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Podcast transcript:

Kyra: Hi everyone, welcome back to the Pedagogies for Social Justice Podcast. This week, we are in conversation with Dr Annapurna Menon, based at the University of Sheffield. Annapurna finished her PhD at Westminster in 2022, where her research focused on the coloniality of postcolonial nation states, specifically studying the Indian nation state's exercise of power in Kashmir and Jammu. In this episode, we discuss her academic background, her article 'Debunking Hindutva Appropriation of Decolonial Thought', and the importance of understanding the strengths and shortcomings of traditional decolonial theory and practice.

So, where did you grow up and where are you currently?

Annapurna: Okay. So, I grew up in [R?], in [D?], which is a small Himalayan town in India, in the north, and I am currently based in Sheffield, where I'm working as a Teaching Associate at the University of Sheffield, and this is my first permanent job after my PhD. So, I've been here since last year, September, so it hasn't been too long, but, yes, I'm currently based here and I'm teaching on modules relating to race and racism in international relations, and the other one is on gender in international relations, so mostly undergrad, but yeah, that's where I am right now.

Kyra: And I guess, on the topic of race, how would you describe your upbringing in terms of how it was seen and felt in your household?

Annapurna: Yeah. So, I grew up in India, and I grew up in different places since my father was in the Indian Army, so, you know, the usual moving around after every two years, and the concept of race does not really translate as neatly in the Indian context as one might imagine, and, you know, one of those ideas of realise you are South Asian and brown when you're not in South Asia, in India, is also quite true for me. However, there is a very strong aspect of colourism that is directly related to race and also to caste in the context of India which was quite permanent. So, for example, my maternal grandmother, because she comes from Pakistan, which is a more...I mean, people there of a certain caste are taller and fairer and those kind of characteristics, which did not neatly come onto me because my father's from the south of India, so hearing remarks such as I'm not fair enough or, you know, you



shouldn't be in the sun for too long to be fair, or that you should be getting married to somebody who's fair, were remarks that I heard of quite regularly, and there is a very clear demarcation and association of people who are supposed to be richer, better, cleaner, with people who are fair. So, that was quite neatly observable in the context of India as well.

But the context of race particularly, I mean, apart from stereotypes about black people, does not really, yeah, exist within the Indian society as such, and I think these differences are quite important to take note of because this leads to a lot of anti-blackness within the South Asian community that is quite prevalent in the UK and the US, whenever these diasporic populations are. So, we really need to be more, I think, critical of these existing relations within these societies, and also take the link to caste, because, again, that is another oppressive structure that has very neatly been transposed into the UK context as well. So, yeah, that is where my understanding actually comes from.

Kyra: What shows and what books did you watch and read like growing up, and I'm interested to learn the kind of the representations that you were exposed to? Some of the things that you've just expressed, like did that translate into some of the media that you were consuming?

Annapurna: Yeah, so I think there is...there are like two kinds of texts that I was majorly reading: one was which were locally produced and written, and these often shifted, depending on which place I was living in. So, I did grow up in like different parts of India, and because of that, you know, the local cultures would be quite different, and the local newspapers would be quite different. I do have a habit of reading quite a bit, which comes from my father mostly, and the obsession with newspapers in our family is quite longstanding. So, I feel, there, what I was reading and who was being represented, in a lot of the places, I was only reading the English newspaper because like there wasn't a Hindi – there would be the regional language, but I wouldn't know the regional language in that context. So, in that regard, how people were being represented, and also the kind of news that would be in the English newspapers, as compared to what would be in the regional newspapers, was quite different, even in terms of quality of news, who were the reporters, what kind of news was getting published, and then also the local comics that would come, which is something that I did enjoy reading quite a bit. And you would have I think really regional representations of people, which were often quite stereotypical and were supposed to be funny. I mean, for that regard, even Tintin, which is not Indian, but one of the comics that I did read as a kid, you know. I had a very different understanding of it – later, I realised, for example, the way they talk about Tibet is...is quite problematic and exoticizes the entire issue quite a bit. So, yeah, I think there was...the understanding of representation within these...within these writings came a bit later.



