

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Is it compressed modernity or colonial modernity? South Korea today

Sujata Patel

Keywords

South Korea, East Asia, India, post-colonial modernity, social inequality, compressed modernity

Article history

Submitted: June 2023
Accepted: 16 Oct 2023
Published: 11 Dec 2023

There are three queries that organise the book, *The Logic of Compressed Modernity*: first it traces the particular attributes of South Korean modernity; second, it suggests theories/perspectives that can be used to comprehend this modernity; third, it suggests that South Korea's transition process is comparable to other regions of the world and particularly generalisable to countries in East Asia. The canvas of the book is extremely wide and it covers almost all attributes of modernity that organise the discussions on this theme - be it the economic, the political and the cultural. It also brings together discussions made by every scholar of note on modernity in the last two to three decades.

As a sociologist located in India, I would like to start with a discussion on the book through the comparison question. This is because the South Korean transition to modernity has evoked comparisons with the Indian model in terms of both the post-50s and the post-90s developments. Though there are many significant differences between these two countries - the most important being the size and the demographics and cultural diversity - both countries were state-centric post the 50s and introduced land reforms to overcome economic stagnancy and ensure growth and development. It led South Korea to industrialize and urbanize quickly, to increase migration and distill received inequalities such that by the late 80s, two thirds of South Koreans perceived themselves as being middle class (Koo, 2007, 2019). While India did not experience such drastic changes, there was a significant growth of the middle class given the post-independence India state support private sector manufacturing through public sector infrastructural support.

The post-90s developments in the two countries further highlight the similarities between them. Scholars who have assessed India's entry into global economic processes after opening its markets in the 90s, have suggested that the economic reforms that it implemented followed the statist model of Japan and South Korea (Kohli, 2018). Both countries promoted their own national businesses (*chaebols*-family controlled conglomerates) and simultaneously used the state to promote and facilitate the availability of capital, labour, technology, and even entrepreneurship. These regimes introduced new supply side policies that enhanced tax collection and investment; pushed public banks to give credit to preferred private firms and sectors; shifted resources from agriculture and urban labour to private industrialists; provided supply of cheap, "flexible", and disciplined labour and ensured that it obeyed its commands through repression (Lee, 2015).

The outcome of these policies has also been similar. In both countries there has been an increase of what Korean scholars have called 'irregular/non-regular' workers and which Indian scholars refer to as the 'informal sector'. By August

Corresponding author

Sujata Patel
Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Rashtrapati
Nivas, Shimla-171005, India
Email:patel.sujata09@gmail.com

2020, 41.6% of all workers were irregular if temporary workers were included in the count (Kim, 2021). In India this number is much higher. It is calculated that between 86% to 94% of all workers are in the informal sector (Jha, 2016). However, both in South Korea and in India they share the same features, they are not unionized; they do not have social security benefits; they obtain low wages; work long hours; face precarious work conditions, employment insecurity and exclusions; no guaranteed housing which leads to urban segregation: the cities of India are dotted with slums surrounded by gated communities. This has led to wealth and income inequalities and increase of poverty both in South Korea and India though given India's population the number of poor are much more than in South Korea (Bani, 2023; Kochar, 2021; Jodhka and Vakulabharanam, 2023; Shin, 2020) In addition, the two countries share two other attributes: growing inequalities in consumption and in access to education. In India while everyone considers themselves middle class since the 90s, the life styles of the rich have changed radically as they align with the global elite. A similar process has occurred in South Korea where the rich and upwardly mobile send their children to North America or other English-speaking countries. Such class differences can be seen in other semi-peripheral capitalist countries. These are graphically represented in movies such as Parasite or TV series such as Squid Games. No wonder Korean movies are a hit with the Indian OTT viewers as these depict worlds that the consumers recognize in their own lives and experiences.

The most important reason to compare the two, India and South Korea, is their embeddedness in their colonial pasts which defines the shaping of their contemporary modernity. In this context, a discussion on the theme of 'colonial modernity' is significant. Conceptualized by the historian Tani E. Barlow (1997, 2012) to comprehend modernity in the Far East, it is an analytical frame that argues that modernity and colonialism are intrinsically linked together and are integral features of contemporary global capitalism (on South Korea, see Sin & Robinson, 2001). Colonial modernity as discussed by scholars is on the one hand a historical process that was initiated in the early 20th century in East Asia consequent to the Japanese colonialization of the region. This process brought in its wake institutional and cultural dimensions of American cultures, thus the argument that East Asia in the 20th century was marked by dual colonization. Additionally given that the Japanese tried to distinguish themselves from the colonized 'other' in distinct cultural ways, the identity question and the way subjectivities came to be organized in the colonized regions of East Asia including South Korea was distinctly different than the one articulated in South Asia which was colonized by the British. The issue of identity continues to define inter-country conflicts in the Far East.

The use of the term colonial modernity is to comprehend analytically these contradictory processes within East Asia. It queries the linear assumption that modernity emerged in each nation-state separately following a pre-modern stage. It also questions the assumption that colonialism played a positive role in reorganizing the region or that colonialism and modernity are polar opposites. Rather it states that these two intersected unequally in time and space creating new geographies in the region (Barlow, 2012). Barlow argues that by the early 20th century, the circulation of commodities across the world had established and reshaped East Asia through styles of governmentality, juridical norms, administrative innovations, and intellectual discourses, thereby legitimising domination-subordination structures defining the metropole(s) with the peripheries. These colonial/imperial flows continued to define all spaces of everyday life,

even those which had not experienced colonialism. Far East Asian scholars are also aware that this received version of colonial modernity is now being re-circulated in the southeast Asian regions as Japan, China and Korea set up a relationship of domination-subordination with other countries in the Asian continent and beyond. Consequently, a discussion on contemporary geopolitics and its entanglement with colonial modernity is imperative in comprehending not only South Korea and the Far East but also the various projects of colonial modernity that are being implemented in Asia and beyond. This is the challenge that scholarship faces in South Korea and the Far East.

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Author information

Sujata Patel is the 2021 Kersten Hesselgren Visiting Professor in the Department of Sociology at Umeå University. Most recently, she was a Distinguished Professor at Savitribai Phule Pune University and a National Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla. She has also been a professor at the Universities of Hyderabad, Pune, and SNDT Women's University. Professor Patel's work on modernity and social theory, history of sociology/social sciences, urbanization and city-formation, social movements, gender construction, and caste and class formation in India combines a historical sensibility with four perspectives: Marxism, feminism, spatial studies and post structuralism. She has authored,

edited and co-edited 13 books and 65 peer reviewed papers/book chapters. Professor Patel is the Series Editor of Oxford India Studies in Contemporary Society (Oxford, India) and Cities and the Urban Imperative (Routledge, India) and in between 2010-2015 edited Sage Studies in International Sociology and Current Sociology Monographs (Sage, London). She has been associated in various capacities with the International Sociological Association and has been its first Vice President for National Associations (2002-2006). She was the President of the Indian Sociological Society from January 2016 to December 2017. Professor Patel holds a PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, an MA from Dalhousie University, and MA and a BA from the University of Bombay.