

## **THE CAPTIVE MIND REVISITED: PROF. SYED ALATAS**

I would like to share with you today four or five aspects connected with this theme, of the Captive Mind. It was in the early 1950s that I started doing some research on this subject. My first publication on this theme was titled 'Some Fundamental Problems of Colonialism'. It appeared in 1956 in a London journal called *The Eastern World*.

After the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War we witnessed the independence of several states in Asia and Africa and one of the problems which emerged was this tendency of our people to imitate the thinking of the West and the ideas introduced by the colonial powers. For e.g. heavy emphasis was given to this new fangled idea of Development. Simultaneously, important interests of the third world were cast aside. The new leaders also saw no function whatsoever for the religious leaders in the development programme. Development was purely a matter of government planners and economists. The function of other groups in society was not seen and not highlighted. This is what I mean by imitation – not only taking up certain ideas and concepts introduced to us by the West but also, at the same time, setting aside things which are very important to the non-western world.

I have spent a lot of time in the '60s on the theme of the captive mind but like any other theme in human history its study is inexhaustible. It would require a long time, a long process involving many people to tackle various aspects of the problem. One aspect which I did not have time to develop is the problem of the captor mind, or the capturing mind. I have concentrated so far on the captive mind because the captive mind is most urgent as far as the developing society is concerned. We are concerned with the enslaved because we all know that change can be achieved only if there is an awakening of the slave community. Without a change in the attitude of the slave community, there can never be any change.

As far as the slave-holders are concerned, they will not give away freedom away just like that. It has to be wrenched from them. The slave must wake up to wrench his freedom from the slave-holders. Understanding the slaveholders was less urgent to me at that particular point of time than understanding the enslaved. Therefore I had concentrated then on the captive mind. But now, I think, this subject should be explored too.

I have also spent my time demonstrating my ideas because I believe that we cannot have such a dialogue merely on a theoretical plane. We have to demonstrate. You cannot, for instance, settle the issue of beauty in a beauty contest (pardon me for using this example because I am not in favour of beauty contests) by discussing the theory of beauty. You can settle the contest by lining up the beautiful contestants and declaring the winner. So you have to put your beliefs into practice in order to convince people.

Similarly, in the field of research, there is only one way to convince society of the need to get away from intellectual captivity and that is by doing some works which demonstrate that this is the kind of work which we want done and these do not bear the stamp of

intellectual captivity. Hence I wrote the book “The Myth of the Lazy Native”, to demonstrate the kind of scholarship that was developed in the colonial period, which is no more relevant.

I believe that we should have our own scholarship. Having our own scholarship does not mean being ethnically biased. It does not mean turning the tables on the colonial powers and offering something of the same kind by way of a substitute. For instance, in history, the colonial historians wrote about our bad rulers, so what do we do – we just reverse it. We just say that the guys they said were bad, were in fact good. Oh no. This would mean adopting their attitude and values in reverse. That attitude according to me is the summit of captivity because this would demonstrate that they have conditioned you to react exactly like them. The scholarship we have to develop is our own scholarship, with our own categories of analysis, giving a different picture and dragging out what they tried to hide. In other words, we have to offer a more complete and true picture, using values which are truly universal and truly moral.

I have spent 11 years in Holland, part of the time as a student in the University of Amsterdam. I remember being continuously bombarded with the idea of the neutrality of the social sciences and with the theories of relativity in the social sciences. I resisted them as being nonsense. There is no such thing as objectivity without morality. Research can have objectivity, but it cannot be without morality.

For e.g. as a sociologist, I may have to study prostitution, or crime. I can study these subjects objectively in the sense that I study the subject as it is. I do not bring in my value judgement. Therefore merely because I am not in favour of crimes, I will not try to paint all criminals black. I will not try to impose my subjective feelings of likes and dislikes on the criminals. If there is a deteriorating morality in a certain city, I will not blame the criminals for that or state in my study that the city has become decadent because of the criminals.

Social scientists should not be victims of that kind of intrusion of their own subjective value judgement. However, after studying the subject objectively, the question of morality comes in. Do we want crime to happen or not? Of course not. We study the problem of crime because we do not want crime to develop. We want to find ways and means to reduce criminality.

