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Musahar and Non-Formal Schooling: an Empirical Study in Patna

Rinki Chokhani

ABSTRACT

Most studies while referring to Musahars often portray them negatively, that they are lazy, blunt, uncouth, dirty and superstitious; have nasty habit of eating rats, carrions and snails. Literature represents them as section of people who are unable to understand the relevance of education, mentally not accustomed to school work, seen as attending schools only for midday meals, disinterested in formal schooling and steeped in a culture of silence. These views reflect a pseudo-Frierian understanding¹ of the Musahar community as they themselves are often blamed for their backwardness in terms of their education and their abysmal economic and living conditions.

However none of the research studies have explored the crucial reasons for the educational gap from the perspective of the Musahars. Hence the present empirical study at Patna, Bihar has attempted to understand the ground reality from their perspective, with the objective to document their experiences in non-formal schools and understand their (both children and their parents) perceptions regarding their educational experiences and the relevance of education in their lives. Further, to examine the condition of their schooling and identify factors responsible for their present educational status particularly in understanding the attitude of school teachers, staff members and non-Musahar classmates towards them.

It was found that the school environment itself becomes a strong hindrance in their educational growth.

Key words:

Musahar Community, non-formal school, Dalit, inequality

Introduction

Education of Dalit children has been discoursed as a major challenge throughout India since Independence. Despite numerous constitutional provisions for educational development and abolition of untouchability, access to quality basic education is still a far cry for majority of Dalit population in the Country. The literacy rate of Musahars amongst Dalit community is the worse which is just 4.6 per cent. (Census of India, 2001). Musahars are hierarchically placed lowest among Dalits and are known as 'MahaDalits'. Besides education, they are deprived of basic human rights of livelihood and even a right to live a life of dignity. There are plethoras of sociological research on Dalits and their schooling, but Musahars and their schooling experiences is rarely

contemplated upon. Moreover the available research studies and literatures² portray the account of Musahar community through the lenses of outsiders perspective, arguing that they are lazy, couth, uncivilized, rat eaters, disinterested in Education, attend school only for Mid-day-meal and so on.

The present article examines Musahar community and their educational deprivation from the native's vision. Empirical study was conducted in a non-formal school (NFS) run by an NGO at Patna in order to understand Musahar (both children and parent's) experiences in school and their perception regarding Education. The researcher further examines the perspective of the NFS team towards Musahar community and the reason for their educational backwardness. Considering the ethics of the research to maintain confidentiality the name of the NGO is not mentioned.

Musahars and Struggle for Primary Education

National Policy of Education ensures universal right to education, but Musahars are often excluded from the scheme. The enrolment of Musahar children was observed to be almost nil. Majority enrolled were forced to drop out because of unfavourable attitude of non-Musahar teachers, staff members and children in the school.

A NGO in Patna initially conducted a survey in 24 Musahari *basti* (Village) of Patna and identified that there is huge drop-out rate among them. They initially liaised between Government schools and Musahari *basti* for re-enrolling the children. The effort was in vain because the negative attitude of school towards Musahar children remained the same. After the researcher interacted with the children and parents of the Musahar community, it was learnt that they were labelled as untouchables not only by high caste teachers and students but also by non-Musahar Dalit pupils. In school they were physically and mentally harassed on the grounds of their caste status and were addressed as dirty, rag pickers and rat eaters. Musahar children were immensely demoralised as other children (Dalit and non-Dalit) would never sit beside them, communicate, play, study or dine with them. As a result Musahar children felt isolated from the school. Unable to bear the trauma the children often dropped out of the school.

Later this NGO initiated a non-formal-school but the Musahar children had lost their interest and trust. Musahars were completely disappointed as several researchers had visited their community, gathered information, made promises for their children's education but no initiatives were taken. Musahars expressed disapprovingly, 'We compromise with our hunger in order to send our children to schools, not to get exploited by the hands of educators. It is better for us to send our children for rag picking so that they can financially contribute to the family'.

The NFS team constantly visited the *basti* to enhance their confidence and finally once again generated a ray of hope amongst the Musahars to provide schooling to their children. Considering their socio-economic condition NFS team developed several strategies and innovative teaching tools to improve their attendance. The classes were divided into 2 shifts, i.e., morning (7 am - 12pm) and afternoon (12pm -5pm) whereby the children were given the option to choose the

schedule according to their convenience. They were given the flexibility to play, study or leave the school as per their desire.

Initially the children were irregular but gradually they started attending the school. These children felt accepted in the school and shared their aim to be doctor, engineer, teacher, police officer, CID officer, etc. One of them also aspires to become prime minister of India. During their leisure hours they voluntarily choose to read and write rather than engage in other activities. Their favourite subjects identified were Hindi, English, and Mathematics, etc. It was learnt through interviews that after acquiring basic literacy, children were hesitant to go for rag picking and expressed that 'We do not want to go for rag picking so it's important for us to acquire education and attend school regularly'. They discussed among themselves that 'Padhney wala log kachra chunney nahi jata hain, kachra chunney jayega to padhai kab karega', i.e, 'Students do not go for rag picking, if they do so when will they study'.

Musahar children compared their experiences with the former Government school where they were physically and mentally harassed. Children shared that they now have friends to study and play together. They mentioned that for the first time they acquired classroom knowledge as they understood the lesson taught, teachers clarify the doubts and gives extra attention when required. NFS conducts parent -teacher meeting and provide the opportunity to parents to participate and discuss regarding children's progress. A Musahar parent remarked 'My daughter is happy and learnt a lot in NFS, she is no more discriminated and beaten up, therefore even if NFS do not provide MDM facility I would prefer it over Government school'. She further questioned with uncertainty, 'I fear what will happen to my child's education when NFS closes?'.

Perception of the teachers

Teachers play a crucial role in inculcating knowledge and education among the children, as they are the main socializing agent after a family. But teachers either in formal or non formal schools in Patna have a biased approach towards Musahar children which have impacted negatively on their learning ability and the children have developed a sense of inferiority. NFS teachers though committed to raise literacy among Musahar children, during class hours demean Musahar children by arguing that '*One should not eat mouse since it is Lord Ganesh's sawari (Vehicle), hence God will become angry on them and will not provide knowledge*'. These teachers indirectly humiliate Musahar children by providing an irrational logic of co-relating their educational backwardness with their food habits. Consequently children were hesitant to discuss their choice of food in the fear of being an object of fun.

Despite NFS's team's hard work and noble intention towards Musahar children, their negative perception and portrayal is disturbing. Below are some excerpts from interview responses in 2012.

Researcher: 'How is your experience in Musahar *basti*?'

Community mobiliser: 'What to say about Musahar community, the entire space is polluted, dirty, stink and unclean. The inhabitants are always intoxicated, shout and speak rubbish. They cook hen feathers, pig, frog, rat, etc., which is so foul even to look at. I visit the area under compulsion, just for children's Education.'

Teacher: 'Nothing is good about Musahar community. I feel pukish to look at their pathetic habits. Parents and children both are alike. They go for rag picking and bring the garbage in their home itself. They sit beside the garbage, dip their both palm inside the meal and have it. We do not like their lifestyle and feel repugnant about it, but we are helpless and constantly have to visit their community to bring children to school.'

Coordinator: Coordinator argues as if she has observed something strange in a museum and stated: 'Before joining NFS I did not know what is Musahar? What do they eat? How do they live? And how they lead their life? Now I understand that those who collect rag are called Musahar. They eat mouse and pig in ample amount which I believe that they should not eat. I do not like their life style, it is bad. Musahar consider it to be all right. They leave their leftover food and dish on the same place. They do not take bath, comb hairs, cleaned clothes and wash their hands before and after having meals. They are not at all hygienic, as they bring garbage in their home after collecting the rag and sit down on the same dirty waste. In short they do not have sense of cleanliness and hygiene practices. Moreover since the beginning their parents do not have any connection with education so are reluctant to teach their children regarding its importance' .

Conclusion

National Policy of Education (1986) provided some relief to Musahar children. After being rejected from the conventional Government school they institutionalised other system to provide literacy to their children. However this is only a temporary solution and a mechanism to further exclude them from mainstream educational process. Non-formal education (NFE) neither provides scope for higher education nor provides good job opportunities. NFE (1986) is actually grounded on discrimination as Sadgopal (2010)³ highlighted that after Independence for the first time it linked Universal Elementary Education to equal quality Education to all and recommended half of the country's children 'who at that time fall under the category of out of school children' to be included in non-formal education of inferior quality rather than regular schools who are responsible to prepare few privileged children for higher education.

Non-formal program was initially formed for the short period of time to provide education specially to 'Drop out, working children's and girls who cannot attend school for whole day and children from the areas lacking school facility'⁴. It was expected to be closed after the admission of all the children in formal school, but instead deflected from its set objective, as the Central Government included it as a formal national program in Sarwa Siksha Abhiyan by addressing it with beautiful terms like 'education guarantee scheme', a parallel and inferior track of education meant particularly for poor and disadvantaged groups. Also the responsibility of providing such

unequal education is delivered by the private parties who no doubt will be concerned for their own profit⁵ Universal Elementary Education has a long way to go to actually reach the most marginalized group.

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Rinki Chokhani
*PhD Scholar, Centre for Study of Social System,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi*

Modi's Foreign Policy of Panchamrit: A Marxist Reaction

Pratip Chattopadhyay

Abstract

Narendra Modi is leading a dominant BJP-led NDA coalition government at the Centre for near about a year and the aim of the government to belittle Indian history as 'created' by the Congress party and for that matter freedom movement has off late engulfed the foreign policy architecture of the country by replacing the age-old time-tested innovative perspective of nonalignment related Nehruvian doctrine of Panchsheel with the muscular power seeking doctrine of Panchmrit. It is high time that India's position in world politics and also the proper meaning of foreign policy doctrine need to be highlighted to withstand the radical shifts that the present government is making in the sphere of foreign policy. In that direction the assessment of India's foreign policy by the Marxist parties, their critical engagements with it requires re-assessment in the face of 'Modified' foreign policy of India.

