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Meera Ashar ^a

^a L'Institut d'Études Transtextuelles et Transculturelles (IETT)
Université Jean Moulin, Lyon
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Taking a Step Back: Revisiting Studies of Indian Politics

Meera Ashar

**L'Institut d'Études Transtextuelles et Transculturelles (IETT)
Université Jean Moulin, Lyon**

How is it that the accumulating corpus of knowledge, deriving from two centuries of imperial involvement, has not proved a firmer foundation for modern political studies?¹

Why—despite a rich body of work built up over more than a century by a number of eminent theorists—do the goings-on of Indian politics elude theorisation? Is the conceptual grid that provides intelligibility to the categories conventionally used to understand and theorise Indian politics—civil society, nation-state, democracy and citizenship—meaningful in the context of India's historical experience? If not, can it really be said that India's political experience constitutes an alternative model? This paper will argue that the root of the problem can be located in the failure of the systems of representation inherited from the colonialists and the Orientalists to relate meaningfully to the Indian context.

A fruitful point of departure for this investigation would be the interrogation of the concepts used to understand Indian politics. In Indian political theorisation, the understanding of politics has crystallised into a discourse on democracy. For an understanding of democracy, one looks, almost unreflectively, to the categories of the nation-state, citizenship and its various cognates. It is as though we have chosen to search for a lost object where the lamp throws light rather than where it is likely to be found.

¹ Hugh Tinker, 'The Rediscovery of India', in *International Affairs*, Vol.45, no.1 (Jan. 1969), p.299.

What is the relationship, we may ask, between the terms of political theorisation and the concepts that they might embody? Is the relationship between the use of certain words and the possession of a concept one of direct correspondence? Does the plethoric use of the words 'democracy', 'nation-state', 'citizenship' and so on provide an affirmation of the fact that they actually embody a shared understanding—that they actually mean something in the context of Indian political discourse?

Quentin Skinner's analysis of language and political change, written as a systematic critique of Raymond Williams' *Keywords*,² provides a rigorous frame for examining the 'keywords', as it were, of our political theorisation and what they reflect about our political reality.³ Critiquing Williams, who proposes the existence of 'keywords' that reflect 'matters of historical and contemporary substance', Skinner asks: '[b]ut what kinds of awareness can we hope to attain from studying the history of keywords?'⁴ Denying the necessity of a direct equivalence between words and concepts, Skinner proposes a test to ascertain this correspondence. The test sets out three criteria for determining whether the recurrent use of a word in different discourses actually demonstrates the existence of a concept within a community of users. The test involves:

1. An understanding of the criteria defined for the use of the word; or the conditions under which the term may be applied;
2. A knowledge of the range of references of the word; that is, the circumstances in which the word can be applied to particular situations;
3. A grasp of the range of attitudes that the term expresses or the 'speech-acts' the word can be used to perform.

This test shall serve to frame our investigation of the vocabulary of Indian politics. Contemporary Indian political language is understood alternately as an indigenous discourse rendered in another language, as a literal translation or direct implantation of the Western political discourse, or as a derivative discourse. In all these cases it is necessary to investigate what the criteria and range of reference of these terms are and ask what it is that lends intelligibility to them.

² Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

³ Quentin Skinner, *Regarding Method*, Vol.1, *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.158.

We Always Had It ...

Bharat-Mata ... the embodiment of *Prakriti* ... is the dynamic element in our ethical consciousness... It is the spirit of Nationality in national life and evolution.⁵ India has hitherto been a nation which is now being disintegrated.⁶

One kind of understanding of the concepts of Indian political theorisation is that all of its categories and concepts have an origin in the ancient Indian political/social/religious domain.

Some writers identify the origin of these categories in the mythic past, that is, in the Epics or the Purānas or similar texts, while others locate it in the ancient or medieval periods of Indian history. According to Bipin Chandra Pal, Bharat (from whom India, or *Bhāratvarīa* gets its name) brought the people of India together to form one cultural unit even though the local princes and kings remained the centres of power. This integration he identifies with federalism.⁷ Further, he believes that Hindu religion contained the very essence of 'what we now understand as Nationalism'.⁸ Alternatively, Romila Thapar argues that 'with the discussion of the *saptanga* theory in Kautilya's *Arthasāstra*, the concept of the state can be said to have arrived'.⁹ A pre-history of the Indian state is evidenced, it is said, by allegorical representations of the polity. The comparison of the human body to the body politic suggests, according to Hartmut Scharfe, an indigenous notion of the state.¹⁰

K.M. Panikkar identifies the Gupta period as the one that sowed the seeds of nationalism. Political unity in the subcontinent survived the invasions of the 'Mongol and Tartar people' and resurrected itself as a 'national idea' which underlay the 'great Mahratta Empire'.¹¹

⁵ Bipin Chandra Pal, *The Soul of India: A Constructive Study of Indian Thoughts and Ideals* (Madras: Tagore and Co., 1923), p.17.

