflected by the material hardships he faced as he struggled to make ends meet.

One of the key methods adopted by the exiles in Pondicherry make a living within the limitations imposed by the British Indian state and to continue their nationalist struggle was to cultivate and write about their shared understanding of Indian culture, which could then also be used as a method for fomenting a pan-Indian nationalism. For the most part, they did this by drawing upon Hindu texts such as the Vedas[4]. Writing about Indian culture also allowed the exiles to publish things which were less likely to be deemed ‘seditious’ by the colonial authorities who were by now intercepting and reading the majority of works published by nationalists across India. These practices of writing about the mythic past in order to discover or reinvigorate a prior nation and culture that existed before the colonial regime are also a classic strategy of anti-colonial nationalism and a central tenet of primordialist understandings of nationalism. The vision of a pre-colonial Indian society, driven in part by a universalistic understanding of the Vedas, creates at its heart a political anti-colonialism centred on a resistant negation of colonial modernity.

However, reading the spiritual activity of the Pondicherry exiles with a reductive emphasis on anti-colonialism as a form of negation obscures the varied pathways that each of the exiles followed as they struggled with their positions as subject of colonial modernity. Each of the radicals was attempting to make sense of the world through the space made available to them in exile, using the Vedas and other classical Indian writings and tales in many cases, but also relying upon other sources wherever possible. For instance, in his writings for *India*,

[4] The Vedas are the oldest Sanskrit scriptures associated with Indian, predominantly Hindu, philosophies, which are often deployed by Hindu nationalists to justify India as a Hindu nation. The exile’s interests here reflect the Hindu Brahmin status of many of the group.

Bharati often drew upon a variety of European thinkers – after Bharati arrived in Pondicherry and became familiar with French republicanism, the *India* began publishing stories and cartoons utilising these ideas (Venkatachalapathy, 1994). Further European ideas permeated Bharati's work – the British Consul in Pondicherry noted in his diary in August 1910 that Bharati and Srinivasacharya were engaged in bringing out a life of Garibaldi (Diary of His Brittanic Majesty's Consul), and Bharati often made reference to the patriotic nationalism of Giuseppe Mazzini. Indeed, Indian nationalists in India and in Europe, particularly Vinayak Savarkar in London, drew on Mazzini as well (Tickell, 2011), and it is likely that at least some of Bharati's thinking would have been influenced by these activities, especially after VVS Aiyar arrived in Pondicherry from Paris in 1910.

Mazzini made sense for Indian nationalists as his arguments for a united Italy in the *Risorgimento* could be transposed onto the disparate regional cultures of India. Mazzini also made particular sense for Bharati and others because of the religious inflection to his work. Writing before his exile in November 1907 about the links between Spiritualism and Nationalism in the *Bala Bharata*, an English language monthly newspaper he established with MPT Acharya, Bharati argued that:

> "We do not deny that even a person who has been victimised by the enervating and poisonous doctrines of the eighteenth century materialism of the West and the [sic] Benthamite Utilitarianism, can feel his country's wrongs and can burn with a desire to raise his nation above the petty oppressions of temporary tyranny. But such a man lacks the never-failing sustenance and sure motive power that are accorded to religious-minded patriots like Mazzini, who loved his God first, his country next and cared not for himself or the rest. The materialist unfortunately, has a tendency to

> love himself first, his country and other things afterwards” (Bharati, 2001 [1907], pages 1143 - 1144) .