“In the interests of a more ethical modernity rooted in a reasoned morality, foreign policies such as nonalignment and *Panchsheel* were devised to produce incremental changes that would one day make possible a world community to which nation-states is subordinate.”¹

Contemporary Indian politics “ system, institutions and policy- is taking a drastic shift from a left-of-centre or even centrist paradigm to a rightist one under the present BJP led NDA government's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Such a shift, particularly in the economic sector has been in place since the New Economic Policy of 1991 for embracing neo-liberal global market policies dictated by trans-nationalist capitalist class with United States of America being the country for coordination of this class. The message of Lenin “ foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy - has been proved in India since the end of Cold War, particularly after the 9/11 incident when India in its foreign policy decisions started to kowtow to the United States of America that reached a climax with the Civil-Nuclear Deal of 2008 even at the face of stern opposition from the Marxist parties. That the tendency of Indo-US intermixing will reach a new height (US President as the Guest of Honour in Republic Day!) through so called 'breakthrough diplomacy' under BJP government was anticipated and warned by the Marxist parties in advance. But the fact that the BJP government will try to change the 'basic structure' of Indian foreign policy “ *Panchsheel* and nonalignment anti-imperialist texture “ is extremely shocking that calls for analysts of Indian foreign policy to deal with foreign policy framework more intensely forcing the government of the day to retrospect and be much more clear on the foreign policy framework. This is a direct attack on the ideals of Nehruvian vision and as the Marxist parties in India believes that in post-cold war period the consensual Nehruvian anti-imperialist independent stance in world politics without getting involved in any military networking is the available empirical alternative

to US dictated foreign policy, the present paper contrasts between *Panchsheel* and *Panchmrit* on the basis of the situations existing, personalities involved in, and desired effect of the policy formulation.

Sometime back, in a four-page resolution on foreign policy adopted by the BJP's national executive, was titled: 'Our national ambition is Bharat's rise as a strong and respected world power'. The resolution began with listing the five cornerstones of the foreign policy as *âœsammanâœ* (dignity), *âœsamvadâœ* (dialogue), *âœsamridhiâœ* (shared prosperity), *âœsurakshaâœ* (regional and global security) and *âœsanskriti evam sabhayataâœ* (cultural and civilisational links) which have become the new pillars of our foreign policy - the *Panchamrit*. The Prime Minister's and the foreign minister Sushma Swaraj's engagement with 94 countries in 10 months proved there was *âœoptimism about Bharat's emergence as an anchor of the global economy and as a leader in advancing peace and prosperity across the worldâœ*, the resolution said. India was described as the *âœpole starâœ* (*dhruv tara*) of the *âœdemocratic worldâœ*. While *Panchsheel* approached foreign relations largely in a spirit of pacifism, *Panchamrit* is founded on an assumption that India is second to none in the global arena and can hold its own against others. *âœThe government has moved with speed and resolve on a scale rarely seen in our external engagement, to restore Bharat's position in international affairs, rebuild partnerships across the board and cross new frontiers in our foreign relations,âœ* the resolution stated. Was this necessary? A cursory glance at Indian foreign policy narrative in 21st century will tell otherwise.

Indian foreign policy in the 21st century is a policy of an enterprising country in the comity of nations in the international political milieu trying to settle as an 'emerged power' by increasing her networks with important countries of the world, multilateral forums and also with the neighbouring countries. The latest drive in that direction is being witnessed through the 'breakthrough diplomacy' of the present incumbent in New Delhi. However such an eagerness for connectivity is not a new phenomenon but has a long truncated history since the end of the Cold War and most particularly with the NDA regime of 1998. Since that time what happened in Indian foreign policy are five things *âœ* (a) closer engagement with the United States with the aim of getting the US support for the permanent membership of the UNSC (b) networking with various multilateral forums and even leading Third World centric forums like IBSA, BRICS and efforts for creating BRICS Bank is to keep up the earlier Nehruvian leadership role of the developing countries intact (c) trying to establish economic partnership with countries even with which it has a uneven political relationship like China which is one of the biggest trading partner of India (d) to advance militarily though nuclear weapons and extending the nuclear potential by entering into military alliance with countries like United States (e) trying to settle disputes through hard and soft power expressions in the immediate neighbourhood. These may be seen as the *new Panchsheel* by remolding the *old Panchsheel*, the change can be seen as from *niti* (moral value principles) to *kutniti* (diplomacy) of Indian foreign policy in the 21st century. One can argue that India is busy in the 21st century to establish her clout both economically and politically in the present multipolar world order and for that end taking bilateral and multilateral route together with the same pace. As

a student of history one cannot ignore or change the nomenclature of the basic structure guiding foreign policy framework but can identify some new changes in the five principles. Is the task of erasing the very nomenclature *Panchsheel* is an effort to shrug off all moral / normative precepts associated with the term? If it is so, it is extremely dangerous for India's heritage as an important 'peace-cushion' country of the world.

In the draft political resolution for CPI (M)'s 22nd Party Congress 2015 it is clearly stated that “The move away from non-alignment and the pro-US orientation in foreign policy has been unfolding since the phase of liberalisation began in the early 1990s. The Modi government is carrying forward more vigorously the strategic ties forged by the UPA government with the United States” Modi has sought to build and strengthen military cooperation with Japan and Australia. These ties are in line with the US approach for a quadrilateral alliance involving the US, India, Japan and Australia.¹² The CPI in its draft political resolution of recently held 22nd Party Congress 2015 candidly argues that “Unfortunate aspect of the present government's foreign policy is that the internal communal atmosphere has also started affecting our foreign policy, particularly in relation to Pakistan and the Arab world. In the present international scenario, India has to preserve and carry forward the foreign policy that promotes close relationship with our neighbours, bring together the developing and emerging economies, join forces with people fighting against neo-colonialism and imperialism and for world peace. Narendra Modi government's policies are just opposite to this.”¹³

One has to understand why and under what circumstances Nehru undertook the *Panchsheel* and the history behind the particular Sanskrit nomenclature. Along with the adoption of the policy of non-alignment, India under Nehru tried to promote the spirit of cooperation and peaceful coexistence among the states professing different ideologies. It developed intimate relationship with China, Nepal, Yugoslavia and Egypt. Nehru's emphasis on promotion of world peace found expression in the *Panchsheel* (or the five principles), - mutual respect for territorial integrity or sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in domestic affairs of another country, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence. These were formulated by Nehru in the context of Tibetan crisis between India and China in 1954 but their long term roots lay in the time tested India's religious tradition and cultural values for goodwill and tolerance to all religions (*sarba-dharma samabhava*). According to Priya Chacko, 'Nehru explicitly said that the five principles were “the result of a long correspondence between the Government of India and the Government of China” and, therefore, the product of a dialogue rather than of any individual leader. *Panchsheel* as an expression has been used from ancient times to describe the five moral precepts of Buddhism relating to personal behavior. Applying a Buddhist-inspired ethic of interdependence to international relations, therefore, means that nation-states are also treated as social entities and that assertion of sovereign rights can contribute to a just world community of equals only when there is an understanding of an interdependent reality and responsibility to other nation-states. “The importance of including incremental changes in modes of thinking” what might today be called, 'diffusion of norms', was something Nehru had learnt during the anti-colonial movement. In the post-independence period this belief underpinned the policy

of *Panchsheel*. This is the context in which Nehru's enthusiasm for *Panchsheel* should be interpreted.⁴

Does *Panchmrit* or the enunciation of new pillars of Indian foreign policy by the BJP government have any such immediate context? To a lay man, the answer is in the negative. The literary meaning of the Sanskrit word *Panchmrit* refers to five powerful vaccines that can cure all disease or can keep a person alive forever. With US President Barrack Obama declaring in his 2010 speech in Indian Parliament that India has finally transformed from an 'emerging' to an 'emerged' power, was there any sign of India as a country dying or decaying in the face of its increasing relevance in post-cold war world politics? So what could be the need for these new five 'energy boosters' in Indian foreign policy? But to strategic analysts such a 'new indigenous design' was on the card to clarify the strategic question as Atul Bhardwaj puts it – "Modi appears to be taking India on a new strategic path, destroying old Nehruvian shibboleths. The question that any strategist should ask whether this image makeover is as per a new indigenous design or is the growing militarization of India meant to fit the American strategic vision and compulsions?"⁵

The distinction between 'India' and 'Bharat' is a long standing one in India's domestic politics after Sharad Joshi and Mahendra Singh Tikayat to differentiate between the 'modern urban' and 'backward rural'. But to sell 'India' as 'Bharat' in world politics would mean indulging in a deliberate effort to boost up a subaltern/backward country to the status of a strong one. A Marxist would read these five principles as leading to India emerging as an imperialist strong power with more defense capabilities in the name of securing its frontiers and a power to reckon with particularly in the neighbourhood so that no country can think of bypassing dialogue with India remembering the heritage of Indian sub-continent of the past which is camouflaged in the name of civilisational and cultural linkages and the idea of shared prosperity includes within it equal footing of all neighbouring countries as against the Gujral doctrine of non-reciprocity. This is nothing but a tendency of narrow nationalism and a myopic vision of escalating power and prestige of a particular country as against the vision of a just humane community oriented world order. Yes, to a realist, *Panchmrit* is in tune with post 9/11 world politics reality but a Marxist can see through in these principles a possibility of India modeling its future in tune with United States of America's status that draws considerable awe and reverence from smaller country's of the world. Sadly, this is a departure from the tranquility that one could associate with the name 'India' in world politics. That such apprehensions are looming large over contemporary strategic analysts can be seen in the comment of Srinath Raghavan, 'It is futile to assume that our interests can converge with that of the US in all important areas. The challenge for Modi is to leverage American power to our purposes without assuming that the US will be the panacea for all our challenges.'⁶

In today's context, well-known scholar Subrata Mitra's comment sound prophetic – "Indian diplomacy has changed greatly in its tone and content. The main framework of nonalignment has remained but the contents have been reshuffled, repacked, enriched and occasionally jettisoned by Nehru's successors."⁷

It is a standard practice in any parliamentary political system like India due to collective responsibility of the cabinet the Prime Minister leads the government and becomes the first-among equals and becomes the ultimate decision maker. Important thing to notice is that for the international community the government of a country is known by the name of the Prime Minister like Nehru government, Indira government or Modi government. So the personalities of Indian Prime Ministers and their reflection on foreign policy making is an interesting reading. Indian foreign policy making was done under the leadership of varying personalities. But here again there is a marked departure. Between the approach of Nehru and Modi there is a contrast. Even knowing the majestic charismatic personality that he possessed Nehru disclaimed any personal credit for the policy of nonalignment. In his own words: 'It is completely incorrect to call our policy 'Nehru's policy'... I have not originated it. It is a policy inherent in the circumstances of India, inherent in the past thinking of India, inherent in the whole mental outlook of India, inherent in the conditioning of the Indian mind during our struggle for freedom, and inherent in the circumstances of world today.'⁸ Nehru attempted to present a synthesis of idealism and realism in Indian foreign policy when he said, 'we propose to look after India's interest in the context of world cooperation and world peace , in so far as world peace can be preserved.' According to an established scholar on the making of Indian foreign policy, '[Nehru's] main contribution probably lay in harmonizing and synthesizing the rightist and leftist opinion on foreign policy within the party and bringing them to a common focus. Finally, Nehru's own foreign policy thinking, and the detailed decisions made by him, were probably influenced to a certain extent by the actual and potential reaction of the various opposition parties.'⁹

