



ERPI 2018 International Conference
Authoritarian Populism and the Rural World

Conference Paper No.35

Ecology, Economy and the Quest for an Authoritarian Polity: a comparative analysis of the trends in the rural United States and India

Pallav Das

17-18 March 2018

International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, Netherlands

Organized jointly by:



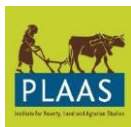
Cornell CALS
College of Agriculture and Life Sciences



International
Institute of
Social Studies



Institute of
Development Studies



In collaboration with:



**OPEN SOCIETY
FOUNDATIONS**



OXFAM
Solidariteit | Solidarité



**ROSA
LUXEMBURG
FOUNDATION**



The Journal of
**PEASANT
STUDIES**

Disclaimer: The views expressed here are solely those of the authors in their private capacity and do not in any way represent the views of organizers and funders of the conference.

March, 2018

Check regular updates via ERPI website: www.iss.nl/erpi



Ecology, Economy and the Quest for an Authoritarian Polity: a comparative analysis of the trends in the rural United States and India

Pallav Das

Abstract

In societies as diverse as the United States and India, a palpable initiative is underway at gradually displacing the democratic order situated on institutions and practices, and to replace it with the authority of a person or a group of people who would run the polity on the basis of a moral order underpinned by an ethno-religious majoritarian affinity. It's increasingly apparent that these efforts are now stabilizing themselves since the arrival on the political scene by President Trump as well as Prime Minister Mody. The proposed paper would analyze the reasons behind these developments and inquire the trajectories, which are similar in the two countries as well as the manifestations that are different. The proposed paper's approach to authoritarianism is predicated on the inequality inherent in the capitalist mode of development and its intensely destructive impact on the earth's climate and environment, specifically in the rural areas of the United States and India. The creation of a second-class citizenry is essential for the appropriation of the diminishing resource base for the elite in both the countries, and an authoritarian regime makes it easier and certain to enforce and achieve the gradual cessation of the expectation of egalitarian access to resources. The time tested psychological undervaluation of the "other" as seen in caste and race based discrimination or its violent manifestation in the rapidly increasing cases of lynching of Muslims and untouchables by Hindu mobs in India, and police brutality against the blacks in the U.S., are unambiguous displays of that societal power dynamic. The paper will explore the societal responses to the weakening of the democratic process and how it is forcing a deeper understanding and creation of alternative systems that can help establish an ecologically sensitive and economically egalitarian society in these two democracies.

The Consternation of The Present

It is possible to be bewildered by political upheavals particularly when they are viewed in isolation from their societal context. The election of Donald Trump as the 45th American president was received with a sense of shock all over the world and even more so in the United States. How could a boorish, right wing populist filch power away from a much-anointed political heiress steeped in political experience and policy expertise? Yet, the observers of American polity have felt that the socio-economic context of that electoral tumult was palpable behind the scene. At a certain level Trump's ascendancy could be seen as the reassertion of the power of capital in the American political economy. While power is expressed in many different ways in the United States, the place of capital in that equation is absolutely paramount. Thomas Piketty has shown in his work that wage growth always lags behind the rate of accumulation of capital (1). Consequently, the power dynamic will always favor the prodigious owners of capital, who will steadily acquire everything including the political process, both, nationally and internationally. Moreover, neoliberal market fundamentalism demands the supremacy of markets over the society and communities, and that of corporate profits over people. In the last three decades since Reagan/Thatcher, the entire political process has worked towards ensuring that. It's only logical that now that process is being run by one of the marquee representatives of the market. Is this a floating of a trial balloon moment when the ruling class has finally dispensed with the need for a political agent like a Clinton or a Bush in the oval office, and decided to experiment with putting one of their own on the throne? Why rule through others when you could have a firmer grip over the entirety of the production process by being on top of the national executive branch. This is particularly important in the light of the tight economic and political control the ruling elite needs to deal with the tricky and troublesome consequences of neoliberal fundamentalism, specifically creeping ecological uncertainty and dire economic inequality in society.

