

Re-Reading *Desivad*: A Freewheeling Conversation With GN Devy

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Abstract

Desivad(Nativism)as a literary movement and a theoretical approach is a pluralistic and diverse field which is surrounded by several legitimate expressions. This paper interrogates the various deliberations around*Desivad*in Indian Literatures followed by a conversation with GN Devy who reflects on the concept of *Desivad*, the use of language and the current literary scene in India. The paper also problematizes the issues regarding the difference between *Desivad*and Modernity. The paper summarizes and critically examines the various perspectives on *Desivad*by academicians and further studies the issues around it and its relevance in the current political scenario. The paper discovers that*desi*-modernity becomes an adequate methodology for dealing with Indian writings and demonstrates the need of *desi*-modernity in today's cosmopolitan world.

Keywords: GN Devy, *Desivad*, Modernity, *Desi*-modernity, Indian writings, pluralistic

Introduction

“Generally, being native means being attached to a particular place” (Nemade 15). Nativism then becomes the value attached to the notion of being native. Native or *Desi* has its own history and its own expression of thought. One's belief, culture, tradition and values comes together to form ones native identity which is a form of Nativism or *Desivad*. This aspect is multifaceted, hybrid and complex and is addressed by various theorists. Nemade is considered to

be the founding father of Nativism and he mentions in his book *Nativism (Desivad)* that – “Nativism evokes a whole constellation of feeling, perception, thought, enlightenment, and memory which has grown due to one’s attachment to a specific bond between man and his territory in the nativist consciousness than rationalism” (Nemade 33).

This nativist consciousness comes from the understanding of the native culture and should be integrated in the Indian ethos. IndraNath Choudhuri in his work *Indian Literature: Dialectics of Continuity and Change* speaks about the concept of ‘Kula’ and ‘Sheela’ which is inherent to the aspect of Nativism. ‘Kula’ is the inheritance whereas ‘Sheela’ is the personality of the man that is influenced by ‘Kula’. At the very outset, ‘Kula’ and ‘Sheela’ together makes the hereditary of the man influenced by the environment. GN Devy on the other hand, mentions that Nativism is the ‘language specific way of looking at literature’ (Devy 120). This language stands for the repository of values and traditions attached to it. According to him, Nativism rules out the *margi* claims of mainstream literature and replace them with *Desi*. The *margi* is the mainstream literature that has a horizontal pattern of culture and literature, *desi* has vertical individual patterns and stands for the regional and contemporary. Sudhir Kumar in “Nation versus Nativism” urges for as many Nativisms as possible. ‘A positive and desired dose of Nativism or *Desivad* will always stand the Indians in good stead in their continued fight against a hegemonic, oppressive version of either nationalism or internationalism of the day. (Kumar 125). K Satchidanandan in his essay ‘Defining the Premises: Nativism and its Ambivalences’ suggests that Nativism in its progressive aspects is the celebration of the pluralism which is the core of Indian Literatures. He proposes that this pluralism should not reject the non-canonical and hegemonic texts and should be all inclusive. For him –

“Indian culture is no monolith and Indian literature is not a monologue; they have many tongues and many voices, many hues and many worldviews. The dominant and the Subaltern, the high text and the popular text, the great tradition and the little tradition, the *margi* and the *desi*, the written and the oral/performative have co-existed in the Indian literary landscape for centuries, giving and taking teaching and learning from one another.” (Satchidanandan 15)

The debate around *Desivad* becomes important in a nation like India which was a British colony for almost 200 years. Postindependence India was suffering from a colonial hang-up, the

