

Structures of Power in Indian Society: A Response

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Class cannot be the exclusive axis in understanding power in Indian society. A caste-ridden rural society with an adivasi fringe needs better characterisation than that offered by Partha Chatterjee in “Democracy and Economic Transformation in India” (19 April 2008).

The 1990s certainly mark a break in Indian economic history but perhaps in a direction opposite to the one Chatterjee suggests. Over-deterministic attribution of hegemonic powers to corporate capital takes away from the centrality of struggle and the contingent unpredictability of historical processes.

We need to practise the “subversive” history advocated by D D Kosambi, which refuses to fit snugly into prefabricated schema of the kind imposed by Chatterjee.

(Three comments on the essay are followed by a response from Partha Chatterjee.)

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Partha Chatterjee is one of our generation’s most creative thinkers in the Marxist tradition. The full fecundity of his oeuvre will only unravel itself in the coming decades through the work of scholars fashioned by the power of his original mind. For me personally, his comments as external referee on my doctoral dissertation over two decades ago, remain a treasure to this day. We must, therefore, confess deep disappointment with his recent piece in the *Economic & Political Weekly* [Chatterjee 2008]. His characterisations of structures of power appear strangely out of line with large facts of contemporary Indian society. They also hark back to a long discredited tradition within Marxism, whose demise owes much to the work of scholars like Chatterjee.

1 Other Axes of Power

The most striking feature of Chatterjee (2008) is the exclusive focus on class as an axis of power in India. Even within the Marxist tradition of scholarship, there has long been a recognition that power in India cannot be understood without reference to the caste system.¹ The period being studied by Chatterjee has been characterised by powerful mobilisation and conflict around caste, ethnicity, region and religion. None of these are even acknowledged as being important by Chatterjee.²

These conflicts are, in some instances, a lashing out of those completely marginalised by the mainstream development process. Such conflicts, characterised at times by extreme violence are, for example, those of the adivasis. The prime minister is on record as claiming this to be the greatest threat to Indian democracy. The union home ministry believes such mobilisation has spread to more than a quarter of India’s districts. In all official records of poverty and distress, the adivasis always top the list [Shah 2007a]. Their struggles are invariably couched in

terms of regional self-determination. This is because a resolute case can be made for India’s adivasi pockets of concentration having suffered from a process of “internal colonialism” [see Chapter 5 of Shah et al 1998]. They have suffered exploitation and discrimination qua region and community. This has been particularly the perception of the people of the north-east. Chatterjee puts forward a characterisation of the adivasis that can only be termed extraordinary: “In every region of India, there exist marginal groups of people who are unable to gain access to the mechanisms of political society. Tribal peoples depend more on forest products or pastoral occupations than on agriculture. These marginalised groups represent an outside beyond the boundaries of political society” (p 61).

Surely, Chatterjee should know better than to repeat the oft-stated but completely fallacious notion that the adivasis of India are largely forest-dependent or pastoralists. As early as 1981, the *Sivaraman Committee Report on the Development of Tribal Areas* concluded that “settled agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for the overwhelming majority of the tribal population in the country” [Planning Commission 1981: 7]. Data from the 1981 Census already showed that over 93 per cent of tribal “workers” in India are engaged in agriculture and allied activities, more than two-thirds of these being cultivators. This is the unique nature of adivasi society in contemporary India, which imbues its modes of exploitation with a historical distinctiveness [Shah et al 1998]. Even more surprising is Chatterjee’s notion that adivasis are somehow beyond the pale of political society: “Political society and electoral democracy have not given these groups the means to make effective claims on governmentality” (p 61). He appears to forget that adivasis played a decisive role in the change of regimes in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand in the 2003 assembly elections, earlier having been part of the struggle for the creation of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. Adivasis are at the heart of some of the most significant political movements of our time, whatever be one’s views on the merits or otherwise of these struggles – the Naxalite movement, militancy in the north-east, the Narmada Andolan and the

more recent battles against corporate takeover of land.