Within this larger narrative of the operative primacy of capital, however, there are other significant strands, which make these populist developments socio-politically ominous and, yet, academically compelling to explore – is there really a societal shift towards authoritarianism in the American polity, which has allowed the majoritarian message of Trump to find resonance among a large section of the American populace, particularly among rural folks? Or, are there lineages of the current flirting with authoritarianism deeply rooted in the American socio-political structure going back to the time when the settler plantation economy consolidated itself in the early years of colonialism in the rural United States? Also, what are the compelling contemporary circumstances, especially ecological and economic, which are imminently leading up to the bolstering of ultra right orthodoxy in the country? This paper will try to delve into those points and also compare and contrast them with the emergence of similar trends of authoritarianism in the Indian polity and scrutinize the evolution of those developments in the context of the pressures on a rapidly industrializing economy, where more than half of the total population still depends on agriculture for its livelihood (2).

Understanding Power

The potential for the rise of authoritarianism in neoliberal democratic polities like the United States and India (even if situated far apart on the development spectrum) depends entirely on the strength of their operative power dynamic and whether that dynamic is able to enforce the hierarchies and inequities built into the system in favor of the ruling elite. If not, then a strong centralized state has to intervene to take control of the polity to get that agenda back on track, obviously without any constitutional accountability. At this point in our discussion, it would be prudent to try to understand how that power dynamic actually works. In any society, the relationships of power get fused into its structure over time. One of the more astute examinations of that very link between power and the structure of society is by Johan Galtung, a Norwegian mathematician and sociologist, specifically in the context of conflict within and between societies. Galtung identifies three ways in which power is exercised in a society – through ideas, inducements and punitive action. The disempowered are expected to follow and contribute to the functioning of the operative ideology, which is determined for them by those who wield power and have control over material resources. They do so in exchange for

remuneration set for them, but any refusal on their part to participate in that process could lead to a commensurate amount of punishment, which again is a part of the dynamic of power. For Galtung, the inequality inherent in this power relationship leads to systemic oppression of one group by the other. It is a situation where a section of society is marginalized, exploited, degraded and debased without actually experiencing physical violence. Galtung calls this the condition of 'structural violence', as it closes all avenues for the disempowered to exercise any agency in their own lives, ultimately being forced to accept the control of others over their lives and their prospects, reflecting a classic case of complete socio-psychological impairment. Structural violence, in fact, is not imposed upon the disempowered using a formal or a legal code. Instead, it becomes a part of the dominant culture, which mutually reinforces its ideological imperative. Media, popular culture and religion help shape society's attitudes and beliefs towards structural violence and consolidate its position as the dominant narrative of power in society.

The Power Dynamic And The Ancient Roots Of Authoritarianism

A significant determinant of the stability and efficacy of any kind of power relationship is the internalization of its logic as well as the operating process by actors on both sides of the equation. The Indian caste system is probably the most successful illustration of that societal order. While power is expressed, implied and accepted in India in many universally recognizable and known forms, both modern and pre-modern, the caste system is unique to the country because it is rooted in an intangible yet powerful notion of 'purity' of a person and even a group. In fact, a person derives his or her relative purity from that which is ascribed to a caste to which he or she belongs. The explanation of relative purity of a particular caste group on the basis of their occupation (the purity of priesthood vs. the impurity of scavenging), or if one was to give credence to the mythical origins disclosed in the Rig Vedic *Purusha Sukta* (the Hymn of Man), to which part of the human form of Lord Brahma was it constituted from (the head or the foot etc.), would essentially remain implausible and dubious until and unless there was a uniform agreement among all actors to accept that explanation as an axiom.

As an ideology, the caste system manifests quite acutely the defining features of John Galtung's idea of "structural violence". Its hold on the society is remarkably strong and enduring, particularly in the rural areas, despite the turbulence that India's rapidly changing political economy has faced over the last few decades. The pulls and pushes of modernization have brought people into shared spaces, both physical and intellectual, whether they desired to do so or not. The labor market and the chaotic process of migrations from rural to urban areas has further accentuated that development. Interaction of any kind, social, economic or political makes its demands on people's inherent beliefs and dogma. It also provides opportunities to question and challenge the power dynamic, which guides relationships. The question is whether all the changes, which have accompanied free market consolidation in India, have been substantial enough to cleave a new path through the ancient strangulating vines of power that defined human relationships in India? Or, was the entrenched power dynamic so strong that it just deflected the discussion to a place where everybody imputed their own meaning to these changes, ultimately compromising their effectiveness as well as their relevance? As S.K. Thorat, an economist and an acute observer of caste has stated, "Something about caste has changed but there is also something which persists. We notice significant changes in the public domain regulated by law and relatively less change in the economic and civic domain, and far fewer in the private domain. There is hardly any change in the practice of caste endogamy, particularly in rural areas, endogamy being the core of the caste system." (3)

