

Title: *Indian Political Theory:
Laying the Groundwork
for Svaraj*

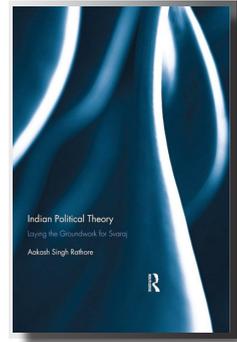
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In *Indian Political Theory*, Aakash Singh Rathore warns us about the unduly prolonged presence in India of theories which are totally foreign to its common people. In view of this, he suggests redirecting our attention towards the lived experience of Indian political life by proposing a ‘return to tradition,’ but with a caveat and a principle which would guide this return: ‘the principle that any modification to be made must benefit the least advantaged and that those changes that do benefit the least advantaged are legitimate.’ The ‘return’ would justify Rathore’s plan to examine ‘the inadequacy of transatlantic political theory.’ This process makes it possible to lay the ground for the ‘preconditions of *svaraj*,’ as ‘the activity of being oneself’ through a ‘look within’ and an ‘excavation downwards.’ While a ‘thick *svaraj*’ insists on the ‘nature and purity’ of Indian tradition, a ‘thin *svaraj*’ points towards hybridity and pluralism. Singh considers Gandhi and Ambedkar as the most prominent representatives of these two positions. Would it be possible to reconcile their divergent views on *svaraj* (and those of their present-day followers), given the well-known antagonism between the two? Having examined Thomas Pantham’s, Ramachandra Guha’s, and Partha Chatterjee’s attempt to resolve the tension between Gandhi and Ambedkar, Rathore concludes that he is ‘quite sceptical about the validity of such attempts of reconciliation. Even Gandhi’s and Ambedkar’s mutual aim in wanting to abolish untouchability does not go far enough to match Ambedkar’s determination to annihilate caste altogether.’

Rathore provides a wealth of evidence to prove the ‘irreconcilable differences’ between Gandhi and Ambedkar, despite the fact that Gandhi ‘moved closer to Ambedkar in the last years of his life’ while Gandhi was against the ‘sin’ and the ‘curse’ of untouchability, no real action followed to address this. For instance, the Bardoli Programme (1922-23), designed for the benefit of untouchables – including their education – resulted in total failure. The ‘satyagrahas’ organised by Ambedkar and untouchables at Mahad and Nasik (1927/1930), to affirm the untouchables’ right to use public water-tanks and temple-entry respectively, were opposed by Gandhi and Congress, thus failing to achieve any result. The major failure was perhaps when the demands made by Ambedkar at the *Round Table Conference* (1930-33) to allow ‘adequate representation’ for Dalits and a ‘separate electorate for a period of ten years’ were forfeited, as Ambedkar agreed to sign the ‘Poona Pact’ to make Gandhi break his ‘fast unto death.’ In this case, Gandhi’s non-violent satyagraha against the British became an act of violence against the Dalits, while Ambedkar acted in a true non-violent manner towards Gandhi. Rathore welcomes, nonetheless, the rapprochement between Gandhi and Ambedkar as a ‘strategic collaboration,’ but suggests that to remain ‘attuned to the fundamental, irresolvable differences between them,’ while bringing them ‘into a *constellation*’ (a term borrowed from Adorno and Benjamin), implying ‘something *less* than identification, less than reconciliation, but still overcoming the chasm of separation.’

This ‘dialogue within difference’ was the result of the irresolvable paradox of the double-bind that entrapped Ambedkar and the Dalits as ‘Slaves of slaves.’ Ambedkar had no doubts, as he made clear in the opening address at the Round Table Conference in London (1930), that ‘... nobody can remove our grievances as well as we can, and we cannot remove them unless we get political power in our own hands...’ At roughly the same time (1934), in a fascist prison cell, Antonio Gramsci was writing: ‘Subordinate groups always endure the initiative of the dominant groups, even when they rebel and arise: only a “permanent” victory breaks, and not immediately, their subordination’(1975, Q 25, § 2, 2283); a few lines into the discussion he adds: ‘Subaltern classes are not, by definition, unified and cannot coalesce until they are able to become “State”’ (Q 25, § 4, 2286). Both Gramsci and Ambedkar were fully aware of the dynamics behind subalternity, since both had researched into its causes within the history of their respective countries. That is why, in that same opening address Ambedkar could confirm: ‘It is only in a Swaraj constitution that we stand any chance of getting political power into our own hands, without which we cannot bring salvation to our people.’