But on the other hand, I think now it surprises me a bit that some of the English work that we were reading – and because India has such a massive influence of English literature, as such, we have a whole degree that is on English Literature. It's quite interesting to note how we would read a lot of Enid Blyton and, you know, 'The Famous Five', and all of these texts, quite a bit, and Charles Dickens as well. So, my great-grandfather had this collection of Charles Dickens books, which were...and we would largely focus on the good message of these texts, and, you know, that were supposed to be passed onto students, but often, now, if you look, like the [joke] of the villain always being black or being a darker child, somehow that is...that we did not really realise as problematic, and that was also because we were being told ourselves as well that, you know, people of a certain colour have certain attributes. So, I can see how that played out.

But, yeah, it was a lot of...a lot of mix of reading [laughing], I think, both local kinds of literature and then mostly British literature, translating there. Not particularly American literature. I don't remember a lot of it per se, and I think it was only much later, like after college, like during my undergrad, that I started reading far more critical and interesting stuff, I think.

Kyra: Well, I was actually going to ask, when did you start to look at things through a kind of critical lens? Like I'm guessing when you were young and you were reading kind of like English literature and you were delving into those kind of stereotypes and ideas, but yeah, when did you start to kind of look at things through a critical lens?

Annapurna: Yeah, I think it was in my first year of college when I remember this professor telling us how, you know, there is no one history and we need to talk about the different perspectives that history is written from and, based on that, history completely changes, like even the form it is written in or what it is trying to get across. At that moment, I feel like there was this...a bulb that just went on, and I was like, oh wait, there doesn't have to be one version of things, that means that every version is written in a particular, specific context that needs to be a part of how you are understanding or reading that particular text. And I think, from there on, I started questioning more the sources that were there, and also the idea of...you know, there's a lot of romanticisation of, for example, summer in the UK, right, and rightfully so, I completely get it, but obviously that's not going to be the case in India. So, you know, even when you're reading books and there is this whole idea of people are going camping in the summer and all that, I was like that does not...that [laughing]...why are people doing that?! That does not sound right. So, I think there was some questioning coming from that regard, how experiences that were shown to be universal, I wasn't able to relate to them. So, even the idea of like dating when you're really young, that's not something that was happening in my school at all [laughing], and definitely [not] to the level where, you know, you would tell your parents that you're going out on a date or whatever.



So, there was...I think the aspect of not being able to relate to certain kinds of literature definitely raised some questions in me, but it was definitely going to college and being put in a space that was constantly trying to expose you to new stuff quite rapidly, in fact, that I think really pushed me towards being more critical.

Kyra: When did that shift to kind of ideas about colonial histories, especially within the Indian context – like was that also in your college years?

Annapurna: Yes. So, towards the end of it, when I was doing two modules on Modern English History, that was when we studied a lot more about colonialism and I was quite – I mean, we studied it at school as well, but I became more familiar with the critical aspects of colonialism in college itself. And then...I knew about what was happening in Kashmir for quite some time because my father was posted there and I had visited him and there was very clear a massive dissonance between what was happening in the place that he would be in, which was the military camp, and what was happening outside of it. And, again, you know, my father encouraged me to read local newspapers, which I dutifully did, and they were telling a completely different story as to what was going on in my...in my father's and the Army's version of things. And, there, I was drawing a lot of parallels between colonial practices, and I think that is where the journey kind of started of me being like, okay, wait, so a country that has undergone colonialism itself is also repeating similar patterns of oppression, so what is exactly going on here? And, you know, if there is a way that nation states can...be not colonial as well. So, I think it kind of started off from there, and then, just my participation in like political student groups and talking to a lot more people from Kashmir like really helped me change and grow my understanding, and also grow out of the narrative that I had lived in for...yeah, all my life, so that was quite a big shift, but yes...

Kyra: Yeah. And, I mean, would you like to give us maybe a bit of a breakdown of your academic background so that we can just have an idea of, you know, where you've studied and things like that?

Annapurna: Okay. So, I studied in nine different schools [laughing], and for my high school, I studied Humanities and I also did Maths, and then I did my undergrad in History Honours from Delhi University. I studied at [?] College for Women. And after that, I came to the University of Westminster and did my MA in International Relations, and after that, I applied for the PhD studentship that I got and I started doing my PhD.

