

Politics, Possibility and Utopia

A Tete-a-tete with Ajay Gudavarthy on India and the Emergent Political



Author of two successive books from Sage, "Politics of Post-Civil Society" and "Maoism Democracy and Globalisation", **Ajay Gudavarthy** has plugged the much needed gap of formulating new theoretical ideas and optics in an emerging field of social science studies in India. Almost three years back, he was shot to limelight with his provoking rebuttal of Partha Chatterjee's

theorization of *Political Society* which he found wanting in understanding the non-civil spaces of politics in India. This interview was partly a follow-up of that debate and partly his reflections on the future of Subaltern Studies project, Maoism and the recent spate of Hindutva politics in contemporary India. On behalf of the Kairos Team, Dhritiman Chakraborty took this interview in 2015.

Dhritiman: The first thing that we would like to know from you is your response to the developments in the Delhi Assembly election which witnessed a massive victory for Aam Admi Party. The sheer size of the victory itself shows how people belonging to different class-caste-religious affiliations voted for the party that sprung up from what you would call the 'soap opera' of middle-class moralization of politics. Would you still consider the victory as an avocation of politics? Or is there something 'new in the quotidian'?

Gudavarthy: BJP in Delhi Assembly elections it looks like has become the victim of the same phenomenon that Congress fell to during the last General Elections in 2014- higher and growing aspirations and expectations of the electorate. While the aspirations were raised by the development language by the Congress it was

eventually encased by Modi, now it looks like Modi is gradually also falling victim to the same phenomenon that was hyped around the 'Gujarat model', where the electorate wishes to try out a change in order to see if the AAP could do something more dramatic than what BJP could achieve in the last 8 months. In this search for a new kind of what I refer to as *conformist optimism* the electorate is willing to play by the rules but is stretching its expectations in order to put pressure on the parties to initially promise wonders and then punish them for not delivering on them. In this play, the BJP failed to come up with anything dramatic that could occupy the imagination of the electorate. Instead, it looked a party that was playing a rather old tune that has long been out grown by the Indian voter.

In this cyclical motion between growing expectations and inability to deliver on them, it is the turn of Kejriwal to occupy, at least in Delhi, what Modi did just a few months back. The same questions will be asked of Mr.Kejriwal in just a few months from now. As the electorate seems to have become a little more critical of the personality-centric politics of Mr.Modi that was otherwise projected and accepted as being decisive only a few months back, Mr.Kejriwal too has driven the internal dynamics of AAP into a personality-centric mode without an effective second rung of leaders to follow up on his actions. What looks like democratic in picking new and unknown faces as AAP did in this election, in a short while will be perceived as disability by the party to nurture effective and strong leaders. AAP will also face the same dilemmas that BJP is facing today for having made contradictory promises. AAP has promised to regularize slums and also make Delhi a global city with sanitized urbanization and a real-estate haven. Personality-centric politics is the starting point and a signpost of eclipsing these contradictory dynamics but they, as the elections have repeatedly proved, have lasted not for too long and this gestation is shortening dramatically with each passing elections.

Dhritiman: You have discussed about the necessity for resignifying some of the practices of Civil Society engagements towards forming what you call 'post-civil society' politics. The counter

argument is that you have kept the whole argument at a level of abstraction and have ignored the immense contribution of civil society movements in resisting state atrocities in Kashmir, in Gujarat riot, in Bhopal gas tragedy, even in Nandigram movement. Instead of looking for post-civil society actors, should we not dwell more on how these actors of civil society formats can be better equipped to deal with governmentality discourses, and resist their cooption within it, something that has happened in case of Nandigram movement. What would be your take on that?

Gudavarthy: Through the formulation of the idea of *Post-Civil Society* I had argued that those processes and practices that look liberal, civil and even democratic, such as rule of law, project of citizenship, voluntary associationalism, among others are radically *resignified* to reinforce dominant power relations and that there is an emergent convergence between State, Civil Society and Market, which has been grossly undermined in much of recent global scholarship on Civil Society and Citizenship. Among the examples you have cited be it Kashmir or Nandigram, where do they stand after the protests have died down? Can we argue that they have not been coopted? They have become part of what I refer to as the '*logic of circularity*', where the dominant coalition of class and other kind of social forces come to wield the same kind of power that they did before the protests began. Here I suggested in my book *Politics of Post-Civil Society* that the way to get past this impasse is when political movements act in tandem with each other in locating and displacing power relations in their manifold form. This I see it as a continuous process. This includes even new kind of issues on inter-generational justice that environmental struggles have brought into relief. There is here a kind of presentification of the future. Therefore, Post-Civil Society actors, unlike the actors of civil society can only act together, the same movements in their segregated or separated zones do not count as post-civil society in my view. In a more recent piece that I co-authored titled '*Politics of Secular Sectarianism*' I argued the same point in a different way in citing the growing tendencies of secular politics to get ghettoized and exclusive. Dalit, minority, feminist and Left politics in India

today are increasingly getting sectarian- this mold of *secular sectarianism*, in a sense, is the obverse of post-civil society.