⁶ Pramatha Nath Bose, *Swaraj—Cultural and Political* (Calcutta: W. Newman, 1929), p.48.

⁷ Pal, *The Soul of India: A Constructive Study of Indian Thoughts and Ideals*, pp.45, 52–8.

⁸ Bipin Chandra Pal, *Nationality and Empire: A Running Study of Some Current Indian Problems* (Simla: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1916), p.34.

⁹ Romila Thapar, *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.392.

¹⁰ Hartmut Scharfe, *The State in Indian Tradition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989). A similar argument is available in P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1973).

¹¹ K.M. Panikkar, *Indian Nationalism: Its Origin, History and Ideals* (London: 1929), pp.11–15.

Other scholars go further. A.S. Altekar draws attention to the existence of a republican-style local government within a larger republic in ancient India;¹² Hemachandra Raychaudhuri asserts that republicanism was as popular a mode of government as monarchy in ancient India;¹³ U.N. Ghoshal asserts (without a glimmer of irony) that ancient India was actually a 'welfare state';¹⁴ and R.C. Majumdar finds hints of democracy in its 'self-governing' villages.¹⁵

All this historiography agrees, though, that India has long possessed nationality, statehood, democracy and a concept of history.

... Or Did We?

It can hardly be claimed for writings in this classification that they shed much light on the origins of modern Indian nationalism.¹⁶

It may be said, without labouring too much over the point, that the use of terms by the writers of this group is fairly loose. When they argue about the existence of nation, state, republic and democracy in ancient India, they do not possess a theory of what it means to be a nation, state or republic, nor do they have an articulate concept of democracy. Nevertheless these concepts unequivocally communicate a positive or desirable content.

To be sure, several writers within this group do not actually assert that India *was a nation*—as in a physical unit with demarcated territorial limits. Still, they insist that there existed, in ancient India, a cultural unity that resonated with the *spirit of nationality*. Interestingly, they see this spirit as proto-national, neither racial nor linguistic in essence. Muslim rule, argues Pal, may have established a common government or a state, but it did not impinge upon the cultural unity of *Bhāratvarṇa* which, for him, was firmly rooted in Hindu thought.¹⁷ Har Bilas Sarda, too, 'Hindu-ises' the origins of Indian nationality. The Hindu people are the 'race' that constitutes the nation.¹⁸ Another of this

¹² A.S. Altekar, *State and Government in Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 3rd ed., 1958), pp.114–5.

¹³ Hemachandra Raychaudhuri, *Political History of Ancient India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁴ U.N. Ghoshal, *A History of Indian Political Ideas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

¹⁵ R.C. Majumdar, *Corporate Life in Ancient India* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 3rd ed., 1969), p.35.

¹⁶ Bruce McCully, 'The Origins of Indian Nationalism According to the Natives', in *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol.7, no.3 (Sept. 1935), p.299.

¹⁷ Pal, *Nationality and Empire: A Running Study of Some Current Indian Problems*.

¹⁸ Har Bilas Sarda, *Hindu Superiority: An Attempt to Determine the Position of the Hindu Race on the Scale of Nations* (Ajmer: Rajputana Printing Works, 1906).

group, Radha Kumud Mookherjee, argues that, as the ancient Indians acquired control over territory, they began to deify it as a Motherland.¹⁹ But who were these ‘people’ identified by these writers, and how did they come to conceive of themselves as a community before the crystallisation of a nation?

The understanding of the state in these writings is an even murkier one. After asserting that the conception of the state in India was a remarkably modern one, Majumdar goes on to explain that

[the state’s] scope of activities was all embracing, and no distinction was made between ... moral principles and positive law. Everything that had any bearing upon the moral and spiritual nature or material condition of a man came within the scope of the State’s activities.²⁰

What, then, was understood as not being the state? Majumdar’s description of the state as all encompassing sounds surprisingly similar to stock descriptions of religion in India. Are we, then, calling the same thing *both* religion and state? The following passage seems to point that way:

It [the state] was based on the concept of *Dharma*, which sustained life, as embracing all the activities of an individual... This totalitarian view of life explains the totalitarian character of the State.²¹

However in the very next sentence Majumdar explains that ‘although the State was totalitarian in its scope of activities, it did not adopt the totalitarian method in carrying out its functions’.²² Can the state be totalitarian but not totalitarian in the way it functions? Maybe Majumdar’s study can be discounted as dated. But if so, what of this much more recent account by Romila Thapar? The ancient Indian state, she says, was

characterized by *concentration of political authority* generally in the hands of an erstwhile senior lineage of which one family claims complete power.²³

¹⁹ Radha Kumud Mookherjee, *Nationalism in Hindu Culture* (London: 1921).

²⁰ R.C. Majumdar, *Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Private Limited, 1952), p.143.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Thapar, *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*, p.378, italics added.

