Populist Hegemony and Majoritarian Dominance

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It is indeed gratifying to read erudite responses from peers and colleagues that allow you to further reflect on some of the tentative formulations I had attempted in my book *India after Modi: Populism and the Right.* Most of the interlocutors acknowledge the complexity of the situation that is created with the overlap between populism, authoritarianism, majoritarianism, nationalism and fascism. Where do the fault lines lie could be difficult to discern, especially when one is intervening in mapping 'popular politics', when politics is necessarily in 'excess' of available categories. One has to -with trepidation- offer fresh vocabulary and renewed categories that is often prone to the critique of being either too sweeping or too limited in its reach but then that is again a necessary occupational hazard of political theorists dabbling in popular politics, more so when one is commenting as events unravel and not with the privilege of hindsight that most social scientists accrue to themselves.

I wish to structure my response by clubbing the response of Samir Gandesha and Anup Dhar, which are essentially theoretical interventions that provide incisive reflections on the theoretical formulations in the book, and allow me to further develop the issues they felt were significant in making sense of the 'contemporary moment'. I would then move to respond to Deepanshu Mohan, Abhay Amal and Vikas Pathak that have raised more empirical issues re-locating them in a historical context. Finally, I will flesh out some of my differences with Prakash Kashwan who has raised primarily methodological issues that need attention in theorizing the contemporary.

Samir Gandesha contextualizes the book in a global context drawing on the parallels built in the course of global capital flows that have ushered in an era of financial capitalism and neoliberalism. He however makes a very important distinction of the rise of Nazism against 'failed revolution' and impending 'threat' of Communist regimes in Soviet Union, as against the current context marked by the declining prospects of the Left. He further develops on the context of the book in probing the interface between populism and neoliberalism that thrive on

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producing 'surplus populations' that have emerged in terms of the discourse of immigrants and refugees in much of Global North. What is unique, if one wishes to move beyond facile similarities, is the nature of populist authoritarianism or as some would refer to it as fascism in its dispersed form beyond the state. Economist Prabhat Patnaik succinctly argues, "This would be a case of fascification, without a fascist State actually being imposed on society in the classical fashion of the 1930s, a case of 'permanent fascism' *unless the conjuncture that gives rise to fascism is itself eliminated.*"[1] It is ironical that in terms of social ethos – 'possessive individualism' – neoliberalism is hegemonic, while structurally it is facing a terminal crisis, which is what explains the authoritarian elements that are integral to the populist upsurge. It is *fascism from below* rather than 'merely' and forcefully imposed by a centralized state.

Apart from the state-society dynamic, as Samir incisively points out it is the simultaneity of instantiating 'possessive individualism' with holding up 'collective identity'. Explosion of individualism is the condition for the claims of 'authenticity', what Michel Foucault referred to as the capillary capacity of modern power to exist in 'each and all', it is dispersed, yet individuated. The emergence of Strongman phenomenon, as I argued in the book, demonstrates the ability to speak, represent and embody this reality. Fluidity of finance capitalism is combined with the solidity of a unified 'Hindu Community'. One compensates the limitations of the other. Cultural differences as the logic of late capitalism are brought into question and thereby questioning the legitimacy of differences becomes a mode of symbolically questioning colonial modernity and by default a critique of capitalism. Where does one draw the line of differentiating modernity and capitalism is a question that has by far remained unanswered since Gandhi's critique of modernity in *Hind Swaraj*. It is in the crevices of this silence that cultural nationalism finds its roots.

Cultural nationalism as populism has re-appeared in its more contemporary form in its appropriation of the post-structural logic of decentering power and questioning the singularity of truth in what I refer to as 'performative dialectics' that Anup Dhar in his thoughtful response equates with the simile of the moebius. He alludes to the question of how one differentiates the submerged multitude of the 'authentic people' with the multitude of the Left and its class mobilization. Cutting across the ideo-logical mobilizations, 'is politics then the new discourse of war?' The need is as is suggested in the book for a Reflexive Left politics that Anup identifies with the task of differentiating common being of community to being-in-common. Somewhat along the lines of what John Holloway refers to as *in-against-beyond*: the simultaneity of forging solidarity and maintaining internal critique or commonality with deconstruction of identities. There are no easy resolutions and politics of authoritarian cultural nationalism is the backlash or even the revenge of history over the present. If modern complexities are producing a 'distorted self', populist authoritarianism is drawing a new consent to disciplined self that is willing to trade off simple-minded loyalty as against conflictual complexity.

