

A Response to Ajay Gudavarthy's *India After Modi*

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Political Scientist Ajay Gudavarthy's book *India After Modi* is an important contribution to contemporary Political Science, as it contributes to our understanding of the rise of right-wing populism in India in recent years. What makes the book insightful is the fact that it does not just study the "what" – right-wing populism itself, to denounce it – but seeks to answer the "why", or account for its rise. Gudavarthy seeks to capture the social narrative of the Hindu Right and account for its success in present-day India.

In this, he is studying the new BJP under Modi, which is a sharp departure from the old BJP under Atal Behari Vajpayee because of reasons as varied as increased popular support, the broader mood of the times and the personality of the leader. He seeks to account for the rise of a new wave of support for the BJP, something that has taken the party far beyond its old RSS support base. In Gudavarthy's book also lies a tacit account of the failures of the left and liberals in devising strategies and forging discourses that could contain the rise of the new right.

Of course, populism could be successful partly because of neoliberalism and the frustration – amid much hype about the ushering in of better times – it caused among many, the rise of the social media and global shifts towards far-right politics. Gudavarthy deals with a variety of themes – the rise of the strong leader in Modi, the falling faith of common people in institutions that have sustained the Republic, the forging of distinctions between all citizens and a new category of "authentic people", the frustrations of the mezzanine elites that the BJP has tapped into, and the ability of the BJP to create an electoral unity amid caste fragmentations. He also calls out the left and liberals for the "problem of retrieval", meaning their inability to reach out to common people by projecting the more desirable and inclusive strands of ancient Indian thought, which are a symbol of Indian civilisation for millions.

From these themes in Gudavarthy's work, I could make out my own connections and read the book in meaningful ways. A book, after all, acquires a personality

beyond that of the author in the act of reading. To begin with, one needs to understand why the liberal concern over the damage to democratic institutions under the present regime isn't making an impact on people. The reason: the right has been able to project these institutions as "elitist" – as islands of empowerment that deliberately kept out the masses – in what is a new concoction of class politics leaning towards the subaltern.

Here, the institutions become the other of democracy and the people. Once this binary is established successfully, these largely Nehruvian institutions – either in origin or in character – no longer need to be defended. Be it the RBI or a free press or JNU, nothing any longer matters. These constitute – in a strange kind of popular anger reminiscent of the "return of the repressed" – the other of the "authentic people", who have been excluded by these very institutions.

In such a scenario, populism establishes the myth of direct contact with the strong leader, who stands above institutions. He may damage them but is believed to be with the people in this democratic "correction". Dangerous as this may sound, this is the logic of populism, as the book brings out. Gudavarthy also says that there is nothing progressive ideological forces have to offer to the "mezzanine elites" – or people from upper castes facing lack of opportunity and people from dominant castes that are ritually intermediate. Caste fragmentation and consciousness have, in fact, worked to bolster the social narrative of the Hindu right. My field trips as a journalist endorse what the author says. The support base of the Hindu right includes upper castes as also dominant OBC castes like the Jats in west UP, who shifted towards the BJP after the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots and have fully supported it in 2019 too.

The BJP has also reached out to marginal OBC castes – even Modi belongs to the small OBC caste of Gujarati Ghanchis – offering them both recognition, as part of the larger Hindu fold that is politically powerful today, and representation, offering them seats in assembly elections and posts. The BJP is best suited to do the latter, I contend, as it always has a surplus of seats because it feels no need to field Muslim candidates.

One way out of the Hindutva social narrative, Gudavarthy argues, is for progressive scholars to retrieve the positive aspects of ancient thought to bolster their appeal among common Hindus across caste. Agreeing with him on this point, I contend that they need to play the role Gandhi and even Nehru played when they found much that was desirable in ancient as well as medieval India. Composite culture as a discourse beginning in medieval India becomes a powerful force only when ancient India is also seen charitably and not reduced only to an exclusivist Brahminism at odds with an inclusive Buddhism, which has all but disappeared from the land of its birth.

One point where I disagree with the author's otherwise insightful work is his belief that there is no Islamophobia in India, and that Muslims become the default target only because they are the easiest target. Research in modern India shows a thread of fear of Islam – alongside a parallel thread of composite culture – in existence throughout the period. The presence of two parallel threads does

not mean the absence of one. Rather, these are two competing discourses for India. The author's contention that apparent hate for Muslims co-exists with hit movies like *Bajrangi Bhaijan* does not show that Islamophobia is absent. It only shows that its opposite is also present. Common people – as distinct from committed ideologies – shift from one discourse to another, as per context. This is how I account for what the author sees as the paradox of the oscillating public sphere.

The most powerful part of the book is its introduction, which sets the tone for it and brings forth multiple compelling insights. However, there are chapters that appear weaker than others, perhaps because many of the author's popular writings are also incorporated here as chapters. This makes some parts of the book appear theoretically complex and some others parts look like very breezy and general readings.

Overall, the book is a very timely addition to the repertoire of our knowledge about the profound discursive shift the country has been witness to in the last six years. It is all the more creditable that the author develops these insights as they happen. Academics are known to develop deep insights, but are often seen to do so with some time lag as they make sense of shifts. Another reason they sometimes seem slower to react than politicians, activists and journalists is that they invest so rigorously in past structures and paradigms that they take some time to develop alternative paradigms when change comes suddenly. To the credit of Gudavarthy, he as a social scientist seems to have reacted very quickly to political change and has developed timely insights to explain it as it happens.