

For a Radical Social Democracy: Imagining Possible Indian Future/s

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'Pure time, then, is not a string of separate, reversible instants; it is an organic whole in which the past is not left behind, but is moving along with, and operating in, the present. And the future is given to it not as lying before, yet to be traversed; it is given only in the sense that it is present in its nature as an open possibility.'

– Muhammad Iqbal (2011, pp. 50)¹

Summary

Drawing on the writings of some important early to mid twentieth century Indian thinkers, the essay proposes the concept of radical social democracy, an idea for the future that appeals for a change in what Ambedkar called the social conscience of the people. In its practice, it will institutionalize the ethics of sharing, so that the resources become part of the commons. The radical social democracy will relentlessly strive for the systems that do not fall prey to powerful oligarchies and enable institutional forms that can provide space for the plurality of visions for the imagined future.

Since the future is not a moment in time that is yet to arrive, rather it is shaped through every moment of our present, hence, it has to be imagined, taking into account the fact, that there are far more groups that have a stake in how it shapes up than ever before. The present form of parliamentary democracy, dominated by the party-form, reduces all politics and contestation to mass manipulation, where effectively oligarchies rule in the name of the masses, without allowing for complexities of any sort to be debated. Radical social democracy, at the very least, would give people the opportunity to make informed choices when problematic questions arise, that may not lend themselves to easy resolutions.

The Future, Here and Now

The future, goes an apocryphal saying, is not what it used to be.² It is difficult from our notions of linear time to imagine how something that has not yet come, could have already changed beyond recognition. The future is, after all, always something that is yet to come, a 'not-yet', to borrow Ernst Bloch's expression. And yet, it is interesting to think of the possibility of a time that never was, having so irretrievably changed that we might perhaps need to revisit all our temporal concepts—modernity, progress, history, future, development—so that we may understand the meaning of this enigmatic statement.

Once upon a time, our future used to be one of abundance, of 'man's' complete mastery over nature. It used to be a future that was driven by technology and large scale industry where technology, it was believed, would liberate us from the everyday drudgery of work and we would be left free to enjoy the beauties of life, have time for aesthetic pursuits and write poetry. Human emancipation was imagined to be predicated upon the domination and control of Nature. All of Nature's bounties were for us to consume and enjoy. This was pretty much the global hegemonic vision that also ruled the imagination of the makers of modern India. Critics like Gandhi and Tagore were soon consigned to the safety of school textbooks, while *adivasi* cosmologies and their notions of their future were seen as signs of backwardness to be eradicated at all costs. Indeed, the power of this vision was most dramatically evident in the life and works of B. R. Ambedkar whose rejection of village autonomy and of traditional occupations and livelihoods was decisive, as was his embrace of modernity and technology. An important aspect of this global dream of a utopian future was the idea that certain modes of being belonged to an unviable past that had to be obliterated. Their backwardness was a drag that held back the rest of humanity from reaching the Promised Land. Thus was Time mapped on to Space in a way that made large parts of the non-Western world and its modes of being to be an embodiment of the past. Conversely, the present was also relocated elsewhere – in Europe – where History was apparently happening. It mattered little what your or my present actually was, for it was always only the past of an abstraction called World-History or World-System. This was where the future was arriving at any given moment. That present-becoming-future was the future for the rest of the world.³

We can resist such a construction by making a radical claim to the effect that we no longer recognize any such thing as a singular World which has only one present. We could join Tagore in wanting to 'kill the giant abstraction which is claiming the sacrifice of individuals all over the world under highly painted masks of delusion' (Bhattacharya 1997, pp. 58).⁴ And this would not be a very outlandish claim. After all, there are mod

of being, once thought to be relics of the past, which have refused to oblige the moderns by disappearing into the pages of history. They will pretty much be part of our future which now has begun to already look different from what it used to only a few decades ago.

Nature too, has not been gracious enough to oblige us. It is already talking back, indeed striking back in anger. Climate change is an affliction of the condition called the *homo sapiens*, but it is not a condition that nature passively bears; on the contrary, it is like that sleeping snake at the bottom of the earth, which has been roused to fury.⁵ The future now is no longer one where a part of humanity basks in aesthetic pleasures, having dispensed with another part of humanity and brought nature itself under its complete domination. It is a future, already arriving – a future where the moderns will have to make peace on equal terms with both the 'wretched of the earth' and an angry and uncompromising nature.