On the other hand, Modi, in the midst of weak opposition forces, tries to give a personal touch to the foreign policy moves or the diplomatic tone of the present government – be it the unconventional '*chaye pe charche*' with US President Obama at New Delhi or a garden meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping at Allahabad or a reported boat-ride talk with French President Hollande in France in a few days to come; or the conventional domestic political pressures leading the government to remain silent on the inaction of its coalition state government at Jammu and Kashmir when some Kashmiri's celebrate Pakistan's flag hoisting in India even if the government warned Pakistan of stopping all diplomatic negotiation if it remain connected with separatist forces in India, or asking the President of the country to visit only Israel and not Palestine and later on President's forcibly intervention accepting a visit to both the places – everything bears an explicit stamp of Prime Minister Modi and he has no problem in accepting that. However for a Marxist it is not only this personality cult that is a feature of the present incumbent but also the implicit influence on the government of ultra-nationalist fervour of the RSS. As the BJP resolution states – 'Prime Minister Modi's strong belief in the shared future of our neighbourhood has resulted in several concrete measures that renewed that promise. The invitation to leaders of SAARC nations and Mauritius for the swearing-in ceremony of the new government was the first move.' A good comparison between the two personalities is on the offer – 'If Nehru's leftist political upbringing pulled him towards peace, Modi's rightwing ideological mornings militate against India's image of a meek man disinterested in war.'¹⁰

In the domestic political scenario, it is the political parties which act as the life-blood of the political system because it creates a link between the government and the citizen and also creates awareness issues through its programmes and documents. On the issue of foreign policy it has been the Marxist political parties that constantly and consistently raised issues of seminal importance through their interrogations on Indian foreign policy directions since independence and more so after the Cold war ended. As the world politics shifted from uni-polar world (1991-2001), then to uni-multipolar world (2001-2009) and now to a multi-polar world order (2009 onwards after the global financial crisis), the Marxist political parties views these changes not in isolation but as a reflection of a continuing reign of capitalism and associated international finance capital in some form or the other, and the foreign policy of India is judged by them on the basis of the capacity of the foreign policy to remain independent from the influence of these capitalist-bourgeoisie complex. The uniqueness of the Marxist political parties as an important domestic imperative of foreign policy making in India is their knack for connecting the effect of foreign policy steps in the domestic socio-economic space and creating an indigenous critique which in effect becomes relevant for a humane and just social order world-wide. Examples of such critique in the post cold war period have been the stand of Marxist parties on India's assistance for refueling of American planes during first Gulf war; India's rejection of Cuban plea to help them with supply of rice; India's frenzies for nuclear arms contradictory to the disarmament policy logic; India's assistance to United States' unilaterally declared 'war on terrorism' and increasing hobnobbing between the two countries reflected in the Nuclear Deal of 2007-08. What these policy initiatives meant for domestic socio-economic space, for the Marxist parties, are two things – (a) pressure from US led MNCs and also US directed international monetary agencies to go for cost-effective capitalist mode of development favouring the global bourgeoisie network; and (b) less public investment on social security measures and private investment induced profit-centric growth leading to distress for majority of the poor people widening the inequality gap. Thus, the Marxist parties in India have been targeting primarily a check on India's growing attachment with the United States that in some ways affect India's diplomatic ties with Cuba, Iran, Palestine and other like-minded developing countries and also internal development paradigm within India. In doing so these parties continue their revolutionary ideological lineage of propagating a different worldview in contrast to those spearheaded by transnational capitalist class and also a different developmental route within the country.

The Indian foreign policy establishment would argue that the domestic cacophony on foreign policy matters is a usual feature of all countries but it is only those who knows the reality of world politics would find the logic of growing engagement with the most important power of the time (read United States) as an appropriate anecdote to deal with any foreign policy related difficulties, be it Pakistan or China. In sharp contrast to these official proclamations and analyses the Marxist political parties would argue that the first and foremost duty of the Indian foreign policy establishment is to settle pending disputes with Pakistan and China so that India will be less depended on the proposed US help against any Pakistan or China threat. The BJP while in opposition favoured the Henderson-Bhagat report on Indo-China war of 1962 to be made public which could have given a new dimension to Sino-Indian relationship but after coming to power

they are silent on their own proposal! Moreover it can be argued that the multilateral dimension of India foreign policy is not a natural choice by the Indian foreign policy establishment given its close bonhomie with the US but a forced one because of the constant interrogation of the Marxist parties at home regarding the rationale for such bonhomie given the presence of other forums of growing importance where some common visions can be shared with likeminded countries. The Marxist parties are also clear about the fact that it is because of their perception of foreign policy of the Congress and the BJP that they have started their opposition of these groups in the domestic political arena. Thus, while the Marxist parties are a crucial domestic imperative in the free flowing of the Indian foreign policy, they are in turn affected not by domestic but by global imperatives of the continuing reigning of what they term as international finance capital under the leadership of the transnational capitalist class presently led by the United States. In such a continuing dialogue between the Indian state and the Marxist political parties, the ultimate beneficiary has been the academicians and analysts and even the common people to have recurrent interest on foreign policy matters. It has to be accepted that whether they are faulty in their analysis or not, the presence of the Marxist political parties in India have kept in check the total embracing of India and United States diluting the progressive and independent character of Indian foreign policy framework.

Independent India's foreign policy is an aggregate result of India's freedom struggle that has introduced the element of anti-imperialism and world peace as the basic element within the discourse of foreign policy framework. The contrast between the tepid national debate following the Chinese debacle of 1962 and the national debate on the course of India's nuclear policy in 2008 that rocked the nation show how foreign policy has become enmeshed with domestic politics in the course of six decades of post independence politics.¹¹ Since cold war ended, the foreign policy framework has not been adhered to because of lack of clarity on defining the global imperialist power of the day. This hesitant and unclear policy has led the Marxist parties in India to keep the foreign policy under scanner. The present inclination of the Modi government in the external affairs is to create a new nexus with big powers and capitalist transnational corporatist class as reflected in it's so called 'breakthrough diplomacy' and to dilute the Nehruvian framework so far as internal affairs are concerned. If renaming of Planning Commission as *Niti Ayog* was the beginning -- now it is *Panchmrit* in place of *Panchsheel*. But as newspaper reports suggest that given the feel-good tone of the BJP official document on foreign policy, it was no surprise there was no mention of Sri Lanka's tough line against Indian fishermen or the intrusions across the Line of Control with Pakistan, which have been higher in the past year than in the previous five years of UPA rule. Issues that await resolution with Bangladesh, such as the land boundary agreement or Teesta water-sharing, also did not find a place. Srinath Raghavan in an article in *EPW* says the penultimate word -- "The real test of foreign policy and strategy lies in coherence of design, finesse in execution, and efficacy of outcomes. It is to these standards that any serious audit of foreign policy under the new government must be benchmarked."¹²

Indian foreign policy under the guidance of Narendra Modi is increasingly selling the indigenous religiosity and culture (Varanasi Dashaswamedh *ghat* hymns, Sabarmati ashram and yoga culture) as a new attraction to lure foreign investment and gain foreign weight age. The declaration of

world yoga day by the United Nations, the presence of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Dashaswamedh ghat, the presence of Modi at the Wembley stadium in London talking about a new India in front of thousands including British Prime Minister David Cameron, everything leads to one argument – that between Nehru and Modi one thing is common – to attain global attraction, for Nehru the path was a moral ladder in the form of nonalignment, for Modi the path have been religio-moral and economic diplomacy. While the former have been reflected in the earlier narrative in this paragraph, the latter is seen in the way Modi have been at the forefront on American-alternate world order position in the development of BRICS ban and also at the Paris climate change Conference in November 2015. For the Marxist parties this volte-face cannot lead to a concrete, effective, sustained struggle against neo-imperial world order. There lies the importance of understanding the difference between Nehru's position and Modi's position in a better way.

Swings are happening in Modi's foreign policy – from United States to China, from Nepal to Bangladesh, from UNO to BRICS. These are visits, networks, speeches – but they are mostly about economic developmental and security commonalities but what about political position in world comity of nations? Till now the enthusiasm with which anti-oppositionism has been followed in domestic politics, the BJP government under Modi has not reflected an inch of that passion in protesting against the US EU World Bank set agenda of world politics. Even if it does something, like its stance regarding agricultural price in world market, it publicizes it like a new hegemon of the developing world not as its compassionate leader.

The Marxist political parties in India led by CPI(M), in spite of change in leadership have not been able to garner the correct position to create an alternate to Nehru's position of nonalignment or Modi's position of *Panchamrit*. They cannot accept in totality either position because of class politics. But even ranging a worldwide class struggle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie as Marx envisaged being the ultimate revolutionary call is far too general before the complex interrelated and interconnected. The best it can advance in foreign policy circle is to fall back upon the true spirit of anti-imperialism in foreign policy in India and here Nehru scores higher than Modi.

In contemporary Indian politics the Marxist parties are trying hard to regain its lost ground since Lok Sabha elections 2014. Acting as a bulwark through rallies, writings and meetings against the attack of Modi government on the symbols of consensus of Indian politics can help them to achieve that. But then again there is a Hobson's choice for the Indian Marxist parties-whom to choose between two evils (Congress and BJP) or whom to attack the most. Politics is a war-like situation and to win one has to take sides as one cannot fight with two enemies at the same time. However, the Marxist parties' soft stance on Congress, on Nehru, is being seen as symbol of weakness, particularly among its young radical followers. Here it is important to remember the 'Forgotten Hero' of Communist movement of India – Comrade S.A. Dange and his prophetic statement – 'Between Indira (Congress) and Jana Sangh (predecessor of today's BJP), I prefer Indira' – as the building bloc of critiquing and halting the encroachment of BJP government to the

fundamentals of Indian politics, particularly its foreign policy framework. In order to counter any policy pronouncements it is best to attack the foundation / philosophy of the policy and in this case, *Panchamrit* principle of Modi's foreign policy, which is nothing but to create a façade of culture, morality and religion to keep in close guard the ultimate motive of being a hegemonic force even surpassing that of United States of America, at least in being the highest prioritized country looked upon as the cure to all ills. This policy needs to be critically interrogated and here the Marxist parties must once again focus on Nehru's anti-imperialist essence of Indian foreign policy to start a revolutionary debate aimed to change the philosophy of Indian foreign policy before the present policy casts its influence over a larger audience.