Kyra: Amazing. And I guess, at what point do you think your opinion of the university changed as a student, especially I think from studying in India and then coming to the UK?



Were there any expectations that you had or was there anything that kind of like changed your opinion of the institution itself?

Annapurna: Yeah. I think universities in India are extremely hierarchical, in the sense there are very set roles of what the student is supposed to do and what the professor is supposed to do and what the relationship between them is, which was...which was completely changed, head over heels, when I came to the UK. I think the idea that your lecturers and professors can be kind and open to you [laughing] was...was quite a shock. It took a while for me to get adjusted to. But I also think like my understanding of the university is something that is constantly changing because, as you go along in the journey, you see different forms of it, and, yes, while you do see that there is some amount of space that enables you to think critically and openly, there is also a lot of [in process] that can be quite repressive and exclusionary, especially if you are not coming from an academic background or if you simply don't belong to the place. At Westminster, however, I was blessed with like, you know, excellent supervisors who were area experts and also theoretical experts in the field that I was working in, so that was a lot of support. But, at the same time, I also realised how, you know, [a decade later, a decade earlier] if somebody was doing their PhD in the UK, getting a job and all of that stuff would be kind of simpler than what it is right now. So, I also recognised how the university, despite people wanting to be a part of it and people wanting to contribute and create knowledge, the system in place can make it really, really difficult to do that, and I think it's important to take note of that...you can't take all of the failures and rejections super-personally as well. Sometimes, just the structure in place is not build for you to be there. But, despite that, if you are trying, then every effort must, yeah, really makes a difference, in my opinion.

Kyra: What motivated you to begin a PhD? Was it always kind of a part of your plan after your Master's? Was staying at Westminster like a part of your plan to do your PhD as well?

Annapurna: Yeah. So, I think it was in the second half of my Master's that I realised I do not...know enough, and I have not found the answers to the questions that I came with, and that's when I started considering doing a PhD, but obviously I could never afford to do a PhD in the UK, and, the kind of research I wanted to do, there isn't space in India right now, because of the political climate, to be able to do that as well, especially on Kashmir. It's just... yeah, it's impossible. So, I was...that is when I started looking for options to pursue a PhD and I was told about the studentship, which I was quite keen on applying for, and then the fact that Westminster had the few scholars who are working on Kashmir and doing quite critical work in the UK are based there was an obvious choice that I would want to, yeah, pursue my PhD over there.



Kyra: And can you share your PhD research question and I guess what made you focus on that particular topic?

Annapurna: Yeah. So, I look at contemporary practices of colonialism by postcolonial structures, and I look at how the Indian state exercises power in the region of Jammu and Kashmir. So, I use decolonial and postcolonial theory to kind of answer this question, and I look at the colonial matrix of power, which is essentially the system that shows how colonial power flows from...through setting hierarchies, through control over knowledge production, and then through control of the individual person to kind of cement the structures of colonialism. And what the previous research shows, which was mostly on European colonialism, that this the kind of structure that states use to establish colonialism, and what my research finds is that postcolonial nation states, because they're formed as a result of this structure, then go back and implement, you know, the same forms of colonialism, which, in the case of Kashmir, was quite visibly apparent after August 2019 when the region's special status was revoked by the Indian government and, you know, they started imposing laws such as severe curtailment over any kind of press freedom, the right of the security forces to take over any private land for security purposes, the re-listing, so re-making of the warders' list, so defining who can be a warder or not a warder, and also passing legislation such as, if you have said anything against the government, and you're in a government job, you can be fired, even if what you said was like 20 years ago or something like that, but if there's a record of it. So, you could clearly see how these really repressive laws were being implemented, and what my research does is kind of provide a larger framework to look at all of this as part of the colonial mechanism, rather than just separate incidents of the state trying to pursue control, but, you know, impacting very clear hierarchies where the territory of Kashmir is far more valued than its people, like the people, you know, don't exist. There is a very clear attempt to impose the Indian education system and also ways of being on the region. And, thirdly, by completing dehumanising the Kashmiri being, you know, through force, but also through more [discreet] means of keeping people completely in suspension, like without telling them what is going on in their own lands, being able to take away their homes at any instance, and obviously this is all surrounded – and they can't express anything ever without any repercussions, and this is completely surrounded, em, in a zone which is the most militarised zone in the entire world right now. So, I think the research just establishes how these colonial practices are carried out, focusing on one region. Obviously, there is more scope to study coloniality in, say, education structures within India, like there could be various aspects of it, but I specifically focus on one region and looking at how colonialism is established there.

