

*Review of India After
Modi: Populism and the
Right by Ajay Gudavar-
thy. New Delhi: Blooms-
bury India, 2019. ISBN:
9789388038812. 266 pages.
Rs. 599.*

Dr Saswat Samai Das & Deepak Mathew

“One who cannot take care of home, can’t manage country”: Nitin Gadkari (The Indian Express, Friday, March 29, 2019)

Ajay Gudavarthy’s *India after Modi: Populism and the Right* stands as an emblem of double articulation: the cartographical zeal with which the author ‘traces’ the current topology of ruling right wing politics in India, sketching its very performativity as a schematic teleological exer-

cise in “authoritarian populism”, need not be viewed solely in immanent terms. Rather it discloses an immanent exterior. The author may be seen as delineating a pocketable ‘roadmap’ for resuscitating the left politics in India in particular and renewing the struggle for securing the very *plasticity* of democracy in general. However, it is not only the uncanny potential of authoritarian populist right wing politics for performance, creation of excesses and experimentation that we encounter here. We also get to encounter the traditional left wing’s reluctance to admit, and its denial of, this concealed potential. The critique of right wing populism that Gudavarthy attempts seems more determined to mark it as an expansive open ended dialectical undermining of left wing’s archetypical urgency to call it altogether fascist and totalitarian.

Gudavarthy divides his book into four parts, with a brilliant introduction which is the crux of every argument he makes. Indeed, the introduction itself may be seen as a summary of the whole book, but more importantly, it offers certain political concepts which Gudavarthy finds unique to populism, and which he further elucidates in four parts. These concepts may be seen as conceptual maps that one needs to follow carefully to navigate the extravagance of details and political observations Gudavarthy offers throughout the chapters, the anchor which grounds each chapter to the central theoretical theme of how left-liberals can address the new symbolism orchestrated by right-wing populism.

Gudavarthy represents a 'unique historical moment' of 'irreducibility of multiplicities' where the vast expanse of multiple lines of flight immanently converging to subvert the current political system is elided by an embattled zone, replete with recalcitrant inner antagonisms of divides and stratifications, with elite and the subaltern, the rich and poor, the upper castes and *Dalits*, pitted against each other, precipitating sensations of arborescence and antagonizing dualisms. The kind of performative dialectics that the far right invents to articulate its schizophrenias, its condition of 'feeling like a subaltern but thinking like an elite', is put by it to an instrumental use. This dialectics sharply divides the multiplicities at the level of their micro-identities only to consolidate them into aggressive majoritarian formations such as Hindus and Indians. The right mobilizes that 'hurt pride' which elites feel for being left behind by progressing subalterns and creates in the process an 'imaginary community' Gudavarthy calls 'mezzanine elites', upper castes yet economically and socially weak, like the 'precariats' of the current 'neoliberal times'.

However, Gudavarthy in his book dwells on the far right's partisan mobilization of hurt pride only to situate it as the breeding ground for the production of what stands as its dialectical counterpoint, the new cultural subalterns. Dispersed throughout the spectrum, from elite universities to pre-modern communities, and standing as an anti-thesis of the mezzanine elites, are the *Dal-*

it-Bahujan subalterns left behind by neoliberalism and modernity. In fact, it is this strategy of the right that Ajay encapsulates when he says in the Introduction, ‘the right appropriates without investing and subverts without challenging’. The right empowers corporate neoliberalism which leads to the production of new class and caste based antagonisms and then appropriates these antagonisms by couching them in intractable symbolic narratives like ‘hurt pride’, which can only be resolved by resolving the deadlock of neoliberalism. More than the pragmatic and explicit realpolitik analyzed in all chapters it is these concepts of right-wing populism that the left needs to encounter, confront, and deftly re-appropriate. Part I and II are critical examinations of the organizational structure and function of BJP-RSS in India. Gudavarthy argues that a return to Nehruvian centrism wedded to constitutional secularism is no longer possible, let alone desirable, after the rise of Modi, a rise woven into the post-truth fabric of neoliberal times where culture and truth is no longer understood in terms of ‘what is’, but stands as a figment of our private world of affects and desires, our imagination of ‘what should have been’. It is indeed this private world of emotions and desires that Modi’s populism strategically exploits and integrates with the public space of constitutional politics. This even becomes the basis for violence and lynching unleashed by fringe groups within the hydra-headed RSS whereby blame can never be put on the mother organization. Public perceptions, including its endorsement

and vehement opposition of the impulsive acts, from *gau-raksha* (cattle protection) to left-liberal protests, are also guided by this private world of affects and desires.