It is a future, in other words, that is already here. Everything that we do today—from building high energy consuming cities with flyovers and malls, to destruction of agricultural land for luxury living—will remain with us for decades to come, maybe even centuries; and in the case of plastics and nuclear waste, even millennia! It will affect everything, bringing in its train changes ranging from erratic and devastating climatic changes to destruction of our food security. As Iqbal's statement cited in the epigraph to this paper suggests, the future must be seen not as something that is 'yet to be traversed' but as a set of open possibilities connected deeply with the present, which is in turn structured by the past which continues to operate within it. A crucial point in Iqbal's assertion is that the future represents a set of open possibilities. In our times, I understand this to be a consequence of the fact that there are today far more people and social groups who have a stake in how the future shapes up, than there used to be some decades ago. No longer is it a matter for state and political elites, policy-makers, economists and corporations to decide. Whether there will be a nuclear power plant in Koodankulan or Jaitapur is a decision that can longer be left to this nexus of the political elite, experts and corporations – let us call it the power bloc. Nor can the decision to simply hand over the natural commons to corporations be left to them. There were movements and struggles against such moves earlier too; but what has changed significantly is that at a global level, the presence and legitimacy of other stakeholders has now become impossible to ignore.

Take for instance the idea of 'inter-generational equity', first mooted in the Stockholm Conference on Human Environment in 1972, which has become one of the key nodes around which revolve not only our critiques of what we do to our 'natural resources' but also the way in which we think of the future. In demanding that the present generation

leave behind an earth for coming generations, in a condition at least as good as it was received in, the idea of inter-generational equity places upon the present the responsibility of shaping the future by exercising discretion and restraint. It forces us to acknowledge that the future is being shaped at every moment of our present, here and now. In other words, it is not a moment in time that is yet to arrive – a time that will begin when this burdensome prehistory of oppression ends. There is no apocalypse that will mark the end of the drudgery of historical time and lead us into the realm of Eternity. There is also no 'revolutionary moment' which will put an end, once and for all, to all exploitation and lead to a new beginning like a classless society without exploitation. It is no longer possible to assume that we can let capital wreak havoc now, in the hope that we will set it right once the revolution takes place, for there will be nothing left to set right at this rate.

The recognition that there are many more players in the field than the power bloc, leads to the enunciation of a fundamentally different set of normative principles.

One example from our recent history will suffice to explain this better. In the wake of the popular struggles against land acquisition, especially after the Singur and Nandigram (West Bengal) struggles, the debate on land acquisition acquired new urgency. Struggles against Special Economic Zones and mining through mass dispossession of tribal communities drew attention to larger questions of justice that had so far been ignored in the name of an inescapable economic logic. In that context, the Minister for Mines in the second term of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government (2009-14), B. K. Handique, made a proposal in parliament, giving the tribal communities 26 percent stake in the proceeds from mining. The proposal came from the group of ministers in the course of drawing up the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Bill and was vehemently opposed by industry bodies like the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry. Even though that proposal apparently went into cold storage, more recently the anti-mining struggle in Goa managed to get the Supreme Court to direct, in April 2014, the formation of a Permanent Fund by putting back 10 percent of the profits from iron ore mining in the state. The Supreme Court basically accepted the principle that a percentage of the mining should go back to the community and subsequent generations, acknowledging them too as stakeholders, even though the proportion of profits earmarked for it leave much to be desired. It is of course possible to see this move as an attempt at incorporation of dissent and a way of buying out resistance but it is equally important to recognize that this move too is being fiercely resisted by the mining corporations. In other words, it is a matter of profound conflict and contestation in which, often, such small changes can become the thin edge of the

wedge for mass struggles and dissenting voices to transform the terms of policy and judicial discourse. Needless to say, this in no way represents an alternative vision of the world – a vision with which many movements on the ground operate.⁶

In another striking move, dubbed populist by the power bloc and intellectuals associated with it, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in Delhi has decided in principle to provide consumers 20 kilolitres of water a month (700 litres a day) free of cost. The argument for this measure advanced by the AAP is that water is the lifeline and cannot be treated as an economic good – at least up to a certain minimum level. Beyond that level, whoever wants to consume excess water must pay higher tariffs. This position runs fundamentally against any argument for the privatization of water. This argument clearly draws on the experience of numerous struggles and movements across the world and points towards a different ethic of living.

The future is now practically indistinguishable from our living present. That is why many contemporary movements are so deeply invested in the 'here and now'. For feminism it was always so – the struggle against patriarchy was never a deferred struggle. I have argued, elsewhere, that this concern with the 'here and now' marks our post-utopian moment more generally, and movements like the Dalit movement or the ecological struggles in particular too, are no longer prepared to wait for an indefinite future.

Technology and Indian Thought Traditions

If the future, for our nineteenth century forbears like Marx, was one of super-abundance and freedom from the drudgery of work through the sheer revolutionary power/s of technology and the productive forces, at the beginning of the twenty-first century that option no longer seems viable. In productivism lay the hope of the future, not only for Marxism but in fact, for all other modern ideologies, for much of the last three centuries. Today we seem to have arrived at the limit point of that imagination.