Kyra: Yeah. I think it's really interesting, especially... I mean, I'm studying, I'm doing my MA in International Relations as well, at Westminster, and I'm really interested in this kind of...I think some people call it kind of like auto-colonialism, where almost, you know, colonies end up becoming the colonisers once they've been...once they're not occupied anymore. And, I



mean, we're going to talk about this later on, but I am really, really interested in this kind of topic and hearing your thoughts on it. But, just thinking about I guess your PhD journey, I guess, could you maybe like describe it for us in three words, and explain your choices?

Annapurna: Yeah. So, I think the three words that I came up with were essentially learning, comradery, and purposeful. So, the first is essentially because, from day one itself, whether it be about your topic or about the university, you're constantly learning so much. It can be quite overwhelming, the process overall. I mean, the first word that I came up with almost "enlightenment", and I was like, okay, no [laughing], I think "learning" is a better option to go because it's also a journey – there's never really recognition, okay, I'm still learning about my project, and, you know, how to go about publications and stuff, still, after it, so that journey is very much a part of it.

And I say "comradery" because I think a PhD is never a single person's job. There is so much effort of so many people involved in everything you do, right, from your research participants to your supervisors, to, you know, people who sit with you in the PhD room telling you, "Yes, you can finish this chapter right now", people who are waiting for you outside the viva room, like from day one, to everything, it's a collective effort. And that is why I don't quite agree with whole narrative of "the PhD is my baby" because I'm like it's... it's not that. It's more...it's more collective, and the idea of, em, you know, attaching yourself so personally to the PhD is also probably not that good because, at the end of the day, it is academic work – it should be open to critique, you should be open to changing your view about things, about looking at further resources, right? So, I kind of see it as a more collective project.

And, lastly, I think it was extremely purposeful because it kind of explained to me what I was supposed to be doing in my life, and also what can have the most impact, looking at what kind of skills I have. So, it really kind of gives you a good idea of where you can actually make some meaning, some impact, in the kind of things you want to do, and I think a PhD really, really streamlines that. So, yeah, those would be the three words for me.

Kyra: Good choices. I like how you kind of refer to the PhD as like a collective project, like it's not a baby, it's more like...a child that, you know, it takes a village to raise a child, in a sense.

Annapurna: Yeah, I completely agree with that because I think, even from my interview, like I...I don't think I did anything just on my own.



Kyra: What advice would you give to prospective PhD students, particularly those in the Social and Political Sciences?

Annapurna: Yeah. I think, again, the topmost advice would be, first of all, don't think of people who are doing their PhD with you as competition. It just...because all of you are working on such different projects, it just does not make sense to think of it as a competition, but, rather, it's a journey that all of us are going on together, and there will be moments where we can really help each other and our discussions will help each other, but we don't necessarily have to work against each other because the academic system is already so individualistic, in a lot of ways, and I feel we have to start challenging that from, yeah, from as early as we can. So, that is definitely one advice: that, you know, everybody is on their own separate journeys, you have your own topics, there is no reason to compete with somebody else in your own similar space to be doing that work because both of you can help each other far more and gain more from that than from working against each other.

And I think, secondly, pick a topic that you know you will not get bored of thinking about for the next four years, because, let's be honest, even when you're officially not working, that thing is going to be in your head [laughing] somewhere or the other, and it does take a toll on you, in a lot of like mental, physical, all possible ways. So, make sure it's something that you can definitely see yourself thinking about, at least for the next four years, otherwise, don't do it [laughing]!

Kyra: And I guess, lastly, for this segment, what do you think you're still learning, in terms of I guess maybe your position in the university or other aspects – what are you still learning...?