The same thing is true for medical science. If a cancer expert studies cancer cells objectively, i.e. as they exist and their influence on the human body and he does not bring his private bias into the study of cancer, that is good. That is medical science. But having done that he has to ask himself the question - does he want to promote cancer? Is the purpose of his science to promote cancer? The answer is no. In that sense there is no science, whether social or physical or natural, without morality.

Take even a subject like astronomy. We can spend a lifetime studying the black holes in as objective a manner as possible but in the end it is linked to morality. To the question,

would you like the black holes to expand in the universe devouring all of us, the answer would be no. So you cannot separate science from morality.

However, a certain trend has developed in the West to separate science from morality. The scientists say that morality is not their business. They only study a subject, that's all. What happens later with the research is not their concern. That is the work of politicians and the administrators. That was the attitude of some scientists in connection with the incident of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan in World War II. The scientists claimed they were only involved in physics and how to construct the bomb. How the bomb was used was not in their hands and it was not their business, implying thereby that they were indifferent to and unconnected with the use of the bomb as an instrument of destruction.

Not everyone in the West shares this opinion of research being apolitical and neutral. There are undoubtedly people in the West too who disagree with this amoral attitude of the functionaries. But they are in a minority. The majority follow this trend and this morality has been exported by them to our part of the world.

Now some of our scientists and builders in the Third World are also adopting a similar attitude and this is another example of the captive mind. The builders of atomic weapons in our countries - I do not mention the countries but we all know who they are - must be made aware of the consequences of their research. The builders of land mines must know that they are maiming little children because land mines are not being used in war against soldiers, but in guerrilla warfare against civilians. Villages are mined just to isolate them. This is going on in Burma, in Afghanistan, in Africa. We all know how many children have been killed by land mines. But the scientists involved in making the land mines feel that this is not their business. It is the business of the politicians who are using the land mines. We should reject this kind of morality. This is what I mean when I say that the Third World should adopt an independent attitude, and not be captive either to their scientific concepts or to their conception of morality.

Another subject for study is to trace the historical origin of the captive mind. The origin of the captive mind is not parallel to colonialism. During the beginning of the colonial period there was no mental captivity. The phenomenon of mental captivity arose more or less in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not before that. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was no intensive intellectual contact of the colonized with the colonial power and there was no attempt by the colonial government to indoctrinate at this level. In the beginning they were only interested in making money.

A very clear manifestation of this phenomenon is in the history of British India. When the British came to India in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they had no vision of themselves as a colonial power. They were traders. Later they started building forts with the approval and support of the Moghul emperors, primarily to defend their interests and protect themselves against thefts and against surrounding raiders. They were not involved in establishing British schools, spreading the English language, having control over the

country and so on. This is discussed in a very colourful and clear manner by Harriet Martinov, in her book “History of British India”.

The Dutch took control of Java in Indonesia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, they had started building forts in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, even conquering Batavia (today, Djarkata) where they had their own government. Yet, during that period there was no captive mind because there was no interchange. It was only in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that there was intellectual interchange, schools were started and they deliberately set up an institution called *Balaypustaka* to translate European classics into Indonesian. So the attempt to spread ideas in Indonesia started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, in 350 years of the colonial period, it is only in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that we see intellectual exchange and consequently intellectual captivity. This is an indication that intellectual captivity is not an epi-phenomenon of colonialism, although it started with colonialism.

However, now, this captivity has become worse. It became much more intensive and much more widespread after independence, when there was no more colonialism. So the development of the captive mind has nothing to do with its origin in colonialism. Now we are politically free, yet we are mentally enslaved. I believe that even if we are economically dependent on the West, it does not mean that we must also be mentally dependent. For instance, people in the West know how to assimilate certain things from the East, without becoming mentally dependent on the East. The very fact that you are using something from another country does not mean you must be mentally dependent. If you use Chinese chopsticks in America (USA has many Chinese restaurants and many Americans eat Chinese food) it does not mean that Americans are conditioned to think like the Chinese! But in our part of the world we are using a lot of western goods and at the same time imbibing western ideas unquestioningly.