Gudavarthy locates the strongman phenomenon of populism and the Indian perception of a masculine ascetic leader within the dialectical interplay of the public and the private. The shift from Modi to Yogi (Adityanaath), from the one who cleanses the system with demonetization to the one who purifies the system as a ‘*sannyasi*,’ also uses the operativity of this private world in the public sphere. Together they not only give the sense of return to a Hindu way of life but also become the fraternal authority injecting an oedipal sense of fear, anger and paranoia into the public discourse of politics. It is because the right governs like a proto-ascetic, masculine and strong father figure would manage his family affairs that it can have an absolute or totalitarian agenda of Hindutva and divide the communities on the lines of caste and class and reunite them as Hindus and Indians. Governance in the hands of the right becomes tantamount to running a family. So much so that it wouldn’t be outlandish to analyze their policies in relation with government institutions and particularly universities like JNU, in this light. JNU for the right stands as an extended ‘family’ that must be disciplined, contained and controlled — hence the systematic attack on JNU, terming it anti-national, reinstating compulsory attendance and silencing deviant voices. The bio-politics of ruling right in

this sense is aimed at reducing the diverse “potential” of multiple vocalities arising out of the centers of knowledge to the level of banal familial domestic singularity.

Gudavarthy argues that it was electoral success that was central to the rise of ruling right and Hindutva brigade, and examines how BJP fared in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh assembly elections, and how their propaganda and tactics differed in each case. BJP’s Caste based propaganda turned out to be ineffective in Bihar because it stood as a ‘forced imitation’ of Nitish Kumar’s caste based propaganda. Voters turned to Nitish Kumar instead of BJP because they felt that the former was a seasoned player, as far as caste propaganda was concerned, and elections in Bihar were always caste centric. In contrast BJP fared well in UP because the opposition carried out an exercise in replicating the patterns of BJP’s Hindutva narrative and voters felt BJP stood as an epitome of that while the former had just begun to learn the rules of the game. Intervention of the left-liberals in elections derives a new meaning at this juncture, and Part III and IV offers some ideas in this respect. The reason for which the left has till now gloriously failed in addressing the issues concerning the Kashmiri pundits and *Dalit-Bahujan* is because it tends to view these issues as marginal or almost inconsequential in relation to its world view based on traditional majoritarian divides or Gramscian historical blocs instead of deftly reconstructing the right’s performative dialectics. The way forward for left-liberals is

to first become rhizomatic, reaching out to the new caste based minor identities and addressing their concerns and then become broadly and effectively dialectical, uniting the precariats, new cultural subalterns and Dalit-Bahujans into a renewed space of resistance.

Ambedkar had made it clear that the annihilation of caste was contingent upon the acquisition of power by lower castes, and the subtlest means for this in democracy was the electoral victory. The electoral victory of Mayavathi Bahujan politics, and multiple Dalit political organizations which have come up because of the failure of the former, and activists like Kancha Iliah stand as praxial equivalent of Ambedkar's logic in this sense. However, according to Gudavarthy, the only way the left could meet the situation in Kashmir, mirroring the discontent of Muslim youth towards Indian government and the polarization between the former and Kashmiri pundits, was by inventing its own brand of populism with dirigist, secular-centrist revolutionary transformation of communities.

A transformation of the present economic system, from neoliberalism to welfare state, is a necessary condition for any cultural revolution in the Gramscian sense, but paradoxically such a transformation of economy is only possible by uniting a divided society as a field of struggle. Ambedkar's idea of fraternity, which Nehruvian centrism could not accommodate, is indispensable

for cultural transformation. Though Gudavarthy argues for a leftist populist intervention here by addressing the anger, fears and desires of the precariats, one could disagree and look for older yet still effective leftist interventions as manifested in the programmes of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbin which are lot less populists but advocate revolutionary class struggle and hopes for working towards a *kairos* moment. This is because the future of democracy in general hinges upon sustaining the idea of struggle and revolution. The politicization of love that Gudavarthy suggests in his book as a cure to misogyny and sexism may sound radical and rebellious at the same time, but in dialectical terms it could be the only solution for the alleviation of injustice towards women. The same holds true for *India After Modi* as a whole, which stands as a revolutionary work. For the left parties it will stand as an exercise in double articulation. It not only delivers a shot in the arm for the entropic left but holds a road map as well for the resuscitation of left politics in India.