Thorat's observation is quite instructive of the gradual narrowing of acceptance and effectiveness of change from the collective to the private sphere, where the public is seen as becoming compromisingly profane and the individual is projected as being defiantly sacred. The most orthodox and reactionary ideas thrive in the personal space, with a divine sense of destiny, protecting and propagating the belief of purity received from the elders at home and the community. In contemporary India there is a continuum, which operates from the aggregated constitutional promise of equality for all, to the personalized space where the possibility as well the eventuality of discrimination, both, in thought and in practice is habitual and ingrained. The distance between the poles is so enormous that often the

legal and moral limits imposed by the constitution are insolently breached without much of a consequence on the other end. Caste violence is one such manifestation of the power of the ritually sanctified personalized space which expands and contracts at will, confident of its safe distance from constitutional probity, particularly in the rural hinterland. As Arundhati Roy reminds us in her introduction to “Annihilation Of Caste: The Annotated Critical Version”, “According to the National Crime Bureau, a crime is committed against a Dalit by a non-Dalit every sixteen minutes; every day, more than four untouchable women are raped by touchables; every week, thirteen Dalits are murdered and six Dalits are kidnapped. ... These statistics wouldn’t include, say, Bant Singh of Punjab, a Mazhabi Dalit Sikh, who in 2005 had both his arms and a leg cleaved off for daring to file a case against the men who gang-raped his daughter. There are no separate statistics for triple amputees.” (4)

In the last few years India has also been witness to morbid blood letting in the form of lynching aimed primarily at Muslims, on the pretext of saving “holy” cows from being butchered for their meat. Brahminical Hinduism has claimed to have a religious sanction against beef eating in recent times, while Muslims have been alleged to have the provocative dietary preference for beef. In a well orchestrated, militant right wing campaign cattle traders, leather industry workers, farmers transporting cattle from one place to the other and random men who were identifiably Muslims were apprehended by crowds of cow vigilantes and lynched to death falsely accused of killing cows or storing beef in their houses or similar other bizarre unproven claims. Dalits, the caste, which traditionally performs the “impure” task of skinning dead cattle were also corralled and often killed by Hindu mobs on the ruse of protecting cows. It was not surprising that these incidents spiked after the right wing Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) took over power in Delhi in 2014, and a majority of these killings happened in states ruled by the same party (5). Also, to be consistent with the trends of caste and ethnic violence previously discussed in the paper, these incidents largely took place in rural areas safely away from the possible intervention of police and law enforcement. The authoritarian feel to this sordid episode became quite apparent when the incidents started declining, as if on cue, after enough tension and fear had been imparted to the society as a whole and Dalits and Muslims in particular. The latter in particular were told in no uncertain terms that law could not save them from random acts of violence, particularly in the rural areas, and the larger society was given a glimpse of the ethno-religious moral order now being fashioned and implemented by the BJP.

Power, Violence And Authoritarianism

The threat of violence has always existed behind the expression of power. Hannah Arendt’s work has helped immensely in getting intellectual clarity on that issue. For her the two concepts are distinct from each other and violence, at most, is a perversion of power. Power, according to Arendt, is “the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. When we say of somebody that he is ‘in power’ we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name.” (6) The Brahmin, thus, represents the collective power of Sanatan Dharma, of Hinduism, by becoming the true repository of ritual purity around which the caste system is organized. And, then, as if talking about repression within the caste system, Arendt states, “Even the most despotic domination we know of, the rule of master over slaves, who always outnumbered him, did not rest on superior means of coercion as such, but on the organized solidarity of the masters.” (7) In the Indian context, the anxiety for compliance that the Brahmanical order had created among the lower castes through the socially organized instruments of pollution and exclusion, seldom forced the need for threat of violence to be activated. According to Arendt power is not created through violence, in fact when power devolves to violence it is eventually destroyed. In words, which turned out to be quite prophetic in her analysis of totalitarian states, Arendt affirmed that, “ Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance.” (8)

