THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

April 27, 2020

The Rise of the Populist State

By: Rudrangshu Mukherjee

A populist idea has developed that an entrenched elite is exploiting deprived people. This then drives populist anger that certain types of leaders take advantage of and exploit through rhetoric and a clever manipulation of facts.

It is unfortunate that the "today" in the book's sub-title has already passed into yesterday through a set of bizarre and utterly unpredictable events. In this thought-provoking study, Partha Chatterjee seeks to provide a genealogy of the "populist state". This populist state is a form of (mis) governance that has gained salience in the second decade of the present century and was the subject of discussion before the pandemic drowned such intellectual pre-occupations and nullified all prospects of organised opposition to populist states and their crass politics.

> The episode relates to the convening in 1946 of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East to try Japanese leaders arraigned as war criminals...

It could be argued that in parts of the world --- certainly in the western world --- the pandemic has acquired the terrible dimensions it has because of the myopia of elected populist leaders who are blind to all else but the perpetuation of their own power and popularity. This phenomenon of blindness and the lure of being popular are identified by Chatterjee as two apparent features of the 21st century populist state. When the pandemic passes and even if the world is left a radically devastated and altered place where - "a terrible beauty is born" *a la* Yeats - this book and its arguments will regain their importance.

Justice Radhabinod Pal

This is a small but by no means easy book. It is closely argued and theoretically grounded and therefore demands a modicum of familiarity with the literature that serves as the scaffolding for Chatterjee's exposition. The author's entry point is a now-forgotten episode and an even more obscure individual. The episode relates to the convening in 1946 of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East to try Japanese leaders arraigned as war criminals, and its remit was modelled on the 1945 Nuremberg trials of the Nazis. But whereas the Nuremberg trials had four judges drawn from the four allied powers, it was decided that for the Far East Tribunal that would meet in Tokyo, there would be as many as 11 judges representing 11 countries. India, though still under British rule in 1946, was given a place on the bench because of its major contribution of soldiers and resources to the war effort. The obscure individual refers to the judge chosen to represent India. This judge, through a quirk of fate, was a Bengali, Radhabinod Pal. He had taught mathematics before becoming a lawyer, he had served as an officiating judge of the Calcutta High Court for two terms between 1941 and 1943; he was a well -known tax lawyer, a scholar of Hindu family law and a professor at Calcutta University's law college. Between 1944 and 1946 he had been the vice chancellor of Calcutta University. His moment in history arrived when in November 1948, he recorded a dissenting judgment by absolving all the accused of all charges. Chatterjee calls him "the inconvenient judge".

Chatterjee correctly points out that the views Pal articulated in his long judgment, running into 1235 typed pages, were "utterly commonplace" in Bengal in the 1940s. Leaders of the Indian national movement from within the Congress had refused to endorse the British war effort and had launched the Quit India movement in 1942. Japan's invasion and conquest of south-east Asia were seen as no different from the colonial occupation of Asia by Britain and other European powers. Anti-British feelings were greatly intensified with the arrival of Subhas Chandra Bose's in Singapore in October 1943 and the formation of the Indian National Army. The trial of the INA prisoners by the British government in the Red Fort in 1945-46 almost coincided with the preparations for the Tokyo trial.

> Pal's remarkable judgment, imbued with a morality that the western powers deliberately ignored, has, not surprisingly, been erased from public memory.

Pal's views were influenced by these developments in India. Thus, he made it clear that the trial in Tokyo should not become an instrument of vengeance in the hands of the victors. He believed that the tribunal should be a legal body and not exercise the power enjoyed by the victorious side in a war. Pal's remarkable judgment, imbued with a morality that the western powers deliberately

ignored, has, not surprisingly, been erased from public memory. Chatterjee retrieves Pal's dissenting judgment and locates it in the history of emerging nation-states in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean - in a world where the identity of national culture was fast becoming the universal ground for a claim to sovereign statehood.

Pal's advocacy of the nation state and national cultures was in fact building upon a Romantic and Enlightenment legacy harking back to Johann Gottlieb Fichte and his merging of nationalism with a nobler moral vision and cause. But in Europe and in India the moral charge of nationalism and nation building came "to be contaminated", in Chatterjee's words, "by the cynicism of power." Chatterjee analyses this amoral exercise of power --- a characteristic feature of all modern regimes of power - through the writings of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci.