Moreover according to Thapar no sharp demarcation existed between lineage system and state. Her descriptions of the lineage system and state system merely suggest that, as a group of people grew from a small community to a larger one, they adopted certain techniques of living that were slightly different from those practised before. Taxation and maintaining an army were some of those things. Further, Thapar offers a more detailed analysis of the arrival of the state in ancient India. She writes:

Many of these new ideologies [of Buddhism and Jainism] hark back to the values of the lineage societies. . . . These values were sought to be resurrected or continued in the monastic institutions. But the contradiction in the situation was that in order to maintain the monasteries the new religions required, in the initial stages, both the direct patronage of the state as well as a society rich enough to support the monks through alms. Such a society would presuppose at least the rudiments of the state, and to that extent a decline in the lineage society.²⁴

Thapar here presupposes the necessity of state support for monastic institutions. After establishing the existence of monastic institutions, she takes her own presupposition as a proof of the existence of 'at least the rudiments of the state'. Thapar is, admittedly, sensitive to the limitations of such an analysis. She claims that even once formed, the state is not 'a unitary, monolithic, centralized state to begin with, nor do the earlier forms disappear'.²⁵ But in the statement quoted earlier, she considers this very 'concentration of power' as the principal characteristic distinguishing the state from the previous political organising principle. If the state is not a centralised one, then what actually distinguishes it from a lineage system? In an attempt to deal with this lack of clarity, Thapar concludes by calling for a typology of states.²⁶

Why are we compelled to imagine all large political communities as nation-states, especially given the relatively recent conception of the nation-state? Here we may conclude by stating that while the terms nation, state and republic are used fairly consistently by this group, the criteria and range of the terms are fuzzy, even if their evaluative force remains strong. And a similar pattern can be observed in the use of the term democracy to describe ancient Indian societies. In this characterisation, any social structures or processes that seem

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.392.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.393.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

desirable from the modern point of view—especially if they allowed the participation of a large body of the community's members—are seen as democracy in action.

Much of the writing that aims to ascribe indigenous origins to contemporary concepts was undertaken in the nationalist period. Its purpose was to create a feeling of national unity and pride. Further, these nationalist writers attempted to open up a dialogue with the colonial rulers by speaking their language. They did so, however, without possessing an understanding of the criteria for the use of the key terms and their range of reference. Thus they failed not only to initiate an independent 'Indian' discourse, but rather they remained entrenched in the colonial and Orientalist framework. What they were left with were terms bereft of concept.

'Not Yet' Theorists²⁷

India was a *nation-in-the-making*.²⁸

Indian society is essentially apolitical but there is a growing politicization of traditional sub-centers.²⁹

The second group of theorists I want to discuss can largely be identified by a 'not yet' element in their explication of Indian politics. This group takes as categories of understanding that which Indian politics is 'not yet'. Thus nation, state, citizen, democracy and other such modern categories are said to be able to characterise Indian politics but, at the same time, are entities that have not yet been installed completely in India.

Often this 'incomplete' modernity is connected to India's social fabric. India's religiosity, superstition, caste system, illiteracy, poverty and lack of a general

²⁷ The phrase 'not yet' has already been made famous by Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). He refers to 'the waiting room of history' in which India has been asked to wait by the imperial administrators. For 'the nationalists and anti-colonialists ... the structure of the "not yet" in their imagination was [replaced by] the horizon of the "now"'. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Subaltern History as Political Thought', in V.R. Mehta and Thomas Pantham (eds), *Political Ideas in Modern India: Thematic Explorations, History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization* (New Delhi: Sage, 2006), p.98. I differ slightly in the use of the phrase. I use it as constitutive of an incompleteness of the project of modernity. Thus, unlike Chakrabarty, I characterise some of the nationalists and contemporary modernisers also as 'not yet' theorists.

²⁸ Bipin Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee and Aditya Mukherjee, *India after Independence: 1947–2000* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999), p.27, italics added.

²⁹ Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970), p.46.

civic sense are said to be a constant and continuing hindrance to its becoming a nation, state or democracy, and to its people becoming citizens. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote:

India must therefore lessen her religiosity and turn to science. She must get rid of the exclusiveness in thought and social habit which has become like a prison to her, stunting her spirit and preventing growth. . . . Caste is the symbol and embodiment of this exclusiveness among the Hindus. . . . *This outlook has to change completely, for it is wholly opposed to modern conditions and the democratic ideal.*³⁰

And Nehru's contemporary and colleague B.R. Ambedkar was even more scathing. In the course of the Constituent Assembly debates of the 1940s he dismissed democracy in India as 'a top dressing on Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic'.³¹ Again, in a speech delivered in 1952, Ambedkar declared that India lacked many of the basic social conditions necessary for democracy—namely 'no glaring inequalities . . . the functioning of a moral order in society . . . and a public conscience'.³²

Although they came from different ideological positions, Nehru and Ambedkar agreed that democracy was a worthy ideal to be pursued by the nation-state. They also agreed that democracy would remain a work in progress until other ideals such as justice and equality had been achieved. In Uday Singh Mehta's phrase, Indian democracy in 1947 or even in 1950 was still only a '*project* and a *promissory note*'.³³

Thus neither democracy nor the nation predated Independence. They were 'projects'-in-waiting.³⁴ Specifically, the deliverance of nation and democracy rested on making citizens out of the Indian people. But unlike in France, where the Revolution conferred citizenship by conflating the private individual and

³⁰ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund/Oxford University Press, 19th ed., 1999), p.520, italics added.

