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Subverting the System

Reflections on the Fate of Democracies in the 21st Century

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The emergence of political leaders the world over with a contempt for the democratic systems they preside over, requires a re-examination of the ideas of democracy & representation. This is a necessary preliminary towards salvaging 'government by discussion'.

The shock verdict of the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the election of Donald Trump as US President in the same year sparked off conversations in the western world about democracies and democratic processes. The popularity of figures like Trump and British prime minister Boris Johnson, who have relied largely on direct personal appeal and have exhibited a wilful disregard for the very 'system' they have presided over, have rattled Western democracies. If 1989 was bookended by *The End of History*, with the West claiming its system was the answer to humanity's many woes, the emergence of this idea of a single assertive leader appears to herald a new era.

The phenomenon of a single leader embodying the aspirations of a country, winning elections, and displaying no desire to accommodate dissent or brook competition, is no longer only about Turkey, Russia, or India. The maverick 'populist' leader, displaying new campaign styles and technologies and leading with a 'direct' connect with the electorate, all seem to herald an insurrection against the 'system' of democracy.

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The curse upon us is not of just living in 'interesting times', but of having to analyse the times while living through them. For now, the point for all good philosophers and pretenders must essentially be to first interpret the world in various ways; though in the end, "the point is to change it."

Jan Werner-Muller's slim but dense *What is Populism* (Penguin, 2017) set the tone early on for a philosophical examination of the phenomenon of democracy throwing up the 'one', the new single leader of democratic societies. David Runciman's *How Democracies End* (Profile, 2018), and Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die* (Penguin, 2018) were among the more discussed books that reflected on democracy no longer being about "government by discussion" (to use Amartya Sen's description for democracies), but about 'the people' nominating a trusted one to run their lives. These books broadly expressed concern at a phenomenon now seen to be engulfing larger parts of the world: the sharp rise in the popularity of far-right and sometimes far-left parties, which strain at the leash of the idea of democracy moderated by institutions. These included the Five Star Movement in Italy, Podemos and Vox in Spain, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland.

The ideas distorting democracies

Three recent books, by philosopher Jason Stanley, political scientist John Keane, and journalist Anne Applebaum, continue the exercise of reflecting on the idea of democracy and representation in the second decade of the 21st century. These works complement each other in locating the moment that modern democracies are living through in terms of ideas: those gone by but staging a comeback (Stanley on fascism); those that are new (Keane on contemporary despotism); and those that are yet to fully reveal themselves (Applebaum's twilight of democracy). They take the debate on populism beyond the label: unhesitatingly discussing the 'populi'—the people—in 'populist' as agents and enablers of the phenomenon. The manner in which citizens are willing to be led by the new leader and with their own consent enable the rise of something beyond authoritarianism, is dissected by each of these three authors.

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Stanley writes with insightful clarity about those who live in democracies but function under the shadow of fascist politics. He offers "critical tools [...] to recognise the difference between legitimate tactics in liberal democratic politics on the one hand, and invidious

tactics in fascist politics on the other” (xviii). In his persuasive and concise book, fascism is not an Italian or German affliction. It is a general state of how governments and people are organised and how a nation’s daily business goes about to make it impossible for diversity and debates to flourish. *How Fascism Works* is most insightful as a guide for citizens to recognise that the numerous political slogans they are given to chant are interconnected in ways which are invidious and damaging to democracy. For instance, he cites US President Richard Nixon’s “war on crime” as an example of how authoritarian leaders working in democracies, use seemingly virtuous ideals to unite people for otherwise objectionable ends. The rich material he has drawn upon to make his argument includes the experiences of his Jewish parents being refugees from the Second World War. He delves deep into the way history shaped politics in the US and how the confederacy and the Jim Crow laws of the US inspired Hitler.

Stanley identifies ten pillars of fascist politics that can exist without the establishment of a full-fledged fascist state. These render a people divided into an ‘us’ and a ‘them’, something vital for those in power to perpetuate their control. These include characteristics like glorifying a mythic version of a nation’s past, boosting propaganda that twists the language of democratic ideals against itself; promoting an anti-intellectualism; and the promotion of the premise that members of minority groups are criminals. Stanley believes it would be foolish to undermine the cumulative impact of these things raining down all together on any country. The phenomenon needs to be understood clearly, even if it does not self-identify as fascist.