Already, by the middle of the twentieth century, Marxists like Herbert Marcuse were writing of the technological dystopia that the modern world was beginning to be (Marcuse, 1964). In his justifiably famous book *One-Dimensional Man*, he had spoken of the technological rationality of modern industrial society as something that increasingly tends towards totalitarianism of some form or the other. Technological optimism had already been severely dented with the rise of fascism and Nazism and reached its mid-century climax with the dropping of the atomic bomb by the so-called 'free world' over a hapless civilian population. That was where Marcuse had begun his story of the technological dystopia of the modern world.

India has had a robust tradition of the critique of technology and what Tagore termed 'machinicedemon' – *jantradaanav* (See Bhattacharya, 1997, p. 32). If there were those like Jawaharlal Nehru, B. R. Ambedkar and M. N. Roy, who shared the technological optimism of their times, there were figures like Gandhi and Tagore who struck a different note on this issue.

A relentless critique of modern technology is pervasive in Tagore's writings – both fiction and non-fiction. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, of course, was an early and prescient text in this regard and his rejection of machine-based modern civilization was uncompromising. But there are interesting dissonances between the positions of these two giant figures of twentieth century India. Gandhi's early attack on machinery drew on his reading of Romesh Chandra Dutt's *Economic History of India*, which, according to his own account, made him weep when he first read it. His conclusion: 'It is machinery that has impoverished India. It is difficult to measure the harm that Manchester has done to us. It is due to Manchester that Indian handicraft has all but disappeared' (Parel, 1997, pp.107). Elsewhere, many years later, he underlined this basic point once again, when he said that what he objected to was, 'the craze for machinery, not machinery as such'. He explicated this further: 'The craze is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Men go on "saving labour" till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation' (ibid., pp.166). It is clear from these statements that Gandhi's primary concern was with the labour displacing power of technology. But even more importantly, in this later statement, Gandhi tied up this opposition to machinery to the concentration of economic and political power: 'I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of the few, but in the hands of all. *Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions*' (ibid., pp.166, emphasis added). This connection between machinery, industrialization and centralization was seen by many Indian thinkers through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but there were also some who believed that it was possible to have a modern industrialized economy without centralization and destruction of the rural economy.

While it is true that most thinkers of modern India had already accepted the superiority of modern science and technology, as persuasively argued by Partha Chatterjee (1994), it is interesting that even many of those who accepted the West's superiority in this regard had deep reservations with regard to industrialism of the kind that the West embodied. Right from the nineteenth century onwards, this attitude resulted from a commitment of the colonized intelligentsia to the rural population and concern for the appalling conditions of its existence. Thus an early modernist figure like Rammohun Roy too 'realized the strategic significance of the renovated and modernized village *panchayats*' (Ganguli, 1977).

pp. 87). He maintained that these panchayats could be the building blocks of an economy 'reconstructed from the bottom upwards'. The future Indian economy, he believed, could not be a centralized structure (*ibid.*, pp. 87).

Tagore was entirely in agreement with Gandhi as far as his critique of technology went but he discerned among the participants of Gandhi's Non-cooperation movement, the powerful presence of what he called the 'slave mentality'. And he could not quite absolve Gandhi himself of some responsibility in encouraging it: 'Where Mahatma Gandhi has declared war against the tyranny of the machine which is oppressing the whole world, we are all enrolled under his banner. But we must refuse to accept as our ally the illusion-haunted magic-ridden slave mentality that is at the root of all the poverty and insult under which the country groans' (Bhattacharya, 1997, pp. 84). For one thing, Tagore was deeply suspicious of Gandhi's presentation of the *charkha* as the alternative mantra to the domination of the machine. 'To one and all he simply says: Spin and weave, spin and weave...Is this the call of the New Age to new creation?' (*ibid.*, pp. 81). Tagore saw in this cult of the charkha the potential to numb the mind, to reduce the human personality to banal levels: 'But if man be stunted by big machines, the danger of his being stunted by small machines must not be lost sight of' (*ibid.*, pp. 82). Tagore revolted against the peculiar kind of 'political asceticism' that he had begun to identify with the Gandhian project. For, in the end, Tagore's was a call for the joyful celebration of life that was predicated upon the exaltation of the individual's capacity for reason and creativity: 'We have enough of magic in this country – magical revelation, magical healing, and all kinds of divine intervention in mundane affairs. That is exactly why I am so anxious to instate reason on its throne' (*ibid.*, pp. 82).