³¹ P.N. Dhar, *Indira Gandhi, the 'Emergency', and Indian Democracy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.226.

³² B.R. Ambedkar, *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and His Egalitarian Revolution* (eds. M.L. Kasare Hari Narke, N.G. Kamble and Ashok Godghate), Vol. 17, Part 3, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* (Mumbai: Higher Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 2003), pp.484–5.

³³ Uday Singh Mehta, 'Indian Constitutionalism: The Articulation of a Political Vision', in Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rochona Majumdar and Andrew Sartori (eds), *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

the public actor, in India citizens had to be cultivated. Citizenship was bestowed upon the Indian subject ‘not because he or she [was] “ready” or “educated” or “free” from sedimented parochial social identities—as classical liberal theory would have required’³⁵—but because it was something that modern states did. The making of the citizen thus required a complete effacement of what was typically understood as the identity of the ‘Indian person’.

Here we have a very different vision of the fabric of India.³⁶ For the late nationalists writing around the time of Independence, India not only did not have a democratic political tradition, but the tradition it had mitigated against the achievement of democracy. While history afforded the writers of the first group we looked at material to make claims about the existence of an indigenous nation, state and democracy, for Nehru and Ambedkar, as well as for one strand of social reformers, history was a millstone around the neck of the newly-minted Republic.

Mehta contends that, while the liberal conception of ‘history as progress’ had assigned to India a ‘not yet arrived’ state of historical maturation, the Indian nationalist view was different. They felt, he suggests, that ‘India was in fact ready, that it had paid its debt on behalf of a “backward” past through two centuries of tutelage’.³⁷ But ready for what? Was India ready for democracy because its constitution said so? But is the setting up of a nation or the becoming of citizens an illocutionary act?³⁸ What was this democracy that could only flourish in a conducive environment yet was required to make that environment possible? Here one can see the strong appraisive force of the term ‘democracy’ at work. In fact, as the foregoing discussion shows, some nationalists, too, saw late twentieth-century India as ‘not yet arrived’. However what concept the term ‘democracy’ embodies in their writing is yet unclear.

Not only is the understanding of democracy by this group opaque, but their grasp of ‘society’ in the Indian context is also fuzzy. While their descriptions of Indian society share common ground with the nineteenth-century Orientalists,

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.18.

³⁶ The Indian social fabric is characterised by a marked ‘absence’ or a ‘lack’. Reading the ‘elite’ narratives of the Indian nation, Chakrabarty writes: ‘Within this narrative shared between imperialist and nationalist imaginations, the “Indian” was always a figure of lack’. Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Pasts?’, in *Representations*, No.37 (Winter 1992), p.6.

³⁷ Mehta, ‘Indian Constitutionalism: The Articulation of a Political Vision’, p.25.

³⁸ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University* (ed. J.O. Urmson) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

they are marked by self-doubt and unease which the Orientalists lacked. Nehru, for example, says of his 'discovery of India':

India was in my blood and there was much in her that instinctively thrilled me. And yet I approached her almost as an alien critic, full of dislike for the present as well as for many of the relics of the past that I saw. *To some extent I came to her via the West*, and looked at her as a friendly westerner might have done. I was eager and anxious to change her outlook and appearance and give her *the garb of modernity*. And yet doubts arose within me. Did I know India?—I who presumed to scrap much of her past heritage?³⁹

These doubts diminish with time and thus a few years after Nehru wrote, social scientists were speaking of India's transition from 'a colonial country to an independent democracy, from a feudal "traditional" society to a nation caught up with the twentieth century'.⁴⁰ The Indian nation-state, democracy and citizenry, which the nationalists recognised as merely formally-installed entities became, for later political theorists, the 'facts' of Indian politics. From this 'empirical' base they proceeded to critique both the traditional social structure of India *and* the governing polity of the newly-installed nation-state.