Annapurna: I think something that constantly surprises me, and annoys me, is, em, how much the university is geared only for individual growth. There is very little space for collective, collaborative work. For example, even when you publish your paper with another scholar, you know, it becomes a contest about whose name will be published first, and I just find this environment quite stifling because it often stops, I feel, really good research from being able to come out, and just creating more sustainable environments rather than that kind of cutthroat competition. And, as a very junior academic, I'm still learning how people will prioritise their very own interests, even over the communities that they research on, and that is something that I'm not comfortable with at all, and I'm still navigating my way around that.

Kyra: So, you recently published a really interesting article called 'Debunking Hindutva Appropriation of Decolonial Thought', which kind of critiques the literature on Hindutva



scholars posing as decolonial and gives insight to how decolonial thought is kind of [bent/ meant] to push like a far-right Hindu nationalist kind of agenda. Honestly, this was not a case study that I was very familiar with before reading your article, so I'm grateful that you kind of like broke down like the historical context of the Hindutva and their ideologies, but also the ways in which postcolonial and decolonial theory have come to be kind of co-opted by them as, you know, this is obviously not the first instance of this kind of co-optation but I think, for those that are in the early stages of thinking about coloniality and how it manifests in global politics, I wanted to ask you, in what ways can decolonisation and decolonial theory be appropriated by political regimes, particularly those that are right-wing.

Annapurna: Yeah, that's a really interesting question, and thank you so much for reading my article as well. I think, with [decolonial] school of thought, it is, just because it does not have a very big "set in stone" methodology about how to go about anything, it kind of becomes open to a lot of appropriations, and, while this is a methodological shortcoming, I also see it as the possibility that opens up spaces to actually imagine different ways to counter existing systems, and, you know, it doesn't provide us a route but it tells us what our route should be moving towards, which I think is more important. However, what has happened in the case of particularly right-wing governments, and also neoliberal regimes in general, you know, they cherry-pick the elements that can work for them and just use...just use those, which is exactly the thing which is happening with the decolonial school of thought as well. So, for example, when you see H&M having those t-shirts talking about feminism, you know, and women just want fundamental rights, or things like that, but, at the same time, you also see that they have refused to pay their factory workers, who are primarily women in Bangladesh, for [quantitative] years now, and, you know, not implementing safety procedures for them, you see how they can easily co-opt a certain part of the narrative without actually having to make any systematic change. And, in the case of the right-wing in India, the Hindutva movement, what they have precisely done is...not only appropriated decolonial theory but they're actually using it to justify a lot of the extremely harmful narratives that they're trying to push, the prime one being, you know, the victimisation of the Hindu community as such.

So, as I talk about in my article as well, the concept of indigeneity, which is quite important in decolonial theory, has a particular context where it comes from, you know. It comes from the South American region where the practice of colonialism depended and was centred around the complete eradication of the indigenous people, right, and this happened through diseases, it happened through mixing with the local population, it happened through sheer and utter violence where entire communities were wiped out. In the Indian context, colonialism did not have the same practice at all, right? In fact, it was more of indirect [rule] and the idea was to use local natives to implement colonial policies on people. That is why you have some of the largest...like you have...the largest counterpart of the British Army, which [was] British Indian Army, which was established during colonial era, and that



continues still [to this day]. You have the entire idea of the Indian constitution takes a lot from existing British laws. In fact, some of the most oppressive laws that we have right now relating to sedition are direct remnants of British policies. So, there is a very clear area where indigenous thought or, as such, indigeneity, was not completely destroyed in the Indian context. So, if we are to even talk about getting this indigeneity back, we also have to be critical about what was left out, what was implemented. And what appropriation of the decolonial thought does is it completely takes away this nuance, right? So, it doesn't remind us that, within Hinduism as well, there are upper class Hindus who have always had access to land and education, and have had access to resources, and have been able to exercise power over a very large group of people. And, hence, if we are saying that we want to go back to the past, does that mean that we again want to go to a period where we want to be ruled by this priestly class? So, it completely takes away any notion of this criticality, and what it simply does is, since decolonial theory says that indigeneity is something we must all do as postcolonial countries, it just goes into that regard, but it does not actually have any methodological, I would say, argumentation or justification for this process, and I feel this really reductive reading is kind of...almost offensive to decolonial theory as well because a lot of the critical scholars, especially women scholars of colour within colonial theory, have been completely ignored because they are the ones who also talk about critical aspects in decolonial theory. And, there, you know, you can see an easy regard between...most of the people writing this [Hindutva literature] are also men, and they're all upper caste men, right? So, very clearly, you are seeing these alliances forming, where they pick on certain points that are beneficial for them, and make them far more palatable to a Western audience, you know, so that they enjoy support amongst Indian diaspora populations across the world and also just Westerners because a lot of money comes in from, em, right...like from charity organisations in the UK and the US that, em, claim to be non-political but are basically sister organisations of RSS, which is the Hindu right-wing in India. So, you have the HSS, which is the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, in the UK, which is like a direct counterpart of the one in India. So, you have all these organisations and, you know, for people who are supporting these organisations, this kind of narrative and the whole idea of decolonising India and all that, is quite romanticised, and hence, I feel it becomes even more urgent for especially scholars who are dealing in these theories to kind of negate this and be openly critical about it. Yeah. And I think that remains an important task for decolonial scholars, raising questions of the theory itself but also challenging these appropriations.