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Pratip Chattopadhyay

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Kalyani

The Politics of the Hijab: A Comparison of French and American Views

Syed Uddin-Ahmed

Abstract

In this essay, I will critically evaluate the differences in the ways that the French and Americans have viewed the hijab, and how such views have impacted political and social discourses in both countries. After 9/11, one of the cultural symbols most often associated with Islam has been the hijab. The purpose and use of the hijab has, from time to time, been turned into a political football in countries like France and the United States. However, there are stark differences in the ways these diverse states have dealt with the hijab itself.

The paper highlights some critical differences in American and French views of the hijab:

A. Why the French Hate the Hijab

B. Laicite

C. American Pluralism

D. Assimilation-Identity Politics

In France, there are laws banning the visibility of hijabs, especially in public spaces. One of the core beliefs of French society in the post-French Revolution era is the importance of moving away from the religious tyranny and social control of the Church. In particular, since 1905, there have been laws operating to remove all vestiges of religion, an institution that French society associates with internal division. The idea is that by removing these symbols, citizens can rally instead around ideas of French nationalism and citizenship. For example, anthropologist John Bowen elaborates upon some of these nuances of French society and their Republicanism. He states that 'It requires the state to construct institutions and policies designed to integrate newborns and newcomers into French society by teaching them certain ways of acting and thinking.'¹ This means that certain ideals of philosophers such as Rousseau impact the lives of people who are both right and left wing because these are the shared ideals of what is supposed to make up French society.

This means that the role of the state and its institutions is to create a French identity and value of citizenship. This is where schools, in particular, play a crucial role in promoting the French ideals of assimilation and identity formation in the hopes of creating an equal society. According to Judge, 'On February 10, 2004, the National Assembly approved by a vote of 494 votes to 10, the first reading of a brief law that prohibited the wearing by pupils in any public school any sign of

religious affiliation.² This was a draconian measure, considering that the French take pride in labeling themselves champions of human rights. The difference between the French and Americans could not be more striking, especially on this topic of religious tolerance. This would be an issue in most American public schools.

In this view, Judge posits a very interesting theory; he brings our attention back to the history of France and its actual formation. There have been abundant conflicts and controversies over religion, and language in particular. Judge states, "France was created by conflict, by war, and the suppression of alternative identities such as Brittany or the Languedoc, where regional languages and cultures had been systematically weakened, often using force to do so."³ He adds that this process was often aided by the Church, which is why later in the Revolution there was such disdain for religion. The hijab is nothing more than a modern foe in post-revolution France, taking the role of the Church as a symbol to rally against.

For Judge, it is imperative for Americans to look back at France's history if they hope to understand why the French have become so upset over the dress of schoolgirls; to liberals abroad these policies seem cold and draconian. These schoolgirls are emblematic of other, more serious social problems. The French state is not full of newly arrived immigrants. There are Muslim communities that are second or even third generation, and they are visibly different.

The differences of the people in these communities make them easy political targets for both the left and the right. According to Fadil: 'There needs to be a more nuanced perspective in scholarly work that covers the practice of veiling to counter popular and stereotypical views that assimilate the head-scarf to cases of docility, oppression, or segregation.'⁴ It has become too easy a topic because the hijab conjures the more backward aspects of these communities, mixing reality, fantasy, and racism together. It is almost too easy to target these communities, turning the fates of these women into a political football to be kicked around by both conservatives and liberals in their policy agendas.

The laicite laws were created to do one thing: create Frenchmen. We may not agree on the way that they go about doing this, but we must consider that these are democratic actions voted for and executed by state institutions. However, what this does not take into consideration is a post-colonial France made up of significant groups of minorities such as Algerians, Moroccans, and others who have customs like the hijab that become public targets via these laws. Their presence and difference threaten French ideals.

This discussion goes even deeper with criticism levied at minority communities and their failure to assimilate. For example, Bowen states: 'More recently critics of Muslims have pursued them into the private realm, claiming to see in their everyday behavior, signs of insufficient older Arabic, Islamic, and African values with new French ones.'⁵ This is an excellent observation gleaned from his analysis. The French cannot come to grips with their own evolving society, and that not everyone looks, speaks, or behaves the same.

Girls wearing the hijab only confirm the backwardness and inability to break away from this crippling communalism, which for critics becomes sacred proof that these communities need to work harder at secularization. As long as they wear the hijab, they are seen as not accepting the French culture and identity; the role of the state is to rescue them from themselves. Ironically, what is lost here is that neither the right nor the left will admit to this paternalistic means of controlling people, or how they are 'Orientalizing the other.'⁶ In this instance, the 'Orientalized' groups are the Muslims who are considered foreign.

In this vein, Hunter-Henin charges the French with going too far in this war of nationalism, under the guise of secularism. She contests the legality of these policies, based on their violation of human rights. She states, 'That in 2010 the law on the Burqa was not uniquely a problem in France, it was a problem throughout Europe where states were using laws that could be disguised under the pretext of secularism that really targeted particular ethnic communities.'⁷ There are millions of Muslims in France, and the state has taken it upon itself to make them, even by force of law, into Frenchmen, even if that means killing their ability to exercise agency or form their own identity.

The dangers in this for Hunter-Henin are the effects of the state on civil liberties, and its impact on the future. For example, Hunter-Henin states: 'Protecting common values was key to both secularism and nationalism, the differences lie on the methods used to protect these common fundamental rights.'⁸ She charges that these laws violate the human rights of French citizens, and the dramatic impact such laws might have on other European countries is troublesome, especially in terms of religious tolerance and discrimination. She argues that the 2010 law takes the power of the state beyond the public sphere; it dangerously regulates the private lives of people, whether by defining 'Frenchness, or this forced feminism' which in many ways oversteps the purpose of the laicite laws.⁹

Furthermore, it is also vital to include Roy's insights and analysis of this topic. These secularist views are not easy topics for people to digest. He warns that even in Western nations such as France or England, the Christian experience with secularism can be a difficult transition. This was why he warns us that these social and cultural problems are complex, and should be reduced to essentialist prescriptions. For example, 'The experience of everyday life for Muslims as a minority brings them to develop practices, compromises, and considerations meant to cope with a secularism that imposes itself on them.'¹⁰ It's not that Islam has never experienced secularism or produced secular thinkers; it's rather that the dynamics of political life in their part of the world has been different from those in Europe. He believes that the policies themselves are unduly hostile in politicizing these communities. Through the process of globalization, the conversation about Muslim society has been dictated by Western ideology and has not truly captured the reality of life for the average Muslim.

In addition to this 'Orientalizing,' Scott complicates this conversation with her research on racism, culture, and identity and their roles in understanding the politics of the veil. For example, while working on her dissertation in France, she encountered racist views about Arabs and Muslims that

tended to generalize and dehumanize them. Scott states: 'After interviewing an Arab man who gave the name of a child to be registered, the officials, upon the exit of the man, began to ridicule the child by saying that these people always name their children Nasser or Muhammad'¹¹ Muslims are made out to be objects asking to be civilized or brought to order. They are reduced to being religious fanatics, clinging to the glory of old dictators.

She reflects on how, when the race riots raged in Detroit, the very same Frenchmen would look at her in astonishment and question how such blatant racism and discrimination could exist in America? To this accusation, she would reply that the French had racism as well, even if they were not cognizant of it or willing to accept it. She states: 'Every day I listen to you saying terrible things about Arabs, the same terrible things white American racists say about blacks, no-no they replied saying that their views were based on facts.'¹² There was no cognizance of how offensive their views might be to others.

Interestingly, the French feel that they possess a level of morality that Americans lack. In their anti-American rhetoric, they express that they feel their views are justified with regards to Arabs, but American treatment of blacks should be reviled. Kellogg states: 'If anything, the French would like to regain their past glory on the continent. In terms of speaking for Europe, something they have not managed to do.'¹³ Clearly, the French feel they have the right to speak for others, so it should not surprise us that they might be distressed when being compared to Americans who they feel are morally and socially, if not militarily, inferior.

This hypocrisy exists in the French because there is a clear sense of entitlement; this racism is based not so much on color as in America, but rather on nationalistic views. Some of the most horrific atrocities in modern history have furthered jingoistic nationalist sentiments under the guise of nationalism.

Scott brings to our attention the mindset of the French who, we should not forget, colonized much of the Maghrib (North Africa); the paternalistic ideals that secularist politicians use to attack the supposed backwardness of Muslim ideology are also used by the secularists to control society. Scott states that 'Historically, French conceptions of Muslims/Arabs included: them being marked as lesser people, incapable of improvement and so impossible to assimilate into French ways of life.'¹⁴ This works in service of her point regarding difference and power. Because Muslims are different, power - via the state - is used to regulate and control them; they are perceived as unable to govern themselves or participate in society. Scott's contribution is incredibly valuable to our comprehension of this laicite issue because she reminds us of how important knowing the history of these relationships is to understanding the ban on the hijab today, and possible conflicts in the future.

Meanwhile, in the United States, there has been a healthy amount of debate on these issues. However, to date, there has not been legislation banning people's choice to use the hijab in America. In the US, there is not the same level of distrust towards religion because America did

not experience such a violent revolution; it does not harbor the same resentment towards the Church as does France.

Moreover, the political and cultural dynamics of both of these countries have led to unique views on the topic, especially in this age of globalization where immigration, economics, political participation, education, and attempts at assimilation have been given critical attention. Both nations have seen a significant amount of immigration to their countries, both before and after the tragic events of 9/11. The key differences have been how each state has dealt with these questions of assimilation and identity politics. France has been working towards a secularism and legislation of public spaces that is driven by law, while in the United States there is no dominant religion to injure or impair communities of faith, especially through the notion of civic engagement.

While in France it is expected that people will respect secular law and not display their religion in public spaces, in the United States it is a different story. In America we have not experienced such a violent break from religion; seeing religious symbols in public spaces is not rare. Often politicians invoke the name of God during speeches and campaign events. This is not the case in France, as it would be interpreted as deviating from core French values. In America, politicians are at home speaking of God, touting God's ability to heal like Bill Clinton, or God's ability to inspire tremendous human achievement as did George W. Bush with his faith-based initiatives and noteworthy humanitarian aid efforts in Africa.

