

Subalternity and Utopia: Scattered Speculations towards Possible Theoretical Horizons

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In his discussion of the methodological criteria for a history of the subaltern classes, Gramsci talked about “a line of development”, culminating in the final stage, marked by the presence of formations which assert “integral autonomy” (Gramsci, 52). Since the political circumstances in which the *Prison Notebooks* were produced were hardly conducive to critical elaboration, his cryptic comments have often led to imprecise speculations and varied interpretations. The reference to “integral autonomy” has also been one of these as Gramsci has never systematically elaborated upon what exactly he meant by that crucial phrase. However, from the many scattered discussions and observations found in *The Prison Notebooks*, it is possible to put together some of the components that could have gone into the making of the notion of integral autonomy. It is quite obvious that Gramsci saw the Party as an embodiment of subaltern aspirations and attributed to it the role of “The Modern Prince” which was supposed to usher in the subalterns’ rise to hegemony by being the embodiment of “a collective will tending to become universal and total” (Gramsci 129). More importantly, Gramsci also goes on to add that “The modern Prince must be and cannot but be the proclaimer and organiser of an intellectual and moral reform, which also means creating the terrain for a subsequent development of the national-popular collective will towards the realisation of a superior, total form of modern civilisation” (Gramsci 132-33). It is

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this superior and total form of modern civilisation that the party as the modern prince seeks to actualise through “the aim of founding a new type of state” (Gramsci 147). This new state, as Gramsci systematically pointed out, could only come about as a result of the “unity between ‘spontaneity’ and ‘conscious leadership’, leading to “the real political action of the subaltern classes” based on “a ‘theoretical’ consciousness of being creators of *historical* and institutional *values*” (Gramsci 198).

Herein lies the association between subalterneity and utopia which has rarely been explored within the domain of Subaltern Studies¹. Much of the distaste regarding utopia has perhaps been caused because ever since the days of Thomas More’s *Utopia*, the term has often come to symbolise some imaginary fixed place which actually does not exist or some unreal fantasy. However, Gramsci’s discussions of subaltern political action can be reconciled with an understanding of utopia if we interpret it in accordance with the analysis of another Marxist, who is possibly one of the most influential theorists of utopia in the twentieth century – Ernst Bloch. Bloch, in fact, is less concerned about achieved utopias as most of them have degenerated into dystopic horrors of different degrees. Instead, he focuses on utopianism or a utopian consciousness, animated by a multilayered hope of fulfilment, as an essential aspect of human existence.

Primarily, everybody lives in the future, because they strive... Function and content of hope are experienced continuously, and in times of rising societies they have been continuously activated and extended (qtd. in Ashcroft 4).

A utopian consciousness is necessarily about the activation and extension of such hope based on the negation of the pressing circumstances of the present. As Jameson explains, “The Utopian idea... keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is” (Jameson 110-11). But dialectics obviously does not permit mere negation. Negation must also be complemented by an affirmation. It is to highlight this affirmation Bloch and Adorno refer to Brecht’s statement, “Something’s missing”. The statement becomes a succinct summing up of that sense of longing which emerges out of the discontent of today and yet leaves open an unbound terrain of possibilities regarding the future which is exactly what ‘hope’ generates (Bloch 1-16). Bloch goes on to define the nature of this hope in the following terms:

Hope is not confidence. If it could not be disappointed, it would not be hope. That is part of it. Otherwise, it would be cast in a picture. It would let itself be bargained down. It would capitulate and say, that is what I had hoped for. Thus, hope is critical and can be disappointed. However, hope still nails a flag on the mast, even in decline, in that the decline is not accepted, even when this decline is still very strong. (Bloch 16-17)

How exactly is this flag nailed? It is done through what Bloch defines as “anticipatory illumination” (*Vor-Schein*). Anticipatory illumination “expands nature without going beyond it” (Bloch 146) by making sure that the “individual, social, and also elemental events” are illuminated in such a way that they become “more elaborate, more essential than in the direct and sensual or direct and historical presence of this object” (Bloch 145). Burghardt Schmidt therefore explains:

Anticipatory illumination mediates through the working, realizing subject that which is still only illusion about him with that which could become appearance... Illusion is moved through anticipatory illumination to a realizable future that is reachable no matter how far away. (qtd. in Zipes xxxv)

It is also in this sense that utopian consciousness can contribute to that intellectual and moral reform necessary for the founding of a new type of state and disseminate those historical and institutional values which are necessary for such an enterprise. The condition of subalterneity, as it moves towards stages of “integral autonomy” must incorporate within itself various degrees of utopian consciousness. In fact, it may even be hypothesized that the intensity of utopian consciousness is proportional to the degree of advancement. Both the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 operate as appropriate examples of such a hypothesis. If this is accepted then we can go on to argue that anti-colonial movements which also dream of founding a new type of state and require various degrees of intellectual and moral reform also encourage various forms of utopianism with regard to the establishment of decolonized nation-states. This is precisely what Bill Ashcroft defines as postcolonial utopianism. Whether it is Rastafarianism, the Chicano quest for Aztlán, the Pan-Africanism of the Negritude movement or the Gandhian visions of *Hind Swaraj* – they all point towards various forms of utopian longings manifesting themselves through nationalist and anti-colonial movements. However, most of us are also painfully aware

of the fact that nationalist utopian visions have often given way to dystopic horrors of one kind or another. One of the basic reasons behind such horrors is the prevalence of various modes of postcolonial subalternization, which is quite natural since the acquisition of independence, in countries like India, only brought about, as Partha Chatterjee has shown (Chatterjee 36-53), what Gramsci defined as the process of “passive revolution” (Gramsci 106-120) which basically means the change of power without the alteration of earlier modes of production and resultant hierarchies. My search therefore is for utopian visions generated either by subaltern agents or visions involving the subalterns’ rise to hegemony as seen from various literary or cultural representations. It is my hope that the subsequent examples, based on the triangulation of Gramsci, Bloch and Ashcroft, would create new spaces for the investigation of subaltern utopian visions which would add a new dimension to the recent and ongoing exploration of postcolonial utopianism. If the Gramscian vision of a successful “war of position” (Gramsci 238-39) is to come to fruition and thus ensure the subalterns’ rise to hegemony, the exploration and elaboration of such seeds of subaltern utopianism would certainly be instrumental.

My first example of such utopian consciousness comes from an article by Nivedita Menon written after the Gujarat genocide of 2002. The horrors of Gujarat, with all the gruesome accounts of rape, plunder, arson, murder and demolition are far too well-known by now to require detailed repetition here. Obviously the survivors of such horrors were not just traumatized subalterns but subalterns who, on account of the unprecedented horrors they experienced, had lost their entire previously held conception of reality. Menon’s account explores the lives of many such survivors and my example comes from her conversation with a woman named Zubeida, living in the relief camp of Vatwa.

“Brindavan gayi ho?” she asks. (Have you been to Brindavan?). No, I reply. “Tirath karne nahin gayi? Hum wahin se hain. Wahi hamara vatan hai.” (You have never been there on pilgrimage? We are from there. That is our land.) (Menon 2678).

In a world, where the children cannot even believe that a Hindu may show them an ounce of kindness or play with them with fond innocent affection, instead of burning them alive or demolishing their houses or tearing them apart with swords, what exactly is the source or significance of this notion of “hamara vatan”? Vrindavan is obviously one of those holy places that are integral to the sacral, psychological cartography of