Kyra: And I guess that's what makes it so effective as a tool of coercion and control, because, yeah, like it doesn't have this kind of solid methodological kind of framework that you can easily kind of follow. It can be easily manipulated and appropriated, in that sense. So, do you think it's possible to move towards decolonising an entire state, without governmental support and resources, if that...if that is the government that is being oppressive, in that sense?



Annapurna: Yeah, I think, in my opinion, decolonising a state would literally mean dismantling it, in all regards, structurally and ideologically, because the version of the postcolonial nation state as we have is subscribed so closely to the previous colonisers and currently to the neoliberal market that none of their policies are made in a way that actually centre people. So, yes, you're absolutely right, there is no state initiative to decolonise as well, but also it's not in the state's interest. The state's interest is control and oppression and profit, and in that regard, I do not think decolonising the state is possible. I feel what is... what we should be moving towards is...is just centring on people and their environments far more than the state, or depending on the state to actually take a stand for people because we are just not seeing that happening in any regards.

Kyra: Yeah. And, I mean, this is quite a big question, but I guess how can citizens continue to build the momentum and build community in meaningful ways, like how do we do that?

Annapurna: Yeah, I think, I mean, this is quite a broad question, and I do refer to it briefly in my article as well, but I think the core here has to be, first of all, to be active members of whatever community you're a part of because, you know, the neoliberal system depends on, I mean, as Marx also said, on alienation of labour, right? So, you are supposed to not feel related to the work you yourself are doing and also to people around you, right? So, breaking those bonds of community really breaks any potential of solidarity. So, wherever you are, in whatever kind of set-up you are, even within the university or outside of it, at least be an active member of your own community itself. And once you are doing that, I feel it is always important to have that kind of empathy where you are able to centre people apart from yourself, right? So, just giving...giving more attention to other people's interests, which I hope is combined with learning more about, you know, what...the struggles of other people, and the struggles of people who have been completely hidden from our eyesight is really, really important. And I think that is like one small step in moving towards more community-centred power arrangements, power-sharing arrangements, rather than depending on the state and so on.

In this regard, I feel like the UK does have really good options. So, when I was living in London, I was part of, for example, mutual aid groups and [co-op?], you know, and that gave me a sense of, em, safety as well, because, especially with regards to what the Met Police has been doing in the couple of last recent years, I would never feel safe to actually call the Met Police if I was in trouble, and these kind of community-centred initiatives really provided me with an effective alternative to reach out to and feel more secure in the space that I was in. And I think these aspects really make a difference. It takes effort to join in, it takes energy, and not, you know, what do you say, dismissing that in any regard, but I feel we have to take small steps somewhere and we have to give effort to these initiatives in some way because that is the only way we can build any kind of sustainable communities that can



go towards making some kind of change. Yeah. So, join a union, if you're in the university now [laughing]!

Kyra: Thank you. So, I guess just reflecting back on some of the theoretical points you raised in the article, you talk about the importance of kind of like being critical of the decolonial school of thought and how we need to be critical because, you know, as you said, it erases feminist scholarship, it replicates colonial histories through practices of gatekeeping within the intellectual academy, and it neglects class as an analytical category, which, you know, is clearly very problematic in the South Asian context, and this is obviously something you speak on. But I guess, more broadly, what are the risks of being uncritical of decolonial theory and, I guess, focusing in on how it manifests in different contexts?