Secularism is a difficult topic in French politics because unlike in the United States, there is a direct colonial legacy with people who have been impacted by the public debate on the hijab. For example, John Bowen made his audience keenly aware of how France must come to grips with the fact that there are millions of people who were once colonized that are now living in France. The difficult debate here is what to do with these people who France feels are not assimilating, at least not to the degree, they would like. It has raised serious debates about the idea of 'Frenchness,' which politicians feel should supersede all else when it comes to identity.¹⁵

In a way, what Bowen's work has highlighted is France's difficulties with assimilating the millions of people who once were ruled by them as colonizers. On the one hand, because they are a democratic society the French are reluctant to use violence to assimilate and mold these people into Frenchmen; on the other hand, political leaders are uncomfortable with the idea of open expressions of Islam in public spaces. They fear its ability to divide French society, especially with regards to the more backward/oriental elements of their culture such as their chauvinistic and tribal views of women. Politicians fear the decay of France's cultural and political freedom. In other words, it has become an issue of xenophobia, because these people are perceived as the exotic.¹⁶

The experience of the United States has tended to be somewhat different because historically, Americans have not had such a violent break with religion. The United States is a nation built on the backs of immigrants. I do not mean to say that minorities are not discriminated against, or that people of different faiths - such as Catholics and Jews - have not faced xenophobia and hatred.

These communities suffered greatly while going through the American melting pot. According to Furseth, 'The United States had been fertile ground for people of different faiths and cultural backgrounds. It even gave birth to domestic religions and alternative expressions of traditional ones.'¹⁷

Culturally, the landscape was somewhat different because these immigrants were not colonized and often came to America for reasons such as religious persecution and poverty. Yvonne Hadad has argued that the dynamic experiences of Muslims are quite similar to those of American Catholics and Jews. She states, 'Much like these previous groups that came into America where the first generation maintained many of the religious and cultural practices, it is in the second and third generations we begin to see people shed some of the skin from the families and added another layer to the conversation.'¹⁸

From Haddad, we begin to see that in America there has been an assimilation not accomplished via laicite laws, but rather culturally as immigrants become more and more comfortable, eventually changing their customs and traditions. From her analysis, we are able to ascertain that a healthy level of assimilation can be expected in future generations in America, but if we are to compare, we will not see the same level of success in France. There are numerous second and third generation families from Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria (the Maghrib), just to name a few, in which the children remain mired in poverty and lack social mobility.¹⁹

This, in turn, has given credence to some of the accusations of backwardness and despotism in these immigrant communities. However, a deeper examination reveals certain painful truths, as many in these communities - even after being college educated and born in France - remain impoverished in ethnic ghettos. According to Scott, 'This ghetto-ization process turned the women into political footballs for politicians who took advantage of the opportunity to further marginalize these communities by attacking their faith as a way to combat the backwardness of these communities.'²⁰

In this regard, Bowen has provided us with keen insights into certain social and political problems in France, such as the unemployment and deep poverty experienced in minority communities. Rather than taking actions to tangibly improve the lives of these downtrodden people, politicians see their misfortune as a political jackpot. For conservatives, this has been an opportunity to address issues involving the extremist elements who have threatened French security and wellbeing. Liberals champion the rights of voiceless women against violence and humiliation. This is why the two sides can so easily agree upon the hijab as a rallying cry because they can use it to fight the undesirable elements of society while at the same time fighting a common enemy. According to Bowen, 'Voting against the head-scarf was essential and more or less a requirement to maintain freedom, liberty, and equality.'²¹

Now, these are interesting points when we consider what would motivate political actors to adopt these policies. In contrast to these developments, Kathleen Moore provides us with some critical

insights into the veil and visibility in America. According to Moore, 'The conversation in America itself is much more robust and does not have this patriarchal tendency of the state to reach in and dictate behavior and preferences for people like the French government.'²² For the most part, states have refrained from controlling or limiting how people practice their faith. The government does not usually attempt to legislate or guide these activities.

For Moore, the visibility of the veil in American society is not rare or exotic. On the contrary, she observes it as an easy way for Muslim women in America to embrace their culture and, at the same time, function as citizens. She has keyed into the idea of citizenship and freedom of choice, especially when addressing the fact that some American Muslim women choose to wear a veil, while others do not. For example, 'The key difference is the citizen has an ability to choose and the decision is not handed down via secular laws, or court mandates.'²³ The veil has not been made into a politicized object as it has in France, and Moore warns us of the dangers of politicizing this topic.

According to Moore, 'Politicization of the hijab brought tremendous risk to freedom of individuals in the practice of religion and freedom of choice.'²⁴ While there have been instances of legal issues where Muslim women have been denied employment or access to other opportunities, in public settings they are generally not made to do things against their will; thus, there is the opportunity to exercise greater agency for Muslim women in America. This is a unique aspect of American culture; it differs from the French in the sense that women in America can construct an identity via the veil. Also, since the laws in the United States are not so anti-religious, Muslim women in America have benefitted from the pluralistic American society.

This conclusion is also supported by Inger Furseth's work at the Kifo Centre for Church Research (Oslo, Norway). This research examines the experiences of Muslim immigrant women in places such as Los Angeles and Chicago. In this work, we see that although many women agree with certain Islamic ideals regarding modesty, the way people dress runs the gamut. According to Furseth, 'Women in different locations have different reasons to wear the veil, in Los Angeles more women agree to the principles of modesty than actually adhere to them, while women in Austin wear it for ethnic and cultural reasons, while more women in Chicago cite religious duty for why they wear it.'²⁵ Once again, we see many variations of Islam in America, and this reminds us that Islam is not a monolith. There are many cultures and ethnicities with dramatically different interpretations of identity that exist in America, so we cannot honestly pursue one definition of an American people. The way people express their identities can be liberal or conservative. In America, not all Muslim women cover their heads, but the difference is in America you are left with a choice, where in France the policymakers choose for you.

Reflections:

By evaluating France and America's different approaches to the hijab, we can draw conclusions on how the veil itself is a political issue furthering a tired argument of abuse and victimization;

perhaps, though, it could become a story of women drawing agency and redefining their visibility. At least in the case of the French laicite laws, there are certain problems with freedoms that accompany individual choice, especially with regards to the practice of religion that are enhanced by these laws' historically racist and colonialist undertones. In America, the experience has been different; because of religious tolerance, Muslim communities have prospered and as a result, found greater success in assimilation. Muslims are visible in American society; this is not to say that there is no racism in America, but someone wearing a hijab on a college campus or while working at a bank would not be out of the ordinary. This visibility creates greater opportunities for choice for Muslims in America, versus the experience people have wearing the veil in France. There is not such an antagonistic view of people of faith in America, and this attitude has allowed these communities to assimilate and flourish; unlike in France, they have kept their right to choose how they express their faith and participate in American society. The ideas of civic engagement and religious tolerance have been successful in drawing people in from Islamic countries, and generations of people born in America have embraced the idea of being American Muslims.

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Syed Uddin-Ahmed
Lecturer, History & Political Science, Mid-Michigan Community College
Doctoral Fellow: St. John's University



Perspective Section

Desirability and Feasibility of Compulsory Voting in India: Some Reflections

Ayan Guha, Neha Chauhan

Abstract

The Government seems to be in a haste to implement compulsory voting in India. But seen critically the system of compulsory voting militates against the very idea of democracy. Moreover, in the Indian social context the practical implications of compulsory voting also seem to be acutely problematic. In this context, while highlighting both the advantages and loopholes of the practice of compulsory voting it is necessary to engage in an informed cost-benefit analysis and allow public debate to take place on the issue before adopting compulsory voting through legislation.

Keywords: *Compulsory, Voting, Elections, Democracy, Representation*

Introduction

Unlike its neighbours India has been able to set up solid democratic institutions and stable democratic processes. Indian democracy has matured over the years and has become a model for others to follow. With the gradual consolidation of democratic system in India the problems which our democratic system faced in the initial decades of its evolution no longer concern us today. Instead new problems have emerged which call for intelligent and innovative solutions. However, sometimes the solutions prescribed become more problematic than the problems themselves. One such situation arises in the case of the practice of voting in India. Gone are the days when concerns were raised regarding the implications of conferring universal voting rights on each and every citizen. Now the mature democracy of India is grappling with the problem of 'indifferent electorate'. The benefits of democratic participation are obscure to the rising middle class in India. Low turnout is usually attributed to 'nonchalant attitude of the urban voters' or 'middle class aversion' " terms which imply a secession of the affluent and educated portion of the urban population from the democratic political processes. Moreover, since the urban population, is more mobile, geographically dispersed and spatially segregated, current voting practice for them involves a substantial consumption of time and travelling expenses. As a solution, the practice of compulsory voting is being suggested with increasing veracity in several different quarters.

Currently, compulsory voting is used in 29 countries.¹ Under the system of compulsory voting generally voting is mandatory and non-voters have to either explain their absence or pay a fine. In some countries they are even debarred from access to the benefits of government schemes and prohibited from entering government service. India's political establishment today seems to be

willing to replicate the system of compulsory voting followed in other countries. Gujarat Government has enacted The Gujarat Local Authorities Laws (Amendment) Act, 2009 in 2014 which lay down that all eligible voters in Gujarat must cast their ballot in Municipal, Nagarpalika and Panchayat elections or be subjected to 'disadvantages or consequences'.² However, the nature of the disadvantages and consequences are not provided for in the amended State Act. Non-voters would have 30 days to explain their absence to avoid disadvantages or consequences. Three Private Member Bills by Shri Varun Feroze Gandhi, Shri Chandrakant Khaire and Shri Janardhan Singh 'Sigriwal' have already been introduced and are pending in the Lok Sabha to implement the practice of compulsory voting throughout India. It is pertinent here to mention that two previous bills introduced in this direction were dismissed in 2004 and 2009. The Bill proposed by Shri Chandrakant Khaire suggests debarring the defaulting voter from government service and making him ineligible from certain government welfare schemes.³ While compulsory voting in India has so far received welcoming gestures from various circles, there are also valid counter-arguments against it which need to be considered seriously.