The Garb of Modernity

One reason for the failure of democratic politics in India, according to these writers, is that decades after a democratic nation-state was formally constituted, the hopes of the nation-builders have not been fulfilled; India remains a traditional society with merely superficial signs of modernity. Why? The core problem, according to these writers, is the Indian people: our mentality, our habits, our customs and traditions, our values, our lack of a sense of justice or civic sense—us. Pratap Bhanu Mehta asks:

Despite having a functioning democracy for almost five decades, does the entire repertoire of our habits and practices outside of the

³⁹ Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p.50, italics added. Sudipta Kaviraj has pointed out that 'politicians of the Nehru type made a mistake very similar to the one that has now been, a trifle theatrically, traced through the entire history of social science. Western social theory moved from a sort of high orientalism practised by Marx and Weber to a very inadequate theory of modernization worked out by Parsonian developmentalists....' Sudipta Kaviraj, 'On State, Society and Discourse in India', in James Manor (ed.), *Rethinking Third World Politics* (London: New York, 1991).

⁴⁰ Myron Weiner, 'India's Political Problems: The Longer View', in *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol.9, no.2 (June 1956), p.283.

sphere of formal politics, conduce to the formation of democratic citizens with a robust sense of right and wrong, a sensitive enough social conscience, and a minimal sense of justice?⁴¹

Like the nationalists earlier, Mehta sees in the 'fabric' of India something that troubles him, and wonders if democracy itself can make much of a difference:

Can democracy itself generate new social norms that give its citizens some moral anchor, some intelligible and convincing sense of the proper scope of their rights and obligations vis-à-vis others, that carries some degree of conviction?⁴²

What a social scientist like Rajni Kothari would identify as custom-driven, Mehta sees as character-driven, arising from a lack of moral conviction and a shirking of responsibility. Once constituted as citizens by the Constitution of India, the people of India have a responsibility he believes towards normalising the values of democracy in order to 'create [a community of] citizens bound by reciprocity'.⁴³

This sentiment is echoed by Dipankar Gupta in his book *Mistaken Modernities*: 'Deep down, at the gut level', he writes, 'we know that our society continues to be corrupt and really, most of us would not know what to do if it were otherwise'.⁴⁴

The grievances these theorists have with political and social conditions in India would suggest that India is not merely not democratic, it is not even a nation at all in any significant sense of the word, since Indians in essence lack the qualities needed for making 'citizens'. If they are right, these shortcomings are not easily rectified. So why then do these theorists continue to describe India as a nation, its political process as a democracy and its members as citizens?

It is not clear why. Certainly they seem quite comfortable with the notion that modern India has been the recipient of institutions forged by other cultures. According to Pratap Mehta,

⁴¹ Pratap Bhanu Mehta, *The Burden of Democracy* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2003), p.30.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.26.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.35.

⁴⁴ Dipankar Gupta, *Mistaken Modernity: India between Worlds* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2000), p.144.

the simple fact was that for the first time in Indian history, all Indians were declared to be citizens and not subjects. Whether or not republics have existed in ancient India, whether or not democracy had cultural roots in 1951, was of less concern. As citizens people would not only enjoy rights but exercise choice.⁴⁵

Indeed Kohli calls this imposed structure ‘a “gift” of the elite to the masses’, albeit one that was given in an irresponsible manner, without adequate knowledge of the consequences.⁴⁶ As Sunil Khilnani comments:

Most people in India had no idea of what exactly they had been given. Like the British Empire it supplanted, India’s constitutional democracy was established in a fit of absentmindedness.⁴⁷

But despite the fact that the contemporary political process in India is not the democracy that was envisioned by the ‘nation-builders’—despite their inability to describe, explain and locate a genuine, rooted ‘democratisation’ of the Indian people—the writers of this group persist in calling India a functioning democracy. Clearly their conception of democracy is based neither on an understanding of the contemporary functioning of the political situation, nor on an explicit elaboration and application of the liberal model. The term democracy denotes (for the members of this group) that which has been installed in India, that which India is not yet and that which we, the not yet citizens, have to strive towards. As Kothari remarks:

a democratic polity is *supposed to be* one in which the government and the people together create an open and civil society—an integrated whole that is brought and kept together by virtue of its being open; one in which people participate not just in things like elections and development projects, but together in creating a common future.⁴⁸

For this group, like the first group, democracy is a positive and desirable thing—yet no one really knows what it actually is! Perhaps the Indian

⁴⁵ Mehta, *The Burden of Democracy*, p.8.

⁴⁶ Atul Kohli (ed.), *India’s Democracy: An Analysis of Changing State-Society Relations* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1991), p.9.

⁴⁷ Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997), p.34.

