
Quest for a Real Dalit Swaraj

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Aakash Singh Rathore warns us about the unduly prolonged presence in India of theories that are totally foreign to the country's everyday people. In view of this, he suggests redirecting our attention towards the lived experience of Indian political life, thus proposing a "return to tradition," but with a caveat and a principle that would guide this return: "the principle that any modification to be made must benefit the least advantaged and that those changes that do benefit the least advantaged are legitimate" (p 2). The "return" would justify Singh Rathore's plan to examine "the inadequacy of transatlantic political theory." This process makes it possible to lay the ground for the "preconditions of *swaraj*," as "the activity of being oneself" through a "look within" and an "excavation downwards." While a "thick *swaraj*" insists on the "nature and purity" of Indian tradition, a "thin *swaraj*" points towards hybridity and pluralism.

Singh Rathore considers M K Gandhi and B R Ambedkar as the most prominent representatives of these two positions. Would it be possible to reconcile their divergent views on *swaraj* (and those of their present-day followers), given the well-known antagonism between them? Having examined Thomas Pantham's, Ramachandra Guha's, and Partha Chatterjee's attempts to resolve the tension between Gandhi and Ambedkar, Singh Rathore concludes that he is "quite sceptical about the validity of such attempts of reconciliation" (p 170). Even Gandhi's and Ambedkar's mutual aim in wanting to abolish untouchability does not go far enough to match Ambedkar's determination to annihilate caste altogether.

Singh Rathore provides a wealth of evidence to prove the irreconcilable differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar, despite the fact that Gandhi "moved closer to Ambedkar in the last years of his life" (p 186). While Gandhi was against the

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Indian Political Theory: Laying the Groundwork for Swaraj by Aakash Singh Rathore, 2017; Routledge, pp 222, ₹450.

"sin" and the "curse" of untouchability, no real action followed to address this. For instance, the Bardoli Programme (1922–23), designed for the benefit of the Untouchables—including their education—resulted in total failure. The satyagraha organised by Ambedkar and the Untouchables at Mahad and Nashik (1927–30), to affirm the Untouchables' right to use public water tanks and temple entry respectively, were opposed by Gandhi and the Congress, thus failing to achieve any result. The major failure was perhaps that the demands made by Ambedkar at the Round Table Conference (1930–33) to allow adequate representation for Dalits and a separate electorate for a period of 10 years were forfeited, when Ambedkar agreed to sign the Poona Pact so as to break Gandhi's fast unto death. In this case, Gandhi's non-violent satyagraha against the British became an act of violence against the Dalits, while Ambedkar acted in a true non-violent manner towards Gandhi. Singh Rathore welcomes, nonetheless, the rapprochement between Gandhi and Ambedkar as a "strategic collaboration," but suggests remaining "attuned to the fundamental, irresolvable differences between them," while bringing them "into a *constellation*" (a term borrowed from Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin), implying "something less than identification, less than reconciliation, but still overcoming the chasm of separation" (p 188).

Political Power

This dialogue within difference was the result of the irresolvable paradox of the double bind that entrapped Ambedkar

and the Dalits as "slaves of slaves." Ambedkar had no doubts, as he made clear in the opening address at the Round Table Conference in London (1930), that "nobody can remove our grievances as well as we can, and we cannot remove them unless we get political power in our own hands" (Ambedkar 1982: 503–06, quoted in Singh Rathore 2017: 195). At roughly the same time (1934), in a fascist prison cell, Antonio Gramsci was writing: "Subordinate groups always endure the initiative of the dominant groups, even when they rebel and arise: only a 'permanent' victory breaks, and not immediately, their subordination" (Gramsci 1975). A few lines into his discussion he adds: "Subaltern classes are not, by definition, unified and cannot coalesce until they are able to become 'State'" (Gramsci 1975). Both Gramsci and Ambedkar were fully aware of the dynamics behind subalternity, since both had researched into its causes within the history of their respective countries. That is why, in that same opening address Ambedkar could confirm: "It is only in a *Swaraj* constitution that we stand any chance of getting the political power into our own hands, without which we cannot bring salvation to our people" (Ambedkar 1982: 503–06, quoted in Singh Rathore 2017: 195–96).

