Interview – Ajay Gudavarthy

Ajay Gudavarthy is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. He currently teaches courses on Contemporary Critical Theory and Indian Politics, and earlier taught at the National Law School of India. His key interests lie at the interface of political theory, and social and political developments in contemporary India. Ajay Gudavarthy was a visiting Professor at CeMIS, Goettingen University, and a Charles Wallace Fellow at SOAS. He was also a visiting Fellow at Tubingen University; CISRUL, University of Aberdeen; and Goldsmiths, University of London. He is currently an Associate Fellow at the Institute for Humanities, Simon Fraser University.

His published work includes *Politics of Post-Civil Society*, *Maoism, Democracy, Globalization: Cross-Currents in Indian Politics* and *India after Modi: Populism and the Right*. Ajay Gudavarthy has further edited a critical volume on postcoloniality, *Re-Framing Democracy and Agency: Interrogating Political Society*, as well as *Revolutionary Violence versus Democracy: Narratives from India* and *Secular Sectarianism: Limits of Subaltern Politics*. His forthcoming book is entitled *Ethics and Emotions in `New India'*. Ajay Gudavarthy has contributed to leading international journals, such as *Development and Change*, and *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. He is a distinguished intellectual who regularly writes for leading news dailies and online portals, and as an eminent public speaker, is frequently invited to talk by various academic institutions and activist organisations.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

As a political theorist, I have been working at the interface between violence and dialogue, democracy and revolution, psychology and social structure, and cultural sociology and political economy. I began by looking critically at the hegemonic domain of civil society and the limits of liberalism, before moving on to compare this with postcolonial interventions and its emphasis on subaltern politics. Following this, I turned to study revolutionary politics and militant mobilisations. While each of these articulations had their moment of hegemony and appeal, what we seem to be witnessing currently, is a prolonged phase of non-hegemonic interregnum. Much of the *organic crisis* is finding its articulation in the form of populist-authoritarianism that is (at least provisionally) able to negotiate multiplicity; I refer to this as 'performative dialectics' in my book on populism.

The most exciting debates are happening in finding explanations for the current majoritarian impasse and the changes that have accompanied the crisis of liberalism. I find myself jostling between the new trends of cultural sociology, introduced by sociologists like Jeffrey Alexander (who explains social differentiation through symbolic representation, place of myth, meaning in social life, and imagination that belongs to `inner environments'), and neo-Gramscian explanations that see politics and ideology as forms of state power, rather than an unmediated expression of the economic structure. In this, I find that structural explanations and hard materialism often cannot explain quotidian aspects of social life related to psychology and emotions, however, they are never completely divested from it. How one finds an Archimedean point is something that deeply interests me. Maybe there is none…

My forthcoming book, *Ethics and Emotions in `New India'*, attempts to look closely at how emotions such as anger, anxiety, hate, fear, and betrayal, come to influence or structure subjective experience and political subjectivity. It also looks at the conceptual differentiation between ethics and morality, and how pragmatism can co-exist with compassion.

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How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I have always had two lives. One of an academic interested in theory, who is deeply invested in the world of ideas and categories. This work requires the ability to take a step back from immediate politics and external environments. The other of being a public intellectual associated with various social activists (though I cannot claim myself to be one), and wanting to reflect on pressing issues of public concern. This dual existence can be fraught with many ethical dilemmas that are often not easy to resolve. It is an attempt to combine what Gramsci refers to as the `pessimism of the intellect with the optimism of the Will'. You live a dual life, which Nancy Fraser (in describing Socialism) said is `cognitively compelling (but) experientially remote'.

In my recent writings, I benefitted immensely from contemporary critical theory, with a special reference to the writings of Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth. I have been teaching a course entitled *Recognition, Redistribution and Representation*' for a decade now. With most students, I have had a very engaging experience filled with intense debates around questions of identity, deconstruction, solidarity, and class. I attempt to connect these debates (which at times can be excruciatingly abstract), with social, cultural, and political developments in India. In doing so, my role as a public intellectual is immensely helpful because I am invited to various events to deliver talks; here, I meet a cross-section of society and witness their contrasting positions on relevant issues. Being part of the lifeworld of protests brings me close to the real-time world and refuses me the privilege of detached theorisation. In my formative years as a researcher, I had the opportunity to interact closely with civil rights, Dalit-Bahujan, feminist, and other social activists. Seeing them work has offered me a rich source of compelling insights. However, keeping a distance as a theorist has also helped me to look for unconventional ideas against the prevalent `tyranny of political correctness'.