Late 20th century India has also been witness to conflicts revolving around the aspirations of the upwardly mobile middle caste formations. And especially following the demolition of the Babri masjid, religion has become an increasingly overt or covert source of conflict in India. In view of all this, one does not expect an account of power in India today to be aseptically focused merely on the question of class. Indeed, the challenge facing the Marxist tradition has always been and increasingly is to creatively articulate the *differentia specifica* of intermeshing of class with other axes of power in Indian society. Perhaps the most important of these is gender, which cuts across the heart of all other axes of power. Cognisance has to be taken of works such as Chakravarti (2003) and Rege (2006), which argue that class and caste both have a very specific sexual dimension.

2 Undifferentiated, Subsistence Peasantry?

Chatterjee says: “Unlike a few decades ago, there is almost no sector of household production that can be described as intended wholly for self-consumption or non-monetised exchange within a local community” (p 56). This is a completely inaccurate description of farming in India not only “a few decades ago” but during the colonial period itself. Debunking the existence of a self-sufficient village community even in pre-colonial India has a long pedigree in historical scholarship across the spectrum from Left [Habib 1974] to Right [Kumar 1965] for 50 years now. Peasant stratification and market penetration have an extended history in India.³ Indian peasant society was highly unequal even before the British came in. One source of this stratification is the caste system, which also blocked the entry of large sections of Indian rural society into landownership. This is the reason why large masses of landless labour existed in India even before the advent of colonial rule [of the massive literature on this see especially Kumar 1965; Habib 1984; Reddy 1990 and Shah 1984a].⁴ Elements of collectivity were certainly there but they are better described as “collective landlordism” [Shah 1985: PE-71].⁵ This already “differentiated peasantry” is a major reason why the classic discourse on “transition” (as Chatterjee correctly says) fails to

apply to India.⁶ At any rate, market penetration greatly intensified under colonial rule and particularly so after independence. Speaking of “subsistence economy” or “small peasant agriculture” in India “a few decades ago” [Chatterjee 2008: 56-57], therefore, appears nothing short of absurd.

If his pre-1990s characterisation of the peasantry in India is badly off-the-mark, the post-1990s picture is even more so. Chatterjee says, “peasants now confront, not landlords or traders as direct exploiters, but rather governmental agencies” (p 60). Ironically, Chatterjee has predicated his entire analysis on the break he perceives as having occurred in the 1990s. Of course, this is an important date. And it does mark a distinct shift in many significant aspects of life in India. But the direction of movement is perhaps the opposite of the one suggested by Chatterjee. What actually happened after the 1990s, precisely for the reasons described by Chatterjee (the new privatisation-centred policy regime), was that the conflict of the peasantry with the landlords-moneylenders-traders became even more acute. As Shah et al (2007) describe in vivid detail, the “reforms” of the 1990s meant a severe contraction of the formal banking sector and a reassertion of the power of the moneylender-trader nexus in rural India. The share of “exploitative” sources (professional moneylenders, landlords and agriculturist moneylenders) in rural credit fell from an average of over 75 per cent in 1951-61 to less than 25 per cent in 1991. The share of formal sector lending more than doubled between 1971 and 1991. But in the period after 1991, dependence on rural moneylenders, most especially of the poor, again rose significantly in 15 major states of India.⁷ What is worse, the ideological climate has moved in a way as to valorise this dependence through what we have elsewhere described as “the crowning of the moneylender” [Shah 2007b].⁸ Thus, without in any way denying the clash of farmers with the state, it just cannot be said that the conflict within rural Indian society abated in any way after the 1990s. All evidence points to the contrary.

3 Governmentality

Let us now come to Chatterjee’s central argument on “governmentality”, which he says he has borrowed from Sanyal (2007):

There is a growing sense now that certain basic conditions of life must be provided to

people everywhere and that if the national or local governments do not provide them, someone else must (p 55)... It is considered unacceptable that those who are dispossessed of their means of labour because of the primitive accumulation of capital should have no means of subsistence (p 55).