Michel Foucault

Foucault, as was his wont, overturned the conventional understanding of the origins of the modern regime's power that was marked by a "shift in the locus of sovereignty from the absolute monarch to an abstract construct called the people." This shift conceals, according to Foucault, and as explicated by Chatterjee, "how modern power can function as mechanisms of domination grounded in the sovereignty of the people, while concealing domination behind the disciplinary forms of regulation and self-regulation." This happened in Western Europe through a race war/struggle (race here being defined as "a group or class of people having some common feature") whose outcome, according to Foucault, was entirely contingent and indeterminate, and therefore unpredictable.

By this argument Foucault was drawing out a lesson - Chatterjee thinks this is critical to the argument - that "there is no moral legitimacy to the legally constituted state." But beginning with Hobbes, disciplines of knowledge - soon to be called the human sciences - morphed what was contingent and something that was the product of a bloody war into something that was recognised not only as legitimate but which also soon expanded into a form that was seen to be universal. What had been uncertain was made to appear inevitable.

By the 20th century, Chatterjee notes, "through the invention of new methods of survey research and the deployment of probabilistic rather than deterministic methods of scientific reasoning to bring under epistemic control a wide range of social phenomena conditioned by uncertainty ... [the] human sciences would fully participate in the process of normalizing society." This enabled the justification, among other things, of the history of violent colonial conquest. The latter came to be appropriated into the discourse of social pacification, trade and commerce and universal progress, in short of modernity.

Antonio Gramsci and the 'Integral State'

There was another level, Foucault observed, at which the struggle continued. This was within the sovereign nation states of Western Europe where groups attempted to establish their superiority and control over other groups. This struggle allows Chatterjee to make the transition to Gramsci who is "particularly helpful in understanding how the contingent, accidental, partisan, and often fortuitous history of political battles is transformed into the universalist legal and constitutional discourse of freedom and equality." The contingent-prone political battles Gramsci called passive revolution; the universalist discourse of freedom and equality, he called hegemony.

Gramsci noted that the establishing of the universal was often disrupted by historical events. He pointed out, for example, how the Bolshevik Revolution had exploded the schema set out by Marx on how the history of Russia would unfold. Gramsci tried to analyse the tension embedded between a theoretical model and the actual histories of how the bourgeoisie came to power in Europe. It is Chatterjee's contention that in the course of this analysis Gramsci made a distinction between the formation of the nation-state and the people-nation. A successful ruling bloc brings the two together with the help of a hegemonic ideology and the politics of passive revolution.

> It was seen to be wasteful, inefficient, corrupt and over bureaucratic.

Bypassing the notion of Hegel's ethical state where state and civil society are separate but in perfect balance, Gramsci posited the idea of the integral state "produced", in Chatterjee's words, "by passive revolution [which] unifies the two [state and civil society] without dissolving them and produces a new state formation in which state agencies (or government organs) assume the role of educators in society." Through this process the bourgeoisie exercises leadership over other classes in society through hegemony - a combination of activities in the economic and cultural spheres of civil society and with those in the legal and political spheres of the state. Gramsci emphasised that since the outcome of the passive revolution was contingent, the histories of the nation-state and people-nation do not

necessarily march to the same rhythm. Nonetheless, in Chatterjee's words:

> The integral state of the passive revolution is where the ruling bourgeoisie exercises hegemony by using the powers of the state to carry out a guiding or disciplining function over civil society without collapsing the distinction between the two domains.

Rise and Fall of the Welfare State; Emergence of Populism

After the experience of the two world wars in Western Europe, the lure of the integral state began to fade rapidly and the nation state could not any longer lay moral claims on the people. "The state," Chatterjee says, "could no longer call upon the people to sacrifice their lives in the interest of the nation." In the altered political and social landscape, the state had to seriously consider the welfare of the citizens as being its primary responsibility. John Maynard Keynes had prophesied that there would be a "craving for social and personal *security"* (Quoted in Judt, 2005: p 73). To meet this demand was born the welfare state - a state that undertook a better redistribution of resources to look after the underprivileged, the old and the sick.

The impact of these welfare policies, in most countries of Western Europe, were wide enough to benefit also the professional and the middle classes. There was a general improvement in the quality of life which was summed up at least for Britain by the then prime minister Harold Macmillan in his famous quip in 1957: "Our people have never had it so good." Chatterjee believes that "the welfare state created in western European countries after the war as the most advanced iteration of Gramsci's integral state produced through passive revolution of the bourgeoisie." It also marked the peak of the state's role in organizing the affairs of society outside the socialist world. In the words of Tony Judt (2005, p362), "Faith in the state --- as planner, coordinator, facilitator, arbiter, provider, caretaker and guardian --- was widespread and crossed almost all political divides".