This call for a patriotic religio-nationalism gives a clear insight into which aspects of ‘western’ modernity he rejected in creating the hybrid connections between the metaphysical and the empirical that shaped his politics at this stage. Rejecting individual autonomy, it is through spirituality that the limits of the self are exceeded, and a form of compearance can take place. These themes are central to Bharati’s politico-spiritual thought, for example, in an article entitled *The Coming Age* (Bharati, 1937, page 45-6), written whilst in exile, he speaks of the lack of understanding of “socialism” in India, but argues that the only “decent” way of living is to make the earth a commons. This commons is again linked to Hindu culture, as Bharati sees this as a potential *Krita Yuga,* or Hindu age of truth. Reading Bharati here sees him attempting to translate ideas like socialism into a different vernacular, taking ideas of social justice and compassion and welding them to Indian religious and spiritual themes. This act of translation lies at the heart of the vision of a post-colonial politics which Bharati was trying to forge – his work often utilised ‘traditional’ Indian concepts and stories to draw out and explain modernity to an Indian audience, this was particularly the case with the cartoons published in the India (Venkatachalapathy, 1994; Venkatachalapathy, 2012). Bharati’s work here was undoubtedly strongly influenced by his status as a Hindu, and his representations of Bharat Mata and of a secular India in the *India* were not unproblematic in their Hindu-centredness (Ramaswamy, 2010). This marks him out on one level as seemingly less ‘cosmopolitan’ than the likes of Mohandas Gandhi or many of the members of transnational networks like the Ghadar Movement, but crucially, unlike the aggressive Hindu nationalism that emerged from the

likes of Savarkar in London, Bharati was more progressive in his visions for a the future of India, as his close association with non-conformist revolutionaries like MPT Acharya shows.

The broadly progressive and spiritually inflected nature of Bharati's writing disrupted settled patterns of what constituted 'political' behaviour according to the British authorities. Cyril Longden, the Madras Police officer posted to Pondicherry saw the radical's literary activity as "marking time", presumably until their next revolutionary activity (GO 1335, Tamil Nadu Archives), and much of this writing was deemed not seditious, despite its clear political tones. Thus, Bharati circumvented the colonial authorities reductive understandings of 'the political', writing at the margins of colonial rule to produce a different, anti-colonial, set of knowledges. These practices, and the colonial authorities misunderstanding of them, I argue, can clearly be read as subaltern attempts to translate and challenge the dichotomies between political/non-political, spiritual/secular, home/exile and 'Western'/Indian, which are at the core of this paper's argument.

Spirituality and tradition, whilst useful for politically contesting the colonial order, could also be linked to struggles against injustice more generally. Bharati in particular was open about the need to reform role of women in India (Bharati, 1937), and he had been an advocate of gender reform since he met Sister Nivedeta, the Irish disciple of Swami Vivekananda at the Indian National Congress in 1906 (Mahadevan, 1957). Bharati's beliefs also filtered into his wider nationalism, and attached to the Indian nation as 'Bharat Mata' or Mother India, a framing which had emerged from earlier nationalist thought, particularly inspired by radical nationalists like Bankim Chandra Chatterji and Bipin Chandra Pal, but as well as radical utopian spiritualists like Vivekananda and Nivedita (Ramaswamy, 2010). This framing

allowed Bharati to make claims about how domestic intent could be translated into wider nationalist consciousness:

> "Nations are made of home. And so long as you do not have justice and equality fully practised at home, you cannot expect to see them practised in your public life" (Bharati, 1937, page 29).

Here, 'home' is not monolithic, it is instead a space to be challenged on grounds of social justice. Despite this, Bharati's statements about women are often paternalist, marked with a desire to protect women as more 'pure' beings than men, and come alongside particular constructions of the home which are more problematic. However, it must be borne in mind the highly conservative context of Tamil Brahmin culture in which Bharati was writing, and as a result, his beliefs are undoubtedly progressive for this context, and in some ways presaged the emergence of a variety of later political movements in Tamil parts of India, such as the formation of the Justice Party in 1916 and the Self Respect Movement in the 1920s. This marked another level of exclusion for him, as his ideas meant he was ostracised by more orthodox individuals in South India (Raman, 2009). 'Home' then, was not a space of undifferentiated longing for Bharati. Instead, Bharati's 'Bharat Mata', as he conceived it before, during and after his exile, was a fragmented space of marked inequality that required extensive social reform.