In light of Hannah Arendt’s discussion of power, is the rise in upper caste violence towards lower castes and that of the Hindu right wing towards Muslims in India a pointer towards the losing influence of the ruling hierarchical system to impose itself? Is violence the betraying sign of a change, albeit quite slow and messy? Will Brahmanical Hinduism’s gradual loss of power be accompanied by

a period of disorder, brutality and bloodshed before a new egalitarian structure of power settles on the Indian polity? In fact, a set of similar questions could be directed at the American polity, too, given that its racist construction of power relationships, its temptation for recourse to violence and its distinctly authoritarian display in current times has many overlaps with the traditional Indian forms of societal stratification and subjugation and similar roots in the rural hinterland. From the extermination of the Native American civilization to slavery to Jim Crow to reluctant concessions on civil rights to pro gun and prolife orthodoxies to cussed rejection of climate exigencies, a common thread runs through these episodes of American history as well as contemporary existence, with the clear purpose of maintaining the preeminence of the ruling elite, which is overwhelmingly white and male. And, obviously, this elite doesn't rule in a vacuum, its roots lie in the firm soil of capitalism which has nurtured their resolute belief in their supremacy, and the relevant question then arising from Arendt's enunciation of power and violence is: what is it in the present state of affairs which is making this powerful elite nervous for it to display overt signs of authoritarianism?

Power, Nature And The Socio-Psychological Roots Of Authoritarianism

The rise of the Trump phenomenon with its apparent roots in the rural areas has been much analyzed and dissected in journalistic as well as academic work. Economic stagnation and a steady stifling of life opportunities seem to have motivated the disempowered rural folk to express their anger against and disenchantment with the governing "elite" in towns and cities by flocking to Trump who promises to bring prosperity and greatness back to their lives. While this is an attractive narrative and quite popular, too, it is not borne out by facts. Exit polls conducted in 23 states during the elections showed that Trump supporters had a higher median income than the national average, usually around \$70,000 (9). Further, among college educated white voters 61% men and 49% women voted for Trump. The economic circumstance of this group was far from distressing, and they did not by any definition form the underclass in their communities. Their expression of support for a candidate without any policy or political experience was rooted in socio-psychological reasons, which have been determined by the interplay of capital and power in the United States.

Let's go back briefly to Hannah Arendt's description of power as the ability to act in concert, and the one in power being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. That critical dimension of human interaction has been the operative fulcrum of American socio-economic and political life since the time of the settler plantation economy. The plantation workers till mid-17th century consisted of, both, black slaves as well as white indentured labor and the two groups had worked and lived under the same conditions. Cross-racial, class based rebellion against the white plantation owners was always a worrisome possibility in those conditions and in 1676 that fear turned into reality when an insurrection historically referred to as Bacon's Rebellion took place in Virginia. That was when the plantation owners decided to intervene to snuff-off any spark of class-consciousness to ignite among workers and peasants in the future. As the renowned theologian, Reverend Thandeka explains, "In 1705, the (Virginia) assembly required masters to provide white servants at the end of their indentureship with corn, money, a gun, clothing, and 50 acres of land. The poll tax was also reduced. As a result of these legally sanctioned changes in poor whites' economic position, they gained legal, political, emotional, social, and financial status that depended directly on the concomitant degradation of Indians and Negroes" (10) Laws were also passed requiring white supervisors to serve on slave patrols so as to impart to them a tactile sense of control over a group of men who were beginning to be perceived as inferior and potentially disorderly, ultimately fostering a feeling among the white working class of being a member of a large team enforcing social order in partnership with the ruling class.

It is not surprising that the establishment of the institution of slavery was concomitant with the European project of colonialism gaining ground all over the world. Armed with exciting new technological and scientific tools and a modern conceptual framework of a production process based on private property, the white male embarked upon the divine task of taming people and nature that it encountered in pursuit of a new political order. Already in Europe, commons, which were hitherto shared by people, were being enclosed as part of private property for exploitation and extraction.

