

Post-Civil Society Politics in India

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Politics of Post-Civil Society: Contemporary History of Political Movements in India. By Ajay Gudavarthy. Delhi: Sage Publications, 2013. Pp.262.ISBN: 978-81-321-1041-5 (HB)

While witnessing a radical restructuring of the very formulation of Democracy across the world in the recent times, one is presumably made to reflect on the transformative potential of democratic praxis, that the domain of civil society has thrown up for globality. Though most forms of popular democracy today have recourse to the dissenting form of civil society, which is supposed to be a “Socratic Gadfly” (Leela Gandhi, *The Indian Express*, April 24th, 2015) to the state, enabling social justice and re-potentialising the realm of democracy, its promissory appeal has come to be contested in the academia. While Gandhi’s depiction teeters on the brink of totalizing the civil society as an antagonistic dialectical counterpoint of the state, the contestations of it alongside, have exposed the latter’s intertwinement with networks of power relations and interests of various conflicting groups of the State mechanism. Gudavarthy’s book has to be read against the backdrop of this critique of the structured and hegemonic practices and limitations that the very framework of civil society privileges and intensifies, in the context of India.

However, even while he discerns the gradual withering of the transformative phenomena of civil society in the postcolonial realm of India, he views it not as a quantifiable extensity with calculable coordinates, but as an assemblage of differing levels of intensities, with contesting 'lines of flights' and potencies. This makes him re-posit faith in the democratic aspirations of contemporary political movements in India, which the author asserts, will 'inaugurate a new set of terms or politics that is beyond or post-civil society' (p.6), while negotiating with the civil society domain, and one that has the potency of deepening democratization in the society.

Gudavarthy's detailed genealogical survey of five contemporary political movements—that stand as manifestations of the dissent expressed by the civil society and mirror the nuanced patterns of its struggle for actualizing the popular form of democracy—puts the spotlight on the dilemmas and the bottlenecks that these movements encounter while attempting to pursue their aims through civil society's displacement of the hegemonic practices of the state mechanism. In fact, as the author shows in his book, it is the incessant interplay between the political movements' bid towards restructuring the current democratic setup in terms of the dissent that the civil society expresses through them, and the hegemonic practices of the latter that culminates in entrapping these two in a relational dynamics that may be equated with what Gramsci calls "blocked dialectics", a self-defeating logic of circularity. Finally, however, the author delineates how these political movements are able to imagine and experiment through their strategic 'in-against-and-beyond' (Holloway, 2005) stance, the democratic space of 'infinite multiplicity', that "could also affirm the undetermined nature of anything and anybody" (Badiou, 2006). Gudavarthy claims that such endeavours also play a significant role in enabling a justice oriented, post-civil society framework.

Thus in the first section of his book Gudavarthy foregrounds how the human rights movement (HRM) in India carves out

post-civil society discourse in successive stages through what he calls combinatory reactions of ‘dialogue-civility and revolutionary politics’, (p.56) that irreducibly syncretizes the processes of dialectical contestation and the virtuosity of strategical negotiation, while generating a self-reflexive auto-critique of its own entrapment in the social dialectics. The next section of the book stresses on the Dalit movement of Andhra Pradesh in the southern part of India. While, on the one hand, Gudavarthy’s reference to Žižek’s view that multiculturalism leads to ‘ghettoization’ exposes the irony of normativizing the process of routine reification of Dalit lived experience by and in state politics, on the other, it lays bare the pitfalls/challenges of identity politics. However, Gudavarthy goes on to claim that it is Dalit movement’s parallel engagement with other radical democratic struggles like Naxalism that could create the scope for the actualization of a post-civil society discourse. In the same section, Gudavarthy’s representation of feminist movements in India results in ‘schizophrenizing’ them so much so that they do not seem merely as ‘constituents’ of the complex network of protest politics, but as agencies empowering the state machinery. Their demand for the enforcement of stringent laws for curbing violence against women caters to the state’s perception about minimizing atrocities against women. Gudavarthy intention here is not to stress the agonistic constitutionality of the Dalit and feminist movement- but to show how these two movements could productively exploit their agonizing state by striking a chord with other collective struggles’ drive towards creating a scope for the post-civil society movements. In the next section of his book, the author intends to claim that the kind of performativity that the contemporary political movements throw up in the form of post-civil society discourse is far removed from the totalizing representation that Partha Chatterjee formulates through his notion of the “political society”. The extensive field study of Kazipally village of Andhra Pradesh offers the author this vantage point to critique Partha Chatterjee’s concept of the political society, as an

emancipated notion of subaltern ascendancy. Instead, Kazipally village acts as a powerful reminder of the resilient networks of power relations that multiply alternative sites of “substantive benefits” to the subaltern without opening up sites for transcendence. The final chapter of the book makes some compelling claims for the urgency of his project of the post-civil society discourse in India, emphasizing on the transformational agency of the political movements to yield elusive non-conceptualizable contours of post-civil society. In so doing, the author also delineates how civil society’s range of attributes, from its innate versatility and extraordinary richness to its contradictions, can merely intensify the problematics of structured constituencies and institution. Therefore, the author seeks to address this limitation throughout the book, by thinking through the “dispersive flexibility” (Badiou) of the political movements in contemporary India.

Gudavarthy’s visualization of this project as the post-civil society practice also partakes of the contemporary moment of “lines of flight”, that the Autonomia School has popularised through Hardt & Negri’s formulation of *Multitude*. However, the frontier that the author engages with as a post-civil society moment is very postcolonial, not one of pure exclusivity or unmediated politics. Rather, it is one of ‘in-against-and-beyond’ stance, offering both ‘solidarity to coexist with resistance and conflict’, a strategy which he terms as ‘Refolution’ (p.230), a strategy offering both solidarity to social groups to co-exist with resistance and conflict, working cohesively both among themselves as well as outside to transform the injustices and deeper inequalities of democratic meta-structures.

However, Gudavarthy has considerably checked the subsumption of his ideas in the panoply of Western theoretical constructs. In fact, his critical and creative appropriation of these ideas has been wedded with postcolonial Indian issues; he chooses to register them as a ‘potent idea’ that can be repositioned in an Indian context as tissues of a fresh postcolonial rejoinder in the making. Thus, Gudavarthy’s quest

for radical and transformational politics that would kick-start the becoming of the post-civil society remains fraught with moments of inter-subjective dialogue with contemporary Western models, but then the need of the hour, one feels, is not to refine what stands calcified as a stereotypical deliberational exchanges between postcolonial contexts and Western episteme, but to find out redeeming possibilities within the folds of South Asian deliberations with its own history.

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