

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Feb 9, 2023

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/psychoanalysis-in-india-duane-rousselle-interviews-arka-chattopadhyay/>

Duane Rousselle

Psychoanalysis, in India? Duane Rousselle Interviews Arka Chattopadhyay

Brief bio – Arka Chattopadhyay is assistant professor, Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Gandhinagar, India. He has been published in books like *Deleuze and Beckett*, *Knots: Post-Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film*, *Gerald Murnane: Another World in this One* etc., and journals like *Textual Practice*, *Interventions*, *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, *Critique*, *Sound Studies* and *The Harold Pinter Review*. He has co-edited *Samuel Beckett and the Encounter of Philosophy and Literature* (2013) and guest-edited the SBT/A issue *Samuel Beckett and the Extensions of the Mind*. (2017). Arka is the founding editor of *Sanglap* and a contributing editor to *Harold Pinter Review*. He is the author of *Beckett, Lacan and the Mathematical Writing of the Real* (Bloomsbury Academic UK, 2019). He has co-edited a volume on *Nabarun Bhattacharya* (Bloomsbury India, 2020) and is working on a monograph on Posthumanism (Orient Blackswan) and two edited volumes on Affective Ecologies and Badiou and Modernism (Orient Blackswan and Bloomsbury). He has recently been awarded the Charles Wallace India Trust Fellowship 2022-2023 at the University of Edinburgh.

Duane Rousselle: Psychoanalysis, in India?

Arka Chattopadhyay: Hi Duane, nice to have this conversation! Perhaps you will be surprised to know that Psychoanalysis existed in India, almost right from the word go. Girindrashekar Bose, the first psychology graduate of India from Calcutta University, set up a psychoanalytic practice in India in the beginning of the 20th century, had an elaborate correspondence with Freud (from 1920) in which he discussed his own theory vis-a-vis Freud's, especially his thoughts on the Pre-Oedipal and the opposite wishes in the unconscious. He went on to establish the Indian Psychoanalytical Association in 1922 which became part of the IPA. Indian Psychoanalytical Association exists till date and has a thriving presence in Kolkata.

If this is the history of Indian psychoanalysis in the colonial period, the history in the postcolonial period centers around Ahmedabad where Erik Erikson spotted Sudhir Kakar in the late 1960s. Kakar eventually got trained in Freudian-Eriksonian analysis in Germany, came back to India and developed a psychoanalytically inflected sociology that attempted to culturally Indianize psychoanalysis via Hindu religious mythology and mysticism.

When it comes to Lacanian psychoanalysis, it was Santanu Biswas, a literature professor at the department of English, Jadavpur University, trained in Lacan Circle Australia, who started possibly the first Lacanian clinic in Kolkata in and around 2012. As his students, some of my friends and I took the cue from him and had our training in Australia, France, America among other places and are now engaged in private practice in India and abroad.

DR: Three moments in the timeline, then: (1) ‘colonial period’ alongside Freud, from the start, via some connection with Paris, (2) ‘postcolonial period,’ which relates to Germany, and (3) the contemporary period, which introduces a Lacanian orientation in proximity to Australia, France, America, etc. What does an Indian practice look like now, after the encounter with Lacan?

AC: Bose didn’t have a connection with Paris in the first ‘moment’ but I like your gesture toward logical time there!

It’s difficult to say what Lacan brings to the Indian scene beyond what Lacan generally adds to Freudian practice (taking psychoanalysis in a direction of anti-mastery, making it more analysand-driven than Ego analysis, among others).

Unlike Kakar, I am not a “culturalist” when it comes to psychoanalysis. I would rather go for *Psychoanalysis in India* instead of *Indian psychoanalysis*! There is no need to nationalize psychoanalysis, I feel. Of course, we need to be aware of cultural contexts and how Lacanian structures unfold differently in different cultures and subjects but when it comes to the fundamentals (like the triplicity of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary or the functionality of desire as metonymy and symptom as metaphor), they are transversal and perhaps indifferent to culture. Culture inflects how the unconscious structure unfolds for a subject but isn’t that difference intra-cultural too (two people belonging to the same culture may have very different inflections)? Lacanian psychoanalysis focuses on the singularity of the subject more than cultural genericity.

To talk about one such general cultural inflection, the Sanskrit word *shusrusha* meaning “to nurse” etymologically refers to “the willingness to listen!” There is a cultural identification in India between wanting to hear the Other and taking care of them.

