

Politics of the ‘Pure’ and the Revenge of the ‘People’

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This book – *India after Modi: Populism and the Right* – takes us to the doorstep of the Moebius of “moral condemnation”¹ of the “Right” and an understanding of the “moral construct” of the Right. Ajay does well to shift gear from condemnation to understanding. Condemnation, at times, makes us blind. Blind condemnation, makes us all the more blind. Blind condemnation intensifies the depth and span of our blind spots. This is, of course, not to condone the violence of the Right; in any way. But to explore, examine and render transparent the (il)logic of the Right; make sense of the Right’s way of *righting* wrongs – which, as Ajay points out is not through the “institutional mode of pursuing politics and governance” but through “street mobilizations” – and the purchase of such processes of righting wrongs with the “people”. It is to understand how the Right “creates a people” and generates mass consent. What is the architecture of the “mass psychology”² (Ajay looks at “social psychology”) that engenders the Right and that the Right engenders? Ajay argues for a “fresh understanding of the Right”; he avoids a “mere moral rejection”; also because “the Right has articulated many aspects that have remained on the sidelines because of how modernity has institutionalized contemporary democracies”. Ajay foregrounds “the need to listen to these voices, *without* agreeing with them”. He shows how these issues would need to be “articulated *without* legitimizing them”, and “recognized *without* institutionalizing them”.

However, it is not that only the Right creates a people; the extant Left had also created a people (though the contemporary Left would be known and marked more by its neglect of and alienation from the people). It is the *nature*³ of the people, how people are *sculpted* that determines Right and Left; the Right creates a pre-given and an essentialized mass of “common beings” united by a shared substance: *revenge*, cooked in the broth of “hurt pride”, deep-seated prejudice⁴, and “group regression induced by a charismatic and paranoid leader”. Ajay hints at the rise of the Right as a consequence of the extant Left’s,

the urbanized Left's vanguardism and contempt of the people – people as “suffering from false consciousness”, as being “backward”, “superstitious”, “religious”, as being “feudal” or “semi-feudal”. One could see the rise of the Right as a consequence of the Left's loss of touch with the people, loss of touch with the *subaltern Lenin-s*.⁵

Ajay does well to shift focus from a mere critique of the Right to a history of the construction of the Right (including the ‘secret support’ of the people during the ‘ban’⁶, which has now taken the most vocal and shrill form), as also the right's constructions; constructions that transcend extant divides and bring polar opposites to dialogue (perhaps such opposites were never opposites, but two sides of the same coin). In that sense, the book opens up space for a fundamental question? Were our secure and stable/staple divides – secular/religious for example – that ruled much of our Left and liberal politics, two sides of the same coin? Further, has the logic of the extant Left also divided the world into us/them; has it, even if not with the ferocity of the Right? Is there a secret work of (racial) prejudice in much of politics? Does the “rise of the Right”, worldwide, make us reflect on the “limits of [...] progressive politics”? Does the critique of the Right require, first, a reflection on Left politics and then on politics, politics per se; as also the inherited fundamentals of politics? Has there been a hyper moral core and a normalization of the ‘pure’ (*shuddhata*) in politics? Has the divide us/them plagued the philosophy and praxis of politics, even Left politics, for long? The Right has only built a more rabid formula out of the nursery bed of the radical intolerance of the Left. The rise of the Right is not just a reaction to the “Left-liberal overreach of the last three decades” but also a creatively cunning or cunningly creative way of extending the “‘logic’ of Left-progressive politics and also the imagination of liberal institutionalism”. The tragedy is that an overdose of medicine is poison.

Foucault grapples with the modern subject's secret romance with violence (all however, in the name of ‘politics’) and the “fascism in us all”.⁷ In his efforts at “a more in-depth understanding of how a *social psyche* is being created that replicates itself from political and institutional heads to the common man on the streets”, Ajay foregrounds the question of “fascism in us all”. Foucault also gestures towards a fundamental doubt: *is modern politics the continuation of war by other means* (the Right has perfected it; the Right is the ultimate realization and actualization of this principle)? Is politics then the new discourse of war? Is politics the new form of normalization – normalization of violence as also normalization of subjects into violence (all in the name of righting wrongs; the Right-wing way of righting wrongs takes it to its logical conclusion)? Further, is the perpetuity of war in the social body cast in terms of ‘race’? But while the battle may have been at first between “distinct” races in the way we may think of two nations at war, in the case of the paradigm of the Right or the Right-wing paradigm, the two races at war are *internal* to the social body.