Annapurna: Okay. So, I think, in academia generally, there is quite a trend of hero-worshipping or making heroes out of [theories, concepts, people], which I really think we should...we should get done away with because what it essentially does is it creates these blind-spots in your own research where you have questions that remain unanswered, right, or you have faults that you have just not looked into. And this is not to say that intersectionality is easy and, you know, you can just implement it. Obviously, there are challenges, but I feel you have to try, at some level, because, otherwise, what happens, and what is happening in the case of the decolonial school, is it will essentially become another tool for the neoliberal world to capitalise on and get profit from, and that completely defeats the purpose of decolonial theory at all because, I mean, it was formed as a system of critique against the ongoing capitalist relations that defined what labour was to do, in the case of South America, so how labour was defined on the basis of the races that people were from. And I just...if we miss out on that link, we are, again, bound to repeat the same mistakes and create systems where the majority of the people, as we are seeing currently, have to live in an impoverished state, without access to basic facilities, and without having the privilege of being able to think about what their political ambitions might be or what kind of political communities they want to build, right? Because, for somebody who does not have access to, say, heating, you're not going to be thinking about who should be in the next elections or whom are you going to vote for or, you know, if you want to be part of any kind of political thing. So, I feel, if we are looking to change the current systems we live in, it is really, really important to not just be critical of decolonial school thought but to be critical of everything that's happening around us, especially if there is an important exercise of power involved, to actively challenge that. I think that's the only way we can transform anything.

Kyra: In what ways have you noticed that International Relations is still a very kind of colonial discipline?



Annapurna: Oh, it's extremely colonial! I mean, the obsession with the US in International Relations is...is absolutely insane. I still do not get it. And I feel there are very few countries that dominate research and also what is being produced in research within the field of IR, and that is quite problematic because we keep talking about de-centring IR but then we keep repeating the same...I think faults or the same patterns, which leads to IR again being centred to US and UK and a couple of other large countries.

And I think, secondly, in the practice of teaching, IR, if you look at the number of, say, people who are teaching it, most of them are going to be white men, and that obviously creates its own issues within how IR is taught and studied, and what kind of readings we have to do, and what kind of topics get covered as well, right? So, there are very few universities in the UK that currently even look at race in IR as a module, right? It's largely just in a session, if they do it at all, or the idea is that race is not relevant to IR at all. And while things on the gender front are slightly better, if you look at it from an intersectional aspect, it's really not because the number of, say, black women professors in the UK is I think less 1% - and that's not in the field of IR but just generally in universities, and that is...that is just really, really [jarring], right? So, I think that is...one of...one of the issues.

And then I think the problem of only what is being produced in the West is seen as IR, while everything else becomes Area Studies, is...is quite annoying. So, for example, my research, I have been told repeatedly that I should sell myself as a South Asian specialist rather than an IR person because I'm more likely to get like jobs and publications through that route since my research focuses on India, but like I'm literally talking about a global structure of oppression, so hence that is why I want to be in IR. And also, if you're looking at a South Asian specialist, they should have knowledge of India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, like, you know, all of these neighbouring regions, which I don't have - that's not my focus [laughing]. And I just find this so difficult, that if you're producing anything on the US, you're automatically an IR scholar, but if it's anything else, even if you're looking at Global South relations - so, for example, relations between Brazil and Kenya - that gets seen as Area Studies and not as IR, and I don't understand this provincialisation of IR itself. So, I think that really needs to get done away with because we, again, end up creating systems where certain countries have the hegemony over creating knowledge and impacting policies, while the rest are just seen as individual examples, I think. So, yeah..

Kyra: I think these kind of discussions can be quite tricky to have with, you know, educators who have been teaching for like 20+ years, and they base their teaching and research on, you know, as you said, certain decolonial theorists and thinkers, because, you know, they face this challenge of having to adapt to the times and, you know, acknowledge contemporary criticisms, and, even though that's like normal for theory, like people should be able to critique it and then we improve it and make it better. But I think, as a student, I've definitely been in classrooms where, you know, I thought I was being taught a certain topic



in a way that was like super-outdated and problematic, and I think, at the time, I didn't really have the language to articulate myself very well, but that feeling was definitely very real and I know it can be real for so many other students. But, with that being said, I guess, in what ways do you think lecturers can begin to move towards decolonising their pedagogy or teaching decolonial content?