On this point, Tagore seems to be considerably closer to Ambedkar, even though the latter differs with both Gandhi and Tagore on the general issue of machinery. Ambedkar experienced the advent of the machine and technology in general as immensely liberating, which is clearly linked to the fact that unlike Gandhi and Tagore, his reference point is the community of labour of the most degrading kinds – the labour that untouchable castes had been traditionally made to perform in Hindu society. Such labour obviously held little romantic appeal for him. But Ambedkar's response to 'Gandhism' on the question of machinery is not merely experiential. He underlines that what separates humans from animals is culture, which he sees as 'essential for man'. He underlines that a life of culture is made possible only when there is sufficient leisure (Rodrigues, 2002). Leisure means the lessening of the toil necessary for satisfying the physical wants of life. This toil, he argues, can only be lessened when machine takes the place of man. Machinery

and modern civilization are thus indispensable for emancipating man from leading the life of a brute' (ibid., pp.159).

Both Gandhi and Ambedkar, it seems to me, were basing themselves on very real experiences of the impact of machinery on different sections of the population of India – even though neither of them actually experienced its impact directly at a personal level, though Ambedkar certainly had a closer acquaintance with it, via members of his family. It is difficult to deny the deeply unsettling impact of machinery and industrialization on large sections of the Indian population, leading to large-scale destitution, that so moved Gandhi.⁸ It is equally difficult to deny the liberatory potential of machinery where it came to populations forced into the most degrading and humiliating forms of work, the Dalits. Nor is it possible, at a more general level, to deny Ambedkar's point about the availability of leisure through technology – something that more recent technologies do in terms of liberating women to some extent from the drudgery of household work.⁹ It is interesting here to note that Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's story 'Sultana's Dream',¹⁰ published a few years before Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, actually visualized a women's utopia that was based on both a reversal of the division of labour and a vision of technology as liberating.¹¹ It is also not without significance that it is the imagination of control over solar power that forms an important ingredient of the technological basis of Rokeya's utopia.

Most discussions of the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate end up affirming one or the other of the positions, replaying old animosities and stances taken in relation to tradition and modernity. It is far more important, however, to recognize that both Gandhi and Ambedkar, and in a different sense, Tagore and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, articulate different responses to the question of technology that give voice to different aspects of an existential reality in a society like India's. Any contemporary discussion of their positions must take this point into account as an index of the complex terrain of India's encounter with modernity. Only then can we possibly begin to appreciate the fact that even when the imperative of ecology and global climate change force us to re-appraise our attitude to technology-fetishism, we cannot at the same time afford to ignore the fact that even today, there are domains of life where its impact is liberatory.

Radical Social Democracy – Ambedkar and M.N. Roy

'Democracy is another name for equality. Parliamentary democracy developed a passion for liberty. It never made even a nodding acquaintance with equality. It failed to realize the

significance of equality and did not even endeavour to strike a balance between liberty and equality, with the result that liberty swallowed equality and made democracy a game and a farce.'

– B.R. Ambedkar¹²

In the above quote, Ambedkar makes a distinction between democracy, which he sees as synonymous with equality and *parliamentary democracy* – its actually existing, liberal form – that, in its passion for liberty, has ignored equality. The implication of his critique of parliamentary democracy is, obviously, that one needs to find other forms that will rectify the situation and bring democracy closer to its central concern, namely, equality.

Equality, however, must be understood in its broadest sense as equality along many different axes – class, caste, gender, community and so on. It is not possible to have equality in one arena alone. At one level, Ambedkar's efforts to institute 'safeguards' in the form of reservations in both employment and political representation, can be read as attempts to make democracy more egalitarian. However, these efforts could not go beyond safeguards for specific communities or social groups like the Dalits and Adivasis and even in those contexts, amounted to making the best of a bad deal. The larger question of what he called social democracy, however, remained quite unexplored.

It may be interesting at this point to bring M.N. Roy, another outspoken modern Indian critic of parliamentary democracy, into the discussion. For Roy too, one of the key elements responsible for the degeneration of democracy was 'parliamentarism' – the other being *laissez faire*. Between the two, they gave unbridled power to a small minority to exploit the majority. Roy actually zeroes in on the very idea of representation and delegation, integral to parliamentary democracy, as the villain of the piece. 'Constitutional pundits declare that this [representation] is democracy itself; but in reality it is a negation of democracy, based on the contempt for the demos' (Roy, 1981, pp.77). Roy's was a critique articulated in the context of the global experience of the rise of fascism and totalitarianism and he held the 'eclipse of the individual', in the service of the state in modern politics responsible for the malaise of parliamentary democracy. His critique of representation leads him to a rejection of the party-form as such, which he began to see as instrumental in the dissolution of the individual into an altogether threatening entity called the 'masses'. 'The purpose of election propaganda is to create a state of mass hysteria' (ibid., pp. 53).

In a very different way, Ambedkar's deepest suspicions too related to the question of the 'masses' – for he saw them all through the nationalist movement as entirely upper

caste in character. In a context where the untouchables were a small minority, any mass mobilization was bound to be threatening to the interests of the minorities, in this case; the Dalits. Ambedkar's strategy was therefore to reject the very idea of the local – his critique of the villages being that they were 'sinks of localism' – and displace the entire question of Dalit emancipation to the terrain of the state. In contrast, Roy's critique led him towards what he called 'radical democracy', which he visualized as a network of local republics with people directly electing their representatives without the mediation of parties.