Compulsory Voting and the Idea of Democracy

Arguments against compulsory voting can broadly be grouped into theoretical and practical arguments. The theoretical narrative associated with the issue equates democratic participation in the form of voting with a belief in democratic values and norms and alternatively non-voting is construed as 'an amorphous non-interest in democratic values and duties'.⁴ However, in this connection, it can be argued that it is simplistic to presume that lack of interest in voting is similar to a disbelief in the idea of democracy. A person not convinced about the ability of any of the candidates fighting an election to contribute to public welfare may well believe in democratic doctrines of toleration, freedom of speech, universal and equal civic rights and may well participate in the wider democratic process of peaceful co-existence and informed and peaceful public dialogue with fellow citizens. Therefore, seen from this angle the idea behind compulsory voting seems reductionist in nature since it reduces the whole idea of democracy to participation in election and thus narrows down the idea of democracy by ignoring its multiple contours. This reductionism is also alleged to be intolerant and therefore un-democratic since tolerance of dissent is an enshrining principle of democracy which lies at the heart of our democratic Constitution. Forcing a person to vote apparently goes against the Fundamental Right of Expression under Article 19 of the Constitution. In a real democracy there can't be any legal provision to disallow the right to not exercise one's right. In fact the Law Commission also opined against 'Compulsory Voting' by stating quite clearly that 'œThe Law Commission does not recommend the introduction of compulsory voting in India and in fact, believes it to be highly undesirable for a variety of reasons described '| such as being undemocratic, illegitimate, expensive, unable to improve quality political participation and awareness, and difficult to implement.'⁵

Democracy must accommodate and gives ample room for expression to views which profess disloyalty to formal democratic structure so long as no violence is advocated. No one will dispute the fact that Gandhi was an out and out democrat despite the fact that he castigated and rejected

modern parliamentary democracy based on party system on theoretical grounds. Both Gandhi and M.N Roy questioned the modern form of institutionalized parliamentary democracy long ago terming it 'cabinet dictatorship' and 'party oligarchy' on occasions. It is pertinent here to mention briefly their objections. Both of them were more or less of the same view about the modern democracy. According to them in a representative democracy the only political activity that the common people participate is to elect their representatives who are projected before them as candidates of contending political parties. They do not play any role in selection of the candidates who are nominated by the parties. After the elections, the elected candidates represent the parties though they claim to represent the people. They take directions from their party rather than from the people who elected them. Thus after the election of the candidates, the common man disappears from politics and loses his popular sovereignty. The entire situation thus, converts the slogan of popular sovereignty a political myth. Gandhi made a plea for restoration of the ancient panchayat system in a self-governing village community and M.N Roy gave the plan for a grotesque system of party-less democracy. While the Gandhian alternative is anti-modern and therefore, unworthy of emulation in the modern period, M. N Roy's alternative is too radical for practical implementation. Though we may disagree with their prescriptions it is difficult to deny that the criticism they made against the modern representative parliamentary democracy highlights valid points and that they made their arguments democratically though they opposed the modern form of democracy prevalent today. It would be extremely logical to conclude that given their principled opposition to parliamentary democracy they would have disagreed with the practice of compulsory voting, abstained from voting and faced punitive consequences accordingly. But ironically they are regarded as the most ardent supporters of democracy. Therefore, the practice of compulsory voting may end up punishing people whose allegiance to democracy is sound and solid. So before a hasty implementation of the practice of compulsory voting we must dwell deeply on the theoretical justification behind compulsory voting by thoroughly engaging with the issue as a vigorous intellectual exercise.

Looking at the Practicalities

The practical narrative associated with issue brings to the fore the practical difficulties connected with the operation of democracy and ends up suggesting compulsory voting as a cure. Lack of public participation in election creates a situation where the winning candidates cannot legitimately claim majority or even substantial public support behind them. Simply put, if a legislator does not obtain 50 per cent of the votes in his constituency, his representativeness is in serious doubt. Thus, this practical difficulty apparently makes a very valid case in support of compulsory voting. Political journalist Jonathan Levine believes that compulsory voting system confers a higher degree of political legitimacy because it results in increased voter turnout.⁶ Therefore, the practical necessity calls for a comparative analysis of the systems of compulsory voting adopted by different countries so that the best features of different systems can be combined together and followed in practice. The need of the hour is to launch in the public sphere an intellectual endeavour that will engage in a comparative analysis of electoral systems of different countries. However, the introduction of compulsory voting may not be a complete cure to the problem of inadequate

representation. Technically, even after the introduction of compulsory voting there may still be situations where the elected candidates will end up obtaining less than 50 per cent of the votes. Such situations can be avoided by replacing the current system of first past the post system by the system of proportional representation. In this connection, other alternative systems of elections such as proportional representation which can resolve current anomalies of the democratic system needs to be considered. Therefore, it is necessary to undertake a comparative evaluation of the practical benefits of compulsory voting with those of the system of proportional representation before implementing compulsory voting in India.

In this context, it also seeks to analyze another very important practical argument made in favour of compulsory voting that it will result in better politics or more efficient Government. It has been argued in other countries that compulsory voting will mobilize the underprivileged rural voters who cannot afford to pay a fine for non-voting. Therefore, the elected representatives will remain accountable to them and will be inclined to adopt welfare-oriented pro-poor development strategies. Several scholars like Lijphart and Bechtel have presented a strong case for compulsory voting.⁷ They have presented convincing data in support of the contention that compulsory voting leads to an increase in voters' turnout. They have also pointed out that compulsory voting reduces representational inequality by mobilizing underprivileged which in effect, gives added incentive to the policymakers to formulate policies that have greater redistributive effects for the marginalized. However, this argument also appears fallacious in the Indian context, since in India it is the middle class people who show apathy towards voting while for the marginalized and poor of India, voting is a very important exercise.⁸ The wealthy and middle classes can survive without government assistance and can easily pay fine. Therefore, they would be hardly inconvenienced by such a punishment. Therefore, the actual anticipated impact of the practice of compulsory voting on the rising Indian middle class needs to be sufficiently analyzed before suggesting compulsory voting as a magic formula.

Conclusion

In the light of manifold arguments against compulsory voting, the desirability and feasibility of implementation of compulsory voting in India needs to be subjected to extensive public scrutiny. India is mulling over compulsory voting at a time when other nations have started to do away with it. Spain and the Netherlands were among the first to abolish the clause and Austria, Venezuela, Chile and Fiji followed suit.⁹ Compulsory voting is a necessary evil. It has benefits as well as side-effects. It has been implemented in many countries. But Indian scenario is quite unique. The sheer diversity of India makes it often unfit for universal policy framework. Moreover, democratic spirit is rooted in the very idea of India which is much broader than the institutional structure of modern democracy. Today the democratic constitution of modern India is the embodiment of the century old idea of India. Therefore, due care needs to be taken to ensure that no offence is given to the very idea of India for which our Constitution stands in modern times. It is in this special context that the practice of compulsory voting needs to be understood. In other words, it is necessary to engage in a cost-benefit analysis with respect to the possible implementation of compulsory voting

and allow public debate to take place on the issue before adopting compulsory voting through legislation.

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Ayan Guha

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Bankura University, West Bengal, India
&

Neha Chauhan

Researcher, Indian Law Institute (ILI), New Delhi



Commentary Section

Minority- An Inferiority Complex or a Term Card of Politics

Harasankar Adhikari

What is the minority and is there any particular definition of the minority? There is no widely acceptable definition of minority because some of the minorities live together in well-defined area, separated from the dominant part of the population; others are scattered throughout the country. Some minorities have a strong sense of collective identity and recorded history. Generally, minority is a culturally, ethnically or racially distinct group that co-exists with but is subordinate to a more dominant group. From the view point of the social sciences, this subordinancy is the chief determining characteristic of a minority group. The concept of minority is many-sidedness commonly. No one is certain of its precise meaning but everyone accepts that this phenomenon does exist. However, the minority is a sub-group within a larger society and that its members are subject to disabilities in the form of prejudices, discrimination, segregation, or prosecution at the hands of another kind of sub-group, usually called a minority.¹ According to the standard dictionaries, a minority is a group of people of the same race, culture, or religion who live in a place where most of the people around them are of a different race, culture or religion.² Further in the definition of minority group, non-dominant position is an important issue and it also considers as a numerical minority.³ It is a group thought to be different from the larger group of which it is a part. The concept of minorities is as to those who because of social or physical and cultural differences receive differential treatment and who regard themselves as a people of part. The characteristics of such groups are hold in lower esteem, are debarred from certain opportunities or are excluded from full participation in the national life. These groups are certain in disadvantageous position and suffer from inferiority and alienation. The existence of such groups in our society reminds that the society is not fully knit together into a single and integrated national unit.⁴ It categorizes into numerous branches and sub-branches like ethnic/national minority, religious minority, racial minority, gender minority, age minority, sexual minority, economic minority and disabled minority, etc. But in each society, minorities comprise a significant segment and serve as material for building up society. It is common that out of many groups, peoples, races, religions and generation should emerge and spring up a single people and nation and where unity and individuality, national and international, tolerance and respect should co-exist. There is a demand for co-operation for the solution of their problems.⁵

This paper attempts to explore psychological status of minority in India and how this status of inferiority usually implies as a term card in Indian politics which is also the cause of our internal disharmony, religious conflict and violence.

Minority and inferiority complex – A symptom of psychological disorder

In India the concept of minority is realm within religious identity primarily. Beside this, there is lack significant distinguishing characteristic among minority groups. Their faith, beliefs and rituals on their particular religion constitute them as a minority group and it also identifies their some social and economic backwardness. These minority groups bear the following characteristics : i) a non-dominant group is comparatively small than the rest of the population, (ii) its members are citizen of the country, (iii) it belongs to a particular religion and it has linguistic features, and (iv) it has a sense of solidarity to preserve their culture, traditions, religion and the language. ⁶ The minority status is mostly conditioned by numerical subordinate groups might constitute a numerical majority in a particular place where they have long term presence. Their social mobility is like a closed society where in individual's role and function can theoretically never be changed. The role of minority group varies from society to society depending on the structure of the social system and the relative power of the minority group.

In Indian society minority groups, specially Muslim religious groups are perceived as 'other' in society and rephrase the majority dominant groups are also treated as others because of the lack of necessary degree of tolerance for one another and wrong perception of intercultural communication. Thus, civil violence of India often represents religious conflict and it is a cause of social division and political grievances. ^{7,8} Consequently, Muslims are the victims of such violence. ⁹ This group is not even cut off from a full involvement in the working of the society and from as equal share in the society's rewards. They also enjoy some reservation benefits in many cases. Thus, it is a fault implication of cultural pluralism and minority members face often the problem of acculturation, bilingualism, alienation, cultural determination, ethnocentrism, ethno phobia and cultural shock, etc. This is causing a culturally a deviation which organizes a clash, misunderstanding, and hostile behavior.