This book is written at a time when “democracies across the globe has taken a populist turn” and when most populist regimes (except, perhaps,

Podemos in Spain) have to them a right-wing hue. Were democracies always already organized around a kind of secret populism? Is democracy's unconscious structured in the language of majoritarianism? It is just that the veil was in place, hitherto. It is just that "community might"⁸ is now out in the open. The subtle forms of *minority cunning*—the cunning of the surplus appropriating capitalist class— and the blunt nature of community might were apparently in opposition. Minority cunning and majority might are working in unison now: Ajay shows how the right is "pro-corporate but anti-modern". Ajay presences such a Moebius or an antithetical twoness in terms of claims to sublaternity in the imaginary of the hitherto elite (the *elite's hurt* and *vulnerability*) and the assertion of the elite in terms of the "language and emotionality of the subaltern". It is also supplemented by an *elitization of the subaltern* ("the rise of the OBC", "the *chaiwalla*", and "the *chowkidar*"); and in the process a form of "de-Brahminized Hinduization". Historical and sociological binaries of the Left are thus unsettled. The Right "feels like a subaltern and thinks like the elite". Right wing populism is a coming together of the "economic elite" and the "cultural subaltern". Hence perhaps the feeling that the polar opposites are in sync in the Right's professed anti-establishment position.

The three-dimensional figure of the Moebius subverts standard Euclidean experiences of space and the notion of 'inside' and 'outside', twoness and oneness. It looks like there are two sides to the Moebius strip. But the Moebius has only one. Because the two sides are continuous it is possible to cross over from inside to outside, and from one side to the other. Yet, when one traverses the length of the Moebius strip, it is not possible to pinpoint at which precise point one has crossed over from the inside to the outside or vice versa. The figure does not just problematize binary oppositions, but shows how the apparently opposed terms—like "sovereign" and "beast"⁹, right and might, "rebellious emotions" amongst right-minded youth, including "hurt pride" (and "Hindu vulnerability") and "reactionary social ideas"—at a subterranean plane, can be rendered continuous with each other; the right "appropriates without investing and subverts without challenging". In this intertwining of reconciled paradoxes, Gandhi can be made a symbol for *Swacch Bharat* (kind of a conscious move of the sovereign foregrounding the Gujrati vegetarian *purity* of the Father of the Nation) and secret endorsement of Godse (which has the support of the unconscious 'drive to destroy' of community understood as a common Hindu being) can be lived seamlessly. One hence sees in the ideological maneuvers and political machinations of the right, extreme populist propensities (i.e. the creation of a horizontal matrix of "people"¹, albeit with a strong sovereign), and rabid polarizing potentials (us/them), as also the capacity to *work through* extant polar opposites; populism and polarisation thus form yet another Moebius. One also sees the cohabitation of cultural roots/routes of Hindu nationalism and neoliberal forms of global capitalism; along with the capacity to bring to an impossible sync the *cunning of a surplus appropriating minority* (the big corporates) and the *secret might of a community*. The brilliance of Ajay's book is in the theorization

of “populism in India” in terms of this figure of the Möbius: “much of the analysis on populism has focused on the larger narrative of us and them”; what it misses is how Right-wing populism in India “produces an authentic majority that is *essentially divided*, across caste, region, language, culture and lifestyles”. Ajay has mapped with care, precision and detail the “new set of [Indian] practices” of populism so as “to produce a political, rather than a moral critique of Right-wing populism in India”. He has also contextualized this in light of fundamental shifts in the experience of the “economic”; given the “dispersed nature of [cyber] capitalism after globalization” and the reorganization of the experience of the economic into what I would designate the “devouring circuits of global capital” with rhizomatic flows and nomadic intensities and the *inappropriate others* that could not be appropriated or were rendered/found-to-be inappropriate.

