

Decolonisation: Myth or Reality

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Abstract

The 20th century witnessed two world wars followed by cold war and in between liberation of colonies by world powers. The colonizing country give those countries means colonies independence in gradual manner. After 1945 the super powers US and USSR take their stand against colonialism and various countries got independence including India. Colonialism was a historical phase but it is also an ideology that perpetuates enslavement even without physical domination. An eminent political philosopher, who has done influential work in the fields of post-colonial studies Frantz Fanon said “Colonised people

— people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave”.

Carl Olson’s plea for hermeneutical dialogue as a methodological tool, to end the gap between the West and the East is no solution. It is merely a cover for the infantile disorder of Western civilisation. The need is to theorize this disorder. The process of decolonisation is not merely confined to the exposition of our own civilisational contributions and cultural gains but also to make perennial colonisers realise their civilisational inconsistency and the inherent danger of an unaltered Semitic ideology which poses the biggest stumbling block to any peaceful progress of human society. But while doing so, one should also be self-introspective and overcome one’s own pitfalls of becoming dogmatic, political and polemical. The impact of the West is prevalent to the extent that people in former colonies define themselves through the Western prism. In this context, Lord Bhikhu Parekh uses a very appropriate term ‘decolonisation of imagination’. Hans-Georg Gadamer, through his term ‘fusion of horizons’ seeks to extend this human project to something far loftier. However, his work is also a mere attempt to accommodate the efforts at decolonisation. Any knowledge system should be inclusive; only then can decolonisation of the mind take shape and become constructive and productive.

In the post-colonial period one of the most effective interventions towards decolonisation has been made by an African novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o. His creative writings in English were appreciated and widely recognised not only in Africa but also in the English literary world of Europe and US. Ngugi’s writings inspired and intensified a new theoretical debate on the decolonisation of literature, language, and culture. He also set an example for the intellectuals and literary giants to contest colonial culture not as a subject matter, but as a movement. Although Ngugi wrote in English and was a product of colonial education and neo liberal culture, but that has not wiped out his quest for

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originality.

Even before his formal expression through a book or lecture, an author/intellectual conceives the idea much earlier. The seed of his influential writing or speech germinates first in his subconscious mind and only then is transferred to his conscious mind. It is at this stage he or she marks an important beginning. It should not be viewed as an abrupt expression, but a continuation of his thought process which is affected by his surroundings. Thus, he tends to behave even contrary to what he expresses through his writings. A manifestation of this can be found true in the works of Ngugi. His childhood memory as well as his later experiences of the colonial culture which was based on brutalities and anti-humane traits, negation of people's self by implantation of consciousness and image construed in alien culture and society did not allow Ngugi to remain integrated with the new form of colonial philosophy *i.e.* neo liberalism. The first effective change he did was to renounce Christianity and English. He changed his name from James Ngugi to Ngugi wa Thiong'o in 1976 as the former was given by the colonial society which was influenced by evangelical forces. This was a potent rebellion against the precedent set by other African authors who preferred foreign languages such as English, French and Portuguese as mode of their expression. He wrote *Petals of Blood* in 1976 which was his last work in English. He then opted for Kenyan language 'Gikuyu' for his future literary endeavours. This exemplary act of him was an inspiration and appeal for other African authors to abandon the use of foreign language and instead opt for their mother tongues. He termed the craze for foreign language among the elites and literary figures in Africa like 'linguicide'. He advocated that 'to speak of African literature in European languages is not only an absurdity but also part of a scheme of Western Imperialism to hold Africa in perpetual bondage. He reviews his own position as a writer in English and decides that he can no longer continue in treachery"¹

One of his most important publications came out in 1986 with the book *'Decolonising the Mind'*. It was a collection of fictions through which he critically re-examined the impact of English on past, present and posterity as well as on culture and society, idea and imagination, thereby unsettling the post-colonial discourse. It resurrected a new debate on perpetuation of colonial impact through language, literature, art, culture and social sciences. It was not only meant for Africa but can be generalised as a form of message for both the ex-colonialists and their ex-colonies. Ngugi's *'Decolonisation the Mind'* should be considered as a landmark beginning of the second battle against colonisation.