devout Hindus everywhere, especially on account of its association with the figure of Lord Krishna. What consciousness allows someone like Zubeida to still identify Vrindavan, after all the massacres and mayhem as her ‘vatan’? The word does not simply refer to one’s place of origin or former residence but connotes an entire world of affective bonds generally associated with places where we have spent a considerable amount of life. Despite the horrors of Gujarat, those bonds remain unscarred in her mind and thus give birth to such a simple yet powerful utterance that also undercuts the logic of the exclusionary and belligerent utopia of Hindurashtra or Ramrajya popularized by the Sangh Parivar. What is even more remarkable is that ever since the days of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement the Sangh Parivar has popularized an aggressive rhetoric of spatial domination that especially targets those places of Hindu pilgrimage or devotional journeys that are marked by a significant Muslim population. Therefore, in one of Sadhvi Ritambhara’s provocative ‘aratis’ during the Babri demolition saga we hear the following prayers:

Tujhse mangun, mannat meri puri kar de

Mujhko chahiye

Ayodhya chahiye, Mathura chahiye, Kashi chahiye

Tu puri kar de, jai mata di (Nandy et al 196)

Zubeida’s brief and calm utterance implicitly rejects the murderous vehemence of all such demands and instead posits a vision of unfettered conviviality and amity that remains undeterred by the shadow lines of communal and religious divisions. Within the postcolonial nation-space of India that still continues to struggle with the implications of its constitutionally endowed secular identity, where Anderson’s idea of “horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 8) still remains illusory, Zubeida’s assertion highlights that ‘presentiment’, which according to Bloch, is identified as “the psychological representation of what has not-yet-become in our time and its world” (Zipes xxxii). At the same time, such signs of the not-yet-conscious also point to objective possibilities of what is possible. Zubeida’s remark is a pointer to those very possibilities and thus operates as an illuminating example of subaltern utopianism which may contribute to vital transformations for postcolonial futures.

Such visions are not only accessible through direct examples of subaltern speech, but also at times through literature. As Bloch explains, not only does literature capitalise

upon a certain degree of “cultural surplus” (Bloch 36-48) that eludes the grasp of ideological interpellation but that artistic truth itself represents “*an anticipatory illumination of reality circulating and signifying in the active present* which portrays things in a specifically aesthetic immanent way” (emphasis mine; Bloch 145). This is evident from Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* where again a syncretic utopian vision appears through both the account of Bon Bibi’s glory and the representation of the Morichjhapi incident. Bon Bibi, is not one of the goddesses who can be found in the Hindu scriptures. Nor is she a part of popular institutionalised religious celebrations in the way that Ma Sheetola or Santoshi Ma or such other Hindu deities are. Bon Bibi remains popular strictly within the confines of the Sundarban area where she functions as a maternal benefactor who is equally venerated by both Hindus and Muslims. The origins of this subaltern divinity also exemplify the same syncretism. Written around 1800 by Abdur Rahim, the text of *Bon Bibir Karamoti orthat Bon Bibi Johuranama* with its unique fusion of Arabic and Bengali and Hindu and Muslim features of worship not only attests to the cultural hybridity of the tide country but also the horizontal alliances that went into the making of the belief systems of those early settlers who experienced both material deprivations and natural threats and were therefore in need of a providential scheme that would cater to their material requirements. Much like Zubeida’s notion of ‘hamara watan’, the ethno-cultural syncretism of the Bon Bibi legend also foregrounds the utopian notion of an imagined community which negates the divisions of caste or community and also emphasises a sense of social justice embedded in the “law of the forest, which was that the rich and greedy would be punished while the poor and righteous were rewarded” (Ghosh 105). As Bloch explains, much like fairy tales, in all such subaltern legends, “the little heroes and poor people are the ones who succeed here where life has become good” (Bloch 167).