At a global level, recent events such as the Occupy movement, the Arab Spring and the Brazilian Spring have hinted at certain new dynamics. For instance the alliance of middle and popular sectors in Brazil enabled state capacity to raise the tax-GDP ratio to over 36% to pay for its developmentalist investments and a universal social security that absorbs more than 16% of the GDP. On the contrary, India spends a miniscule 4% of its GDP on social security, and has failed to raise the existing tax-GDP ratio beyond 16%, a level inadequate even to sustain the state. Instead of supporting efforts of expanding state capacity to social protection, the middle class in India today has opted to ally with the elite/ruling class and has distanced from the historically excluded, highly vulnerable and the poor. This is why I see increasing *moralization of politics* as endemic to the way middle classes in India engage with politics.

Dhritiman: In your critique of the Maoist movement in the ‘Maoism, Democracy, Globalisation’ book, you have pointed out both the insurgency’s successes and limits in various registers. However, towards the end, you suggest that the ‘ideas of the new mostly lie in the old’, therefore the radical possibility has to be reworked within the old. But the Maoist forces would argue that this ‘old’ is necessarily structured and discursified to serve the bourgeois interest, hence this argument is downright reactionary. Would it be wrong to say that there is a dilemma in you as you on the one hand desires to transcend the civil spaces, radicalize all the available coordinates, but simultaneously you impose a sort of limit, let us say a limit of the rational/institutional, a limit of social acceptance, that you otherwise have vehemently criticized?

Gudavarthy: No, I am not imposing the limit of the rational/institutional kind. What I have argued for instead is the *false imagination* of the Maoists that they are reconstructing everything political and social for the first time in the history of a nation’s politics. Here they imagine a *pure rupture* or binarise socio-political processes (which by the way is also part of Chatterjee’s formulation

on Political Society). What is required instead, as again I argued in my book on *Post-Civil Society* is to resignify the available political discourses, institutional spaces and processes. For instance, the human rights movement in India resignified the meaning of rule of law, unlike in civil society where it is in opposition to violence, to mean the need to contextualize political violence rather than moralise violence. The point here being various available spaces can be significantly resignified to assume more radical meanings, which helps radical politics to *connect*, rather imagine a *pure rupture*. Consider, for instance, the fact that radical politics never, almost as a rule, have an imagination of how to negotiate with institutions and institutional spaces. The same discourses, for instance such as that of human rights are considered useful and political in their everyday use but are considered conservative and formal when they become part of institutional structures, such as the universities. How to 'do radical politics' within institutions is a pressing question for revolutionary politics that cannot be addressed if one imagines 'overthrow' as the only mode in which radical politics survive. Every post-revolutionary state and society will have to face very much similar kind- 'old' in this sense- of issues that liberal governance handles, even in substantially tilting power relations in favour of the weaker classes. For instance, which social groups would need more urgent attention in redistributing resources, over other similarly placed vulnerable social groups? There are plenty of examples within the Maoist movement on how they repeatedly fail to deliberate on such complexities. Here the recent crisis in Nepal could also be a case in point.

Dhritiman: In that same critique of the Maoist insurgency, you mentioned Karantani's position that literary composition is an expression of 'the condition of political failure'. However, on the contrary, recent literatures in critical theory have expressed tremendous faith on radical possibilities of different creative vocations. What could be the role, if any, of creative or performative acts like documentary movies, street theater etc. in galvanizing/sensitivising popular imagination in a post-civil society framework?

Gudavarthy: The argument you are referring to had the immediate context of asking why is it that the Maoist movement and politics has inspired a plethora of literary forms, including song and dance, novels, short-stories, poetry, and street-plays but has not produced anything even remotely comparable in terms of social theory and political analysis. Here I suggested that Karatani's argument that Post-modernism was born out of literary theory, reflecting a moment of defeatism in 1970s, could give us a few clues as to why the Maoist movement is more in tune with literary genre. Partly the suggestion was it reflected the structured, monolithic and singular moments could be better expressed in literary genre than in political theory. It was in a sense more readily available. This question needs to be opened not only in order understand the potential of literary forms but also to understand the social character of the Maoist politics. Could it be possible that increasingly as the leadership in Maoist movement is getting passed unto the leaders from 'basic classes' that they find a resonance more in literary form than in theory? What would be the political consequence of such a reality? For instance, by Maoists own admission they have lost base among intellectuals. While larger social reasons are relevant for this kind of development, would it be inappropriate to argue that intellectual mode of engagement within the imagination of the Maoist politics has been steadily shrinking, and literary forms supplant it.