Language not only serves as merely a tool of communication but also acts as a carrier of one's culture. Language is intrinsic and cannot be separated from the culture, history and civilisational trajectory of a community or a nation. He very aptly traces the interdependence of culture and language. As Ngugi says:

"Any language has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Take English it is spoken in Britain and in Sweden and Denmark. But for Swedish and Danish people English is only a means of communication with non-Scandinavians. It is not a carrier of their culture. For the British, particularly for the English, it is additionally and inseparably from its use as a tool of communication, a carrier of their culture and history."²

Language harmoniously mingles with the evolution of a community or a nation. Therefore, it is quite

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obvious that it nurtures the history, emotions, messages and social consciousness of nations in its womb. Every language internalizes cultural values of the community and the idealism it cherishes. Folklores and stories, fictions, narratives in the mother tongues are in consonance with idealist view of the community. Ngugi recounts his childhood memories and its impact as evident in the following passages:

“There were good and bad story tellers. A good one could tell the same story over and over again, and it would always be fresh to us, the listeners. He or she could tell a story told by someone else and make it more alive and dramatic. The differences really were in the use of words and the images and the inflexion of voices to effect different tones.

We therefore learnt to value words for their meaning and nuances. Language was not a mere string of words. It had suggestive power well beyond the immediate lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words. So, we learnt the music of our language on top of the content. The language, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world, but it had a beauty of its own.”

As, stories tutored in mother tongues always engage children and give mental fodder for future life, they interpret and evolve their own thinking on that basis. They correlate stories with activities they observe around them, and communicate during normal life. When this unbreakable chain of communication is wrecked, it also delinks the pattern of thinking, imagination and social perspectives. Ngugi says that in his childhood stories that were narrated to them had mostly animals as the main characters. He further tells how they used to mould their thinking and perspectives accordingly.

“Hare, being small, weak but full of innovative wit and cunning, was our hero. We identified with him as he struggled against the brutes of prey like lion, leopard, and hyena. His victories were our victories and we learnt that the apparently weak can outwit the strong. We followed the animals in their struggle against hostile nature-----

drought, rain, sun, wind—a confrontation often forcing them to search for forms of co—operation. But we were also interested in their struggles amongst themselves, and particularly between the beasts and the victims of prey. These twin struggles, against nature and other animals, reflected real-life struggles in the human world.”

Ngugi holds the view that colonialism has proven a curse for impressionable mind when they were compelled to adopt a language which was completely alien to them and not reflected the world view of Kenyan society and culture. “The home and field were then our pre-primary school but what is important for this discussion, is that the language of our evening teach-ins and the language of our immediate and wider community and the language of our work in the fields were one. And then went to school, a colonial school, and this harmony was broken. The language of my education was no longer language of my culture.”

The colonial stress and imposition of English as a means of education created two sets of ideas, values

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and imaginations, one disseminated through school education in English and other through natural mode of communication in homes and community life. Nevertheless, Colonial education increasingly succeeded to alienate people from their own culture, heroes and customs. Thus, a new artificial self was implanted in each and every child. Ngugi elaborates this when he says that:

“Literary education was now determined by the dominant language while also reinforcing that dominance. Orature (oral literature) in Kenyan languages stopped. In primary school I now read simplified Dickens and Stevenson alongside Rider Haggard. Jim Hawkins, Oliver Twist, Tom Brown — not Hare, Leopard and Lion— were now my daily companions in the world of imagination. In secondary school, Scott and G.B. Shaw vied with more Rider Haggard, John Buchan, Alan Paton, Captain W.E. Johns. At Makerere I read English: from Chaucer to T.S. Eliot with a touch of Grahame Greene. Thus, language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds.”