But such utopian wish-landscapes are often included within the larger domain of ‘common sense’ where they co-exist with a thousand other inherited and emergent strands of thought and instead of crystallising into any coherent perception of the world and one’s position in it, only lead to a continuation of the status quo. This is why Gramsci also speaks of the existence of a “healthy nucleus” within the realm of ‘common sense’ and states that even the criticism of common sense must begin by basing itself on common sense (Gramsci 328). Discerning this connection is important if we are to analyse the link between the Bon Bibi legend and the represented activities of the refugees who had resettled on the Morichjhapi Island. While the abandoned

and destituted Dukhey is rescued by the intervention of Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli, these hapless refugees, abandoned by both the administration and the other sections of the society, attempt to refashion out of nothing an entire settlement, a community based on collective labour and solidarity, a niche of their own within a nation-space that is unwilling to accommodate them as equal citizens with fundamental rights. What their action implies, in Gramscian terms, is the emergence of the directive and responsible subaltern who is able to arrive at a critical unity which accrues from the revision of earlier modes of thinking. Therefore, the agency of recovery and restitution passes from the hands of supernatural agents and on to the theoretically conscious section of the subaltern population which is able to mobilise and lead the others by ensuring the diffusion of certain critical forms of truths which then become the basis of vital transformative action (Gramsci 337).

How exactly was such transformative action manifested? The answer comes through Nirmal's journal which offers a mediated account of the consequences of constructive subaltern action, fully conscious of its historicity and responsibility:

There was much to show – even in the short while I had been away, there had been many additions, many improvements. Saltpans had been created, tubewells had been planted, water had been dammed for the rearing of fish, a bakery had started up, boat-builders had set up workshops, a pottery had been founded as well as an ironsmith's shop; there were people making boats while others were fashioning nets and crablines; little marketplaces, where all kinds of good were being sold, had sprung up. All this in the space of a few months! It was an astonishing spectacle - as though an entire civilization had sprouted suddenly in the mud. (Ghosh 190-91)

This is precisely what Bloch would elsewhere identify as “the landscape of hope” (Bloch 76) and it also corresponds to the Gramscian vision of a new kind of state, which in this case, according to Nirmal's perception, was the product of an experiment, “imagined not by those with learning and power but those without” (Ghosh 171). Irrespective of the exact nature of the violence which was inflicted on them and the exact number of casualties, or the authenticity of Ghosh's depiction, what makes such representation significant is precisely the utopian promise it carries, on the basis of conscious, historicised subaltern action which contains the seeds of transforming the

nature of the nation-state. As Ashcroft explains, “Postcolonial utopian vision takes various forms but it is always hope that transcends the disappointment and entrapment of the nation-state” (Ashcroft 4). And it is this hope which may take us to what Bloch defined as ‘heimat’ (Zipes xxxii) or home, that figurative space beyond oppression, exploitation and misery which we have all sensed but never reached, a space that may be linked with Gramsci’s vision of integral autonomy, and a space that is based on “the possibilities for rearranging social and political relations” (Zipes xxxii).

Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to find in Indian history or socio-political reality concrete examples of resolute subaltern actions which have led to an actualisation of such possibilities of “re-arranging social and political relations”. Therefore, in this concluding section of the article I turn to an example from elsewhere, which however, has much in common with the subalternizing conditions prevalent either in India or in other third-world countries. The example will be that of the Zapatistas of Mexico who began their movement with armed insurrection against the Mexican government on 1st January 1994 to reclaim the basic rights and dignity of the indigenous Mayas who mostly lived as impoverished peasants and agricultural labourers. Despite the military offensives they have had to endure they succeeded in creating autonomous regions of their own in the southern province of Chiapas, the most backward province in all of Mexico, where something resembling the kind of “integral autonomy” Gramsci spoke of has been achieved and sustained for the last twenty years¹. Speaking of their achievement, journalist Laura Gottesdiener, while referring to a boy named Diego, born after the revolution in Zapatista territory, writes:

Most of the movement’s work over the last two decades has involved patiently building autonomous structures for Diego and his generation. Today, children like him grow up in a community with its own Zapatista schools; communal businesses; banks; hospitals; clinics; judicial processes; birth, death, and marriage certificates; annual censuses; transportation systems; sports teams; musical bands; art collectives; and a three-tiered system of government. There are no prisons. Students learn both Spanish and their own indigenous language in school. An operation in the autonomous hospital can cost one-tenth that in an official hospital. Members of the Zapatista government, elected through town assemblies, serve without receiving any monetary compensation.