Take some recent examples from Malaysia. For years and years, we have been continuing with development, without investigating the kind of development we need. We know that when a country develops, it must not avoid or neglect the agrarian structure. Europe, Japan and all the leading industrial countries were very careful to preserve their agrarian structure and they developed their industrial structure without harming the agrarian structure. But we are developing our industrial structure, without paying any attention to the agrarian structure. This is what I mean by imitation thinking.

Another example: Suddenly, a couple of years ago, overnight, the term K-economy began to be used. Why? Because the Prime Minister used it. The media, ever ready to beat the drums, started using the term within a day. The term K-economy was everywhere, on the TV, in the newspapers, everywhere. What is the meaning of this term, K-economy? K stands for ‘Knowledge’. Why suddenly Knowledge economy? Can there be any economy without knowledge? Everything has to be planned with knowledge. What then is the distinctive nature of K-economy? Nothing.

If you want to periodise in terms of economic history, for heaven’s sake use a term that’s really a term of periodisation. For instance if you want to use the term ‘computer economy’ as a term for an economy based on the use of computers, that is appropriate.

But K-economy means nothing. Just because it was invented in the West, it was taken over lock-stock-and-barrel without any critical enquiry. The purpose of introducing such terms is probably in the interest of domination. Because the moment you introduce the term K-economy, it is a tool of domination. You are made to feel you don't have enough 'K'. You must depend on them for more 'K' and so it is a mode of domination.

Finally, we have to be aware of a trend which is dominant in the West i.e. the need to dominate. Independent of whether they have colonies or not, there is a drive internally to dominate. This is very apparent in the social sciences, particularly in the U.S.A. When I was a student, the school of functionalism sought to dominate all the campuses. Those who were not functionalists were put aside. We should not imitate such trends. But I find that here also we have this trend, without being aware. We have also started becoming functionalists, as opposed to structuralists.

We should have a scientific approach where we should be able to combine anything. If there is a lot of contribution from a particular group, take it, combine it and synthesize it. We should not be victims of a particular trend. So the question of domination goes beyond a particular concept. As you can see there are many areas of the captive mind which we have yet to explore.

### **Discussion:**

**Partho Mukherjee:** The profundity of Prof. Alatas is in the simplicity and lucidity with which he handles complex materials. Prof. Alatas had made several important points. First, while attempting to get out of the captive mind, we should guard against getting into the model of counter captivity created by ourselves through self suggestions, reinforcements etc. and we should have a much more catholic approach in the understanding of reality. Second, Prof. Alatas distinguishes between value commitment and objectivity. It is a fallacy that there cannot be objectivity in the social sciences because we have values. We should not confuse value neutrality with objectivity. There do exist values which are truly universal and moral. So, if social science is aiming at universality, it cannot but be based on truly universal values and morals. So you have to have a value commitment in order to play on the exercise of objectivity. I completely agree with his perspective that the enterprise of social science has to do ultimately with the conception of a just society. Third, social science does not confine itself to the objective operation of only the study, per se. It has to link with its consequences. This is where the moral import comes in. One area we can debate is how to tackle the variable of colonialism. There was no element of captive mind before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although the element of captivity entered with colonialism, after colonialism has departed the feature of captive mind has got reinforced rather than emancipated. Fourth, the K-economy concept is very important because what we are generally confused about is the irreversibility of globalisation because it is technology driven (the technology of IT revolution) which has led to the compression of time and space to such an extent that the world is re-ordering itself on many fronts. In fact the whole social space has expanded from the local to the larger global reaches, and the dynamics with which we were confined within limited spaces have become much more expansive. Therefore

contestations are taking global forms and that is the paradigm shift for social science to look forward to. To sum up, the essence of this presentation was that there should not be a sectarian spirit guiding social sciences unlike the West and that we should be combining and synthesising from all sources of knowledge. All that helps us in the understanding of reality is relevant. All that is not, we have to sift out. That is the quality of mind that emancipates itself from captivity. Not exclusions and inclusions in sectarian forms but judicious understanding on the basis of assumptions of a just and moral society and a truly universal set of values which we have to draw from all sources of knowledge, as long as they are relevant in the understanding of the local. I had used the term disciplined eclecticism long ago and this is my feeling after hearing Prof. Alatas.