Further, “And since those images are mostly passed on through orature and literature it meant the child would now only see the world as seen in the literature of his language of adoption. From the point of view of alienation, which is of seeing oneself from outside oneself as if one was another self, it does not matter that the imported literature carried the great humanist tradition of the best Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, Tolstoy, Gorky, Brecht, Sholokhov, and Dickens. The location of this great mirror of imagination was necessarily Europe and its history and culture and the rest of the universe was seen from that center.”

Ngugi says that language as culture is like ‘the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history’. And therefore ‘culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next.’

Ngugi’s following passage truly unravels the contours of colonial mindset. The colonial masters were not only interested in making students learn how to use English, but also intended to completely cut off children from their mother tongues. This objective was achieved by employing force, treachery and greed.

“One of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment — three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks — or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford. And how did the teachers catch the culprits? A button was initially given to one pupil who was supposed to hand it over to whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue. Whoever had the button at the end of the day would sing who had given it to him and the ensuing process would bring out all the culprits of the day. Thus children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one’s immediate community. The attitude to English was the exact opposite: any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded; prizes, prestige, applause; the ticket to higher realms. English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences* and all the other branches of learning. English became the main determinant of a child’s progress up the ladder of formal education”.

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He concludes with his incisive observation on the imperialist's projection to replace the language of the people by their own language.

"So, what was the colonialist imposition of a foreign language doing to us children? The real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth: what they produced, how they produced it, and how it was distributed; to control, in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life. Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser. The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised."³

Therefore, in the light of such colonising impact decolonisation is anticipated and is treated as 'an act of exorcism for both the coloniser and colonised.' And 'for both parties it must be a process of liberation: from dependency: in the case of the colonised, and from imperialist, racist perceptions, representations and institutions ...in the case of coloniser.'⁴

Samia's observation on this scholarship of decolonisation can't be disputed where she detests politics of vengeance. But she is sceptical in her approach and believes that there can't be also reconciliation with the Western mind because they renounced old categories like racism and apartheid. The real challenge is to contest the domination in other avenues away from politics and also to create strong alternative with a sense of indigenous values and confront them philosophically. The issue of decolonisation of the mind has become a prominent area of discussion. Over the years many new categorisations have been devised and developed to understand post-colonial society and the West-East debate. In the post-colonial India, decolonisation of Mind has not been seriously debated, least to say steps taken to recreate alternative. English not only dominated but also expanded as a mode of education. The English elites have turned it into the language of modernity, primary to higher education, university debates and discourse, made it an essential ingredient of urbanisation and also a language of commerce and culture.

One could cite the reasons within the Indian society's status quo on the linguistic question. The rich diversities of indigenous languages and dialects which though is a matter of rejoice are considered as a burden. We have been acting linguistic status quoist and giving more space to English as a bridge between Indian language even after seven decades of independence. Given that there is no dearth of classical texts in Indian languages and that should have been a matter of curiosity for the Indian readers. There is no effective centre or mechanism to translate the classics and contemporary writings from one language into another. Linguistic ghettoisation is a reason for the present crisis, which is not only a linguicide, but also a cultural suicide. The strong hold of English is like a

