Public-Facing Scholarship in India After Modi

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Writing on the domineering omnipresence of the Indian Prime Minister on the streets of Delhi, a reporter remarked that the "billboards and posters were only the most visible manifestations of a full-blown 'personality cult'" (Lukas 1976, n.p.) that was carefully constructed by the Prime Minister's supporters. Notwithstanding the penchant that India's current Prime Minister and his supporters have for self-aggrandizing billboards, the above description is for another Prime Minister who 'ruled' India at another time. Incidentally, that earlier era also witnessed vicious attacks on major universities, though not really comparable to the mob-led mayhem witnessed at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in January 2020 under the current regime: "[...] the Central Reserve Police surrounded the dormitories of New Delhi's JNU, arresting 60 students, 10 of whom were kept in prison for weeks. At Delhi University, 126 professors were arrested in the middle of the night, handcuffed and dragged to jail" (Lukas 1976, n.p.).

So, India has seen it all before. Yet, the political analysts of this era may argue that the uniqueness of the current dispensation rests in cultural politics that BJP's current leadership has marshaled to fuel its political success story. Unfortunately, this too would be an inaccurate description of India's political history. This too we have seen before:

> Government hotels have been required to replace their Western entertainment with Indian songs, folk dances or sitar performances; New Delhi's streets, long named for British colonial administrators, have been nationalized (Hastings Road has become Krishna Menon Marg) and [the Prime Minister] personally ordered a woman television announcer to change her Western hair style to the Indian bun.[1]

If our attention was focused on the leader of the day, India before Modi looked very much like India after Modi does today. However, the same would not be

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true if one were to talk of the Indians at large. To the extent this author can tell, in the past, we did not witness the frequent acts of lynching. The current regime has unleashed the demons of mob violence, prompting journalists and scholars to launch projects such as 'Violence Lab.'[2] The current regime has skillfully weaved multiple narratives intended expressly to feed the outrage of the frustrated youth, who are either unemployed or precariously employed, even as their country seeks to conquer the Moon and Mars.

Ajay Gudavarthy offers a ringside view of these various manifestations of outrage and anger against the very institutions that are supposed to protect Indian democracy and the foundational values of secularism, accountability, and inclusivity enshrined in India's constitution. *India After Modi* treats readers to myriad insightful moments of political ethnography, such as the following: "[...] one way to understand the spread of these populist regimes is that they are allowing the private individual some social space for expressing her own emotions and beliefs [...] Populism is allowing subjective emotions to play out in public" (Gudavarthy 2019, 13). However, any analysis of this apparent disruption of the private and public spheres must account for the *selectivity* of such opening up of the public domain. Girls and women enjoying their evenings in bars in second-tier cities such as Mangalore would object very strongly to this description of the public and private spheres. Lest this is mistaken as a question of the divide between the liberal elite and the marginalized minorities, think of the gender non-conforming couples going for a stroll in a public park. Numerous instances of the airing of private views in the public domain, say via Facebook posts that criticize the Prime Minister and the president of the ruling party, have led to arrests of politicians, journalists, and other individuals.[3] Without looking at the selectivity of these disruptions, we risk drawing conclusions that sound far more profound than warranted by the real-world events.

Most instances of the inversion of public discourses or practices are a reflection of an ugly, and at times fatal, politics of hate. Those who belong to the in-group get away with transgressions that produce a variety of social consequences, including lynching, while those not considered to be a member of the in-group can be punished on the slightest of pretexts. Therefore, it may be a bit hasty to argue that: "We must not reject [the current] regimes as merely populist, as there is something inclusionary about them" (ibid., 14). Instigating public expressions of bigoted views has long been a part of populist ideologies on the right of the political spectrum, as has been the promotion of mob-justice for those who are considered to be part of the out-group. There are several such slippages between the observed reality and their analytical manifestations in *India After Modi.* However, focusing too much on this disconnect would be missing the valuable contribution that the text makes in attracting the interest of those who do not call social science their profession. The pop-format of the book, with its expansive and fluid observations made in a language that seems accessible to the layperson, touches upon many of the complex ideas in social sciences. It should serve as a provocation introduced in the public sphere. The challenge is to carry

the conversation forward in a way that cautions the readers against jumping to quick conclusions without losing altogether the attention or interest of the popular audience.

For the social scientists and the well-read Kairos readers, the text demonstrates both the limitations and the potential of conjoining political theory analyses with a political ethnography approach. Traditionally, political theory has been a normative field, that is, a field that asks questions of ethics and morality that are beyond the realm of simplistic empirical observations. Yet, these questions have a great deal of relevance for and intersect with everyday politics, as demonstrated in Gudavarthy's wide-ranging analysis. However, the fusion of political theory and observation-based ethnography requires multi-layered and slow-form analyses that do not lend very easily to the format of writing that Gudavarthy has experimented with. The writing is expansive in its coverage of a long list of questions that do not always come together in a coherent analysis. One gets a sense that these limitations have to do with the text's origin in various newspaper columns that were written originally without a plan to pull them together into a book. One could also imagine how taking the analyses of the results of various state assembly elections out of this collection would have opened up a significant amount of space for deepening the analyses of the issues that Gudavarthy touches on in the first and third parts of the book.