At a superficial level, these two might seem to be very contradictory visions – one which placed exclusive reliance on the state and the other that moved towards a network of local republics that sound suspiciously close to the Gandhian notion of *Gram Swaraj* or even Tagore's idea of *swadeshi samaj* (See Bhattacharya 1997, pp. 25).¹³ However, I will argue that there is a link that connects the Ambedkarite search for social democracy to Roy's radical democracy. This link lies in the value Ambedkar places on the issue of social reform while arguing that in the final analysis, no law or state can ensure the protection of democratic values; it has to come from the '...social and moral conscience of society...' (Rodrigues, 2002, pp.122). In fact, he goes on to quote Edmund Burke to say that 'there is no method found of punishing the multitude' and that while law can punish a solitary offender, '...it can never operate against a whole body of people who are determined to defy it.' With such an understanding, it was hardly possible for Ambedkar to support a strong state-centric vision of social democracy. His argument, therefore, turned to the idea of a 'social conscience' of the people at large, which alone could '...safeguard all rights, fundamental and non-fundamental'. That is why, in this well known essay on 'Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah', Ambedkar makes a case against the arguments of those he calls the 'political school of the intelligentsia' and accords priority to the issue of social reform over the political goal of self-government. 'The politicals never realized that democracy was not a form of government: *it was essentially a form of society*', he therefore asserts (ibid., pp.123). Elsewhere, in *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, he goes one step further in arguing that 'self-government and democracy become real not when a Constitution based on adult suffrage comes into existence, but when the governing class loses its power to govern' (ibid., pp. 134). What precisely does this mean? Given that Ambedkar never supported the idea of the oppressed class(es) overthrowing the powerful 'governing class' by a revolution, I read this statement to mean that he visualized a possible scenario where the power of the governing class would be hemmed in by other countervailing powers that would represent, in some sense, the social conscience. Since Ambedkar was hugely sceptical of the majority community, this appeal to the social

conscience could only make sense if the social itself was reconfigured. This reconfiguration does not make sense if one believes that the majority community can never change, for in that case, the Dalits would have to remain a permanent minority. Such a reconfiguration, it is evident, calls for a powerful social reform movement, one which cannot but be based on a serious intellectual challenge to the old order. Something of this kind is suggested by Ambedkar towards the end of his *Annihilation of Caste*:

'...(T)he Hindus must consider whether the time has not come for them to recognize that there is nothing fixed, nothing eternal, nothing *sanatan*; that everything is changing, that change is the law of life for individuals as well as for society. *In a changing society, there must be a constant revolution of old values* and the Hindus must realize that if there must be standards to measure the acts of men, there must also be a readiness to revise those standards' (ibid., pp. 304, emphasis added).

It should be clear then that the idea of social democracy only becomes meaningful in the context of a society reconstituted through a radical change in ways of thinking. In Roy too, the idea of radical democracy is predicated on the idea of an intellectual revolution that had to precede any social revolution. In his later years, Roy was to elaborate the idea of an intellectual revolution into a full-fledged programme for an Indian Renaissance that would accomplish something of a modern transformation of our ways of life, not very different from the kind Ambedkar had in mind. One can wager that in a society thus transformed, Ambedkar too would have been willing to rethink his ideas on decentralization and local democracy. In a different way, then, this could tie up with the more general inclination among many early twentieth century Indian thinkers towards some combination of a modernized panchayat system blended with a cooperative economy.

Possible Indian Future/s

The futures that we imagine today, I have suggested earlier, will be crucially framed by what we do today. Our collective future/s can no longer be imagined in terms of transcendent ideals that must be realized by making the world conform to those ideals. Such transcendent utopianism has been at the root of our modern miseries, writ large across the global history of the twentieth century. Modernist utopias, irrespective of whether they were Marxist or liberal free market type (a code word for capitalist utopias), eventually became massive projects of social engineering that relied crucially on the state to enforce them. These projects were inherently violent, based as they were on the cognitive arrogance of the modern mind that sought to eliminate all signs of 'backwardness' and 'irrationality' by

bringing them in tandem with what it saw as the only way to be rational. Economically, such a vision was predicated upon the violent destruction of all 'pre-capitalist' forms of 'ownership' – non-individual, not codified in legal instruments, often based on use and access by communities. This was particularly true of adivasi or indigenous people's relation to their land and habitat, to the resources they accessed from them. The transformation of such pre-capitalist property into bourgeois private property was co-terminus with two things: the uprooting of traditional communities and the production of the individual property owner on the one hand, and the concentration of the new individualized property in a few hands on the other. In other words, it instituted mass dispossession and concentration of property in a few hands as part of the same mechanism, just as we see happening before our very eyes today. The political form so far called 'democracy' was, in effect, one of electoral oligarchies – call it 'party-crazy', if you will. The institutions called political parties became the instruments of keeping the new economic dispensation in place, thanks to their state-centric nature. Representation through parties was a way of containing egalitarian democratic urges, not a way of expanding them, as the philosopher Jacques Ranciere has recently reminded us.¹⁴