To briefly offer one response to your question, let me say that the Lacanian understanding of the unconscious as the Other’s discourse has a particular resonance in the Indian social space which is far more porous and striated and much less individualist, compared to some of the social spaces in the western countries. In this hyper-social and somewhat incestuous environment, the judgment of the Other has a heightened effect on the subject. To deepen this cultural relativist point, let me add that in India, people pour out their problems more readily than they do in many other countries and while this isn’t unhealthy, the social judgments for their part too, have a far more direct and blunt expression (comparatively speaking). It activates the field of the Other in a strong and invasive way in the unconscious.

As another cultural differential, one could consider the staple bi/tri-lingualism in the run-of-the-mill Indian subject. Does this doubleness/triplicity (English+Hindi/ English+Hindi+Mother tongue in a non-Hindi speaker) impact the unconscious in a different way in India, given that the unconscious is structured like a language? For instance, in a regular analysis in India, the analysand often finds themselves translating words and sentences from their first languages (as brought back by memory and/or free association) into English, since the analysis is typically conducted in English language and the analyst may not know the analysand’s mother tongue. Hope this is making sense.

DR: The “anti-mastery” you locate in Lacan no doubt helps to frame this revolt against the nationalization of psychoanalysis, since, alongside Lacan, if I’ve followed you, one can say: psychoanalysis *in India*, which means a practice oriented as a counterpoint to the prevailing discourse. Yet, what practices have emerged or are necessary within an “incestuous environment” that “pours out issues”?

AC: This is a very interesting question! How can psychoanalysis subvert the political discourses of power and dominant ideology in the Indian context? How can it become an anti-dogmatic tool of ideological critique?

Identity politics and a public psychology of religion are integral to Indian governmentality in the current context. Psychoanalysis can interrogate identity categories like caste, class, gender, sexual orientation and produce “identifications without identity,” to echo an idea from Samo Tomšič. This identification without the imaginary moorings of identity (identification with the *sinthome* or with a frame object *a*) as a goal of analysis is not that far away from what Ambedkar calls the annihilation of caste. Psychoanalysis can question and “work through” the affective idea of “pride” associated with religious identity (the *Hindutva* politics). Psychoanalysis in India can become a radical discourse if it demonstrates in the clinic how religion is a symptom and the majoritarian religious identity, a smokescreen of the imaginary that hides the anarchic real of identity as a “desetre.”

Though I mentioned the incestuous hyper-social Indian spaces, allowing outpouring of personal emotions, over the years the way global capitalism flattens out certain distinctions across the countries, India’s so-called westernisation has led to atomization of the subject and capitalist alienation, not unlike the western countries. In other words, the space for social and interpersonal dialogue has shrunk and with that there is increasing need for psychotherapy in India. The taboo around going to a therapist has gotten reduced to a substantial degree at least in the urban spaces in 21st century India. But most people come to “therapy” and not “analysis!” They don’t necessarily know the difference all the time.

DR: What you are sharing with me seems to highlight something of a politics of psychoanalysis in India?

AC: Absolutely. That politics comes, as in other countries too, from its para-institutional structure of freedom. Psychoanalysis has a particularly subversive edge vis-a-vis the pedagogic structure of the academic discourse in India which in its cultish *Guruvadi* inclination is still predominantly hierarchical and top down! Psychoanalysis can infuse a certain kind of egalitarianism in that discourse of academic mastery. It can deliver some much needed blows to academic ego, often mistaken for a subject! Lacan’s earliest moves are still very relevant here!

In addition, as I said in my previous response, psychoanalysis can and should become a heuristic tool for political critique and address caste, gender and other social identity categories, peel off their layers and help us think through what Ambedkar would call a situated “social humanity” beyond the limited identity categories. It can interrogate “graded inequalities” in the social system, again to echo Ambedkar.

Caste discrimination or heterosexist discrimination produces specific kinds of psychic affects (shame, guilt, insult produced by both words and non-verbal practices). The clinic has to take these conditions and their ramifications into account.

The loosening (if not dissolution) of the patronymic is a social process that has taken/is taking place in India. But having said that, there is perhaps a greater residue of patriarchy here. For instance, the question of male political leadership and its masculinist branding in public culture is a place where psychoanalytic tools of interpretation might be useful. Many of its political dimensions are shared across the world. The difference is, more often than not, a difference of degrees.