Dhritiman: Now let me come to your critique of Partha Chatterjee's by now a renowned conceptual tool, 'Political Society'. In my field-works in the anti-POSCO movement in Orissa, I found many of your points as extremely pertinent and valid. But when you limit the question of subaltern agency by telling that it is 'inextricably caught between militancy and powerlessness', I want to know how you would like to theorize movements like anti-POSCO in Jagatsinghpur (you mentioned the movement in your work), which has stalled the project for over a decade now and has not given in to any provocation for militancy or governmentality inducements?

Gudavarthy: I agree there are popular movements that still exist but today it's more of an exception than a norm or ordinary reality.

Popular protests by the subaltern are witnessing drastic decline due to various reasons such as expansion of the informal sector, distress, rampant migration, and governmental cooption. This is visible in the decline of the trade union struggles, farmer's movements, among others. The streets vacated by the subaltern are being occupied by the middle class and urban elite, and youth, while the subaltern is moving towards, as Chatterjee rightly points out to 'contextual negotiation'. Subaltern today is either demobilized like the migrants in Maharashtra or in distress like the farmer's committing suicides in Andhra Pradesh, or negotiating through electoral means to gain minimal and subsistence benefits. Their capacity for collective bargaining is by and large weakening after the neo-liberal consensus. The only other sustained protest across India is that of the Maoist movement against the new kind of development model. Part of the crisis is also because we really do not have an alternative idea either of development or of market based on exchange relations that has popular appeal, and a return to the days of developmental state is not considered attractive as not many social groups actually benefitted from that kind of a state that resembled a social democratic state. I recently argued in a piece titled '*Rightward Shift of Dalit Politics*' that social groups considered traditionally in opposition to the new development model are actually becoming more enthusiastic champions and seeking mobility through this model. Part of the unprecedented success of the BJP is part of this development where even dalits, in spite of Hindutva, feel today they stand to benefit. Neoliberalism has succeeded in creating this optimism, which gets reflected in politics through what I refer to as *conformist optimism*. In a context of such sweeping changes I argued that subaltern agency is caught between *powerlessness and militancy*.

Dhritiman: There seems to be a fundamental similarity between Chatterjee's and your position as both of you have attempted for an envisioning of politics beyond the civic limits. In fact, you also talk of negotiation, persuasion of a different kind and preservation of the democratic norms, something that Chatterjee also tangentially touches upon. Could you please reflect on these

possible similarities between your and Chatterjee's respective positions?

Gudavarthy: This is indeed an interesting observation and I agree that there are similarities on some fronts between our frameworks. Both of us do privilege protests and mode of politics outside the civic limits, and that is what I argued in my edited book on Political Society. However, it ends with this. I resist the kind of binary that Chatterjee draws between the civil and the political, or between modernity and democracy. I do not dignify everything subaltern does by giving it the name of agency. I do not find the idea of community as necessarily empowering but actually see the tremendous hold over various fragments of the subaltern, which can be as regulatory as the governmental mechanisms of the state. Chatterjee also, I feel, rather unproblematically equates community with agency. Wherever the subaltern has a step outside modernity does not necessarily mean there is subaltern agency. Instead, we have a complex task of wading through communitarian forms of power and modern modes. In fact I believe what we are witnessing today is an increasing fit between them rather than tension. They are working in tandem rather than in contesting each other. Modern modes of power are getting dispersed through traditional practices and vice versa. It is in this context I suggest the very limit of working with modernity as the faultline, and at a larger level find both postcoloniality and liberalism belonging to the same 'epistemic community'. My next project is to precisely explore these continuities, which I in a very preliminary sense alluded to in my review of Vivek Chibber's book.

Dhritiman: Chatterjee in his defense of his theoretical position in your edited book "Reframing Democracy", has drawn attention to the specificity of his analytical objective, to the contingent nature of his theoretic formation, and to what he calls as the 'politics of real' in his book "Lineages of Political Society" as against the 'conceptual blur' that any exploration of the ideal would often stumble upon. In fact your formulations are also in a sense contingent on the specific case studies in the former Andhra Pradesh. Should we then say that the politics has become so

diversified and contextual that theoretical responses are more contingent in nature without any claim to universality? If so, how can we discount the category of 'everyday' from politics, that Chatterjee pitches for?

