The Subversion of Institutions and Creation of a Cultural Discourse

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The KR Narayanan Chair for Human Rights and Social Justice, Mahatma Gandhi University in Kottayam, Kerala held a two-day lecture series in January 2017 in the memory of the former President of India K R Narayanan. Imbibing the ideals of the former president and his penchant for Nehruvian and Ambedkarite political-economy, the invited speakers for the lecture series spoke about how forces of communalism and private-global capital have subverted our institutions in order to turn our discourse away from political issues and towards cultural ones.

The KR Narayanan Chair for Human Rights and Social Justice, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala has instituted a Chair in the memory of KR Narayanan, the former president of India and a great son of Kerala. We have established this chair at the Mahatma Gandhi University because K R Narayanan was born in a place close to Kottayam, where the Mahatma Gandhi University is situated.

In a society steeped in discrimination on the grounds of caste, K R Narayanan overcame innumerable hurdles to achieve exemplary levels in education. Born in the little hamlet of Perunthanam in the town of Uzhavur in Kottayam district on 27 October 1920, he rose from the lowest tier of the social ladder, with the tag of “untouchability”, to rise to the highest office in the country.
**Democratic and Supreme Principles**

The Chair would like to invoke the legacy of K R Narayanan, to move ahead with the transformative politics that he carried forward throughout his life, upholding democratic values as the supreme values of Indian politics and economy. He was a person who had a personal affinity to both, the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru and his liberal values, as well as to B R Ambedkar and his economic policies to place huge investments in the public sector which would secure the role of the state. As Ambedkar thought, K R Narayanan also believed in transforming the rigid structures of rural and urban India through the state mechanism. But those days of politics paved way to state minimalism and market maximisation, allowing the market to take care of both the state and people. It is in this context that the two lectures—namely, “Emerging Challenges of Higher Education” by N Sukumar, who teaches Political Science at the Delhi University and “Globalisation of Economy and Communalisation of Society” by G Haragopal, the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) National Fellow at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Hyderabad—become important in order to understand contemporary Indian society and economy.

The Chair was instituted in 2016 and Sukhadeo Thorat, a former University Grants Commission (UGC) Chairman and the present ICSSR Chairman, happily accepted the Mahatma Gandhi University’s invitation to take up the Chairmanship. Then, on 16 January 2016, the Chair was inaugurated by the then Minister for Culture and Rural Development in the Government of Kerala, KC Joseph. That same day, Sukhadeo Thorat delivered a special lecture on “Dalits and Indian Society”, and Rajesh Komath, an assistant professor at the School of Social Sciences was nominated as the coordinator of the Chair.

**Pedagogy of the Free and Oppressed**

During the lecture series, held on 19 and 20 January 2017, the Vice-Chancellor of the Mahatma Gandhi University, Babu Sebastian started his speech quoting Paulo Freire’s book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and argued for a new pedagogy that universities in India should adopt, which he called the “pedagogy of freedom.” Universities shall accept the rights of each individual student, and the teachers and bureaucracy shall change their mindset regarding the “master-student” or “master-slave” relationship, and that they are to consider everybody as equals, without any prejudice. This would make our classrooms a space for producing, knowledge as well as notions of freedom. Thus, he argued much persuasively that institutions should adopt a new approach of pedagogy, that is, from the “pedagogy of the oppressed to the pedagogy of freedom.”
Sukumar began his lecture, on 19 January 2017, titled as “Emerging Challenges of Higher Education in India” by quoting the same argument of “pedagogy of freedom”, and went on to describe how university spaces are hierarchically ordered as per the aspirations and social dispositions of the upper-castes and thus, how those spaces of higher education do become contested spaces. When students from Dalit-Bahujan castes and communities, started flowing into centres of higher education, they were forced to fight against these caste prejudices. In addition, the assertive tendency of the lower-castes and their ability to articulate their identity, also posed a threat to upper-caste students as well as to the university’s bureaucracy. This is what makes a university a contested space, but then, it also opens up a new space for democracy as it creates the possibility for dialogue between contested classes and castes, on issues that are around them. But the flipside of this phenomenon is that agencies that work outside the university, as private capitalists, make use of these contested spaces within the university to project a false picture that public universities are trouble-makers thus, attempting to legitimise the role of private universities in India. These social facts reveal a visible nexus between the upper-castes and private capital in India. Public universities and other institutions need to recognise this fact in order to fight against the casteist interests of private capital.