⁴⁸ Rajni Kothari, ‘Interpreting Indian Politics: A Personal Statement’, in Upendra Baxi and Bhikhu Parekh (eds), *Crisis and Change in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), p.165, italics added.

discussion of democracy perfectly illustrates the Žižekian argument that democracy is a ‘signifier’ without a ‘signified’.⁴⁹

Democracy with a Difference

To understand political modernity in the non-Western world is impossible without Western social theory; it is equally impossible entirely within the terms of that tradition.⁵⁰

With the third group of writers, we arrive at a situation where, on the one hand, there is an assertion that Indian political theorisation cannot proceed without employing the concepts of Western political theory and, on the other hand, a recognition that the key concepts of Western political theory, introduced as part of the baggage of colonialism, are incongruous with the Indian political experience. Although they acknowledge that, with colonisation, certain formal structures did come to be installed in India, they do not believe that colonialism had the transformative power ascribed to it by the second group. Accordingly they conclude that colonialism did not constitute a complete transformation of the structure and institutions of India, and that therefore the language of politics cannot be, *tout ensemble*, the modern Western idiom. Consider, says Sudipta Kaviraj, the case of ‘sovereignty’,

a concept which lies as an unstated premise under the very language of modern western political theory. . . . A language of the sovereign state, or rather a language which is practised in the description of the destiny of sovereign states is inappropriate for the political formation which existed in traditional India.⁵¹

The language of sovereignty also informs the destiny, or the *telos*, of the state—or history. Vivek Dhareshwar explains:

History has always been a discourse of sovereignty and sovereignty has always been structured in a form implying the presence of a subject, whether we take the latter to refer to the citizen subject or to the collectivity named by the nation. These concepts, moreover,

⁴⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996).

⁵⁰ Sudipta Kaviraj, ‘In Search of Civil Society’, in Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (eds), *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.287.

⁵¹ Kaviraj, *Politics in India*, p.11.

have defined the very intelligibility of 'politics', indeed of political modernity itself. Other political concepts, too, derive their context and force from these three.⁵²

But this begs a further question. If sovereignty, history, the citizen subject, and the nation-state form a thick network, wherein each concept is necessary to provide intelligibility to the others, why are the discourses within which these categories circulate not replicable in India? That is to say, what prevents us from employing these categories to explain our own political situation? While Kaviraj presents no explicit explanation for the discord between sovereignty, categories emerging from the discourse of sovereignty, and the Indian political experience, Dipesh Chakrabarty attempts to locate the problem in 'history' which he views as a (Western) exercise of relating to the past. Chakrabarty shrewdly observes that in writing the history (or histories) of India, what Indian scholars are actually doing is writing 'variations on a master narrative that could be called "the history of Europe"'.⁵³ Since in the colonial period (with the reformist, missionary and nationalist movements) the Indian person was both the subject and object of modernity, the categories within which politics was conducted were essentially European. The mode of conducting the modernising project (of writing history, of setting up a nation-state, of becoming citizens and so on) was thus, Chakrabarty explains, using Homi Bhabha's word, merely a 'mimetic' one.⁵⁴ Further, it is only the elite (read nationalists or modernists) in the postcolonial context who, according to Ashis Nandy, are eager to write histories: 'They sense that the dominant ideology of the state and their own privileged access to the state apparatus are both sanctioned by the idea of history'.⁵⁵ Only if their past is 'packaged as history'⁵⁶ can the elite be part of the process of politics. History thus comes to be not so much a relationship with the past, but more an act of mimicry performed in preparation for the 'game' of Indian politics.

However this subject of history, desiring a place in politics, bungles the basic rules of the game. He wishes to be a citizen, but he cannot demarcate the private and the public. We see in nineteenth-century India the rise of novels, biographies, autobiographies and histories, as well as the institution of private

⁵² Vivek Dhareshwar, 'Politics and History after Sovereignty', in Rajeiv Bhargava, Amiya Kumar Bagchi and R. Sudharshan (eds), *Multiculturalism, Liberalism and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.401–2.

⁵³ Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?', p.1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁵⁵ Ashis Nandy, 'History's Forgotten Doubles', in *History and Theory*, Vol.34, no.2 (May 1995), p.45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

property—all pointing to the coming of age of the private man who could now become the citizen. But this narrative of the interiorised private man, as Chakrabarty's discussion of the autobiographies of Nirad Chaudhuri and Ramabai Ranade makes clear, cannot be written without ignoring a number of serious anomalies. The ramifications of 'private' were not understood even by the elite who tried to write autobiographies!⁵⁷ It is only if we ignore the anomalies that Chakrabarty points to that we may comfortably be able to speak of a nationalist movement and a nation-state.

In his *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, Partha Chatterjee explains, through three significant 'moments', the coming into being of an elite nation-state modelled on the Western modernist conception.⁵⁸ In a later work, Chatterjee argues that this nation-state was fashioned out of the 'fuzzy communities'⁵⁹ that existed earlier. At the 'moment of departure', or inception, of what is commonly referred to as the nationalist movement, he writes, one finds a patriotic sentiment articulated within 'the framework of knowledge imposed upon it by colonialism [which leads] inevitably to an elitism of the intelligentsia'.⁶⁰ This is perhaps why Chatterjee critiques the discourse of nationalism as a derivative discourse. Similarly, in sharp disagreement with Benedict Anderson's modular nationalism,⁶¹ Chatterjee writes:

If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain 'modular' forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world, shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. . . . Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized.⁶²

That said, though, it is clear that the discourse of the nation in the hands of the modernist elite eventually 'arrives' at a completion, by way of the setting up of

⁵⁷ Chakrabarty explains that Indian autobiographies are extremely 'public' in the case of men and all about the extended family in the case of women. Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?', p.9.