The task of conjoining insights from political theory with an ethnographic and sociologically oriented political analysis is worth pursuing with some doggedness. This would best be approached in a careful and deliberative manner without succumbing to straw man binaries that are the staple of newspaper columns. It seems useful to consider Gudavarthy's analysis of the assault on JNU student union president Kanhaiya Kumar in a Delhi courtroom. Even if the lawyers or ruling party goons dressed up as lawyers were middle-class individuals who feel 'left-behind' in their own subjective worldview, Gudavarthy argues that it is "understandable why various sections of the society have begun to lay premium on *security* rather than *freedom…*" (Gudavarthy 2019, 31, italics added for emphasis). Such a sweeping claim begs the question about what notions of 'freedom' and 'security' would have informed this argument. Even the most diehard security experts trained in international relations today acknowledge the importance of 'human security' as an integral part of the broader debates on geostrategic security.[4] That begs another obvious question about whose freedoms and whose security is at stake in any given instance. Numerous Delhi policemen and a woman officer, who bore the brunt of the lawyers' rage against a policeman's attempt to enforce a simple parking regulation, would certainly disagree with the freedom-security dichotomy that the text posits.[5] Each of these incidents brings us back to the importance of selectivity in the macabre workings of the proclivity toward mob justice that the current regime has unleashed.

The complexity of the present moment in India's history demands an analysis that eschews words and phrases that mean very different things in academic literature versus the popular lingo. The glibness with which several

arguments are presented in the text means that the most exciting insights that emerge from Gudavarthy's analysis are lost in the twists and turns of an enchanting rhetoric. Gudavarthy's analysis of JNU student union president, with the apparent connivance of policemen stationed to ensure his security in the premises of a courtroom offers a useful illustration. The real question that this analysis throws up is why is it that such an assault goes unpunished either in the system of rule of law or in the broader sphere of public discourse. Gudavarthy's implied answer is insightful. He argues that the public at large is not disturbed by these events because "everyday life is constituted by violations of law – not as an exception but as a norm" (ibid.). This is an interesting insight that could be juxtaposed to arguments other social scientists make about the myriad ways in which India's poor have fought for the restoration of a system of rule of law decimated by the country's political and economic elite (Sundar 2011). The marginalized and socially ostracized have also fought to protect various other elements of the constitution, a history that has prompted a contemporary historian to refer to the Indian Constitution as a 'People's Constitution' (De 2018). Such a multidisciplinary engagement with the different strands of India's democracy should be part of a more rigorous analysis of the present moment.

An egalitarian, inclusive, and secular constitution of 'public morality' is a necessary ingredient for the functioning of democratic institutions, as Gudavarthy argues. However, while the entrenchment of 'public morality' may be a necessary condition, it is by no means sufficient for smooth conduct of the affairs of societies as complex as ours. For a very long time, the 'Congress system' relied on the decentralization of this difficult job of democratic bargaining to regional satraps who used their positions to accumulate wealth and power without being answerable or accountable to their constituents (Kashwan 2014). This is why we failed to engage the masses productively, not just in the deliberations on questions of public morality but also in the debates about more concrete social and economic questions that postcolonial India needed to resolve. Yet, we need not grope in dark to investigate the conditions under which such public engagements may be developed. Many of us, including Gudavarthy, have sought to address this highly salient question of state-society engagement (Gudavarthy 2012).[6]

Broad-based societal deliberations about the conduct of social, political, and economic affairs require that the state engages with not just well-organized interest groups, such as the various chambers of commerce that represent economic elites, but also myriad other social movements and civic initiatives that should have an equal say in the polity. While disparate examples from our own history and the contemporary era are useful, properly contextualized comparative analyses of the influence of deep-seated structural variables can be even more insightful. Comparative analyses show that leaders care about the economically poor and other marginalized groups when these groups are mobilized between elections to leverage their numbers to shape political and policy processes on a sustained basis (Kashwan 2017). Despite the unforgettable

miseries that the unbelievably stupid economic policies of the current regime have imposed on a large majority of India's citizens, including the middle classes, the Congress and other opposition parties have failed to act as the sheet-anchors for meaningful sociopolitical mobilizations. It is only through broad-based and inclusive deliberations that engage various constituent groups in a sustained way that we can respond meaningfully to the multiplicity of claims to Indian democracy. Failing that, Indian democracy is susceptible to the vagaries of an unpredictable public sphere that oscillates between 'Operation Green Hunt' under one regime and 'Operation Bandar' under the next.[7] Such oscillations are unlikely to be countered successfully by some mythical non-Brahmanical form of Hinduism that will satisfy a majoritarian hunger for a sense of control and dominance. Social scientists, public intellectuals, social activists, and citizens need to work a new praxis that is founded on a deep sense of solidarity translated into a broad-based social, cultural, and economic program.

Notes

[1] Lukas, J. Anthony. 1976. "India is as Indira does". *New York Times*. April 4.

[2] The Polis Project. https://thepolisproject.com/category/violence-lab/

[3] Dasgupta, Piyasree. 2018. "What Happens To The People Arrested For Insulting Modi?" *Huffington Post*, April 24, 2018. https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2018/04/23/what-happens-to-the-people-arrested-for-insulting-modi_a_23417412/

[4] Mathews, Jessica Tuchman. 1989. "Redefining Security". *Foreign Affairs* https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1989-03-01/redefining-security

[5] Sharma, Neeta. 2019. "Unruly Lawyers On Camera In Delhi Court Clash. Woman Cop Alleges Assault". *NDTV*, November 07. https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/tis-hazari-court-woman-officer-alleges-assault-in-cop-lawyer-clash-loaded-gun-missing-2128552

[6] See, for instance, Ajay Gudavarthy. 2019. "From a party to a movement: on Congress". *The Hindu*, March 11. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/from-a-party-to-a-movement/article26488970.ece

[7] *The Economic Times.* 2019. "'Operation Bandar' was IAF's code name for Balakot airstrike". 2019. January 21 https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/operation-bandar-was-iafs-code-name-for-balakot-airstrike/articleshow/69889631.cms

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