Our imagination of our collective future/s must therefore look beyond these, drawing appropriate lessons from the disastrous experiences of modernity. We must understand that capitalism was not an aberration in the modernist project but was integral to it – which is why socialism, even while it thought it was presenting an alternative to capitalism, in fact only mimicked it.

And yet, there was something in that socialist idea – an egalitarian ethos tied to an ethic of sharing – that was liquidated thanks to its dream of replicating capitalism's 'achievements' through an excessive reliance on the state. The idea was not transcendent, but rather immanent in the lived practices of many indigenous/ adivasi communities. That is why the new movement of indigenous people in Bolivia led by Evo Morales, calls itself the Movement for Socialism. The difference between the modernist socialism of the twentieth century and the new twenty-first century socialisms will be that while the former believed that the whole world had to first undergo capitalist transformation before socialism could be realized, the latter believes that the natural commons cannot be privatized, that the earth cannot be reduced to land and a provider of 'natural resources' – a mere commodity or a 'factor of production'. Nor can water or air be transformed into economic goods or commodities for private corporations to profit from. The battle today, in other words, is for the commons. The battle is for reclaiming popular control over the commons not via the alienating and dubious agency of the state, but directly. In the world of nation-states and

powerful global economic and financial institutions, however, much of this remains within the realm of utopia, since states remain even now the structural limit and the ultimate horizon of intelligibility, of relative autonomy vis-à-vis global powers. That is perhaps why even the Evo Morales story ultimately remains tragic because state-domination still remains a reality in Bolivia, as does extractivism, even if in somewhat modified form.

Nonetheless, a struggle is on, at this very moment, for reclaiming a part of the legacy of the socialist idea. The socialism of the future, it is clear, cannot be a state-directed enterprise. It has to be immanent; it has to be molecular. That is to say, it must be deeply connected to actual lived practices on the ground and drawing its principles and norms from them. There are many instances in India today where local communities have taken charge of their lives and worked wonders by relying on such lived practices. On the other hand, the logic of private property has transformed ordinary life practices of sharing into something called 'piracy', against which states and private corporations act in tandem, criminalizing them. That itself shows how powerful their presumed impact on corporate profits is understood to be. The socialism of the future will have to be relentlessly egalitarian in its practice and will have to institutionalize the ethic of sharing as one that undercuts the logic of private property. This socialism, if one wishes to call it that, it should by now be evident, will prioritize ecological concerns and those of well-being over abstract ones of development. The political form of that socialism can only be something like a radical social democracy that continuously strives to find institutional forms beyond those of direct participation and those of the political party – forms that are not susceptible to appropriation by powerful oligarchies.¹⁵

Perhaps the most daunting challenge today is to spell out a specifically Indian vision of possible futures. The difficulty lies in the virtual impossibility of reconciling various different imperatives that govern the way different futures are imagined. To take one very evident example, we could see how problematic the demand for the preservation of traditional livelihoods raised by various ecological struggles can be for Dalits.

Today, when predatory corporate capital is rapidly taking over all the natural commons and even privately owned agricultural land, the importance of the issue of preservation of traditional and not-so-traditional livelihoods of adivasi and peasant communities can hardly be overstated. At any rate, it has become necessary to oppose their forcible dispossession in the name of some large design or logic of History. At the very least, the imperative of justice demands that people be given the opportunity of making informed choices. However, for Dalits employed in some of the most degrading occupations like manual scavenging, the only possible release lies in leaving those occupations.¹⁶ But, in the perverse

world of Brahmanical Hinduism, the release was never easy. In the first place, there were little options for alternative employment available for people belonging to these social groups, since they had been aggressively denied all possibility of educating themselves and accumulating wealth. Badri Narayan's study of the *nara-maveshi* movement that continued for decades in the state of Uttar Pradesh, for instance shows how difficult it was for the scavenging *chamars* to refuse to carry the carcasses of dead animals, for they had to face violent reprisals for their refusal¹⁷ (Narayan, 2011). It was not even possible for individual members of these castes, even till about a couple of decades ago, to escape to the city – so powerful was the control of the upper castes. It was not for nothing that Ambedkar saw the liberation of Dalits as linked to a dual flight – a flight from Hindu religion and a flight from the village to the city. This speaks of quite a different relation to the lived world from that of the adivasi or the peasant whose struggle revolves around the refusal to leave the land and livelihood.