> One could play around with Ranajit Guha's (and Gramsci's) terms and say that in post-colonial India there is hegemony with dominance.

It was too good to last. As the post-war economic boom began to die in the late 1960s and Western Europe was faced with inflation and unemployment and it seemed to many that capitalism was in crisis, criticism of the welfare state mounted. It was seen to be wasteful, inefficient, corrupt and over bureaucratic. It was argued that the size and the role of the state should be hugely reduced. The frontiers of the state, as the saying went in the 1980s, should be pulled back. This was best exemplified by the policies of Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister of Britain from 1979 to 1990.

Chatterjee sets this - the contraction of the integral state, the shift to the welfare state and the backlash against it - as the immediate context for the rise of populism. His argument is that there is an embedded tension in the "universal expectation" that governments should look after populations. The tension is caused by "contrary pulls of legitimate and illegitimate inequality." There is little agreement, he says, "on whether a particular governmental benefit is a just reward for excellence or the affirmation of unjust privilege, a compensation for historical discrimination or the bestowing of new favours." This gives rise to the populist idea that an entrenched elite is exploiting deprived people. This then becomes the source of populist anger that certain types of leaders take advantage of through rhetoric and a clever and deliberate manipulation of facts.

The Indian Experience

It is necessary, for obvious reasons, to take the focus away from the western world and to look at how Chatterjee uses his theoretical framework to analyse contemporary India. In India, the path of the integral state moved in a different trajectory from that of Western Europe. The ruling classes in India, following the trail laid down by the British rulers enjoyed, in the now famous phrase of Ranajit Guha, a "dominance without hegemony" (Guha, 1998). Moreover, the unravelling of the integral state did not quite follow the sequence visible in Western Europe - commercial society leading to civic associations to rational bureaucracy to industrialisation to universal suffrage to the welfare state. The sequence of changes was different with rational bureaucracy and universal suffrage preceding civic association and industrialisation. Notwithstanding the altered sequence, the state that emerged was democratic, though not a mimesis of the democratic state in Western Europe. A different kind of modernity was the outcome. The Indian state was certainly not the ethical state of Hegel (which never existed as a historical reality) but neither was it the integral state of Gramsci. Chatterjee terms it the "tactically extended state."

> While forms of populism are common to all political parties, it is the emphasis on Hindutva that makes the BJP unique.

What happened in India? Chatterjee's analysis hinges on two theoretical interventions. One is his own distinction between civil society and political society. The latter constituted by innumerable people who enjoy and exercise democratic and political rights but are not by any reckoning members of civil society (Chatterjee, 2011). The second derives from the extraordinarily insightful work of Kalyan Sanyal (Sanyal, 2007) where he points out that in India (and in other post-colonial economies) the process of primitive accumulation, unlike what Marx described in the famous chapter in *Capital* Volume 1, creates a huge number of dispossessed peasants who are displaced from the agrarian economy, without being absorbed into the circuits of capitalist production. They come to form a floating and migrant population working in the informal sector or eking out a living on the margins of the capitalist economy. This population has full democratic rights and constitute what Chatterjee terms political society.

In a democracy, the state, whatever its ideological orientation, cannot afford to ignore this population. The state enables this population to survive and work through subsidies or cash transfers and by ignoring, even condoning, transgressions of laws, regulations and the various protocols of civil society. The state in India, teasing out Chatterjee's argument, is tactically extended since the bourgeoisie exercises hegemony over the properly constituted civil society; but exercises dominance over political society. One could play around with Ranajit Guha's (and Gramsci's) terms and say that in post-colonial India there is hegemony with dominance.

Populism in India

Populism as an instrument of political practice was first witnessed in India under the prime ministership of Indira Gandhi. The practice grew more common, cutting across political parties, when after the Emergency the Congress began to lose its popularity especially at the state-level and then in the 1990s at the national level. Chatterjee delineates two levels at which populism works - the nation state and the people-nation. The formation of the latter, he says, has a long history which is written about mostly in the regional languages. The federal structure of the Indian Constitution creates space for this dual practice of populism. The characteristic, almost definitional feature of populism is that government policies are designed to benefit large sections of the electorate to win votes. Winning the next election appears as the principal goal of populist regimes rather than social and economic transformation. Populist regimes have at their helm a leader who projects herself as the benefactor and protector of the people and is invariably authoritarian in style and not averse to crushing any opposition by force.

> Thinkers like Chatterjee who are strongly influenced by Marxian ideas and the works of Foucault need to address these modern regimes of power that used the alibi of communism to perpetuate terror.