Economic independence is considered the cornerstone of autonomy—especially for a movement that opposes the dominant global model of neoliberal capitalism. In Diego's town, the Zapatista families have organized a handful of small collectives: a pig-raising operation, a bakery, a shared field for farming, and a chicken coop. (Gottesdiener)

This might perhaps be seen as an actualisation of the fictional representation one witnesses in Ghosh's novel and as in the novel, here too the new civilisation which these indigenous communities have developed through two decades of successful resistance, manifests that same spirit of postcolonial utopianism, especially as it rejects the seemingly inexorable logic of multinational capitalism at the heart of empire. Members of these communities neither pay taxes nor receive governmental aid and many of them do not even have any presence in governmental documents and records. Away from the structure of hegemonic control, these Zapatista caracoles, for that is what the natives call them, operate as new signs of subaltern self-assertion which continue to operate as beacons of hope to dispossessed and marginalised people around the world. Theirs is not an achieved utopia as the poverty is indeed critical. But even in the face of such poverty what continues to sustain them is the belief and possibility of determining their own destiny – a right which for the better part of the last five hundred years, ever since Columbus' 'discovery' of America, the indigenous communities have rarely been able to exercise. It is in acknowledgment of this amazing achievement that Laura Carlsen writes

Imagine communities where local officials rotate to avoid accumulating power, political parties have no role or presence and state and government programs—long used to buy off advocates for a more equal society—are banned. Much of the food is produced by the community, cooperatives do buying and marketing and decisions are made collectively rather than being imposed by a state. The Zapatistas have attempted to resurrect this model, practiced for centuries in indigenous Mexico prior to the Spanish conquest. (Carlsen)

It is in this way that the Zapatista enclaves in Chiapas act as living examples of postcolonial utopianism which, quite characteristically, look back in order to move forward, without ever ossifying into reactionary, retrograde revivalism.

What are the seeds of such alternative world order which the Zapatistas have created and sustained for so long? To understand that, one has to go through one of the foundational documents of Zapatismo where the utopian core of their project is proclaimed. The document is titled “Chiapas: The Southeast in Two Winds – A Storm and a Prophecy”, written by Subcommandante Marcos in August 1992 and translated and circulated across Mexico after the rebellion of 1st January, 1994ⁱⁱⁱ. Here, after documenting the abject misery of the ordinary indigenous inhabitants, Marcos goes on to articulate a metaphoric vision of hope that resists the hegemonic voice:

Not everyone hears the voices of hopelessness and conformity. Not everyone is carried away by hopelessness. There are millions of people who continue on without hearing the voices of the powerful and the indifferent. They can't hear; they are deafened by the crying and blood that death and poverty are shouting in their ears. But, when there is a moment of rest, they hear another voice. They don't hear the voice that comes from above; they hear the voice that is carried to them by the wind from below, a voice that is born in the Indigenous heart of the mountains. This voice speaks to them about justice and freedom, it speaks to them about socialism, about hope...the only hope that exists in the world. The oldest of the old in the Indigenous communities say that there once was a man named Zapata who rose up with his people and sang out, “Land and Freedom!” These old campesinos say that Zapata didn't die, that he must return. These old campesinos also say that the wind and the rain and the sun tell the campesinos when to cultivate the land, when to plant and when to harvest. They say that hope is also planted and harvested. They also say that the wind and the rain and the sun are now saying something different: that with so much poverty, the time has come to harvest rebellion instead of death. That is what the old campesinos say. The powerful don't hear; they can't hear, they are deafened by the brutality that the Empire shouts in their ears. “Zapata,” insists the wind, the wind from below, our wind. (Marcos 28-29)