The world has changed in a rather dramatic fashion. The single most important aspect is the rejection of all forms of patronage. As Wendy Brown once pointed out, the discourse of equality and democracy has spread, but conditions to realise this have become progressively constrained. This anomalous situation has led to a proliferation of the assertion of recognition and dignity in all aspects of everyday life, without (social and economic) inequalities reducing substantively. The growing incivility that we are witnessing is the cost of the *injury of equality* that we are paying. They may look like `morbid symptoms', but they could actually mean something in excess of what we understand. One has to keenly observe the micro-dynamics of power to make sense of this `double movement' of change within authoritarian trends and uncivil practices that are otherwise difficult to approve of. The romance with the ideal of equality is dead.

How do caste politics, Liberalism, and Post-colonialism converge in the workings of Indian democracy?

Postcolonial interventions contributed to a large body of literature and they alerted us to the hegemony of European Enlightenment and Western modernity. Above all, they offered the confidence to assert local forms of knowledge that previously did not get their due. However, it is one thing to question the hegemony of the exclusivity of European Enlightenment, and it is quite another to look for quintessential features of an `Eastern way of life'. In this, I align with Amartya Sen, who thinks that `ideas of justice, fairness, responsibility, duty, goodness and rightness have been pursued in different parts of the world'. On the contrary, disproportionately stressing `difference' could mark a trend of reverse orientalism.

Liberalism and postcolonial interventions belong to the same `epistemic community'. They negotiate with power in a somewhat similar manner of leaving structures more or less intact. Both draw on a series of binaries, such as the one between civil and political. I edited a critical volume on the concept of `political society' (formulated by the leading postcolonial thinker, Partha Chatterjee), to explore the critique and continuities it may have with the liberal modes, notwithstanding `differences' on the centrality of law and modern institutions. Partha Chatterjee offered a very detailed and a diligent rejoinder to his interlocutors, which was published as part of the volume I edited *Re-Framing Democracy and Agency: Interrogating Political Society.*

Postcolonial scholarship has not addressed the key issues of our time. For instance, it has not seriously analysed anti-

caste politics. It appropriates Gandhi as a symbol of indignity, claims identification with Dalit `lived experience', and locates B. R. Ambedkar within a `heterogeneous time'. Ambedkar was a champion against untouchability and as Chairman of the drafting committee, was considered the father of the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar declared Indian villages as `dens of ignorance and isolationism', while most postcolonial scholars see Indian villages, following Gandhi, as prototypes of ideal-type collective living. This generalised framing does not help us understand why Dalits in India reject Gandhi. Or why Ambedkar was a high modernist who rarely privileged `community' over public reason and liberal institutions.

Postcolonial studies privileging an `autonomous domain' of subaltern agency remains skewed in the context of `graded inequalities' and ladder-like caste structure in India. For instance, there could be unlikely continuities between the nature of segregation in Brahmanism, operating on the principles of `purity' and `pollution'; the practice of `difference as distance' in liberal practices of multiculturalism that leads to the social ghettoisation of (religious/ethnic) communities; and postcolonial scholarship that marks a separation through an `autonomous domain' where the subaltern thinks in an exclusivist manner, separated by law and civility. In essence, I argue the need to move beyond the narrow identitarian modes of framing caste politics, which sits at the heart of both liberal accommodation and postcolonial celebrations of exclusive `lived experience'.

Your book *Secular Sectarianism: Limits of Subaltern Politics*, highlights how secular sectarianism has gradually polarised communities in India. How so and what can be done to ensure India's survival as a secular and democratic nation?

India is marked by secularism as part of its constitutional morality, and diversity as a lived reality. Secularism is never only about separation of state and religion, but also about a certain ethos and ethics. I argue that secularism is essentially identified with trust — an ability to trust strangers and those with whom you may not share a common history, identity, and culture. It could also be a way of fighting everyday prejudices between caste and religious groups. In India, anti-caste groups were readily identified as secular formations that disallow confessional politics and stand against cultural majoritarianism. However, five decades of secular politics has only resulted in growing sectarianism and the social ghettoisation of various caste groups and religious communities. It has resulted in the proliferation of intra-subaltern conflicts between Dalits and tribals, Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), OBCs and Muslims, among many others.

Anti-caste politics identified as harbingers of secular ethos in India, have only fought against the hegemony of those above, but have rarely expressed compassion with those below. Today, with the rise of far-Right majoritarian-Hindutva politics, there is a convergence of these conflicts and their inner dynamics with the majoritarian ethos of consolidating and centralising power around a monolithic identity. In the place of secular resistance, what we find is a rightward shift in Dalit and OBC politics. This is also the same with dominant Muslim politics that refuse to address questions of caste-based inequalities within religious minorities. Under the pervasive conditions of *secular sectarianism,* every kind of critical engagement is construed as patronage, and every form of solidarity as hegemonic.