Britishers had left but the uncertainties, frustrations and sufferings remained. The period is marked with the formation of 'modern' which was often equated with westernization of thoughts and ideas. Modernization in the postindependence era was often equated with slow economic growth, competitive and self-centered lifestyle coupled with the inability to exist in the new system. It was in this socio-political and cultural scenario that discussions around *Desivad* became relevant. Modernity has often been seen as a binary opposite to *Desivad*. If a thought or an idea is considered to be modern, it cannot be native to that particular land. But, critics have observed that Modernity to be a crucial aspect in understanding Nativism. For Nemade, Nativism stood as a reaction to colonialism which hinted at globalization. It stood for principles that explained Indian modernity. Indian modernity has often been referred as 'Colonial Modernity' which according to Velcheru Narayana Rao was produced by the impact of English on Indian Literature. According to him – "Emergence of indigenous modernity was not a radical break from the past but involves a significant change in the social practices, political institutions and literary sensibilities." (Rao 136). GN Devy propounds Nativism as commitment to society. "It sees writing as a social act" (Devy 120). Nativism frees literature and does not hold or binds it by glorifying history and traditions. It values realism and accepts the past to understand the present.

Conversation with GN Devy

Question: In your book *After Amnesia*, you begin by talking about the 'crisis' in 'literary criticism in India' and a similar angst is seen in your keynote address on *Desivad* at the seminar on *Desivad* in Indian Literature organized by the Sahitya Akademi. Do you still feel that Western knowledge is considered 'superior' and all Indian knowledge is considered as 'low-value'? Is Indian literary criticism still in crisis?

Dey: In answer to your question, let us focus on the term 'value'. The comparable term in your language may be *arth* (as in *arth-purn*, *anarth*, *arthat*, etc). 'Value' in the English language, drawn from its Latin (and middle-French) origin is related to a 'measure', a quantity. It was, in the original, a measure of things (such as grains, etc.) which brought a corresponding price, a clear monetary/quantifiable gain. The subsequent cultural associations made the term 'value' mean a socially or culturally 'gainful traits in one's thought'. 'Arth', on the other hand, which

meant something like money, currency, wealth, also meant 'meaning'. The term 'arth' was made one of the four goals of human life. But, the term always remained confined to the domain of the personal, the life of an individual. The current use 'arth-niti' is a literal translation of 'economic policy' and the term was not, never used in that way in the past. Now, supposing you were to ask a question like "what is Marx's 'arth-vichar'"? Not even the most devout Marxist will be able to answer your question, because Marxism did not offer much to think about the individual's 'economic behaviour'. He had extremely original and important views to offer about our collective economic behaviour. Hence, we cannot explain Marx in terms of how he understands 'arth'. As a result, whenever we start discussion economic history, economic changes, economic clashes, etc. we have to set aside the connotations of 'arth' from our discourse and move over to 'economic strife', "economic shifts", etc. In the process, the knowledge about 'arth' which we have remains at the stage of minimum knowledge and the major western economic theory takes the centre stage.

Question: In one of your lectures on Indian Aesthetic, you mention that 'history' is a problematic term but much like B. Nemade, you have often been called as a nativist writer-critic who advocates an "indigenous" history. What is your definition of "indigenous" history and how different is "indigenous" from *Desivad*?

Dewy: The term 'indigenous' is a colonial product. It is used to describe the people and their culture encountered in other continents by the colonizing nations. 'Desh' has a history of its own. The two cannot be equated, except superficially.

Question: Would you say that *Desivad* is similar to the idea of going "back to the roots"? How similar or different are these concepts and what as per you are the characteristics of *Desivad*?

Dewy: Not 'going back'. One can say, to be fairer to the ideas, 'going to the roots'. When you add 'back', one brings in a thought-baggage that is unnecessary. 'Looking at things as they are'

from the perspective that has emerged within the cultural and historical context of those things is 'Desivad'. It neither asks you to 'go back' or 'to move forward'. It only asks you 'to see', 'to see it well', 'to see in its entirety'. That is all.

Question: "I am opposed to *Desivad* because all through my own work I have opposed the *Desivadi* type of theater. If you want to know who symbolizes that kind of theatre I could give the names of Ratan Thiyam from Manipur, of Kavalam Narayana Panikker from Kerala, of B.V. Karnath, though with some reservation." This is what Prasanna in his essay 'A Critique of Nativism in Contemporary Indian Theatre' mentions. Do you think there is a difference between *Desivad* and *Desivadi*?