Stanley’s case that anti-intellectualism is a fundamental tenet of fascism is valuable as it distils the experience in a way that people across countries can immediately connect with. He writes: “fascist politics seeks to undermine public discourse by attacking and devaluing education, expertise and language. Intelligent debate is impossible without an education with access to different perspectives, a respect for expertise when one’s own knowledge gives out, and a rich enough language to precisely describe reality. When education, expertise, and linguistic distinctions are undermined, there remains only power and tribal identity” (36). This anti-intellectualism explains the identification of universities as a major threat by these regimes. World over, including in India, universities have been at the forefront of battles against injustice and authoritarianism. The 1960s anti-war movement on campuses in the US went on to shape the decade and the world. There are parallels in our very own homeland: the innocuous mess strike in Ahmedabad’s LD College of Engineering in 1974 and the anti-authoritarian movements in Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1974, or before that, the 1967 Naxalbari struggle powered by students in some of India’s most prestigious colleges in what was then Calcutta and Delhi too. To establish supreme control, it is essential for these regimes to block up all avenues for critical thinking by young persons seeking to understand the world around them.

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John Keane’s *The New Despotism* points out that it would be unwise to imagine despotic systems as being in some twilight zone “between democracy and non-democracy” (19). Keane’s proposition is that contemporary despotism is a model in itself, and needs to be studied for its own characteristics. He maintains that it would be naive to see this new form of despotism as something imposed on the citizenry. That citizens have agreed to be led by an authoritarian system despite the absence of any direct material gains or well-being is detailed across discussions of many countries, including Hungary, Belarus, Poland, Saudi Arabia, China, Singapore, and Vietnam. Speaking of “voluntary servitude,” (34) Keane explains that such systems appear more skilled than older despotisms at governing societies, with their “recombinant strategies” of “plutocracy with talk of the people, periodic elections with lawlessness and targeted violence, tough media censorship with toleration of digital publics” (18).

Keane goes beyond Werner-Muller and others who have grappled with the idea of the leader eclipsing the system, to describe in great detail how it enables “earthquake-resistant polities” (18). By exercising control over resources that those who oppose the ideas of the ruling elite/system can utilise to disseminate their point of view, over the larger information system with periodic surveys and polls, and by tweaking messages designed to keep people happy end up hurting their interests yet keeping them under control.

A particularly striking paragraph, that stands out while reading it in India, is where Keane describes the new despotism as learning to fully deploy all kinds of resources that being in power allows them to, “from capital markets to technology start-ups to media and public relations services, secret intelligence agencies and the armed forces.” Thus, despite the regimes’ “vulnerability to internal dysfunctions, external shocks and chronic public resistance, they display strong signs of long-term durability and metastasis.” The methods deployed by these systems are eagerly picked up by others as they are proving both “effective and attractive” (19).

If Keane is absolutely sure that the new despotism is not a defective democracy or a halfway house but a distinct evolved genre, Anne Applebaum is not. Her *Twilight of Democracy* portrays the redefinition of the social contract by those in power: government taking sides unabashedly, sharpening divisions in society and bringing back old prejudices such as anti-semitism that rocked the 1930s. Her book has been criticised for claiming to be about larger questions when in fact she is focussed on recollections of a party she and her Polish politician husband Radek Sikovski threw at the turn of the millennium in Poland. But when she contrasts this party with another get-together they host at the end of 2019, it turns out to be an effective device and a useful barometer of the change that takes place in all those who sup with them. The world has changed completely between the two decades that have gone by. Earlier this year, the Law and Justice Party regained power in Poland, and has succeeded in pushing the country firmly down the road on more homophobic agenda, and to fray Poland's ties with Europe – less Proust and Paris and much more about 'native' Poland. Applebaum, the wife of a minister in Poland's government in 1999, does not hesitate to tell all from that lens too and eloquently weaves the personal with the political.