These very concepts have been translated by Rathore into the ‘*Dalit svaraj*,’ which, in his theory, becomes also ‘the precondition of Indian political theory,’ since ‘svaraj without Dalit svaraj is tantamount to liberty without equality.’ In order to clarify ‘Dalit svaraj,’ Rathore adheres to Ambedkar’s idea of svaraj: ‘a Government of the people, by the people, and for the people, which is well beyond the promise of accepting social ameliorations for Dalits, since ‘not bread but honour, is what they want.’ British rule had not changed the situation of Dalits, and only ‘Dalit svaraj, or free, equal, and agent-centred participation in the political sovereignty of a free sovereign nation works Ambedkar and the Dalits out of the double-bind that they had found themselves ensnared in for so long.’ As we know, Ambedkar never managed to win a separate electorate for the Dalits and he opposed a ‘Hindu svaraj’ for the rest of his life, until, a few months before his death, he opted for conversion. For, ‘Just as

Swaraj is necessary for India, so is also change of religion necessary for untouchables. The underlying motive in both the movements is the desire for freedom.'

I do agree with Rathore that India must find its own way for a sound and effective political theory rather than relying on political theories coming from 'the West.' I would, however, tend to take a more radical approach to the problem, and apply some caveats when discussing 'Eurocentrism,' Presumably, political theories are based and rest on a supporting philosophy. The problem we have been facing, for some centuries now, is that Anglo-European philosophy has been portraying itself as a 'universal philosophy' – the only 'philosophy,' rather than the historical or localised philosophy of Europe (see Zene, 2015). There is no doubt that the philosophy which motivated the expansion of European empires, with the acquisition of political, economic, and military power, imposed itself as the highest, if not the sole, 'way of thinking,' thus imposing also a 'colonisation of minds' or an intellectual subordination. My contention is that, although we can safely affirm that 'the history of European philosophy has been a history of "egology"' (Levinas 1979), there have been moments of sanity and self-reflexivity within this philosophy, despite its 'follies and mistakes' (Gramsci, Q 11 § 12), and that some philosophers have resisted the temptation to impose on to others the all-powerful, domineering western Logos.

On the other hand, we must also recognise that colonialism, subalternity, sexism and racism happened in Europe prior to being exported elsewhere. There is, however, a tentative way of 'provincialising Europe, by acknowledging and accepting that its philosophy is not universal, but regional and historically bound. In this way we can welcome Rathore's suggestion to 'open a window of opportunity for new or hitherto ignored conceptions to be brought into play,' thus provoking 'the thought, or at least the possibility, that some aspects of "Eastern" thought may hold resources towards a more sustainable future.' I would venture to call this exchange 'inter-philosophical critical dialogue,' which takes place within the environment of world philosophies, thus recognising the presence of multiple philosophies and epistemologies, rather than one single philosophical tradition dictating the pace of reasoning to the whole world. This is not very dissimilar to the closeness Rathore finds between the concepts of *pratyahara* and decoloniality (see Walter Mignolo 2008; Miguel Quijano 2007), as a central component of contemporary Latin American philosophy, and in particular the difference between postcolonial theory and decoloniality, 'that very inward turn of decoloniality, a turn toward indigeneity and alternative epistemologies, and a disavowal of futile attempts to elbow in to transatlantic institutional and academic discourses.' Indeed, as Rathore suggests 'a thin svarajist Indian political theory will find deep resonance with the fruit of decolonialist work, despite being grounded half a world away' (ibid.). As the Argentinian-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel suggests, there is 'the need to undertake and deepen permanent South–South dialogue, in order to define the agenda of the most urgent philosophical problems in Africa, Asia, Latin America, eastern Europe, etc., and discuss them together philosophically' (Dussel 2009: 511).

Despite many setbacks and being ignored by Indian academia in social sciences and humanities, Ambedkar still motivates Dalits to carry on their quest for a real Dalit svaraj, also as independent thinking. Gramsci would have certainly supported the idea of Dalit svaraj, as a democratic educational practice conducive to overcoming subalternity by becoming subaltern-citizens who are able 'to think, to study, to direct,

or to control those who direct' given that 'every "citizen" can become a "ruler" (Moreover, Gramsci and Ambedkar alike struggled to become 'collective thinkers' for the subalterns, for those excluded from 'thinking'; not an easy task. The clear positions and strong convictions of the two leaders rest on their ethical standing reflected in Gramsci's calling for 'intellectual and moral reform' and Ambedkar's pushing for a 'social and moral consciousness of society,' both very much in line with the principle announced by Rathore at the outset of his reflection: 'the principle that any modification to be made must benefit the least advantaged and that those changes that do benefit the least advantaged are legitimate.'

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Endnotes

1. References to Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* follows the internationally established standard of notebook number (Q), number of note (§), and page number, according to the Italian critical edition, Gramsci 1975.