Dey: Prasanna is critiquing one peculiar understanding of 'Desivad' as proposed in Kannada criticism. He is justified in what he says within the context he has picked up for his comment.

Question: Makarand Paranjape believes that 'Nativism is a reactionary form of Modernism.' Please comment.

Dey: Makarand Paranjape has an unmatched pace. He has believed in many different things in different phases of his literary career.

Question: Playwrights of the post-independence era are often termed as 'modern writers'. Can we say that it is a general statement and playwrights often resorted to native roots, traditional values, use of epics and folklore in order to establish their "indigenous modernity"?

Dey: I do not think that any playwright consciously does anything 'to establish' her/his brand of critical-thought. One is always engaged in an attempt to create 'dramatically' a representation of life. It is for the critics to classify and attach descriptive labels to the work produced.

Question: Do you believe that the discourse of 'desi-modernity' can put to rest the uncertainties about Nativism and Modernity?

Dew: Both 'tradition' and 'modernity' in India have been products of the 'traditional' and 'modern' Indian context. Therefore, 'Nativism' is not/cannot be the binary opposite of 'Modernity'.

Question: In *After Amnesia*, you mention that 'Nativism is a language specific way of looking at literature'. So, as a theoretical concept, *Desivad* can only be comprehended from the way writers use their language?

Dew: I am not talking of 'a writer's use of language'. I am talking of 'a language' (such as Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, etc.) and its universe of philosophy, culture, meaning, social relations, memory, patterns, etc. The two are very different concepts.

Question: Academicians and critics have often maintained that *Desivad* is not related to fundamentalism or radicalism, but given the contemporary cultural and political scenario, do you think it's possible to talk about *Desivad* without falling a prey to such discourses?

Dew: I agree with you. Unfortunately, many noble ideas like 'nation', 'culture', 'memory', 'history', 'god', 'religion', 'secularism', 'democracy', have been hijacked by ideological extremes. 'Desh' (and 'Desivad') too belongs to this list. This hijacking the problem, the ideas in themselves or by themselves are not a part of the problem. We need to rescue these ideas and reinstate them where they belong. In ancient epic *Ramayana*, Sita is not the problem, the kidnapping of Sita is the problem. Let us not blame the victim, let us be bold enough to say that a victim is a victim. The perpetrator should be seen as being at fault, not the victim.

Question: Lastly, what are your concerns about the current literary scene in India and what would you say to the next generations of our writers?

Dey: "Dear Next Generation, courage, fearlessness, infinite compassion, respect for diversity and commitment to a culture of decency and concern make literature great. Save them if you see them threatened. Speak up where it is necessary to do so. Preserve your sanity in the times of shrill propaganda. Be the conscience keepers of society." About the current literary scene: It is what makes it necessary for someone like me – close to the end – thinks it necessary to address the next generation in the words I have used in the above lines.

Conclusion

It becomes very easy for *Desivad* to be equated with regionalism and supportive of hegemonic ideologies especially when one sees the current political scenario. Nemadé's views on *Desivad* have often been criticized as supportive of Hindu ideology. Nativism can easily fall prey to fundamentalism and discrimination and can often be confused with rejection of foreign influences. *Desivad* understands the culture and realism that is inherent in the society whereas Modernity is an energetic relationship with its times which sees the world with objectivity. Individually, these theoretical frameworks provide one side of the story resulting in a half-baked presentation of our cultures and society. Juxtaposition of both *Desivad* and Modernity together can help understand the Indian writings at large. *Desi-modernity* is a categorical space that can be defined as a site of confluence between Nativism and the Modernity. As an assimilation of these two frameworks, *Desi-modernity* will help us to conceptualize the Indian sense of modernity in the native context.

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