Similarly, with the rise of Hindutva, the issue of minorities, especially Muslims, in India has become highly contentious in Indian politics once more.¹⁸ A daily war of attrition is carried on by Hindutva forces that often use the Muslim/minority question as a proxy for settling issues of caste division in Hinduism. Untouchable castes can neither leave the fold and adopt another religion, as can be seen from the frantic campaigns around so-called *gharvapasi*, nor can they find an honourable place in Hindu society as is evident from the continuing daily instances of humiliation that occur across the length and breadth of the country. The communal question in that sense is, and has always been, a displaced caste question.¹⁹

But at another level, the communal issue goes much deeper, tied as it is to the question of nation and nationalism as such. Right from the days of the anti-colonial struggle, dominant Indian nationalism of all hues – secular and Hindu – designated the 'communal Muslim' as the antithesis of 'national/nationalist Hindu'. Much of this politics was closely tied to the imagination of the Indian nation as going back three thousand years to a hoary Hindu past. In order to justify their exclusiveness nations always inhabit such mythical times that apparently bestow them with a sense of eternity.

It is interesting that Gandhi refused such an exclusivist idea of nationhood. Indeed, as has been argued by scholars like Ashis Nandy, Gandhi's refusal of nation is tied to his repudiation of history. Actual empirical history to him was always a domain of conflicts and violence and proved nothing about the universal idea of love that marked all religions. It may not be altogether without significance that he chose to call his famous tract, his manifesto, *Hind Swaraj*. By designating the subject-object of his Swaraj as *Hind*

Gandhi had made an important statement. India, to him, was not a pristine Bharat (or *Bharatvarsha*) whose roots lay far back in mythical time, an unadulterated entity whose purity the nationalists wanted to resurrect. It was rather the geographical entity called Hind – the India of *his time* – that encompassed within its flow, the different currents and tributaries that had joined it over centuries. It was therefore neither possible nor desirable to separate its different components from one another. Gandhi's Hind and Iqbal's Hindi (not the language but the inhabitants of Hind) resonate with the same sense of celebration of a vibrant world in motion – not one that is fixated on an imaginary mythical past.²⁰

The past moves along with the present, says Iqbal, and operates within it. But the problem, as we know, is that there is not one past. The challenge of thinking of a common future is, therefore, a challenge of reconstituting our pasts as well, of rendering them legible in ways that are radically different from the ways in which nations and nationalisms constitute a singular past – that is to say by referring back to some pristine time which inevitably makes it exclusivist. Indeed, even for those who apparently live or lived in the same time, the pasts may not be the same. We know after all that the great battles that were fought by the Sramanic traditions like Buddhism, Jainism or the Ajivikas against the dominant Brahmanical one, have a different story to tell about what we assume to be the same past.²¹ Many of lower caste revolts in the early twentieth century after all, drew precisely upon those traditions, especially Buddhism, in order to articulate their vision of an emancipated future.

The only way of imagining a common future, it seems then, is to liberate ourselves from actual, empirical history, somewhat in the manner of Gandhi, thereby sidestepping the actual history of conflicts. Historically situated contentions and conflicts that often determine the conduct of figures like Gandhi, Iqbal, Ambedkar or Tagore can actually become an impediment in appreciating what might be truly valuable in their thought. Their encounter, I suggest, needs to be restaged by liberating them from the limits set by their historical contexts. This is not to suggest that their differences can be ironed out. Rather, it is to suggest that we contemporize them, make them speak to us today rather than enchain ourselves in historical conflicts they were forced into.

The problem of imagining an exploitation-free future for India, it should be clear by now, is not really one that can be resolved by thinking of it only along one axis. If we think of the future only in terms of its being free of class exploitation, for example, we ignore other important forms of oppression and exploitation that continue in our society like those linked to caste and patriarchy, which are part and parcel of our traditional

society. Over and above these, there are modern forms of exploitation and violence that mark our society which have to do with modern modes of being – the mass displacement of communities and populations from their traditional habitat and forms of livelihood. Thinking of the future in terms of a specific content therefore limits our understanding. We need to think in fact of political forms that will enable different struggles to impact upon the ways in which the society of the future shapes up. The idea of a radical social democracy that draws on both Ambedkar and Roy and indeed takes what is positive in the ideas of Gandhi and Tagore, opens up precisely such possibilities for us.