Through thinking about the fractured intersections between home, nation and gender, we can see Bharati's intersubjectivity at work, making sense of the present through calling out to a mythic Vedic past, arguing for reform of the present against inequality, yet acting in paternalist ways himself. Crucially, he took note of certain aspects of the "Benthamite Utilitarianism" he raged against when seeing inequality within Indian society. However, his

solutions came not in the form of Western rationalism, but in calling out for a domesticated spiritual reaction against inequality. This was learned through his experiences before, during and after his exile, but particularly whilst he was in Pondicherry and during the compearance he experienced with others who lived in exile there. Ramaswami Aiyangar, described how listening to conversations between Bharati and Aurobindo was “a sort of variety entertainment, only the [intellectual] level was very high” (cited in Heehs, 2008, page 222). It was through conversation and debate in Pondicherry that many of the exiles tried to make sense of the colonial order that they were confronted by. Thus, Bharati’s exile was inherently disruptive of a settled idea of the ‘homeland’. By being in exile whilst also being in his homeland, we see that he was involved in attempting to forge an alternative, albeit still imperfect, world whilst living in exile. Bharati’s attempts to disrupt the colonial, sexist and casteist politics of his homeland ensured that he occupied a marginal, subaltern position, whether he was spatially exiled in Pondicherry, or more epistemogically exiled as his radical beliefs and practices positioned him firmly at the margins of South Indian society.

As a result, Bharati’s life in Pondicherry must be read through the translations that he used to understand the world. Bharati’s life in exile could be read as operating contrapuntally, as he used the conditions of his exile to speak and think about the broader situation of colonialism he was faced with. However, to draw on Jazeel’s (2014) call for subaltern geographies, the translations that Bharati was performing were creating a different, subaltern space of encounter between anti-colonial radicalism, (Western) modernity’s political norms and Indian cultural values – he was definitely not suspended ‘between worlds’. The geographies of exile and homeland that overlapped in Bharati’s life were subaltern, existing uneasily within and without the hegemonic framings of the colonial

order. Writing from the margins, Bharati attempted to change and transform these dominant understandings of the world, translating utopian socialist and nationalist ideas to suit an emerging pan-Indian sensibility.

Conclusions

Whilst often classed as a nationalist and a patriot, Subramania Bharati's positionality exemplifies the hybrid nature of 'exile' life in Pondicherry. Bharati was not suspended 'between worlds' as Said would tell us. Instead his exile took place in and through the fractured geographies of his 'homeland' that colonialism had produced, and which emergent forms of Indian nationalism were attempting to produce. This was an important part of his struggles against colonialism, as he struggled against the inequities of foreign rule. However, it was the politics of friendship that were constructed with other residents of Pondicherry that helped him to understand and shape his anti-colonial nationalism into something that was more than a simply oppositional politics into something that envisioned a 'new', more socially just, India.

The politics of friendship developed by the anti-colonials in Pondicherry meant that they could forge new relationships and sociopolitical ideas. Crucial here is the need to understand this process in the terms Jazeel sets out in his argument for a subaltern geography – the process of translation which all the political exiles in Pondicherry, not just Bharati, took part in was an important part of developing ideas about the future of India (and by extension, the future of a post-colonial world). Rather than rejecting 'Western' modernity outright, the nationalists and revolutionaries in Pondicherry grappled with the concepts they encountered and tried to make sense of them in order to shape the future society they wanted to see.

There is a need then to think more thoroughly about what overarching frameworks we adopt when considering concept-metaphors like 'exile'. Rather than relying on Saidian tropes about the contrapuntal understandings of exile that can leave people trapped 'between worlds' or longing for a lost, uniform 'homeland', it is important to continually question these ideas and the translations that underlie them. This is not to say that Said's work is not useful, but instead is a call to think through the unique and subaltern spatialities that different experiences of exile produce. This is something that, especially in geography, our conceptual understanding of exile has tended to lack as we have tended to unproblematically utilise Said. In this case, understanding Subramania Bharati's exile in Pondicherry exposes a range of different geographies, encompassing transnational anti-colonialism, Tamil literature, pan-Indian nationalism, utopian universalism and competing imperial territoriality (to name only a few). It is through the working through of the various trajectories of these spatialities that Subramania Bharati's own subaltern geographies of exile were produced. I would argue that it is in recognising and grappling with these subaltern geographies of exile that we will produce a more nuanced and valuable conception of 'exile', recognising Said's impact, but attempting to question some of the assumptions that are inherent in his work. Given the importance of exile to our knowledge(s) of the world, both historically and in the contemporary, this is a necessary project.

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