While Gandhi in the classical post-colonial moment found spirituality in connecting thinking-being-action, Foucault in contrast found liberation in freedom to self-represent one's own self as against the 'truth regimes' constructed by organized systems. Gandhi's celebration of conscience is contrasted against Foucauldian dispersed self. Gandhi's morality as the essence of being, as against Foucault's open-ended ethics. The tragedy of contemporary moment is while Gandhi is appropriated by the State; Foucault was subsumed by the market. Gandhi's inward oriented-self offered social space to modern state, and Foucault's celebration of multiplicity and heterogeneity was appropriated by markets.[2] Is there a way out of this conundrum for what Anup refers to as the reflexive Left to emerge from the debris of modern politics? More importantly, will the current moment of cultural nationalist politics, with its majoritarian dominance, signify and pave way for the not-yet in our collective imagination of politics. While one cannot be optimistic in current times, the challenge is not to eliminate the possibility.

Vikas Pathak, Deepanshu Mohan and Abhay Amal have offered relatively more contextual reading of the book and re-reading it in the historical context that it needs to account for. Among other issues both the responses disagree with my formulation of India having communalism and not Islamophobia. I argue Islamophobia is not a useful way of framing the question of religious minorities in India. The relation between Majority and minority communities in India is marked more by what I call 'contextual communalism' and an 'oscillating public sphere' rather than growing Islamophobia. It is somewhat paradoxical that Muslim politics in India, as much as scholars, have insisted on persistence of Islamophobia as a mode of counter-mobilisation. The trepidation that usually accompanies victimhood seems to be missing in this somewhat de-stigmatized claim of global Islamophobia. What such a discourse has got to do with global spread of Islam and assertion by Muslims of Islam as the fastest spreading religion in the world is something that one needs to wait and watch. Pointing to continued practices of untouchability against Dalits and growing sexual violence against women has been in different registers from the claims of growing Islamophobia. What that difference points to for me remains significant and is perhaps the point scholars in their response have missed.

Vikas Pathak insists that communalism co-exists with Islamophobia, while Deepenshu and Abhay refer to the colonial context and the policies of the colonial state for what could be referred to as the modern version of Islamophobia. I do not see an unproblematic continuity between colonial policies and what we are witnessing currently. If one wishes to keep apart homologous similarities then I do see the current developments more to do with neoliberal reforms of late capitalism, as against capitalism of colonial times. Whether Capitalism can itself be read as an undifferentiated continuum remains important, as is the question of its specificity in Global South.

Current phase of communalism has more to do with the collapse of social democratic imagination with the inauguration of neoliberal capitalism. The

terminal decline of the centrist politics of the Congress party marks the untenable mix of neoliberalism with secularism. I pointed out in a more recent book that what this kind of secular ethos has instilled is what I refer to as *Secular Sectarianism*.[3] It is important to fix the relations between social groups, not just religious groups, in this context to make sense of the political sociology of conflict. The conflict between majority Hindus and minority Muslim community is more of everyday conflicts that are social, cultural and economic in nature rather than a generic conflict born out of an exclusive discourse of Islamophobia. Conflicts between Dalits, OBCs and Muslims are born out of social conflicts over land, employment, wages, discrimination and exclusion.

Extending the global discourse of Islamophobia as a mode of framing the conflict between religious groups at best misses and at worst displaces the layered nature of this conflict. To begin with even the worst of bigot in India is neither dismissive nor abusive of Islam as a religion. What the majority point towards is historical memory and everyday conflicts and aggression. While the emphasis on religious identity could be misplaced it does not depict phobia of any kind. The discourse of Islamophobia has a social locationality in India. It serves the purpose of converting social conflicts into exclusive issue of cultural differences. It further displaces the question of internal power within religious minorities and draws on the same homogenized identity that is otherwise critiqued for lacking nuance and being ahistorical. Is there phobia against all sections of Muslims or is it directed against certain class of slum-dwelling Muslims, who are also discriminated against by the dominant sections within the community, including the practice of untouchability that has been referred to by some as 'intimate untouchability'.[4]

Further, an undifferentiated discourse of Islamophobia displaces the possibility of making sense of how current majoritarian cultural nationalism is mobilizing the majority. For instance, the recent case of *Sabrimala* that made the entry of women into temple contentious drew the conservative sections of Hindus who had more in common with the conservative Muslims than their co-religionists. Is it then possible that a new kind of neo-conservative politics that can possibly draw sections from across religions against a hyphenated modernity more than conflicts between religious communities? It is also evident that 'Liberal Muslim' is as much of an 'outsider' as any other when differences on religious practices are expressed. It is also true of the Dalit-Bahujan politics that those offering internal critique remain as marginalized as those standing 'outside' the boundaries of community. The question of 'constitutional orality' is selectively invoked more as a point of common mobilization than being invested in it as a social vision. We need a new language that can point towards a series of differences between identity and sectarianism, between difference/recognition and prejudice; between justice and power.

Finally, there are more substantive differences in my way of framing current political issues from the structural-functional approach of Kashwan. He writes, for instance

> 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.