What India today awaits is a `third democratic upsurge'. While the first upsurge was the anticolonial movement and the second was the extension of reservations to OBCs, India now needs to move beyond bounded identities and the prejudices that accompany them. It requires ways of overcoming prejudices and forging larger solidarities, notwithstanding maintaining cultural and identity differences. From its cultural and identity-oriented demands, India needs to move towards social demands, such as free and quality education for all, and common neighborhood schools that can bring together castes and religious denominations. This paves the way to a `cultural revolution' that can re-negotiate differences. Much of what goes in the name of `recognition' today, is actually obfuscated prejudice.

How has the propagation of intra-subaltern conflicts influenced issues relating to caste in India?

Dr. Ambedkar once remarked, `caste is a habit'. Caste can no longer be understood in large conglomerates such as `Dalits', and `OBCs'; they are now internally divided into Jatis or sub-castes, and are actively mobilised for the purpose of political representation. Far-Right politics, otherwise known as Hindutva politics, is succeeding in

combining internal fragmentation and external unification into a common Hindu identity. Internal fragmentation is leading to a proliferation of intra-subaltern conflicts, even though they themselves identify as Hindus. The eventual promise is to overcome social conflicts and mutual prejudices.

Conflicts between Dalits and OBCs have always existed in the rural hinterlands. Much of the labour on the fields owned by OBCs and intermediary castes, belong to the Dalit communities. The problem is further compounded with both Dalits and the OBCs mobilised against Muslims. Polarisation against Muslims and ushering in a local cultural idiom, makes possible unlikely caste alliances cutting across the spectrum. I refer to this as `new cultural subalterns'. They are subalternised vis-à-vis the modern ethic of institutions, urbanisation, and the English-speaking middle classes. Hindutva makes castes vulnerable vis-a-vis each other at one end, and empowered vis-à-vis the Muslims at the other end. There is an inclusion-exclusion dynamic to change the very terms of reference.

The old-style, centrist `politics of accommodation' of the Congress Party and `Bahujan' politics born out of the anti-caste mobilisation, are unable to counter the decentered strategy of the Hindutva. It is `strategic' yet based on fissures that already exist in the social fabric. Therefore, it has the capacity to self-propel, akin to what E. P. Thompson refers to as the phenomenon of `gathering determinism'. Today, most anti-caste politics in India is either in denial of the emergent situation, or muted. In fact, the more vocal sections of urban and English-educated Dalit and OBCs, are expressive of a class rather than caste character.

Left-secular politics is also unsure how to handle a situation that is marked by communal (religious) polarisation, alongside active support of the subaltern castes and further divided by `internal' caste conflicts. The old kind of Brahmanism versus Bahujanism does not directly speak to the situation, even though it provides a rhetorical anchoring. Brahmanism here refers to the Vedic past and scriptural sanction of the spiritual superiority of the `twice born' castes, while `Bahujanism' refers to the political ideology of bringing the Dalits and OBCs together to constitute a numerical majority. More recently, we have been witnessing a `Shudra' critique of caste-Hindu politics (Shudra is a term used to refer to the castes located at the bottom end of the Hindu Varna system). However, Shudra is neither a sociological category nor an economic or class category. Today, the majority of ruling elite belong to the Shudra castes, including the current Prime Minister. Therefore, it does not offer much analytical purchase.

Finally, the implosion of the 'political', marked by the simultaneity of multiple conflicts, has also led to a complexity that is beyond the political vision of the progressives. For instance, much of the popular culture of subaltern castes is also marked by routine gender-based prejudices (gendered practices are one thing that unite the `high' and `low' cultures in India). Negotiating these prejudices immediately antagonises the `majority' of castes and religious groups. This provides an effective vantage point for the Hindutva-right in further entrenching their hold on subaltern castes, forging commonality with caste-Hindus, and gaining the sympathy and silence of conservative sections among the religious minorities. The all-pervading wedge between the `popular' and the `progressive' on the one hand, and the `political' and `cultural' on the other, provides a formidable challenge to transformative politics that at the moment, is proving to be insurmountable.

How does one make sense of the continued presence of militant left-wing politics in India?