This book ends (though this suggestion does not come at the end of the book) with an interesting suggestion regarding the “afterlife” and the future of democracy in India. Will right wing populism further the cause of and deepen the texture of democracy in India? Or will it lose its way into totalitarianism? Ajay, somewhat provocatively, does not seem to foreclose the possibilities of the former; though the present seems to be tilted towards the latter.

Let me end this reflection on an excellent book with one final self-doubt; this self-doubt haunts my reading of the book like a running footnote. Do we need to distinguish between left and right populisms? Or do we need new distinctions? Are we prisoners of old distinctions? Has the Right wrong-footed us on our old distinctions? Ajay’s book constantly urges us to think anew; and this is the strength of the book. Think the distinctions in the *context* of India. This is not just about how populism works out in India; it is also about the micro-changes that take place in the given theory of populism when it is deployed in India. This is how the Indian experience could make us rethink theories of populism. Or make us rethink populism itself, in itself, because of our experience of the political in India (of the many interesting and provocative suggestions in the book is that Islamophobia is perhaps not at work in India in the way it is at work in the West). Do we also need to distinguish between Left and Left – say, the classical Left and the reflexive Left? The classical Left that was largely in charge of “order and administration”¹⁰; and *normalization* (especially, in places where the Left was in power) – the classical Left is the one on which the Right builds – and the reflexive Left as the painstaking praxis of working towards a *being-in-common*. The thinking of community as *essence* in the classical Left imagination is the ground on which the Right builds. Such thinking assigns to community a *common being*¹¹. Being in common means, to the contrary, no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity (or sharing an equally narcissistic “lack of identity”). The movement from a given common being to the difficult *praxis of being-in-common* marks the movement from the classical Left (on which the Right builds) to the reflexive Left.

Notes

- ¹ All phrases and expressions in double quotes – if not otherwise stated – are from Gudavarthy, A. 2019. *India after Modi: Populism and the Right*. Bloomsbury: New Delhi.
- ² Reich, W. 2018. *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. Aakar: New Delhi.
- ³ Is the nature of the organization different in populism, especially right-wing populism? Is it a “commonality” different from those produced “as a class or as ‘multitudes’”?
- ⁴ Akhtar, S. 2001. “A Note on the Ontogenetic Origins of Prejudice”. *Samiksha: Journal of the Indian Psychoanalytic Society* 55: 7-14.
- ⁵ Chaudhury, A. 1990. “In Search of a Subaltern Lenin”. In *Subaltern Studies V: Writings on South Asian History and Society* edited by Ranajit Guha. New Delhi : Oxford university press.
- ⁶ “What we are witnessing today in terms of the rise of the Right-wing populism is an outcome and a response to that rugged survival at the margins for so long” and through the ban of the RSS.
- ⁷ Foucault, M. 2000. “Preface” to Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (translated by R. Hurley, M. Seem and H.R. Lane). University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000, xiii.
- ⁸ Freud (1932) shows how the social had moved not from ‘logic of force’ to a ‘logic of rights’, but from ‘individual might’ to ‘community might’. “The Einstein-Freud Correspondence (1931–1932)”. September 1932, available at: <http://www.public.asu.edu/~jmlynch/273/documents/FreudEinstein.pdf>.
- ⁹ Derrida, J. *The Beast and the Sovereign*. Vol 1. Edited by Michel Lisse, Marie-Lousie Mallet and Ginette Michaud (translated by Geoffriry Bronington). The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London.
- ¹⁰ Nancy, J. L.. 1991. *The Inoperative Community* (translated by Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney, foreword by Christopher Fynsk). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, xxxi.
- ¹¹ This idea of a “common being” is premised in India on the creation of a *social organisation* solely dedicated to converting India’s caste-divided Hindus into a unified Hinduism through the founding of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) or ‘National Self-Help Organisation’ in Nagpur in 1925.