Gudavarthy: I think this kind of diversity has always existed and that precisely is what constitutes the stuff of politics. However, this kind of 'politics of the everyday' or 'politics of the possible' do not occur in free spaces, they get mediated through structures and processes that can and do have certain patterns. Scale of a phenomenon is indeed a challenging question given the diversity and contingency as real time factors in politics. For instance, even neoliberal order in India in many senses is completely in contrast to the way it occurred in Europe. We are witnessing the expansion of social welfare right at the height of neoliberal reforms. We are not witnessing a role back of the state, instead more issues today are getting articulated in the language of rights- Right to work, Right to information, Right to Education, to name just a few. This however cannot discount the thrust of neoliberal reforms in creating a certain kind of *uneven inequalities* by which I mean the potential of reforms to create new social elites in various subaltern social groups and pushing for conformist politics. This is where the thrust of the argument becomes important and also the reason, as you pointed out, that you find similarities in my arguments with that of Chatterjee. For instance, Chatterjee valorizes 'survival strategies' of the subaltern as signs of their ingenuity, I don't see it that way, while that might be real but that doesn't form for me the crux of the story. Finding something new in quotidian does not mean we discount the hold of the old kind of patron-client relations. I often find in Chatterjee, notwithstanding his incisive analysis and often very original insight, a misplaced thrust, a capacity to selectively pick and choose that often gives us a very reduced and sometimes a blurred vision of even everyday politics.

Dhritiman: Critics say that your works do not take into considerations the cultural/anthropological issues that factored into any mobilizations, especially in *adivasi* and ethnic identity politics. You on the other hand detested such moves as being 'ethnicisation

of politics’, that in Vivek Chibber’s words ‘whisk capitalism out of picture’. If we take into consideration these different positions, we would like to know what new tendencies of capital have you detected in Indian condition that needs to be combated on the political register solely. To extend it further, could there be a singular instance of politics divested of any cultural belonging? Conversely, if we have to accommodate the cultural question vis a vis the discursive function of capital, can we build up an alternative structure of epistemology to de-settle the existing knowledge-power paradigm of capital? Unless we do that, doesn’t our theoretical position become politicization qua politicization without the realization at the ground zero?

Gudavarthy: What you are asking necessitates a reasoning of the relation between capital and social identities and hierarchies. Here, capital has worked itself both ways; it could definitionally speaking work itself independent of social hierarchies, in fact that is what was unique about capitalism that it was based on a wage labour system for extraction of surplus and did not depend structurally on extra-economic force. However, functionally, capital draws from all existing social and cultural resources to augment production process and extract surplus through cheap labour and raw materials. This duality of capital is what renders history complex and in a sense, indeterminate and different. Yet, this indeterminacy occurs within the structural context of capitals drive for profits and extraction of surplus, which has the capacity to iron-out cultural differences and undermine the capacity of societies to stand outside its machinations. This fact of capital’s capacity- ‘double movement’- allows for a global history of capitalism, with and without differences. This stands all the more true with the nature of neo-liberal capital that seems to have abandoned the enlightenment project of freedom, autonomy, and dignity. It could provide women with new opportunities in the market, yet reproduce caste differences within a factory; it could intensify commodification of religion, astrology and Ayurveda, whose mere existence does not necessarily therefore signify ‘Limits of Capital’. This is akin to the Subaltern theorists understanding that mere use of religious forms make subaltern radical- without being hegemonised- and different-

belong to an 'autonomous domain' - and not the nature of demands those forms are put to. Even here the attempt by the Subaltern scholars has been to dignify the practices of the subaltern as they exist, rather than account for how agency is determined by the way power is structured and resources constrain choice of political action. While, in highly prejudiced social and communitarian context this might hold some value, it also for this very reason suffers from reifying the modern and 'ethnicization of the subaltern'.

Subaltern Studies project has claimed a kind of autonomy for culture that is in some sense supra-historical. It has understood capital through culture and culture in its difference with enlightenment. In this mode of analysis it has opted for a selective rendering of history and politics. While one way to make sense is that in itself it was a political project of its times, and therefore historically constrained to forge a narrative that is entrenched in its singular focus on drawing a binary opposition with Western enlightenment. However, the political fallout of such a selective rendering has been severely limited in imagining alternative modes of political articulation. This could be pursued, for instance, not merely in highlighting the difference but also the alignment and layered nature of social and cultural practices. Colonial rule was to a large extent based on the already existing social hierarchies, which were neither created nor institutionalised by the colonial state. Governmentality is no more regulating than the already existing systems of enumeration based on clan that was integral to the way caste was reproduced. Similarly, practices of untouchability were deeply bio-political and techniques of disciplining that did not originate with modern forms of power. It could well be the case that modern forms of power draw on the already existing modes of culture, including that of the subaltern. However, much of post-colonial theory has very selectively only foregrounded the 'creative power of community' without ever laying out the practices internal to the formation of such collectives. The fantasy of community, as Zygmunt Bauman would put it, has haunted the post-colonial project as an 'empty category' that is necessarily only made sense of as the other of modernity. Post-colonial theorists have held on to

this `fantasy` even as they have increasingly grown critical of utopias of the Left/Marxist variant. We certainly need new work around deconstructing community and on `technologies of the self` in the communitarian context in order to pose a new set of terms for critical theory in India.

Dhritiman: Thank you Sir.

Gudavarthy: Thank you and the entire Kairos team.

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