People uprooted from their land were being captured by the drudgery of the production process as cheap labor. Large spheres of life and social processes, which had been untouched by the logic of profit, were beginning to get commodified by the market. Internationally, imperialism had opened up vast swathes of landmasses for rule and subordination, a process, which achieved grand success in the United States by wiping out the Native American civilization.

The most important consequence of the fervent that accompanied colonialism and its gradual transformation into mercantile capitalism, with particular significance for the United States, was the stiffening of the distinction between society and nature, a process initiated by European patriarchy with very specific ideas of what it meant to be human. The white male with his power over the production process constituted society and the rest of the world essentially got categorized as nature to be exploited and subjugated. Maria Mies, the German eco-feminist described capitalism as the appropriation of women, nature and the colonies. Those sentiments find an echo in Jason Moore's recent book "Capitalism in the Web of Life" where he succinctly points out that, "capitalism is a way of organizing nature." The gradual consolidation of that process of organization steadily opened up other perverse dichotomies, which were built on the society/nature dualism and clearly characterized by the use of power, domination and periodic violence by one over the other. In Moore's own words, "this idea of Nature and Society is very deeply rooted in other dualisms of the modern world: the capitalist and the worker, the West and the rest, men and women, white and black, civilization and barbarism. All of these other dualisms really find their taproots in the Nature/Society dualism." (11)

Ecology, Economy And The Rising Societal Stresses

The power dynamic, which has created a fertile soil for the rise of authoritarianism in contemporary politics, in fact, traces its roots to early days of colonialism in the United States. It actively allows for the suppression of one half of the dyads mentioned above by Jason Moore - women, colored people, workers, developing countries/former colonies etc. In the United States, the white patriarchal elite has been careful in keeping its class contradictions within check by elevating the status of the white working class above that of the colored subordinates – offering them a psychological wage of superiority along with an added preference in medium and low wage employment, till recently that is. This is a crucial operative reality of the rural areas of the United States. Now, capital, in its quest for endless growth on a finite planet has begun bumping up against the natural limits of the planet and that of nature itself. It cannot continue to enclose new "commons" for exploitation and extraction – fossil based energy sources are becoming scarce and prohibitively more expensive to extract, as are the other mineral resources, which have kept the capitalist machine moving, both, in the United States and in the rest of the world. Despite what President Trump promises, coal extraction is not a long-term solution for the working class in rural states like Kentucky and West Virginia. Capital has and will continue to off load people from the gravy train and cannot, now, continue to guarantee a sustainable superior role and livelihood to the white working class.

The American rural employment recovery after the Great Recession has been fairly weak and uninspiring, the total number of jobs was down by 128,000 from the pre-recession levels. Also, the workforce in the rural areas is actually shrinking because people have either stopped looking for work or have left towns for urban areas (12). The go to model for economic development in the rural United States is that of economic colonialism – outside corporate investments, extraction of natural resources, and industrial agriculture. This has largely resulted in degradation of the natural environment, severe depletion of natural resources, pollution by toxic waste of industrial extraction, erosion of land fertility through intensive cultivation, depleted aquifers and polluted ground water. This troubling scenario only gets more depressing when you factor in the rampant opioid and other health crises into the equation. The corporations have no long-term economic interest in the areas, which they swoop down upon and exploit. Once the resources have been depleted they leave for areas with more resources and where labor and land costs are cheaper, which could be anywhere in the world. Climate Change is the other factor making the picture murkier by the day – fires, floods, freezes, hurricanes – these events cost American farmers more than \$7 billion in losses in 2017 (13). A recent analysis, titled, "Estimating economic damage from Climate Change in the United States" (14), published in the

journal, "Science", concluded that the rural southern states will suffer the most inimical consequences under business as usual scenario to climate change. Solomon Hsiang, the lead author of the study, declared quite clearly that, "Unmitigated climate change will be very expensive for huge regions of the United States. If we continue on the current path, our analysis indicates it may result in the largest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in the country's history." It seems there is no redemption in sight for rural America.