Kashwan does not pose the significant question that is necessitated in such a context, which is why is the majority continuing to support a regime that has imposed 'stupid economic policies?' He merely assumes that opposition parties, including the Congress have failed to mobilize the discontent. This presumptuous and rather anodyne conclusion that Kashwan draws, I think, demarcates the boundaries of how we approach the issues at hand. For me the continued support is not merely a question of opposition or lack of deliberation but brings in a range of issues including that of public morality, emotions, distinctions between public-private, to state a few. Opposition in India has suffered both due to lack of narrative and in spite of a narrative. This conjecturing is only possible if one is willing to read the context for what it is and also for what it is not.

Kashwan's reading of the book completely misses the central thrust it wishes to bring and he instead offers a face-value reading of lamenting over 'cohesive analysis', while the thrust of the book is precisely to demonstrate the coming together of unlikely modes and perspectives as part of the quotidian reality. Rightwing cultural nationalism has precisely offered us a new possibility of seeing a continuum where one saw from a secular-liberal viewpoint a binarised reality. The book attempts to look at this rather layered process of how this was made possible and what does it mean for Indian democracy. This mode of framing by far seems to lie beyond the structural-functional approach of Kashwan, and therefore he reads the discontinuities as either gaps or as sweeping generalizations. The fluidity of the popular escapes the fixity and normativity of the protocols of social sciences of the kind Kashwan's response represents. The simple-minded centrism and social democratic worldview that he offers for instance when he says "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", completely undermines the point that what he feels are readily available "concrete social and economic questions" are mired in the same "public morality" and it is not something that is stand-alone to be recovered.

The current cultural nationalist politics precisely brought into question this kind of 'artificial' separations that marked both secular-associational politics and scholarship. Today social policy itself is deeply mired in social psychology, public morality, everyday ethics and hidden emotions. [5] I (co-authored) attempted to investigate the place of intangible factors in social policy of the current regime in a recent article on *Social Policy and Political Mobilization in India*.

It is at the interface of the intangible and what are assumed to be 'concrete' that cultural nationalism of the Right is marking itself. It is not in divesting or undermining some at the cost of other aspects, as Kashwan seems to suggest, that one can meaningfully speak to the current context but bringing them together, as I attempted in a very preliminary sense.

Finally, in terms of method of study, again I seem to have significant differences from the way Kashwan seems to frame it. It is not merely about combining political ethnography with political theory as he suggests but it is about the specific modality of combining the two. I have attempted to approach and frame current political and social issues through the prism of 'radical contextualism', instead of losing myself over differences between quantitative and qualitative methods. Radical Contextualism as elaborated by Lawrence Grossberg and Stuart Hall lay emphasis on making sense of the context.[6] As they pointed out, context is not out there to be picked up, instead context is both the starting point and end of analysis at the same time. Further, contexts are invisible, especially when they are familiar contexts: "they must be teased out, made visible and this is facilitated by theoretical contextualist framework".[7]

Finally, we cannot but negotiate with everyday perceptions, practices and assumptions in the theory-making process. Context itself acts as a text, and this cannot be unraveled merely through organized fieldtrips, and bounded interviews and data collection, this has got to be a 'lived' everyday process based on lived interactions. Much of professionalized social scientists have circumscribed this as a specialized activity that is distanced from one's own everyday living and reflection. *India after Modi* was an attempt to beat this routinised mode of conceptualizing and methodological essentialism, and it is possible that it may well have missed significant points that still remain to be unearthed from the lived context.

Notes

[1] Patnaik, Prabhat. 2019. "Shadows of Fascism". *MR Online.* April 8
   https://mronline.org/2019/04/08/the-modi-years/
[2] Gudavarthy, Ajay. 2019. "Demystifying Gandhian Resistance". *Newsclick* October 6.
   https://www.newsclick.in/demystifying-gandhian-resistance
[3] Gudavarthy, Ajay, ed. 2019. *Secular Sectarianism*. Delhi: SAGE.
[4] Lee, Joel. 2018. "Who is the true *Halalkhor*? Genealogy and ethics in dalit Muslim oral traditions". *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 52 (1): https://doi.org/10.1177/0069966717742223
[5] Gudavarthy, Ajay & G. Vijay. 2020. "Social Policy and Political Mobilization in India: Producing Heirarchical Fraternity and Polarised Differences". *Development and Change* 53(2): 463-484.
[6] Grossberg, Lawrence. 2006. "Does cultural studies have futures? should it? (Or what's the matter with New York?): cultural studies, contexts and conjunctures". *Cultural Studies* 20 (1):1-32. Also see Hall, S. and Back, L., 2009. "At home and not at home: Stuart Hall in conversation with Les Back". *Cultural studies*, 23 (4), 658–687. I am thankful to Dr. Tarushikhs Sarvesh for drawing my attention to Radical Contextualism of Stuart Hall.

[7] Kovala, Urpo. 2014. "Theories of Context, Theorizing Context". *Kovala: Journal of Literary Theory* 8 (1): http://www.jltonline.de/index.php/articles/rt/printerFriendly/732/1674