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psychological transformation of Indian mind which realised its necessity to survive in 'modern Indian society', or to put in other way masses who never acceded to colonial effort to introduce English have increasingly surrendered to it. Where are efforts and who is doing? These two questions embolden an answer for the contemporary crisis, which is deconstructing and compromising our mental autonomy and communitarian culture. However, this should not be treated as a separate question, and it is linked with a larger issue of our concern and desire for *Swaraj in Idea*. This phrase, coined by an Indian thinker Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya, finds mention much earlier than the issue of decolonisation of the mind became an academic debate. J N Pieteterse and Bhikhu Parekh preferred the new term, *i.e.*, 'decolonisation of imagination' over *Swaraj in Idea*.⁵ The year 1931 assumes significance for two great lectures on this line of thought, one by Mahatma Gandhi and another by K C Bhattacharya. On October 20, 1931 Mahatma Gandhi delivered a lecture at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, where he criticised the colonialists for destruction of Indian education system. He said that the beautiful tree of education was cut down by the Britishers who made India more illiterate than it was hundred years ago.⁶ Gandhi, of course, attracted the attention of press in London but back home the issue had not been responded to by his people in course of the freedom movement. The social philosophy of the freedom movement which he redefined too lacked the concern for European domination in culture and intellectual discourse besides politics. Gandhi limited decolonisation to vocabularies and mode of struggle which suited the colonialists more than anything. While Gandhi wanted *Swaraj* by giving moral defeat to the imperialist forces which in fact was a noble idea, but it had not let the colonialists to lessen the atrocities on Indians. However, this is another debatable point since cultural nationalists in India were more inclined to the revolutionary movement. With the decline of revolutionary movement, Gandhi rose to scene and acquired hegemony, making the movement a bit too political. In the same year Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya (1875-1949) delivered Sri Asutosh Memorial Lecture organised at Chandernagore by Charu Chandra Roy.⁷ This was the most outstanding theorisation of decolonisation and his speech was both a latent critique of the freedom movement which had ignored and side-lined the cultural dimension while indoctrinating Satygrahis and emphasised merely on mode of struggle. Bhattacharya begins his speech by making a distinction between political *Swaraj* and *Swaraj in idea*:

"We speak today of *Swaraj* or self-determination in politics. Man's domination over man is felt in the most tangible form in the political sphere. There is however a subtler domination exercised in the sphere of ideas by one culture on another, a domination all the more serious in the consequence, because it is not ordinarily felt. Political subjection primarily means restraint on the outer life of a people and although it tends gradually to sink into the inner life of the soul, the fact that one is conscious of it operates against the tendency. So long as one is conscious of a restraint, it is possible to resist it or to bear it as a necessary evil and to keep free in spirit". He clarifies that the same is not true about cultural subjection. He argues, "cultural subjection is ordinarily of an unconscious character and it implies slavery from the very start." He then makes a categorical difference between assimilation of cultures and cultural subjugation. He says, "when I speak of cultural subjugation, I do not mean the assimilation of an alien culture. That assimilation need not be an evil; it may be positively necessary for healthy progress, and, in any case, it does not mean a lapse of freedom. There

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is cultural subjection only when one's traditional cast of ideas and sentiments is suppressed without comparison and competition by a new cast representing an alien culture which possesses one like a ghost." He describes this phenomenon as 'slavery of the spirit'. And, "when a person can shake himself free from it, he feels as though the scales free from his eyes. He experiences a rebirth and that what I call *Swaraj in Ideas*."

In the process of colonial hybridisation in India, a new class of people emerged who were defined as Indian only in colour but English in taste and thought. Such people were comfortable and felt happy while remaining disconnected with our culture and legacies. They defined their self in the mirror of Europe. Such people slowly started dominating our culture, education and dialogues. Bhattacharya pronounces that they willingly disavow Indian culture. Describing about it he says, "many of our educated men do not know and do not care to know much of this indigenous culture of ours, and when they seek to know, they do not feel, as they ought to feel that they are discovering their own self." Further, he says that there can be 'no vital assimilation of the imposed culture'.

The western culture has been imposed on our system through narrative and counter narratives both emanating from the West. This domination took the shape of hegemony, however, not for the entire masses but a principal class of educated people and it has been they who praise the West rather than judge them from their own wisdom. Bhattacharya says:

"There is no gainsaying the fact that this Western culture – which means an entire system of ideas and sentiments – has been simply imposed on us. I do not mean that it has been imposed on unwilling minds: we ourselves asked for this education and we feel, and perhaps rightly, that it has been a blessing in certain ways. I mean only that it has not generally been assimilated by us in an open-eyed way with our old-world Indian mind. That Indian mind has simply lapsed in most cases for our educated men, and has subsided below the conscious level of culture. It operates still in the persisting routine of their family life and in some of their social and religious practices which have no longer, however, any vital meaning for them. It neither welcomes nor resists the ideas received through the new education. It dares not exert itself in the cultural sphere."