Endnotes

1. Some of Iqbal's ruminations on Time are, to some extent, influenced by early twentieth century French philosopher, Henri Bergson but that should not concern us here, just as it has never really mattered that Spinoza's fundamental move of making God immanent to the universe, in all probability drew from Eastern pantheistic ideas. Iqbal's explicit purpose in these lectures was the reconstruction of Islamic thought in the face of challenges of the modern age for which he drew liberally from different sources.
2. There are various possible authors of this statement, in its many variations and it is difficult to trace its origin. Some of the earliest seem to be poet and philosopher Paul Valery and litterateurs Laura Riding and Robert Graves – both in 1937. For a useful list of references and possible origins of the statement, see <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/12/06/future-not-used/> (last accessed on 20 May 2015).
3. Those interested further can see an elaboration of this argument in the context of Indian nationalism in Nigam, 2006.
4. In a letter addressed to Gandhi, in response to the latter's request that Tagore give a statement in support of the Non-cooperation movement, Tagore actually sent out an angst-ridden critique of the abstraction called nationalism.
5. This expression has been used by the adivasi inhabitants of Jadugoda (Jharkhand) where uranium mining by the Department of Atomic Energy has unleashed radioactivity leading to high incidence of cancer among the local inhabitants. In the film *Buddha Weeps in Jadugoda*, by Jharkhand-based film-maker Shri Prakash, Ghanshyam Beruli of the Jharkhandi Organization Against Radiation, invokes this powerful image of a snake being roused to anger.
6. Borrowing from an expression used by Lester Brown, I have argued in another article, that a new Copernican revolution is already underway, which radically reverses the relationship between the economy and ecology and which must increasingly determine our understanding of 'economic development' in the twenty-first century. Interested readers may see Nigam 2010 for an elaboration of this argument. In that larger scheme of things, I suggest, it will be through small, imperceptible

- changes that bigger changes will make their presence felt, whatever the intentions of the powers that be.
7. For a reading that complicates, in another way, the straightforward modern versus anti-modern or pro-development versus anti-development view of these divergent tendencies in Indian thought, see Srinivasan (2014).
 8. Pl. see Craft Futures essay in this volume.
 9. Interestingly, in the 1924 statement cited earlier, Gandhi himself lauds the Singer Sewing Machine as having saved the woman from the tedious process of sewing and seaming with her own hands (Parel, 1997, pp. 166). A caveat is necessary here though: while technology can in some respects be liberating from certain kinds of degrading work, one needs to recognize the prior existence of sexual and caste-based division of labour and that technology does nothing towards transformation of those relations and prejudices that go with them.
 10. The story is available in digital form at <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/sultana/dream/dream.html> (last accessed on 23 September 2015).
 11. This comparison has recently been made by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in a lecture, 'Feminism's Futures: The Limits and Ambitions of Sultana's Dream'. The lecture was delivered as the first Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain Memorial Lecture at the Centre for Women's Studies, and is now published (Sunder Rajan, 2015).
 12. B.R. Ambedkar, Speech delivered at the All-India Trade Union Workers Study Camp, Delhi, September 1943 (Das, 2010, pp. 48).
 13. Tagore wrote an important essay entitled 'Swadeshi Samaj' in 1905 which is available in virtually all Tagore collections. Its idea of a decentralized society was essentially anti-statist and was something Tagore held on to all through his life. Both Tagore's *swadeshi samaj* and Gandhi's *gram swaraj* are ubiquitous ideas scattered throughout their writings. Gandhi's pronouncements on gram swaraj are available in the collection, *Village Swaraj*, compiled by H. M. Vyas (1962) and published by Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. It is available online in pdf format at <http://gandhiashramsevagram.org/pdf-books/village-swaraj.pdf> (last accessed on 23 September 2015).
 14. See Ranciere (2007).
 15. At one level, then, such a vision of radical social democracy is not very different from that of 'radical ecological democracy' that some scholar-activists have been talking and writing about. See, for instance, Kothari (2014). Important in this vision of a radical ecological democracy, is the bottom-up imagination of a future society, that is to say, an imagination that starts from the everyday practices of ordinary people rather than from macro structures and concepts. See essay on Dalit Futures in this volume.
- Things have started and changing slowly over the years and lately some very vocal protests have emerged, witnessed for instance, in the struggle after the Una incident in Gujarat. The refusal to carry carcasses by Dalits in Gujarat, following the flogging of four dalit youth by cow vigilantes, received massive support not just within Gujarat, but elsewhere in the country as well. See essay on Religious Minority Futures in this volume.

19. For an elaboration of this argument see Nigam, 2006 and Menon, 2006.
20. The reference here is of course, to Iqbal's famous lines 'Hindi hain hum, vatan hai Hindostan hamara.
21. Sramanic traditions were essentially counter traditions to the Vedic/Brahmanic one, which was largely a householder's or lay person's religion, heavily based on rituals that gave the Brahmans, as custodians of Vedic knowledge, a position of exclusive power. As against this, the sramanic traditions became associated with wandering ascetic renunciates who rejected Vedic ritualism as also the dominance of the Brahmans. Buddhism, in particular, also became associated with an egalitarian ethos that rejected caste distinctions.

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