In two of my books, I delved into the question of radical left-wing politics invested in militant mobilisation and `revolutionary violence'. In *Maoism, Democracy and Globalisation: Cross Currents in Indian Politics* and *Revolutionary Violence versus Democracy: Narratives from India,* I argued that India continues to be a `violent democracy'. Violence is routinised and hidden, and to a large extent normalised. The state outsources much of the violence through cultural practices — a point that Historian D. D. Kosambi made about ancient India. It is through such structural and routinised exclusions, marked by violence, that the left-wing militant politics of the Maoist movement find resonance with the earlier landless labour and the current tribal belts of central India.

Maoist politics present an intriguing case of a politics that neither expands nor dies out. It highlights the case of a subaltern politics that some scholars have referred to as 'non-sovereign agency', and others have referred to as a case of `shared sovereignty'. In fact, the understanding of certain kinds of structural politics does not allow Maoists to expand beyond the most dispossessed, but also finds support among them, as much of representative democracy

makes little difference. Whatever the critique, armed mobilisation becomes more about survival than choice for such excluded communities.

Unevenness and social differentiation has disallowed the Maoists to expand beyond a certain point. The centrality of their agenda to capture state power has also disallowed them the social gestation required for political experiments. Ambedkar was right in pointing out that India needs a `cultural revolution' to precede a `political revolution', unlike China. The cross-currents between gender, caste, and class are too complex to merge into a multitude. However, it is the continued need for larger solidarities over social demands that prevent Maoists from either being completely eclipsed or brutally suppressed. The current majoritarian impasse has provided them with a fresh challenge in what they believe is a condition of Fascism. What I have realised under the current surge of populism, is that dialectical thinking can serve to centralise power and is not merely for subversion.

In what ways are political movements currently pushing towards a new kind of politics of post-civil society in India? What roles are religious and ethnic minorities playing?

Through the formulation of the idea of Post-Civil Society I had argued that those processes and practices that look liberal, civil and even democratic, such as rule of law, project of citizenship, voluntary associationalism, among others are radically resignified to reinforce dominant power relations and that there is an emergent convergence between State, Civil Society and Market, which has been grossly undermined in much of recent global scholarship on Civil Society and Citizenship. Through the formulation of the idea of Post-Civil Society I had argued that those processes and practices that look liberal, civil and even democratic, such as rule of law, project of citizenship, voluntary associationalism, among others are radically resignified to reinforce dominant power relations and that there is an emergent convergence between State, Civil Society and Market, which has been grossly undermined in much of recent global scholarship on Civil Society and Citizenship.

Through the formulation of the idea of post-civil society, I argue that those processes and practices that look liberal, civil, and even democratic, such as the rule of law, the project of citizenship, and voluntary associationalism, get radically redesigned to reinforce dominant power relations. Moreover, there is an emergent convergence between state, civil society, and market, which has been grossly undermined in much of recent global scholarship on civil society and citizenship. I suggested in *Politics of Post-Civil Society,* that the way to get past this impasse is when political movements act in tandem with each other in locating and displacing power relations in their manifold form. I see this as a continuous process. This includes new issues on inter-generational justice that environmental struggles have brought into relief. There is a kind of 'presentification' of the future. Therefore, post-civil society actors, unlike the actors of civil society, can only act together. The same movements in their segregated or separated zones do not count as post-civil society in my view.

Post-civil society meant to re-signify the available political discourses, institutional spaces, and processes. For instance, the human rights movement in India re-signified the meaning of rule of law (unlike in civil society where it is in opposition to violence), to mean the need to contextualise political violence, rather than moralise violence. The point being that various spaces can significantly be re-signified to assume more radical meanings, which helps radical politics to connect, rather imagine a pure rupture.

The context changed after the neoliberal consensus and its tryst with cultural majoritarianism. There is more fragmentation and demobilisation of the subaltern groups, including the religious minorities, but the arguments I made for larger solidarities continue to remain relevant. Recent protest politics by religious minorities such as the anti-CAA (Citizen Amendment Act) offered a glimmer of hope. But anti-CAA protests were reduced to a singular identity of being protests by and for the Muslims. The protests were lead by women and in the name of protecting democracy and the Constitution. However, there needs to be a new normative-universal for the majority community to have a sense of `identification' with the religious minorities, drawing on Jefferey Alexander`s ideas about `civil repair' in civil sphere. Some have critiqued me for suggesting identification, since it is patronising and assimilationist. However, we need to figure out a `place' for Muslim identity without remaining singular and sectarian. I don't see the protests led by the Muslims deliberating on this, except to remind the rest of us that they need to protest as Muslims because they

are targeted for being Muslims.