Finally, something which has not said here but in his writings and which I would like to draw your attention to is that the captive mind knows not that it is captive and that it is incapable of separating the particular from the universal in science and thereby properly adapting the universally valid corpus of scientific knowledge to the particular local situation. So my question is how do we approach universality and social science? Does the universal always explain the particular? I will just end with a quote from Prof. Wallestein: “If all universalisms are historically contingent, is there any way to construct a relevant single universalism for the present time? Is the solution to contingent universalisms, that of ghettos or that of social integration? Is there a deeper universalism which goes beyond the formalistic universalism of modern societies and modern thought, one that accepts contradictions within universality? Can we promote a pluralistic universalism on the analogy of the Indian experience wherein a single God has many avatars?”

## **DISCUSSION**

**Claude:** I would like to raise a provocative question here, not so much to Prof. Alatas but to people in the audience. The captive mind concept was introduced several years ago and a lot of captive minds have been discussing the captive mind. Yet, we have not got out of captivity but instead, after independence, we have had worse captivity than before. So why has this concept not translated into a practical programme of de-captivity?

**Jabardin from Malaysia:** I am a product of a social science curriculum that can be called ‘captive mind’ We have been taught to be champions of our race, to be heroes, to be warriors, to fight, to conquer and to win – all this because we don’t want to be colonised. We are taught in the university that by conquering we become heroes and we are liberated but that whoever fails will be slaves forever. So how do we interface with this? How are we going to manage these challenges you speak of when this is how the young Malaysian is taught to behave.

**Chiu:** What really impressed me is the discussion of the strategy of self emancipation. With all the experience of the Second World War we have learnt that counter strategy maybe the worst strategy. You just turn yourself into the other side. You flip back into what you are supposed to fight against. I believe that a mind can be captivated only when the mind itself willingly cooperates and is willing to allow itself to be captured. So it

involves a self-captivating activity. Nobody can captivate you or enslave you against your will. A slave-owner creates a slave just as a slave creates a slave-owner. Can this element of self-stigmatization and self-victimization justify us doing whatever the enemy did to us even as it turns us into the same animals as they were? Hence the strategy of self-emancipation is a very important lesson to learn. We need not give too much credit to the colonizer because we have a whole bunch of sub-imperialists, sub-colonialists, who are not just compradors (sellers), but they are killing on behalf of the colonizers. It is this mediating category, the *muchachos*, the nationalist elite, who are doing the same work but now in the name of the nation state.

I also have a problem with the word social sciences. I doubt that any of these disciplines e.g. political science have anything to do with science. I also do not believe that we can be technology driven. We are only interest driven, based on the available technology. It is not the other way around. We are never dominated by technology. We are always dominated by the ruler and the ruling interest. We really need a political economic analysis of the so-called knowledge economy. When the capitalist world fails to valorise their capital, they have to make knowledge a scarcity. Only when knowledge is monopolised, captivated, patented, and becomes a scarce commodity, does the knowledge itself have a premium. This premium is used to rule the world. Before you make it saleable you cannot make it openly available, otherwise everyone will freely obtain it. So it has to become privatised in order to become valuable. The whole intellectual property rights problem is the last ditch, life and death struggle of dying capitalists trying to destroy the human being's very essence, which is the knowing being, the thinking being.

**Ashis:** There was not a single school of management in Japan till almost 1980s. By that time Japan was not only the world's second largest economic power, it had begun to threaten US business interests. So the Americans were very keen to know what made Japanese business click. There was a plethora of books published in America around the late 70s and early 80s, all of which dealt with the Japanese style of management, Zee theory, etc. All became best sellers. Some were even translated by the Japanese into the Japanese language. The Japanese then became somewhat embarrassed that there are American business schools teaching Japanese management theory while Japan does not even have a proper business school. So business schools began to come up in Japan around 1980s. The process was completed by the 1990s - at which time the Japanese economy began to decline. So the first principle I propose to you is learn from what you do, not from what others think you do or should have done or thought.