If increasing distress characterizes contemporary rural America, despair is the word that comes to mind in regard to rural India. Farmers' suicide is a particularly troubling reality of the country – more than 12,000 farmers committed suicide every year between 2013 and 2016 (15). Nearly 90% of the farmers who took their own lives were in extreme financial debt. Their average debt was about \$835 (16). This seemingly low amount as the price of a human life becomes clearer to understand in the context of a survey conducted in 2016 in which 92% of the 180 million households were estimated to have a monthly income of less than \$200 (17). A debt four times the annual income could certainly cause extraordinary psychological stress if the possibility for its repayment was remote. Adding a new twist to this depressing reality, a significant new study sponsored by University of California, Berkeley came to the conclusion that increasingly high temperatures caused by climate change are bound to add further extremis on farmers' suicide in India (18). According to Tamma Carleton, the author of this study, the economic pressure on the farmers has been increasing enormously in the growing season due to higher than normal temperatures, which reduce crop yields. As she puts it, "These crop losses may also permeate throughout the economy, causing both farming and non-farming populations to face distress as food prices rise and agricultural labor demand falls (19). According to an IPCC study (20) cited in the Berkeley study, average temperatures could rise by 5.4 degrees Fahrenheit or 3 degrees Celsius.

The IPCC study further projected that in 2030 there will be over \$7 billion of agricultural loss due to climate change which will severely impact the income of 10% of the country's population. Also, the agriculturally crucial Indo-Gangetic area of South Asia is expected to experience 51% reduction in wheat yields due to heat stress. This area accounts for about 14% of the world's wheat production and feeds around 200 million people of the region. The study also projects increase in floods because of extreme precipitation and spike in droughts as well because of decline in seasonal rainfall. The issue of water availability has already become quite alarming all over India due to climate change. Of the ten major river basins in south Asia, 9 of them experience significant or severe water scarcity at least four months in a year. In fact, the largest two, the Indus river basin and the Ganga river basin, suffer that kind of scarcity more than six months a year (21). These developments could inevitably lead to a rise in conflicts on water as increasingly larger areas come under severe stress due to climate change.

The Slippery Slope From Power To Privilege To Authoritarianism

The western state of Maharashtra in India often faces severe droughts because a large part of the state is extremely arid and climate change has acutely impacted water availability, there. Often, the state government has to supply drinking water by tankers to villages in these areas as was being done once in 2000 to about three thousand villages in the hot months of April and May (22). What was surprising, however, was that many of these villages had well irrigated crops of sugarcane standing triumphantly in the middle of all that paucity of water. Not surprisingly, the groundwater, a community resource was being monopolized by a minority group of rich farmers. They also had easy and preferential access to capital and electricity, resources, which are scarcely available to the poor. The saving grace was the local government's supply of drinking water to the thirsty villagers. There would be many areas in India where even for that they would be left to fend for themselves. As environmental exigencies put pressure on resource availability in rural interiors in India and as acute economic inequality becomes an inevitable part of India's neoliberal landscape, the traditional axis of power and privilege occupied by the Hindu upper and middle castes becomes automatically operational – dalits, lower castes, tribal and indigenous communities, and religious minorities like Muslims fall beyond that circle, trying to survive on the margins. As we saw in the earlier discussion it is not out of the ordinary for this group to be subjected to authoritarian violence if they were to be

perceived to be transgressing the limits imposed by the ruling elite, however illegitimate or captiously trumped up those charges may be.

In the United States the capitalist subjugation of the rural farm based economy is proceeding with utmost ferocity. As an increasing number of small farms become unviable because of barriers to credit and price volatility a rural land grab is getting underway with large agricultural businesses and investors like banks, pension funds and hedge funds swooping in to capture all available land. In another ominous development, which replicates the feckless guile of “sub-prime mortgages”, Wall Street traders have been bundling commodities for their mega deals. This risks the growth of price bubbles and as it had happened to the housing market it could make the entire operation vulnerable to extreme fluctuations. The crux of the matter is that capital looks for the next high, the next spike in profit. It has no interest in preserving the integrity of the farming community or the health of the soil and the natural environment or the well being of its people. Yes, it does grant the traditional ruling class the psychological satisfaction of being a part of the “winning team” and the protectors of the social order, even when it continues to impair their economic prospects. Capital makes them complicit in its devastation of the rural landscape and degradation of human relationships within the community. In the process, the white working class causes injury to its own class interests and also foregoes the opportunity to contribute to the radical and rational movements for change, which aim to address the socio-economic turmoil and the consequent trauma being experienced in the rural areas, and consequently redress their own condition.