DR: For me, this concept, “social humanity,” without discounting its importance in revolutionary political discourse, seems almost oceanic. Does this appeal aim toward what some political theorists call “universality?” I wonder to what extent it is necessary to preserve “psychoanalysis *in* India,” that is, a space within which the singularity of the symptom is confronted, as a counterpoint perhaps to political, religious, and scientific discourses that would otherwise render it consistent with prevailing sociality (e.g., *Indian* psychoanalysis). What do you think?

AC: Social humanity is homologous to the “proletariat;” if it is a universal, it’s a subtractive universal (the dispossessed human subject in Badiou’s “generic humanity”), or what Žižek has called “concrete universality” on occasions. The way the universal unfolds for each subject is a singular process and hence the logic of the singular universal in Lacan. The way I understand it, Lacanian psychoanalysis, whether in India or in any other country, is meant to attack the identity discourses and challenge an inductive (generalized) universal with a deductive if not subtractive universal. It is about creating truth as a break in knowledge.

I am not sure about the relation between your two questions but it seems to me that you think “psychoanalysis in India” is somehow related to a social humanity while Indian Psychoanalysis is reducible to identity discourses and dominant ideologies. I am not making this equation though. For me, there is no Indian psychoanalysis just as there is no French or German psychoanalysis. I am using the expression, “psychoanalysis in India” to take away from the idea of Indianizing psychoanalysis.

To be more granular, I think there is no ONE psychoanalysis either. Each analysis is ultimately singular. There is no THE psychoanalysis but A psychoanalysis, if you like. The question is what happens at the end of an analysis when the identitarian masks are peeled off? How does the subject reorient themselves with the help of the singularity of the *sinthome*? How are their social relations altered and/or re-invented? Psychoanalysis is a social bond that unknots the prevailing social relations of the subject and confronts them with an exteriority from which the subject must re-knot themselves. This is a pivotal moment when the subject realizes that their subjectivity is *irreducible* to the fact that they are Indian or biologically male, or straight or Hindu or Brahmin or whatever. It is this sense of irreducibility that psychoanalysis preserves.

DR: It preserves, and, perhaps, perseveres! A final question: where do you see Lacanian psychoanalysis currently in India? Are you aware of (or involved in) any cartels, societies, clinical groups, initiatives, courses or teaching programs, and so on?

AC: Indeed both preserves and perseveres! Psychoanalysis must persevere against medical reductionism, neurobiological cognitivism and pharmacological capitalism. That’s perhaps true across countries and in India as well. But this marginality is precisely what gives the practice of psychoanalysis a radical value.

Lacanian psychoanalysis in India is at a nascent level, I must stay! There are not more than 3/4 practitioners across the country! It’s very sparse to say the least. There is more psychoanalysis in the university than in the clinic! People like Santanu Biswas and I are in both worlds. There are no institutional structures in place and I like that. The informal space works better for me. I lead a reading group that has been reading “Direction of Treatment” for more than a year now in fortnightly sessions. Some of us were part of an NLS cartel in 2020. The members of our cartel collaborated with NLS members to read a Lacan text (“British Psychiatry and the War: 1947”) together in real time. There are some other ongoing cartels in India that are affiliated to NLS (has an NLS +1 as we did in the cartel on *Seminar 4* that we participated in). Santanu Biswas has his own clinical group that meets at his place in Kolkata. That’s it as far as I know. But there may be other informal groups that are beyond my knowledge.

Thanks so much, Duane! This was a really stimulating conversation!

Bio:

Duane Rousselle is a Lacanian psychoanalyst and Canadian Sociologist. He is currently Visiting Associate Professor of Sociology at the University College of Dublin, Visiting Associate Professor of Sociology at the

University College of Cork, Visiting Associate Professor of Sociology at Nazarbayev University, and Assistant Professor at the Indian Institute of Technology in Guwahati. He has published numerous books including *Real Love* (Atropos Books, 2021), *Gender, Sexuality and Subjectivity: A Lacanian Perspective on Language, Identity and Queer Theory* (London: Routledge, 2020), *Jacques Lacan & American Sociology: Be Wary of the Image* (London: Palgrave, 2019), *Lacanian Realism: Political and Clinical Psychoanalysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), and *Post-Anarchism: A Reader* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

Publication Date:

December 9, 2022