Secondly, I want to take one point made by Prof. Alatas to its logical conclusion. When I was studying colonialism, I did not go to the history books because I was interested in the colonial mind, the colonising mind and the colonised mind. I wanted to have a flavour of how the colonialists operated. So I went through novels, literature, stories, memoirs, diaries, photographs and paintings and the old Bengali writings which published daily expenditure accounts of the British in India. My first great surprise was that the photographs and paintings showed that the British in India wore Indian dress, smoked the hubble bubble, often sitting on low stools, looking like small village landlords. I also

found out from the daily diaries that there were regular payments from their household accounts to Brahmin priests for maintaining a temple at the house. So while on Sundays they went to church, the rest of the week they offered pujas to the Indian Gods. They were deadly scared of Brahmins believing them to have magical powers. One of the tasks of British Indian army was to fire volleys on every religious festival in the major Kali temple in Calcutta. It would also play the band, for which task the army officially got a part of the share of the offerings given to the temple. Many people do not know that for the first 80 years, the official language of the British empire was Persian not English.

Things began to change only as late as the 1830s. Interestingly, the change occurred not because of the rapacious British soldiers or colonial administrators but because of the great liberal thinkers like Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, John Stuart Mill and others, who pushed the colonial empire towards a new kind of mission which was to civilise the savages. I tell this story to make the point that it is people like you and me, or at least our ancestors, i.e the professional educational sector from which we come, the so-called social scientists, who are partly responsible for the capture of mind either as victim or as perpetrator. Therefore we have greater responsibility to take up this job rather than the politicians, soldiers or the military industrial complex, who we would like to blame for the persistence of colonial attitudes. We are the ones who began it and perhaps we will have to end it.

**Vinay:** I want to comment on several of the earlier speakers' thoughts. Ashis has told a story linking the decline of Japan to the beginnings of professional management schools. One could give a very different kind of story as well. Think of the Gujaratis who in the 14<sup>th</sup> century were virtually all over the Indian ocean and had a dominant presence in every port. Perhaps you are aware that the Indian Institute of Management, located in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, is a model business management school for India. So it is the Gujaratis who have mastered the nature of business and mercantilism, who today have to be instructed professionally through the business school model.

Claude posed the question why are we still in this particular modality of the captive mind. Most to us know about a very small tract written by Gandhiji called Hind Swaraj, where Gandhi says we may talk about the colonizer being rapacious etc. but let us not forget that we were seduced by the glitter of the West. He is very clear about this, just as he is clear about the fact that having an India ruled by the Indians who are just brown versions of the English Sahib is not going to make India any better than it was under colonial rule.

One of the reasons why most minds are captive is that there is an etiological purpose behind the western conception of history, where our goal is that we simply have to arrive at a destination that has already been determined for us by somebody else. The problem is that by the time we arrive they have already left and have moved to another spot. So, according to this vision, we are always destined to be running a little bit behind those who have decided our destiny for us.

I also want to address the question of knowledge. Why do we call the social sciences 'sciences' to begin with? Why do we need to have this pretension attached to the

enterprise of anthropology, politics, sociology, history, geography, etc. The question of category is therefore very important. Let me give you a simple illustration: according to the dominant mode, 9/11 is termed an act of terrorism. But the war on Iraq is not similarly termed an act of terrorism. It is called a war. So why do we use one category for one thing and another category for another, when actually the war on Iraq is terrorism multiplied by a factor of 100. We therefore need to fundamentally look at the categories that we deploy. If we want to argue that the social sciences are working towards the concept of just society, it seems to me that all evidence points to the contrary. 50 years of economics, anthropology, sociology and so on have given us, everywhere, a much worse society that we have ever had. We therefore have to look at how these categories of poverty, scarcity, development etc. work for us.

My last observation is that howsoever we speak of the West, it is important to keep in mind that the West did not do anything to us that it had not already done to its own people. If you look at the history of Europe from the 10th century down to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you will see that the Irish are as much colonised by the English as the Indians were by the English, and in some ways much worse, because they were seen as apostates. Whatever was done by the Germans to the Jews is simply bringing home the kind of genocidal policies that had been actively pursued by Europe abroad with respect to its own people. You will also find that there were always some elements in the West who, despite being colonised, also attempted to resist the dominant model in many ways.

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