⁵⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁵⁹ See Sudipta Kaviraj, 'On the Construction of Colonial Power: Structure, Discourse, Hegemony', in Sudipta Kaviraj (ed.), *Politics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁶⁰ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, p.79.

⁶¹ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁶² Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post Colonial Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.5.

the nation-state: with the crossing of this threshold the nation becomes constituted as part of the state ideology, and the nationalist imagination is appropriated by the state. The nationalist movement attempted to transform the existing 'peasant consciousness' into 'rationalist forms of an "enlightened" nationalist politics'.⁶³ Nevertheless, peasant support was appropriated with the intervention of Gandhi and a benign republic was established. Nehru's creation was, however, compromised by its accommodation with feudal interests. Deploying an explanatory scheme borrowed from Antonio Gramsci, Chatterjee characterises this process as a 'passive revolution'.

In critiquing the contemporary situation in Italy, Gramsci hypothesised that the bourgeoisie, the vanguard of the capitalist system, had compromised with certain pre-capitalist (or pre-modern) identities. He concluded from this that the bourgeois revolution had, in some ways, failed—thus his description of it as a 'passive revolution'.⁶⁴ Yet when Chatterjee uses the term 'passive revolution', he seems to mean something rather different—a revolution not only compromised by bourgeois-feudal negotiations but also stalled by subaltern resistance, a double failure! Marks of the lack of success of the failed revolution are etched, for Chatterjee, in the narrative of the Indian nation. Unearthing previously-lost or occluded narratives of the nationalist struggle, he finds that the heroes of the movement are not elite modernisers but members of an 'unorganised subaltern domain',⁶⁵ or what he later calls 'the political society'.⁶⁶ Applying this insight, he concludes that

most of the inhabitants of India are only tenuously, and even ambiguously and contextually, rights bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution. They are not, therefore, proper members of civil society and are not regarded as such by the *institutions of the state*.⁶⁷

Most Indians, Chatterjee believes, relate to the state not as citizens, but as 'population groups'. They are the recipients of welfare schemes and education and the target of policies and disciplinary measures. If he is right, the nation, as

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.81.

⁶⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare, ed. Geoffrey Nowell Smith) (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1996), p.106.

⁶⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), p.39.

⁶⁶ Partha Chatterjee, 'On Civil and Political Society in Post-Colonial Democracies', in Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (eds), *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁶⁷ Partha Chatterjee, 'Modernity, Democracy and the Political Negotiation of Death', in *South Asia Research*, Vol.19, no.1 (1999), p.108, italics added.

imagined by the bourgeoisie, has not been put into place, since those who are supposed to constitute the nation-state are not themselves constituted by it. And if that is so, it follows that what has been put into place, apparently in a 'fit of absentmindedness',⁶⁸ is not a nation but something else, the workings of which are evident in the politics of the political society.

Chatterjee provides ample evidence of what Dhareshwar calls the 'unworking' of the concepts of modern Western political language.⁶⁹ Similarly Kaviraj, Nandy, Chakrabarty and Dhareshwar have all put forth powerful theses for the failure of the language of the Western political idiom. Why then do they negate their own insights and persist in trying to explain Indian political processes and institutions in that same language: a language that they find not just incongruous with Indian political experience but also elitist, colonised, and 'undemocratic'? Chatterjee for example frequently employs the term 'civil society', which he takes to mean

those characteristic institutions of modern associational life originating in Western societies which are based on equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exit, contract, deliberative procedures of decision-making, recognized rights and duties of members, and other such principles.⁷⁰

How does this apply? We have already established that in India, civil society was produced in an act of farcical mimicry⁷¹ by the nationalist elite. In imitating the Western discourses, the nation-state and citizenship were inadvertently made 'provincial' by the Indian subject. Can this 'provincializing of "Europe"' open up the possibility of actual politics in India?⁷² In the process of mimicry does one actually become what one is imitating? For Chatterjee, the bourgeois state was not rooted in civil society since it was a passive revolution that created both this compromised state and a compromised civil society. But if by his own account this passive revolution itself was stalled by subaltern struggles, was a civil society created at all? He admits that his application of the concept of civil society in India excludes 'the vast mass of population',⁷³ and yet

⁶⁸ Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, p.34.

⁶⁹ Dhareshwar, 'Politics and History after Sovereignty', p.419.

⁷⁰ Chatterjee, 'On Civil and Political Society in Post-Colonial Democracies', p.172.