Resistance and Alternatives – Challenging Authoritarianism

The application of authoritarianism whether at the apex of a society or at various subsidiary levels of social organization is always an intimidating possibility. It is a significant option available in the toolbox of capital, whenever the benevolent facade of free-market fundamentalism becomes an irritant owing to its own ideological and structural flaws. As we’ve seen earlier in the discussion, the rural areas of India and the United States are unsettled by unchecked economic inequality and deleterious ecological exigencies caused by years of unfettered neoliberalism. The ruling elite recognizes that as the resource base for capitalist production depletes and as climate change continues to alter weather patterns affecting natural world as well as people’s lives, it has to step in to manage any kind of potential intellectual or physical disruption to or the questioning of the ruling ideology of capitalism. The Trump administration and the BJP government are managing that intervention through white and Hindu ethno-majoritarian representative enforcers in the rural United States and India. This expression of authoritarianism need not be violent but as we’ve observed earlier the act of enforcing order never precludes the possibility of violence, and as Hannah Arendt has informed us when power descends into control through violence it begins the process of its disintegration.

The process of societal change in any epoch is a long and tedious one and it is quite likely to be so with the way power of capital dissolves and is eventually replaced by something more egalitarian and nurturing. It is, however, imperative to make sure that the ensuing period doesn’t devolve into chaos, particularly in the ecologically fragile and economically frail rural areas of India and the United States. Lately, people’s struggle for environmental and economic justice has gathered impressive and sustainable momentum. Movements emerged organically from within specific ideological and experiential locations and spread to other spheres of resistance over time, even if they ebbed at the original point. In the United States, for instance, it could be said that there’s a continuum which surfaced with the anti-globalization movement in the late 90s, and then embraced the anti-war, climate justice, anti-racism, gender equality, occupy Wall Street, anti-fracking and students divestment movements at different times in recent history. Many of these movements have strong rural origins or strands of association in those communities. In India, too, alliances are being formed between women, tribals, dalits, Muslims and lower castes to challenge neoliberalism and its authoritarian allies. These movements of resistance are a result as much of the realization that unfettered capitalism is the prime cause of climate change and the calamitous societal disruptions being experienced by people, as they are a reminder of Mahatma Gandhi’s idea of self-restraint, frugality, minimum wastage, communitarian interdependence, the shunning of materialistic desire and respect for the eco-system.

Not surprisingly, these initiatives have not emerged from the intellectual centers of Indian academia or from its cultural elites but have germinated in the lived experiences of the country's so called "backward" tribal and agrarian communities living in the proximity of nature in the rural heartland.

The frozen narrative, which is actively endorsed and severely fostered by the power elite is that there is no viable alternative to the neo-liberal political economy which governs people's lives and any attempt at installing a substitute structure would only lead to widespread societal chaos and misery. The corporate media trumpets that myth continually, and drowns out the voices articulating alternatives. Given the increasing marginalization of the vast majority of the poor and the disempowered in the rural areas from the process of economic growth in India, alternatives are being forged by grassroots communities, which blend current and evolving ideas on environmental and economic justice with the communities' assertion of their traditional rights viz. a viz. their commons, and the opportunities they afford them for localizing and creating self-reliant economic networks. An innovative and meaningful effort to emerge in the last couple of years is called "Vikalp Sangam" or the "Confluence of Alternatives", in Hindi. This is the first attempt in India to document the very vigorous search for alternatives to the kind of developmental model, which has been imposed on the people. Vikalp Sangam is also creating opportunities for these grassroots initiatives to network and exchange ideas through regional and issue-based meetings. In the United States, too, a couple of interesting organizations, "Next Systems Project" and "Great Transition" are exploring a whole raft of ideas which could replace global capitalism with alternatives that are ecologically sensitive and politically and administratively decentralized.