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While Applebaum's work is a meditation more specific than either Stanley or Keane, there are two points that are of general interest. The first is when Applebaum explores the doubts about democracy that troubled Plato: that citizens might be “vulnerable to the fans and braggart words of a demagogue” and naturally succumb to being fans, no longer citizens. This nagging doubt posed the tough question on whether “democracy might be nothing more than the staging point on the road to tyranny” (28).

She uses the work of a behavioural economist Karen Stenner to enquire if this degeneration takes place when a sizeable section of the population which dislikes complexity is scared by debate, pluralism, and differences and opts for uniformity and a strong leader. Stenner believes that one-third of any population has an inherent “authoritarian predisposition” (30), and it is this tendency that supports a strong leader who comes down on diverse views, prescribes the one way forward and provides a sense of closure for anxieties. This enables a slow march towards a system which is less democracy and more “twilight.”

The second point of concern across cultures discussed here is the destruction of the public square or the equivalent of the commons in the world of information. Applebaum elaborates how each technological leap since the invention of the printing press has had its consequences. For instance, broadcast enabled Hitler to reach directly into homes way beyond what pamphlets or books would have allowed. The way technology has now evolved has fractured the common ground. This has no doubt provided cracks in the surface for many hitherto unheard voices to break out, but it has also taken away the idea of shared facts, vital for any discussion in a democracy to take place. This is only now being recognised as a factor vital to shaping opinion amongst the citizenry and a factor which could play a deciding role in morphing democracy into something else.

Reading three books in India in 2020

These three books draw from particular country stories and seek to establish principles and trends emerging across experiences in present times. They do not fully describe the Indian story of today. But there are many sections in each book that find a disturbing echo when read in New Delhi at a time serious questions are being raised in India about the meaning of dissent, protest, and opposition. Are Indians citizens or subjects? What is the job of the judiciary, media, and other institutions at a time like this, to be speed-breakers that keep democracies chugging along at a healthy speed, or to demurely fall in line with the 'mood'?

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In a recent paper titled ‘*Killing a Constitution with a Thousand Cuts*’, the Oxford legal scholar Tarunabh Khaitan postulates three kinds of executive accountability in liberal democracies: vertical, or accountability directly to the people asserted through holding free and fair elections; horizontal, to institutions like the legislature and judiciary; and diagonal, where the executive must engage with media, civil society, trade unions, charities and the like. With the ruling party having captured or undermined most institutions, he argues that India does not fare well at all on all three counts, but especially on horizontal and diagonal accountability.

Recent weeks have seen a casual disregard for the Parliamentary opposition, and the passage of important bills without discussion or referral to committee touted as a virtue and as efficient functioning. The criminalisation of public protests on important questions of citizenship, the portrayal of anti-government agitations as being ‘anti-national’, numerous sedition cases filed against protesters; all of these do not bode well for any sense of a “government by discussion.” In fact, even a discussion about the government is fraught with danger for the average citizen not keen on spending time in police custody.

South Asia is no exception to the global trends of shaky democratic societies; trends which have been boosted by either the public health emergency the world faces or the pandemic’s deleterious impact on the global economy. There is a fraying of the idea of internationalism, and little can be said that provides confidence about social cohesion either within national boundaries or internationally. India, which looked like it had dodged trends defiantly on the adoption of a remarkable Constitution in 1950, has lost much of its moral clout as a beacon of a modernity that stood as a counter to majoritarian instincts in its troubled region. Today’s India is far from being the *Vishwaguru* it imagines itself to be.

Is it all doom and gloom? Applebaum is the least optimistic about the “precariousness of the moment” (274). Keane’s central point is the durability of despotism by consent, which is different from totalitarianism of the past, as the current model is cleverer and more shape-shifting. But he also points to the deep vulnerability of the new despotisms to “surprise disruptions, digital mutinies and media storms [...] founded on digital communication networks, despotisms are forced to recognise the power of the powerless” (252). Stanley speaks of the system that by taking away the empathy the powerful may feel for those dehumanised as others, “can solidify the structure of fascism. But it can also trigger empathy once another lens is clicked into place” (xix).

The answers may seem obvious and a tad simplistic. But Shelley’s *Ozymandias* never fails to remind the reader of the inevitable fall of despots. Of “the king of kings”, he wrote,

*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*