On the second day of the lecture series, on 20 January 2017, G Haragopal’s lecture on “Globalisation of Economy and Communalisation of Society” was a revealing read of the politics of economy and society in contemporary India. He started by saying that K R Narayanan was a good human being who always upheld the spirit of democracy. K R Narayanan was mainly inspired by three eminent political figures in India, that is, Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar. He quoted K R Narayanan stating that, “the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992 was the greatest tragedy that struck India since the assassination of Ganghiji”. It is difficult for a sitting President to make a comment like this, because our economy and society has been subverted by communal forces, who subvert institutions that uphold free and fresh thinking and who enjoy autonomy like Universities. Although subverting institutions is the major act that communal forces practice in India, Haragopal reminds us that it is not just a local process, but is driven by the larger economic motives of global capital. First, they tried to attract foreign Universities to come to India, for which the Congress party and Kapil Sibal was responsible. They then tried to convert the 2+3+2 system of Indian education into a four-year integrated course, which was to fit in with courses offered in America and elsewhere. In order to make a match that fits with the interests of American students, the University authorities moved to re-frame their programmes but, this was defeated by the teachers of Delhi University, given that they were highly organised. If they former succeeded in implementing these policies, it would have been easy for Universities in other parts of India to adopt the same. This is what Haragopal was persuasively arguing about, that the subversion of institutions go together with
globalisation processes. When these issues are brought out to the public, communal forces become worried and begin controlling the University's autonomy. This has manifested in the form of denying permission to Thorat to enter the University of Hyderabad, saying that he is an outsider. They are fearful of his wisdom.

Subverting Institutions

Now major Universities in India are undergoing a severe crisis which has led to these campuses becoming suffocating places. As a student of Political Economy of Indian State and Society, Haragopal finds an explanation for this situation where institutions are subverted institutions in the larger economic process and within the larger economic model. The framework is said to link the current economic process to authoritarian regimes and authoritarian culture. He reminded us again that the authoritative regime of Indira Gandhi, who in the 1970’s talked about land reforms and poverty shifted to “Unity and Integrity” in the 1980’s. The real issues of the people and the real political questions have been shifted to cultural issues. He drew a picture delineating the contemporary Indian political situation, stating that the real issues of food security, unemployment among others have become cultural issues. The question of food security has become an issue of what are the things we should eat and not eat. Subverting the politics of the masses into cultural issues is also a part of the larger process of globalising the economy and communalising society. It is in this context, that Prime Minister Modi’s ruthless reform process drives the economic sphere at the cost of cultural issues. People are not asking questions regarding employment, the rationing of rice, the price rise, hunger and poverty. Our political discourses have been subverted by communal forces as cultural discourses. People are not asking for scholarships or land. Even women who fought for the 33% women’s reservation bill in Parliament, are now asking for entry to temples and shrines rather than Parliament. If they entered the parliament, they could have easily passed a resolution allowing woman to enter temples and shrines. What Haragopal was arguing, was that what was once political has been subverted to become the non-political. This is where the interconnection of the economy connects the issues of cultural terrain, and he urges us to understand this shift and act accordingly.

Communalising Society

Haragopal’s points were persuasive and provoking too for our young minds to understand that, what was/is going on around us is something called “politics.” He reminded students and teachers to act as political beings, and then, as an agency of change. He briefly went on to do a creative engagement with the present political process, which is connected to the politics of the past in India. But, coming to contemporary Indian politics, he argued that the first step that communal forces in India usually take is subverting institutions, which is a part of a larger process of the communalisation of society. Commenting more on the ruthless “politics of hatred” by the fascist forces in India today, he reminded us that politics
is an art that can solve the problems of human beings; it is a creative mechanism to transform society and that it is not one for spreading hatred and making political advantages off it. In this process, what becomes political is not issues of poverty and hunger, inequality, wages, food security and unemployment, but communal forces subverting discourses of politics into a discourse surrounding issues such as beef eating, narrow nationalism, terrorism and cash-less economy (where still 90% of the Indian population is dependent on the cash economy). In order to drive political attention to the dark areas, the Government of India implements ruthless reform policies which develop social tensions, which the government in turn tries to solve with the help of religious ethos and riots. As a consequence, religion in India becomes a visible political force in the contemporary. Haragopal was talking about demonetisation and the squeezing of the economy; the squeezing of the economy, he argues, will widen income inequality that could torpedo the spirit of democracy in India.