Annapurna: Yeah. I think I definitely agree with you that happens, [the academia] that's being taught is outdated, and this is also a problem within academia where you are constantly told to defend your work so much, you know, right from the stages of the PhD, that you kind of become a bit unwilling to listen to change or seeing how it is relevant to your own project. So, for example, a basic exercise I do in all of my classes is to come up with kind of a communication manifesto, where I and the students agree on certain ground-rules on how our conversations will be based in the classroom, and I remember discussing this with another lecturer and they were like, "Oh, you know, I teach politics of the Middle East – this is not something that is relevant to my module, so I would not do this." And I was just like, "But why not? I mean, how does what you're teaching...?" In my opinion, even if you're teaching Sciences and not necessarily Social Science, this becomes an important conversation to have because identity does have a clear role to play within the classroom and we know identity impacts not only your learning practice but also the way you're going to perform, and hence it is important, as educators, to take this into consideration. So, I think the conversations that have to take place for this to be actually implemented at a large scale level are going on, but it is a slow process.

There are definitely people who are far more invested in it and, you know, are really pushing through and trying to implement a lot of changes – like, for example, this podcast, and like the work that Jennifer has also been doing over the years is really important in, you know, starting these conversations.

And some Departments, again, Social Science, are probably better at it than other Departments, but even within those, I think there has to be a more, first of all, equitable distribution of labour as to who is doing how much work, because, often, the burden of accessibility only falls on the junior staff, on the graduate, like the PhD students who also teach on the side; and, second of all, if accessibility is being made a core value, that has to be made a core value at all possible levels, right? So, that ranges from digital accessibility to adding alt text to your slides, to going to other ends and making sure that everybody in the classroom is included and has access to the resources. I feel like that is the bare minimum that should be the case.



Having said that, I would also say that not all the fault lies with the lecturers themselves because, often, there is just so much admin work, for example, that staff members are expected to do that they fall short on these aspects, and, you know, we all know about the long working hours, and the payment issues along with that, and how academics often spend more time on admin than on their own research or planning their lectures. So, there also needs to be...almost a rehaul of the university system so that academics have the space to create content that is accessible for students and take that into regard, but there also needs to be a general push for all academics to be implementing those changes, not just people who are new or younger or whatever. So yeah...

Kyra: So, unfortunately, we are coming to an end, but as a question I do like to finish on, what would you like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Annapurna: Yes. So, I think after my short stint in the university system [laughing] – I mean, I've only been part of a university as a staff member I think for the last five years now – I think there needs to be a devolution of power. There needs to be more power with the students and the teachers than the management. I think it is the people who are actively involved in the learning and sharing of knowledge who must be able to call more shots than they're able to do now. That is like a core step. That is step one. We need to begin there.

We move from there to basically building more open and accessible forms of the university, and that also means no fees for students – and that is something I strongly believe in. [...] there is open access to education, I don't think there is any kind of competition in universities because half the people are not able to enter the university space in the first place. Accessibility of language... Getting done with these [visa regimes]... I know this is quite idealistic in a lot of ways, but I think the only way to actually build centres of learning and research would be through open and accessible university spaces. And it's a long journey, but I think that we can definitely make some inroads in the next 10 years as well, whatever position we occupy in the university.

Kyra: Absolutely. I mean, I just want to thank you so much for joining me here today. It's been such a pleasure to hear you speak on the thinking that you've been doing, but I'm also grateful that your writing kind of brought this case study to my attention and has made me feel like I have so much more to learn on this. But, yeah, I can't wait to read more of your work and keep up with what's next for you!

University of Westminster - Pedagogies for Social Justice Podcast

Episode 35: Annapurna Menon

Transcribed by www.premiertyping.com



Annapurna: Thank you so much, Kyra. Thank you for inviting me, and I'm really glad that you're doing this project, and I really look forward to listening to the other speakers as well on this.

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