These very concepts have been translated by Singh Rathore into the "Dalit *swaraj*," which, in his theory, becomes also "the precondition of Indian political theory," since "*swaraj* without Dalit *swaraj* is tantamount to liberty without equality" (p 192). So as to clarify Dalit *swaraj*, Singh Rathore appeals to Ambedkar's idea of *swaraj*: "a Government of the people by the people and for the people," which is well beyond the promise of accepting social ameliorations for Dalits, since "Not bread but honour, is what they want." British rule had not changed the situation of Dalits, and only "Dalit *swaraj*, or free, equal, and agent-centred participation in the political sovereignty of a free sovereign nation works Ambedkar and the Dalits out of the double-bind that they had found themselves ensnared in for so long" (p 202). As we know,

Ambedkar never managed to win a separate electorate for the Dalits and he opposed a “Hindu swaraj” for the rest of his life, until, a few months before his death, he opted for conversion. For,

Just as Swaraj is necessary for India, so is also change of religion necessary for untouchables. The underlying motive in both the movements is the desire for freedom. (Ambedkar, quoted in Singh Rathore 2017: 203)

I do agree with Singh Rathore that India must find its own way for a sound and effective “political theory” rather than relying on political theories coming from “the West.” I would, however, tend to take a more radical approach to the problem, and apply some caveats when discussing Eurocentrism. Presumably, political theories are based and rest on a supporting philosophy. The problem we have been facing, for some centuries now, is that Anglo-European philosophy has been portraying itself as a universal philosophy—the only “philosophy,” in fact (Zene 2015)—rather than the historical or localised philosophy of Europe. There is no doubt that the philosophy which motivated

the expansion of European empires, with the acquisition of political, economic and military power, imposed itself as the highest, if not the sole, way of thinking, thus imposing also a colonisation of minds or an intellectual subordination. My contention is that, although we can safely affirm that “the history of European philosophy has been a history of ‘egology’” (Levinas), there have been moments of sanity and self-reflexivity within this philosophy, despite its “follies and mistakes” (Gramsci 1975), and that some philosophers have resisted the temptation to impose on to others the all-powerful, domineering Western Logos.

On the other hand, we must also recognise that colonialism, subalternity, sexism and racism happened in Europe prior to being exported elsewhere. There is, however, a tentative way of provincialising Europe, by acknowledging and accepting that its philosophy is not universal, but regional and historically bound. In this way we can welcome Singh Rathore’s suggestion to “open a window of opportunity for new or hitherto

ignored conceptions to be brought into play,” thus provoking “the thought, or at least the possibility, that some aspects of ‘Eastern’ thought may hold resources towards a more sustainable future” (Singh Rathore 2017: 208). I would venture to call this exchange an “inter-philosophical critical dialogue,” which takes place within the environment of World Philosophies, thus recognising the presence of multiple philosophies and epistemologies, rather than one single philosophical tradition dictating the pace of reasoning to the whole world.

South-South Dialogue

This is not very dissimilar to the closeness Singh Rathore finds between the concepts of *pratyahara* and decoloniality (Mignolo 2008), as a central component of contemporary Latin American philosophy, and in particular the difference between postcolonial theory and decoloniality, “that very inward turn of decoloniality, a turn toward indigeneity and alternative epistemologies, and a disavowal of futile attempts to elbow into

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transatlantic institutional and academic discourses” (p 214, note 4). Indeed, as Singh Rathore suggests, “a thin swarajist Indian political theory will find deep resonance with the fruit of decolonialist work, despite being grounded half a world away” (p 214, note 4). As the Argentinian–Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel (2009: 511) suggests, there is “the need to undertake and deepen permanent South–South dialogue, in order to define the agenda of the most urgent philosophical problems in Africa, Asia, Latin America, eastern Europe, etc, and discuss them together philosophically.”

Despite many setbacks and being ignored by Indian academia in the social sciences and humanities (Singh Rathore 2017: 186–87), Ambedkar still motivates Dalits to carry on their quest for a real Dalit swaraj, also as independent thinking. Gramsci would have certainly supported

the idea of Dalit swaraj, as a democratic educational practice conducive to overcoming subalternity by becoming subaltern citizens who are able “to think, to study, to direct, or to control those who direct” given that “every ‘citizen’ can become a ‘ruler’” (Gramsci 1975). Moreover, Gramsci and Ambedkar alike struggled to become collective thinkers for the subalterns, for those excluded from “thinking,” not an easy task. The clear position and strong conviction of the two leaders rest on their ethical standing reflected in Gramsci’s calling for “intellectual and moral reform” and Ambedkar’s prompting for a “social and moral consciousness of society,” both very much in line with the principle announced by Singh Rathore at the outset of his reflection: “the principle that any modification to be made must benefit the least advantaged and that

those changes that do benefit the least advantaged are legitimate” (Singh Rathore 2017: 2).

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