In an article for E-IR, you highlighted that the Farmers' Protest "penetrated the seamless continuity in the campaigns of the BJP". How did they manage this? How do these protests differ from previous protests in the country?

To begin with, the farmers' protests are led by rich farmers who constitute one of the dominant proprietary classes in India, alongside the bourgeois and the urban middle classes. Rich farmers protesting would mean there is a fragmentation within the ruling elites. The Indian state today is exclusively representing the interests of the corporate, and has withdrawn its `social contract' with the middle classes and rich peasantry.

Rich farmers were also the social base of Hindutva politics in the rural hinterlands north of the Vindhyas. They were active in the mobilisation and organised violence against Muslims. Today, the same social group has turned against cultural nationalism, has started to forge new solidarities with Muslims, has initiated reforms in Khap Panchayats on the place of women, and has actively accommodated Dalits. They have also included various left-based peasant organisations, and most importantly, claimed nationalism by invoking the sacrifices made by the peasantry in the anticolonial movement. This has seriously dented the Indian rights' claims to nationalism that is essentially rooted in rural imagination and agrarian relations. For the first time, the hegemony of the Right and its cultural nationalism is seriously being challenged.

Previously we had protests led by students, and later by religious minorities. However, these remained sectoral and limited in their reach. In `popular consciousness', they could not breach the symbolic representation organised by the right. On the contrary, the farmers could create a larger `identification' with various sections of society, and are now moving towards questioning the model of development, including privatisation and the philosophy of 'market fundamentalism'. They are foregrounding the need for welfare, public goods, commons, and other social demands, across castes and classes. In effect, this has produced cracks in the narrative and hegemony of the right, and in the social equilibrium that it was attempting to build. From a temporary phase of equilibrium, India is now witnessing an *interregnum* marked by competing strategies. There is a distinct possibility of new common sense taking root, which recognises the need for broader solidarities and is against social fragmentation.

How do you see Right-wing populism in India evolving?

Right-wing populism gained ground by drawing equivalence between various disparate social demands. It created a narrative of common Hindu identity that managed to represent the interests of both the social elites, and the subaltern castes and classes. For instance, it re-signified the `shudra' counter-culture and created a hegemonic `identification' with the dominant Hindu cultural ethos. It `fused polar opposites' to subvert progressive politics and accommodate their narrative within a larger grid of `national interests'. Right-wing populism paved the way for aggressive marketisation, but also counter-mobilised against urbanisation and individual ethic, in favour of community and tradition. It was `pro-corporate but anti-modernity'. It produced a `regressive modernisation' to be found in the political subjectivity where most social groups were `feeling like the subaltern and thinking like the elites'. Right-wing populism created a `strongman' phenomenon that actively lent support to street mobilisation and organised violence, such as the spectacle of mob lynching. Many of these arguments are to be found in my book *India after Modi: Populism and the Right* (the Chinese edition is due for publication in 2021).

However, in pursuing these various competing strategies in order to maintain its hegemony, the right also wedged open social hierarchies that had been fossilised in Indian society. It foregrounded the question of gender exclusion within religious minorities; it provided social space to smaller castes to enable them to wriggle out from the grip of dominant sections within those castes; and it questioned the legitimacy of regional and linguistic identities, exposing the domination of regional elites. The right forged these narratives to weaken resistance and extend its own hegemony. However, one needs to wait and watch to see if this has initiated a process of *democratisation by default*. If these processes find a new institutional expression, and social groups recalibrate their mutual relations, then India could well move towards a new phase of inclusive social equilibrium, upturning the monolithic imagination of the right.

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What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

I would suggest that you avoid narrow specialisations. You should not only move towards a more inter-disciplinary and transdisciplinary focus, but also avoid methodological fixations. Social Sciences should allow ample room for imagination and connecting various dimensions of social phenomenon that data-sets may not easily lend themselves to. There needs to be an intellectual sweep that helps join the dots about the times that we are living in, even if they do not reveal grand truths. Social Sciences today are suffering from lack of fresh imagination and bold formulations. Methodological obsession has eroded both the reach and depth of insights. Astute interpretations are increasingly being replaced by writing that is mistaken for dense conceptualisation and theorisation.

Dipesh Chakravarthy, a Postcolonial scholar, recently remarked that one may not reveal the ultimate truth, but that does not prevent us from being truthful about what we say and do. Social Sciences are human stories — the way humans think and act. This cannot be captured through detached methodological scientificity. It requires an element of integrity, courage to beat the tyranny of political correctness, and compassion against plasticity. Without these, no degree of methodological finesse can create scholars who generate interest in others to read what they write. Often, asking the right questions is more than half of the research done.