At the national level, Chatterjee focuses on the character of the government under Narendra Modi who came to power promising change and development. This brought to him the unstinting support of big business (who funded his campaign and his party) and the enthusiastic support of an upwardly mobile younger generation. The hope was that Modi would step on the accelerator of economic growth and reform. This hope has evaporated because of the state of the global economy and the government's unwillingness to take forward economic reforms. The sudden and inexplicable move to demonetise, in fact, stalled economic growth. What has expanded is data gathering, commercial penetration, and state surveillance through mobile phone services, electronic bank transfers and mandatory biometric identification of all inhabitants of the country. Side by side, the Modi government to retain its popular base has resorted to populism to assuage the grievances of farmers and certain caste groups. But these, as the results of recent state elections show, have not brought Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) the expected dividends.

There is another vehicle through which the BJP attempts to consolidate its popularity among the Indian people. This is the ideology of Hindutva which is founded on the idea of an original Hindu nation and which, according to the BJP and its parent organization the RSS, was formative in the making of the people-nation. While forms of populism are common to all political parties, it is the emphasis on Hindutva that makes the BJP unique. Chatterjee argues, "the project of Hindutva is a hegemonic struggle to achieve a convergence between the nation-state as inherited through the transfer of power from British rule and a people-nation that is unitary, homogeneous, and transcends the various regions within India." This ideology posits the Muslim as its other since, within the interpretive frame of Hindutva, the centuries of Muslim rule only disrupted the singular and continuous civilisational narrative of Hindutva.

Missing Features

There are two features of Modi's regime that I found surprisingly missing or underplayed in Chatterjee's analysis. One is the prominent streak of authoritarianism and intolerance and the other is the deliberate peddling of lies and misinformation. This is not the argument that Modi himself is always directly responsible for spreading and perpetuating these features. But it is to point out that there are enough people around him, within his party and in his support base who are "working towards Modi" by spreading intolerance and misinformation. Modi is complicit in this since he has never condemned these tendencies nor has he disassociated himself from them.

I want to point to another absence in the book. The attempt of leaders to identify themselves completely with the people-nation and the nation-state, the suppression of dissent, the peddling of misinformation, and the use of the rhetoric of "anti-national" (as in "enemy of the people") was by no means a political phenomenon confined to populist leaders in liberal democracies. The regimes of Joseph Stalin, Mao Ze Dong, Pol Pot and many other communist dictators used these techniques efficiently and ruthlessly to oppress and terrorise people in the name of ruling over them. These were also modern regimes of power and they do not enter Chatterjee's analysis at all. Thinkers like Chatterjee who are strongly influenced by Marxian ideas and the works of Foucault need to address these modern regimes of power that used the alibi of communism to perpetuate terror. I used the word "terror" somewhat deliberately since Robespierre's justification of the Terror in the French Revolution was precisely the claim that he was the embodiment of the people and the nation. The continuity of terror in the name of the people but directed against the people is arguably Robespierre's most lasting legacy to 20th century revolutionaries.

> The pandemic has revealed the vacuity not only of the neoliberal policies that dismantled the welfare state, especially public health care services, but also the utter indifference of populist leaders and regimes towards the most underprivileged and the most vulnerable.

As a kind of coda to his exposition and analysis, Chatterjee also briefly looks at the rise of populism elsewhere in the world and in an attempt to dispel the pessimism that his book could produce also presents the outline of a counter-hegemonic narrative "with the emotional power to draw people into collective political action." Reason alone will not suffice, Chatterjee seems to be suggesting. It is entirely possible --- and this is the hope that one clings to --- that in a post-pandemic world conditions will be created for such collective action. The pandemic has revealed the vacuity not only of the neoliberal policies that dismantled the welfare state, especially public health care services, but also the utter indifference of populist leaders and regimes towards the most underprivileged and the most vulnerable. Out of this searing of suffering could emerge new emotive narratives from those who have suffered, from those who have cared and even from those who have watched in despair. The "people" who were Chatterjee's point of departure could then perhaps create their own point of arrival.

References:

Chatterjee, P., *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracies* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black: 2011)

Guha, R., *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press: 1998)

Judt, T., *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, (London: William Heinemann: 2005)

Kershaw, I., *Hitler: 1889-1936: Hubris*, (London: Allen Lane: 1998)

Sanyal, K., *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality & Post-Colonial Capitalism*, (Delhi: Routledge: 2007; repr.2020)

Shanin, T., (ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the `Peripheries of Capitalism'*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 1983)