Is this the language of a political treatise or that of a literary exposition? More importantly, this is the language of ‘hope’ which considers the determined negation (Zipes II) of the present and turns it into the seeds of a utopian quest – a quest that

incorporates within its fold thousands of campesinos like Antonio who shout ‘Ya Basta!’ – enough is enough – and march on:

Antonio dreams of owning the land he works on, he dreams that his sweat is paid for with justice and truth, he dreams that there is a school to cure ignorance and medicine to scare away death, he dreams of having electricity in his home and that his table is full, he dreams that his country is free and that this is the result of its people governing themselves, and he dreams that he is at peace with himself and with the world. He dreams that he must fight to obtain this dream, he dreams that there must be death in order to gain life. Antonio dreams and then he awakens... Now he knows what to do and he sees his wife crouching by the fire, hears his son crying. He looks at the sun rising in the East, and, smiling, grabs his machete.

The wind picks up, he rises and walks to meet others. Something has told him that his dream is that of many and he goes to find them. (Marcos 32)

Again, one is forced to wonder if this is an excerpt from a political tract or the conclusion of a novel or a short story. Irrespective of how we categorize it, it undeniable that such assertions embody what Bloch had identified as “structured anticipatory illumination” (Bloch 41) which itself results from the circulation of cultural surplus, outside the boundaries of dominant ideology. More importantly, as the history of the Zapatistas and their struggles and achievements have shown, such utopian potentialities are integral to subaltern agency and praxis. The words of subcommandante Marcos, standing on the “horizon of the real” (Bloch 72), provide a “connection to knowledge...a connection to the material of grasped hope” (Bloch 73) which manifests itself through the caracoles, the schools, the health centres, the protest marches, the charter of demands submitted to the Congress and even the festivities which the Zapatistas continue to organise, despite all the adversities they endure (Khasnabish 96-163). Tracts such as these aim to effect that change in the “ideological panorama” (Gramsci 340), which Gramsci deemed essential for collective subaltern action. It is precisely through such articulations, which follow the rhetorical strategies of fiction and foundational religious texts, that organic intellectuals like subcommandante Marcos seek to circulate philosophy as faith which can then inspire collective subaltern political action (Gramsci 339). In the process the Zapatistas, with their discourses, struggles and civic actions, embody not just the bond between Gramscian “integral autonomy”

and Bloch's notion of "anticipatory illumination" but also Ashcroft's postulations about "the essence of desire for a better world... the space of social dreaming" (Ashcroft 2).

This paper is a meditation, albeit rudimentary, on the possibilities of these links between Gramsci's quest of integral autonomy for the subaltern and Bloch's insistence on utopian consciousness which may converge with Ashcroft's assessments of postcolonial utopianism. Such assessments may help to expand the horizons of both postcolonial and utopian studies and thereby open fresh avenues of critical exploration.

Notes

1. It is necessary here to dispel some doubts regarding the role of utopia and Marxist thought as they have often been considered antithetical, especially in view of Marx and Engels' own repudiation of utopian socialists in *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx and Engels had identified the political doctrines of St. Simon, Fourier or Owen as examples of "critical utopian socialism" (Marx and Engels, 89) and criticised them for ignoring the forces of class-antagonism, the initiative of the proletariat and the evolving socio-historical circumstances (89-93). However, there is a great difference between a utopian political doctrine and a utopian consciousness that either constitutes a part of a historicised political action of subaltern classes or manifests itself through artistic representations of one kind or another. This is also why in *What is to be Done*, Lenin ranked St. Simon, Fourier and Owen "among the most eminent thinkers of all times... whose genius anticipated innumerable things" (Lenin 14).
2. It is beyond the scope of the article to discuss the struggle and achievements of the Zapatistas in detail. Interested readers may refer to Alex Khasnabish's *Zapatistas: Rebellion from the Grassroots to the Global* (London: Zed Books, 2010) or Gloria Munoz Ramirez's *The Fire and the Word: A History of the Zapatista Movement* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2008).

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