⁷¹ What Homi Bhabha calls 'mimicry', Kaviraj refers to as 're-enactment'. Citing Naoroji and Nehru, Kaviraj argues that the political form in India was a re-enactment, in Naoroji's case, of laissez-faire capitalism, and with Nehru, the socialist model of democracy. See Kaviraj, 'On State, Society and Discourse in India', p.83.

⁷² Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?'.

⁷³ Chatterjee, 'On Civil and Political Society in Post-Colonial Democracies', p.172.

he claims that ‘civil society as an ideal continues to energise an interventionist political project, but as an actually existing form it is demographically limited’.⁷⁴ But where does Chatterjee see the force of this ‘ideal’? Why do we want to continue asserting that we need to retain the blueprint of a project of modernity that has not even taken off in any significant way?

While Ashis Nandy recognises that ‘millions of people still live outside “history”’, he still insists that ‘the politically powerful now live in and with history’.⁷⁵ How do they come to live within history, especially when the evidence of their move to the ‘empire of history’, as well as their practices of history are both, to say the least, questionable? Dhareshwar admits that ‘unless one is committed to a certain historicism’, the language of modernity appears to generate, in the Indian context, a ‘polysemy’, a multiplicity of meanings:

The coherence of our identity and politics was achieved by the modernist interpretation of modernity: the belief in progress and the confidence that reason would organize and order our cultural and social world, and the belief that true universality would be achieved when all human practices could be brought under the rule of reason.⁷⁶

But Dhareshwar hesitates to follow this thought to its logical conclusion. To *reject modernity* itself would be ‘an absurd project’ he tells us. “‘We’ are modern. The state and sovereignty are as much an Indian thing as say, caste’.⁷⁷ Also the rejection of modernity is seen, strangely, by these authors as too radical an option. Kaviraj, for instance, argues that

Gandhi did not seek an answer to the problems of the modern condition. He shrewdly refused to deal in modernity’s terms. . . . In a sense he embraced a *deliberate obsolescence*. His critique of modernity is of course powerful and lucid, but *too radical*, for he offers not an alternative solution to modernity’s problems, but to modernity itself.⁷⁸

Since the project of modernity is itself incoherent, I contend that the issue at hand is not about the radicalness or orthodoxy of a stance, but rather the

⁷⁴ Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*, p.39.

⁷⁵ Nandy, ‘History’s Forgotten Doubles’, pp.44, 46.

⁷⁶ Dhareshwar, ‘Politics and History after Sovereignty’, p.420.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.419–20.

⁷⁸ Kaviraj, ‘On State, Society and Discourse in India’, p.96, italics added.

necessity of an alternative to modernity. However, before we can even make sense of an alternative, we need to dismantle the concepts of modernity to see why they make any alternative to modernity seem like an ‘obsolescence’.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion let me return to Dhareshwar’s point about the polysemic character of the concept of modernity in the postcolonial Indian context. I want to juxtapose this insight with Quentin Skinner’s evaluation of words and concepts. Skinner argues that it is only when there is no shared concept that a term acquires *polysemy*. Applying his test to writings on Indian political theory, we find not only are there no concepts in Indian political theory, but also that there is a strong evaluative force to the terms derived from Western political theory. Consider, though, the hypothesis that the concepts embodied by the terms have undergone a change—that is to say, that in the face of a failure of their ‘correct’ application in a new context (that of India) they have acquired a new meaning.⁷⁹ Skinner states that a feature of the coming into being of a new meaning is that while the criteria of the use of the word and the range of reference are altered, the evaluative force is lost. However, in the Indian context the change in meaning has strange effects—the evaluative force connoted by the term is retained (perhaps with greater vigour) and the term transforms into a polysemic one. Why does this happen? Why are we not able to give meaning to the terms that we employ so consistently in our political vocabulary? As an attempt to answer this question we must first interrogate the frame that Skinner uses to establish the relationship between words and concepts. Skinner critiques Raymond Williams for a lack of clarity in his elucidation of the elements that constitute our core social, political and moral concerns, but after replacing Williams’s term ‘keywords’ with the phrase ‘appraisive terms’,⁸⁰ he himself dodges the question of what constitutes these keywords or appraisive terms. We need to find out what it is that makes them (and no others) the vocabulary of Western political thought and a derivative discourse in our context.

My last comment has to do with the rejection of modernity and its ramifications. The rejection of modernity cannot be conflated with ‘obsolescence’. I would rather associate it with the unintelligibility that stems from

⁷⁹ Also see Partha Chatterjee, ‘Secularism and Toleration’, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.29, no.28 (July 1994), pp.1768–77.

⁸⁰ Quentin Skinner, ‘Language and Political Change’, in Russell Hanson *et al* (eds), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change: Ideas in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.6–24.

the employment of a particular way of understanding ourselves and our institutions. Of course we need to talk more about the repercussions of particular economic processes on Indian politics, or the relationship between identity politics and citizenship. But this paper argues that these important questions cannot be properly addressed without clarity on the conceptual frame of our political language.