It is true that every religious group has adopted some particular habits and rituals in their daily life and these are considered as their own cultural practice. It might be compared with tapestry of culture metaphorically which is composed of many interconnected threads in which the whole is more than the sum of its parts. This metaphor further emphasizes the interweaving of all the aspects to form a single, unified whole. So, it is impossible to see the individual threads rather than an overall design. In this global era, it is a wrong way to live in isolation. Everybody should be homogenized mind and intermingled, and it would be possible when one would gain insight into and acquire understanding of other's culture. Like the colours and designs of an enormous tapes by where every thread contributes to the pattern, similarly on individual minority groups and their culture ultimately contribute to the picture of their society. ¹⁰ Further cultures are different in terms of psychology. The member of every cultural group might think and feel differently. But when we look at other's cultures that are very different from ours, it is like a mirror image to us.

Thus, it is a matter of shocking that we have a tendency to evaluate and interpret other culture in terms of one's own and it yields vividly a competition between majorities versus minorities'

relationship. Actually, it is due to ethnocentrism which devotes one's own culture as superior to any other. We forget that the behavioural codes are determined by environment and surrounding with essential code of conduct when a member is raised. It has no relation with biological and genetical inherited traits.¹¹ In Indian society, this is the prime cause of conflict and the narrow lens of culture misleads to grow inferiority among the members of minority. Both the majorities and minority Muslims are involved in conflict. The ethnocentrism is strictly holding and pertaining to others to promote inferiority. Consequently, it cultivates narrowness, intolerance, rejection and the image of minority is endangered and perceived in a less favourable right. The minority groups do not comply with the norms/rules set by the dominant majority and ultimately it impedes integration into the dominant society and involved in destruction to prioritize their own culture. It is the cause of alienation of co-culture from dominant culture.¹² Further, it is a symptom of ethnophobia - a prejudice against dominant group and it is the cause of trouble and unhappiness provoking social distance and violence against majority versus minority. Practically, the Muslim dominant minority and Hindu dominant majority of India suffer from this ethnophobia. It is like a genetic disease and our government or elected ruler does take any initiative for treatment of this disease. But they spread over this disease tactically to ensure their vote bank. On the other hand, the religious priests of Muslim group use to take advantage from their innocent fellows to spread misconception against majority Hindu. So, they are basically provoking the disturbances and conflict deliberately.¹³

Minority and Indian Constitution – A political paradigm

The Constitution of India does not support this religious difference at all. Article 14, 15, 21, 26, 29 and 350A of the Indian Constitution are directed to protect the interest of its citizen with equal rights and no discrimination according to religion, race, caste and equal freedom of conscience, the freely to profess, practice and propagate religion and establishment and maintenance of religion institution, etc.¹⁴

So, it directs us to live all together with oneness and our identity is one as citizen of India. It is where we live not a battle field. It is a world largest democratic country with its secular nature. It is a common passage to performing our religious duties according to our own faith and belief. There is no scope of deprivation of minorities in our country's unity in diversities. It is true in real sense that a group is being permitted to live here with their own choice of food and habits. But no one can restrict it.¹⁵ But the minority should follow the common laws and rules for the integration of the society. But unfortunately, our country has not been still implied a common laws of some essential aspects i.e. marriage, divorce and so forth.

In our democracy and electoral process, the minority has absolute rights to participate.¹⁶ It is key tool of playing election games. So, there is needed some promises and provocation for this. The political leaders are only assuring to provide some benefits strictly related with religion like economic advantages, employment reservation, and special education, etc. Some of them are

propagating threat to dismissal of minority tactically because to get vote from majority. It is bridge of faith of ensuring their vote in favour of particular leaders and their parties.

Conclusion

The Indian Constitution has granted to provide, protect and safeguard the fundamental rights of every citizen and every minority. But the relevance and effectiveness of the safeguard suffer from saffronization of political ideology. It is a threat to the existence of the minority and it jeopardize the fundamental rights of the minority. Minority and majority feelings are in vein of our citizen, even after 69 years of freedom. The country's identity and dignity are getting increasingly obscured because of minority related issue that needs to be tackled and dealt with. But the issue is not properly overlooked. In general, we observe that there is no such conflict at grass root level when both majority and minority live together. But the issue of religious faith and performance of rituals raise its ugly head with interference of some interest group. That should not be permitted more because India is a country of secular. There is a need of urgent harmony to build up world peace and internal security. So, the following steps might be taken

- a) Minority members should be fully integrated into society, participate in and activity contribute to all areas of life.
- b) Discrimination, exclusion, isolation and abuse would be completely reduced.
- c) Effort should be made to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and opportunities and to promote respect for the dignity of minority members.
- d) Building up a communal harmony otherwise religious conflict would promote a fractured society.
- e) As per the guideline of one of the Directive principles listed in Part IV of the Indian Constitution clearly calls for implementing a Uniform Civil Code throughout the country to be needed immediate effect.

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The Chambal Valley: An outline behind the making of Bandit-Land of India

Tapoban Bhattacharyya

*"When a mother in a remote village narrates the story of Gabbar Singh
to her naughty child at night, the child goes to sleep in the bed."*

- The famous dialogue of the cult Bollywood movie SHOLAY (1975)

From Sholay to Bandit Queen, to Paan Singh Tomar there are scores of Indian Movies (also Novels, short-stories), where the gang robbers or bandits of central India are frequently depicted as the chief protagonists. The hilly and jungle terrains of central India (specially the Chambal Valley and its adjoining areas) are still popular today as the bandit-breeding land of India. Yet, this bandit-land is also replete with history of banditry. The topography, the socio-economic condition, the political scenario of this region is, to a large extent, responsible for the rise of notorious bandits from the medieval period of Indian History.

The sandy ridges and ravines of the Chambal Valley have bred both rebellion and religion for hundreds of years. The valley takes its name from the Chambal River, which is known locally as the river of revenge. It flows eastwards from its source in Rajasthan through Madhya-Pradesh into Uttar-Pradesh, where it joins the Jamuna. Two hundred miles downstream it meets the Ganges at Allahabad. It runs through three administrative states of the Indian sub-continent, cutting through the breast of the country. Each river has a legend of its own. The Yamuna and the Ganga, to use their old Indian names, are considered to be sacred. Local people drink these waters when called upon to testify to "truth", much in the way that people place their hands on the Bible before taking the oath in British Court rooms.¹

The Chambal River, local villagers say, was cursed by Draupadi, common wife to the five Pandava brothers in the ancient Hindu epic the Mahabharata. The story goes that the Pandavas, in a dice game with their cousins who were also their rivals, steadily gambled away their kingdom and eventually, their wife. Draupadi had cursed the river so that generations to come would remember her vengeance. It is said that if anyone drink the water of this river he/she would be imbued with the spirit of revenge. On the either side of the river lie the badlands of central India, some 8000 square kilometres of bandit country, inhabited by people who have, for centuries, been contemptuous of the state but remain fearful of God.²

Here the land yields little. Erosion is severe. Each year thousands of hectares, nearly 20,000 acres, are lost to the ravines that scar this wasteland. People migrate in search of better livelihood. The adjoining areas of the Chambal valley has very little land suitable for cultivation and it is moreover

of a poor quality. All they leave behind are streaks of vermilion on a rock or a dried-up well. The climate and especially the minimal amount of rain was not conducive to agriculture. In summer, vicious winds sweep the plains, shifting sands in every direction. During the monsoon season, torrential rains flood the low-lying villages, washing away the topsoil.³ On the top of the ravines grow fodder grass and thorny shrubs, that can only be fed to cattle when green and is used in thatching mud-houses. The climate of the valley is harsh with very little rains and extreme variations of temperature; rainfall is on average 30 inches per annum, which falls during the rainy season from May / June till August / October, and temperatures range from just above zero degree Celsius in the winters to more than 45 degree Celsius during summer.⁴ In this desolate landscape of sand and thorn, people have for generations settled their own scores, taken their own badla "revenge" killing. In the name of the God and justice, bandits of Chambal Valley are the products of this cruel and harsh environment.

Beside these, the communication and education infrastructure of the Chambal Valley is still very poor. There is also struggle between different classes and castes. From the early phase of medieval age to the present post-colonial era, feudal set-up of the local society has remained almost unchanged. Discrimination of caste hierarchy is very prominent here. The dominance of privileged higher castes (Thakurs) over under-privileged Dalits is also present. As a result the Dalits often turn outlaws. Most of the dacoits of the post-colonial India like Man Singh, Paan Singh Tomar, Phoolan Devi---all of them came from Dalit families, and to the poor Dalits these bandits are almost like messiahs like Robin Hood and Dick Turpin.

The history of rural banditry in the Chambal Valley dates back to the twelfth century when Raja Anangpal Tomar, driven out of Delhi by his cousin Prithviraj Chauhan, took refuge in the ravines just south of Agra. From there, he made repeated attacks, without much success, on his cousin and on Delhi. Ever since, that time this terrain has been known as Baghi or rebel-territory. After the death of Sultan Razia (1239), the outskirts of the capital city Delhi were repeatedly plundered by the Mewati Rajput Dacoits. To deal with these elements, Balban adopted a policy of "blood and iron."⁵ The Meos (Mewati dacoits) were ruthlessly hunted down and killed, but not totally annihilated. Later in the sixteenth century, when the Mughals took control of Delhi, the Chambal Valley region served as a buffer zone between Muslim powers in the north and the regional kingdoms of the south.⁶ In the Mughal records there are numerous references to "refractory" Mewatis and districts "desolated through their rapacity". Still later when the British East India Company entered the fray, opening up trade routes that skirted these forests and ravines of the Chambal Valley, travellers were constantly killed and robbed by gangs of "Budhek dacoits" or "Mewatikazaks / thugs".