Conclusion

If the United States is crucial in the push back against authoritarianism because it is the fountainhead of neoliberal free-market fundamentalism, India is an important case of what kind of disasters those policies are fashioning downstream in the developing world. Whether it's farmers' suicides because of the failure of genetically modified cotton or the sprouting of unlivable urban ghettos and slums as a result of incessant migrations from increasingly unproductive rural areas due to a fast spreading drought, the country is witnessing ever-new forms of depredations on human existence. Still, resistance is also emerging with certainty and vigor, and so are the alternative ways of being and living accompanying those movements. A careful integration of the resistance movements emerging in both India and the United State with the search for an alternative paradigm could lead to the creation of a dependable process of transformation in society. It is one of the important possible ways in which we could stop neoliberalism from inflicting an authoritarian fatal blow to the earth and its people.

References

- <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/fichiers/public/Piketty2003b.pdf>
- [http://www.fao.org/india/fao-in-india/india-at-a-glance/en/Seminar Magazine/2012/633/Conversation On Caste Today](http://www.fao.org/india/fao-in-india/india-at-a-glance/en/Seminar%20Magazine/2012/633/Conversation%20On%20Caste%20Today)
- Ambedkar, Roy, Anand, "Annihilation Of Caste: The Annotated Critical Version" P-21
- <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/86-killed-in-cow-related-violence-since-2010-are-muslims-97-attacks-after-modi-govt-came-to-power/story-w9CYOksvgk9joGSSaXgpLO.html>
- Arendt, Hannah Crises Of The Republic 1970, p-44
- Ibid, P-55
- Ibid, P-56
- <https://edition.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls>
- <https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furr/spl/thandekawhiting.html>
- <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/09/28/capitalism-in-the-web-of-life-an-interview-with-jason-more/>
- https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/national/rural-america/?utm_term=.ec61cce241af

<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/10/this-years-crazy-fires-freezes-and-floods-cost-farmers-at-least-7-billion/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-per-cent/2017/aug/24/new-study-finds-that-climate-change-costs-will-hit-trump-country-hardest>

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/over-12000-farmer-suicides-per-year-centre-tells-supreme-court/articleshow/58486441.cms>

http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/csd16/PF/presentations/farmers_relief.pdf

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/92-rural-homes-run-on-less-than-Rs-10000-per-month/articleshow/47931716.cms?>

<http://news.berkeley.edu/2017/07/31/study-climate-change-already-causing-suicides-in-india-as-crops-fail/>

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/08/01/59000-farmer-suicides-in-india-over-three-decades-may-be-linked-to-climate-change-study-says/?utm_term=.14f379ca6d87

<http://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/what-ipcc-says-about-india-47230>

<http://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/climate-change-causes-about-1-5-per-cent-loss-in-india-s-gdp-57883>

http://www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/undp_climate_change.pdf (P-43)

ERPI 2018 International Conference
Authoritarian Populism and the
Rural World

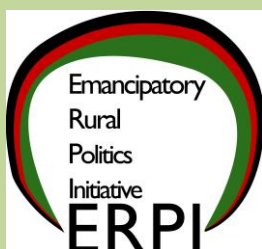
17-18 March 2018

International Institute of Social Studies (ISS)
The Hague, Netherlands

About the Author

Pallav Das has pursued a twin-track career in environmental conservation and creative communications. He has designed and launched innovative campaigns, and founded and led private and non-profit organizations, including Kalpavriksh. Pallav has documented some of India's most pressing development challenges through his film work, including films on violence against women and the threat of HIV/AIDS among street children.

As a student of political science and sociology, Pallav is keen to help build a productive space at the confluence of ecology, politics and communications. He is currently in the process of launching a website (www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org) with Ashish Kothari, his colleague from Kalpavriksh, India. The website is an attempt at providing a platform for exchanging analysis, ideas, activist initiatives and news etc. on next systems and attempts at creating alternatives world wide, which challenge the current neo-liberal orthodoxy.



The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

For more information see: <http://www.iss.nl/erpi>
or email: emancipatoryruralpolitics@gmail.com