Those who tirelessly pleaded utility, greatness and friendliness of the Western culture could not realise that even after its impact on our educated people the influenced mind could not yield anything great in the knowledge system of the world which includes, art, literature, science, humanities and culture. Bhattacharya poses the question before them, "One would have expected after a century of contact with the vivifying ideas of the West that there should be a vigorous output of Indian contribution in a distinctive Indian style to the culture and thought of the modern world, -- contribution specially to the humane subjects like history, philosophy or literature, a contributions such as may be enjoyed by our countrymen who still happen to retain their vernacular mind and which might be recognised by others as reflecting the distinctive soul of India. Barring the contribution of a few men of genius, -- and genius is largely independent of the times, -- there is not much evidence of such creative work done by our educated men."

He portrays his deep concern for the people who have just bought and uncritically accepted the western culture and their judgments about our own culture, traditions and world views.

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“We speak of world movements and have a fair acquaintance with the principles and details of Western life and thought, but we do not always sufficiently realise where we actually stand today and how to apply our bookish principles to our situation in life. We either accept or repeat the judgments passed on us by Western culture, or we impotently resent them but have hardly any estimates of our own, wrung from an inward perception of the realities of our position.”

No society can progress and can remain original if it imitates others and feels euphoric by blindly following ideas that originated in a totally different cultural atmosphere. It should be the objective of education system to evolve according to our needs and genius privileges both for present and posterity. It should be able to generate, to develop, to add new ideas with reason and universal appeal. Such an idea will thereby illuminate other societies too having universal appeal. It is with the destruction of beautiful tree and imposition of an education system merely with an Indian frame we have been self-sabotaging it. In the field of natural science and mathematics genius can be produced with strenuous efforts, inspiring systems and minimum facilities. While that achievement is and should be laudable, they give the nation prestige, the real challenge remains unaddressed *i.e.*, the discovery of the soul of the nation. The discovery of India is not the task, rather a mission to defeat the danger of national conceit which gets the support from those who interpret idea of India to kill the self and soul without any remorse or repent. They are the educated people who hold the upper echelon of our opinion making system, academic and political titles, who are loath and have surrendered to whatever the western thought whether good or bad fresh or rotten produce in economics, social sciences and philosophy. They take shelter in the synthesis between the East and the West, clearly ignoring the fact that West has never accepted this synthesis in true sense. The West has always been reluctant, has never obliged and convinced its masses about the greatness or even the utility of Indian philosophy. The slogan of universalism is a mask to surrender before the West and accept them uncritically. The education system built on this premise is confusing and unphilosophical, creates a detachment from the past. Bhattacharya fears this and observes that:

“Our education has not so far helped to understand ourselves, to understand the significance of the past, the realities of the present and our mission of the future. It has tended to drive our real mind into the unconscious and to replace it by a shadow mind that has no roots in our past and in our real present. Our old mind cannot be wholly driven underground and its imposed substitute can function effectively and productively. The result is that there is confusion between the two minds and a hopeless Babel in the world of ideas. Our thought is hybrid through and through and inevitably sterile. Slavery has entered into our very soul.”

Bhattacharya rightly accepts that we have weakened our vernacular, which might be due to backdoor entry of English and shift of genius from vernacular to English. He confesses that he himself would be not proficient had he been asked to present the same ideas in Bengali. He says that complexity of linguistic problem needs to be resolved and considers that would be the first genuine step towards Swaraj in India as he states:

“The hybridisation of our ideals is evidenced from the strange medley of vernacular and English in which our educated people speak to one another. For the expression of cultural ideas especially we

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find it difficult to use pure vernacular medium. If I were asked, for example, to conduct today's discourse here in Bengali; I have to make a particularly strenuous effort. ...if the language difficulty could be surmounted, it would mean a big step towards the achievement of what I have called Swaraj in Idea."