The Mewatis were among the original inhabitants in the parts of Doab who were expelled by the Rajputs and after the wars claimed Rajput ancestry. Actually the Chambal Valley region had originally been populated by various Rajput dynasties dispossessed from their land during centuries of intermittent fighting with succession of powers, and from the ravine country along the Chambal River, they kept alive a tradition of rebellion. The inhabitants in the area thus acquired a

proverbial reputation for violent resistance to the imposition of authority from the indigenous rulers preceding the British. From their mud forts the petty Rajput rulers not only opposed outside intervention but also engaged in inter-clan feuds and banditry, in keeping with the notion of Bhumewat---the traditional fight for land and honour.⁷ According to John Malcolm, the Mewatis were kept as "Sebundies" or militia by the landholders of central India, and many of them who settled in villages became robbers. The Meos, which was the proper name for Mewatis, constituted one of those fluid groups, supposedly Muslim but with strong elements of Hinduism in their beliefs, that the British had difficulty in classifying, using the term "tribe" and "caste" interchangeably at different times.⁸

The link between soldiery and banditry is historically well established more generally and in the northern India context, the conditions were remarkable at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The most prominent example of this element is Pindari bandit-mercenaries who played a pivotal role in the expansion of the Maratha Hindu Kingdom in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. According to George Bruce, the worst among the robbers were Pindaris, mounted bands, totalling some 30,000, who rode forty or fifty miles a day in bodies of two or three thousands with neither baggage nor tents, wasting and destroying like locust swarms whatever province they invaded, seizing all the cattle and property they could find, burning what they could not take away. Interestingly, Pindari women accompanied their menfolk on these savage forays, but far from having a restraining effect they gave a lead in cruelty. Pindari women mounted on small ponies and were feared more than the men.⁹

When the colonial subjugation was almost complete, the Pax-Britannica took very aggressive steps to control these outlaws. In 1857, several bandit gangs, Pindari mercenaries, outlaws joined the militia of the "Rani of Jhansi" Lakshmi Bai in her fight for independence from the colonial rule--- the Revolt of 1857, as some scholars call the First War of Independence. Gwalior Central Jail, where most of the arrested bandits of the Chambal Valley are held today, overtakes the battlefield on which the legendary "Jhansi Ki Rani" was killed by an unknown British soldier, temporarily quelling the revolt against the British Empire. She was dressed like a man, riding a horse; she was riddled by bullets while in the saddle, and is now part of the legend of the Chambal Valley.¹⁰

Post-independence, India emerged as a vibrant republic of the Asian continent. Still the Chambal Valley is famous for its notorious bandits. Bandits like, Phoolan Devi, Paan Singh Tomar, Man Singh, Malkan Singh were all products of post-colonial Chambal Valley. Even on 29 October 2004, 13 peasants were massacred by the dacoits at Bhanwarpura village, west of Gwalior (Madhya Pradesh). These bandits sometimes attain a cult figure. To bring to light their fearless character, cruelty as well as sufferings narratives on the lives of Paan Singh Tomar and Phoolan Devi, the two well-known bandits of central India are presented in this paper.

The story of Paan Singh Tomar made national news, and throughout the Chambal Valley stories were being told of his valour and integrity. In 1958, Paan Singh Tomar had represented India at

the Asian Games in Tokyo, winning a gold medal for his performance in the long-distance steeplechase. He had spent twenty-two years in the Indian army, which had trained and sponsored him. When he retired in 1971 as a subedar (non-commissioned officer), he returned to his village and got involved in a dispute over land on behalf of his brother. They killed their enemy and took to the ravines. Paan Singh and his brother Matadin proceeded to wreak vengeance on all those associated with their enemy. They kept themselves alive by looting villages, dominated by Gujjars, a caste to which their enemies belonged. His gang soon acquired the reputation of being the "most dreaded" in the valley. Pursued for months by police patrols, one day in November 1980 Matadin was shot dead in an encounter, near the village of Pawa, not far from Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh. For several hours, a gun battle raged between the police and Paan Singh, who was determined not to allow his brother's body to end up in a police mortuary. Eventually, with no hope of any reinforcements reaching them in the ravines, the police retreated. Paan Singh Tomar, it is said, then lifted his dead brother and walked miles, through Morena, crossing the border into Rajasthan, so that he could give him a proper funeral, performing the final rites himself, at Bharatpur. This act of intrepidity and tenacity have made him a legend.¹¹

Another popular bandit of the Chambal Valley was Phoolan Devi. She became legendary for both her acts of revenge on those who had abused her and her Robin-Hood like actions to aid the poor lower castes. Phoolan Devi's life-history is a mixture of fact and legend, beginning with her arranged marriage at the age of 11 to a man three times her age. A year later, having been brutalized by him, she returned home, an act her family considered disgraceful. By the time she was in her early 20s, she had joined (or been kidnapped into) a gang of dacoits (bandits). She was sexually assaulted several times ----- once by upper-caste landowners, Thakurs, in the village of Behmai-- and later was forced to be the mistress of a dacoit leader. On 14 February, 1981, Phoolan Devi led a notorious act of revenge known as the Saint Valentine's Day massacre; 22 Thakurs of Behmai were rounded up and shot in retribution for her gang rape. This act intensified her status in modern folklore and labelled her as "the Bandit Queen of India."

So, the topography, climate, socio-economic conditions all contributed in making of Chambal Valley -- the Bandit-land of India. Through centuries, generations after generations banditry has become the identity of the Chambal Valley and the adjoining ravines and jungle terrains of Central India. We can sum-up by mentioning a press conference speech of Phoolan Devi after her surrender, "If I had money, I would build a house with rooms as large as the hall of this prison. But I know this is all a dream. If any woman were to go through my experience, then she too would not be able to think of a normal life. What do I know, except cutting grass and using a rifle?"¹²

Notes and References

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Tapoban Bhattacharyya
Assistant Professor of History, Vidyasagar Evening College, Kolkata



Review Section

Deepak Chopra, Muhammad: A Story of God's Messenger and the Revelation that Changed the World

Syed Uddin-Ahmed

Chopra's comprehensive understanding of one of history's most misunderstood individuals has helped him in this work to create an accessible fictionalized narrative of Muhammad's life. Unlike the numerous traditional biographies in circulation, this historical novel relates the story of a man and the impact he would eventually have on the world. This was not an Orientalized interpretation of an exotic figure who appeared out of the desert of the Arabian Peninsula to spread a particular religion. Rather, Chopra humanized Muhammad and captured some of the most intimate aspects of his life, details that in a typical historical narrative would not be covered.

Chopra neither deified nor villainized Muhammad, but instead described a man who was simply God's messenger sent to communicate a universal message of brotherhood, compassion, and peace. The story of the man himself, rather than his political career or the evolution of an empire, dominated this novel and provided a refreshing contribution to the existing body of literature. Chopra's primary theme was that Muhammad, although a messenger of God was still a human being; he was not deified like Jesus or transcendent like Buddha. He was remarkably like us, average men and women; he would have seen himself simply as one among many.

Chopra covered Muhammad's life in a way that was both breathtaking and inspiring. He began this narrative through the eyes of actual people who were parts of his life. With this approach, Chopra created a clear view of who Muhammad was and the world around him. For example, some of the more interesting descriptions of Muhammad's circle included those of his wife Khadija, Halima the wet nurse, a slave, and a Christian monk; and these are just four of the nineteen people Chopra included, giving his readers a comprehensive, first-hand account of Muhammad's life. Truly, in this illuminating fashion we, as readers, are able to see the person Muhammad was stripped away from any political judgment and without the all too common veil of misunderstanding. Chopra details the life and experiences of Muhammad where the audience gets to intimately interact with and understand him as a person.

The use of nineteen different people from Muhammad's life was a clever technique for bringing us, the readers, into the life of a man who lived in 600 AD. We saw Muhammad the way his peers would have seen him. Of special interest was the agency given to women and in particular, his wife Khadija, a wealthy widow when they married. It was under her tutelage that his career as a merchant was established, and the early years of his recognition as a prophet occurred. Khadija was a friend, confidant, and tremendous source of support. She was fifteen years older than him brought brought into his life a level of stability, love, and support that he would be eternally grateful. Of note was the fact he never had another wife while she was alive. Khadija was his pillar of hope

who his most passionate and staunchest support in the early days when his message was under severe persecution. Khadija stood by his side as he transformed from a young merchant working on her Caravan to one day carrying the message of 'One God.' She was one of the strongest inspirations in his life and deeply impacted his message and emboldened his faith in his 'One God.'

Additionally, Halima the wet nurse was the woman who raised him; through her eyes, we are offered a glimpse into the earliest years of a child who would become an orphan at a very young age. However, this orphan's story would not be one of defeat, but rather of personal triumph. At an early age, Muhammad learned to negotiate life in the rugged desert city of Mecca, in a society that was utterly brutal in its treatment of the poor. This made him a quick learner, and truly a child of all worlds; his survival depended upon how well he could communicate with others. This would have a dramatic impact on his life and heavily influenced his mission of being an advocate of social justice with particular respect to the rights of orphans. One of the hallmarks of his message was giving voice to the voiceless and marginalized. The majority of his initial followers were among the most down trodden people in Mecca society.

Beyond these relationships, the scene with the slave gives us an intimate insight into the tremendous inequalities that existed in this society. Muhammad learned at a young age to stand up for the voiceless; even in his youth, issues of social justice and human rights were a motivating factor. One of the first institutions he attacked was the brutal practice of burying daughters. Polytheistic tribesmen of this time regarded their daughters as a burden, which created a terrible view of women in a society that Muhammad worked to change. Among his earliest messages included the verses in the Quran which condemned the horrible act of infanticide which unfortunately was prevalent through the region. To this inhumanity, he brought a voice that stood up to social injustices, and championed for the most marginalized in society with regards, to the treatment of women who were treated as property. They were transferred from father to husband, with no rights or dignity. Muhammad, advocated for women having a choice in who they marry, and furthermore rights to inheritance just like their brothers.

As a young man, Muhammad was fortunate enough to travel through Syria and elsewhere, allowing him to experience a diverse cultural landscape that included both Christians and Jews. He was exposed to the idea of monotheism and the rhetoric of social justice, compassion, and devotion to God. He was dynamically aware of those monotheistic prophets such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus before as he found himself in deep search for meaning and purpose in life. Religion was a large part of this society, but as Chopra uniquely expressed, Muhammad turned inward to find himself; when he traveled on this personal journey, he found God. He was terrified that he had been chosen to carry God's message, a duty which he was not sure he deserved. However, with this inward journey, he learned to accept his fate for the sake of humanity as his life took a powerful responsibility to teach humanity to be cognizant of this 'One-God.'

Finally, Chopra's work humanizes Muhammad rather than deifies him. Moreover, Chopra avoids subjecting Muhammad's story to traditional or contemporary prejudices. Chopra brought us back to 600 AD to meet Muhammad in person. The novel provided the audience with a deeply personalized story that demystified Muhammad for the average reader. The text should be seriously considered for those teaching World History or World Literature courses at the undergraduate level to provide their students for a non-Orientalist interpretation of a man who mostly in western academic settings has been poorly under-researched and covered under shades of ignorance with respect to historical context. The text brings voice to a story from a smoothly developed narrative of Muhammad as the people of his time would have seen him.

Syed Uddin-Ahmed

Lecturer, History & Political Science, Mid-Michigan Community College
Doctoral Fellow: St. John's University