However, ignoring this, our modernists and lazy intellectuals fail to realise that ideas are no merely essays or speeches. An idea can be effective that transcends the limits of time and geography if it contains ideals along with it. Ideas internalise aspiring ideals of the society thus it makes an impact and defeat resistance with the support of the common will and consent of the people. Idea develops as a thought and when it engages ideals it becomes a concept. An idea conceptualised and nurtured in a particular civilisation or nation can't be translated with the same essence in other social, cultural communities and civilisations. They can be contextualised but that is merely the nearest solution. Sometimes when basic presumptions of the two civilisations fundamentally differ or stand opposed to each other than even the contextualisation creates more problems than symmetry. European civilisational impact also led to varying conceptual uses in India. It can be best exemplified and understood with the use of two words which deliver two entirely different meaning for Indians and Europeans. They are religion and dharma.

"All vital ideas involve ideals. They embody the entire theory and an insight into life. Thought or reason may be universal but ideas are carved out of it differently by diverse cultures according to their respective genius. No idea of one cultural language can exactly be translated into another cultural language. Every culture had its distinctive 'physiognomy' which is reflected in each vital idea and ideal presented by the culture:

"It is possible for a foreigner to appreciate the literature of a country, but it is only to be expected that this mind would react to it differently from the mind of a native of the country. A Frenchman, for example, would not, I imagine, appreciate Shakespeare just as an Englishman would do. Our education has largely been imparted to us through English literature. The Indian mind is much further removed by tradition and history than the French and the German mind from the spirit of English literature, and yet no Indian, so far as I am aware, has passed judgments on English literatures that reflect his Indian mentality."

"The most important contribution of ancient India to the culture of the world is in the field of philosophy. It is in philosophy, if anywhere that the task of discovering the soul of India is imperative for the modern India : the task of achieving, if possible, the continuity of his old self with his present day self, of realising what is nowadays called the Mission of India, If it has any. Genius can unveil the soul of India in art, but it is through philosophy that we can methodically attempt to discover it."

Bhattacharya concludes with a practical suggestion that no idea can be effective unless it possesses constitutive power that originates through its ability to convince the large masses, and secondly by combining pragmatism and idealism. The Swaraj of Ideas can only be achieved once we rebel against the imposed ideals and ideas and self-created social and cultural barriers. It can only be possible once we resolutely begin our mission to resurrect our originality and progressively define our self.

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“In politics our educated men have been compelled to realise by the logic of facts that they have absolutely no power for good, though they have much power for evil, unless they can carry the masses with them. In other fields there is no such realisation of this circumstance. In the social sphere, for example, they still believe that they can impose certain reforms on masses – by mere preaching from without, by passing resolutions in social conferences and by legislation. In the sphere of ideas, there is hardly yet any realisation that we can think effectively only when we think in terms of indigenous ideas that pulsate in the life and mind of the masses. We condemn the caste system of our country, but we ignore the fact that we, who have received Western education, constitute a caste more exclusively and intolerantly than any of the traditional castes. Let us resolutely break down the barriers of this new caste, let us come back to the cultural stratum of the real Indian people and evolve a culture along with them suited to the time and to our native genius. That would be to achieve Swaraj in Ideas.”

Europe and the US dominated the modern world through their economic and military might. Social sciences are an important tool to justify the domination and also turn domination into hegemony. The West has to answer to the world for many of its odious contributions to humanity. The destructive ideologies like Fascism, Nazism, the two World Wars, identity-based conflicts, colonialism and religious wars have been their yields. The West cannot escape its responsibility in downgrading of civilisational discourse and dialogue. In seeking to do so, it has been creating new international institutions and professing counter-narratives after every invention of destructive ideological weapons.

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