Thus, there is a dual process:

On the one side, primary producers such as peasants, craftspeople and petty manufacturers lose their land and other means of production, but, on the other, are also provided by governmental agencies with the conditions for meeting their basic needs of livelihood. There is, says Sanyal, primitive accumulation as well as a parallel process of the reversal of the effects of primitive accumulation (p 55).

For Chatterjee, this process is specific to the post-1990s India when “capitalist growth is far more capital intensive and technology-dependent than it was even some decades ago” (p 55), which means that the victims of this process “are completely unlikely to be absorbed into the new capitalist sectors of growth” (p 55). Dare one say to Chatterjee that the process Sanyal and he describe is almost as old as capitalism itself?⁹ Or, more accurately, one should say that the process post-dates the Great Depression of the 1920s.¹⁰ This is when the capitalist class was forced to acknowledge (in contradiction to the orthodox economics of that time) that unemployment is not only possible but an “inevitable” consequence of the process of capitalist accumulation. Ever since then, this insurance strategy of not allowing those inevitably marginalised to turn into what Chatterjee calls “the dangerous classes”, has been an integral part of the process of legitimation of capitalist rule.

If for world capitalism, this dates from the 1930s, for India, perhaps the more accurate date would be 1971, rather than the 1990s suggested by Chatterjee. Of course, Indian policy from the very inception of planning had an in-built strategy of containing the worst impact of capitalist accumulation on the poor and marginalised. This is what Chatterjee himself affirmed in an earlier work on Indian planning: “The object of the strategy of ‘passive revolution’ was to contain class conflicts within manageable dimensions, to control and manipulate the many dispersed power relations in society to further as best as possible the thrust towards accumulation” [Chatterjee 1997: 290].¹¹ But as we see it, it is from 1971 that this thrust gets its most

powerful expression under Indira Gandhi and her 'garibi hatao' slogan. These were the heydays of heavy taxation, rural public works programmes, deficit financing, massive state investments in agriculture, agricultural subsidies, state price support to and procurement of foodgrains, the public distribution system (PDS), abolition of privy purses and nationalisation of banks. This was also the aftermath of Naxalbari, setbacks to the Congress Party in the 1967 elections and massive droughts of the mid-1960s.¹² "Dangers" began to be perceived in an unprecedented way. And comprehensive remedial measures were initiated. Ideologically, it was officially acknowledged for the first time that the benefits of growth would not automatically "trickle-down" and that poverty and unemployment would need to be tackled through separate dedicated programmes.

Abdication by State

The 1990s too mark a break but perhaps in the reverse direction. With a massive thrust towards privatisation, the state has been in retreat since then. Each of the initiatives of the 1970s has been reversed. Taxation levels of the rich are down to their lowest ever, food subsidies have been cut, corporates have been allowed entry into crop procurement and public investment in agriculture is at a historical low. Agriculture has been witnessing a major crisis. In the 1990s, the rate of growth of agricultural production fell below the rate of growth of population for the first time since the 1960s and the rate of growth of dryland crops grown and eaten by the poorest people of India actually dropped under zero, with the per capita availability of pulses dipping below the 1950s level [GOI 2006]. What is worse, the PDS has become "targeted" (excluding millions of the really poor), banks have a diluted presence in rural areas and the poor are once again at the mercy of the usurious moneylender. This, along with the removal of tariffs and subsidies for the agriculture sector (following World Trade Organisation (WTO) "compulsions", see Planning Commission, 2007 for a candid admission), played a major role in creating conditions that have led to more than 1,00,000 farmers' suicides, a scale unprecedented in the history of Indian civilisation. In other significant respects things remain as bad as ever – public expenditure on health and

education continue to be among the lowest in the world. We have the highest proportion of pregnant anaemic women in the world and the proportion of our malnourished children has not once fallen significantly below 50 per cent over the last 20 years. There are 836 million people who spend less than Rs 20 per day. There is a severe breakdown of governance in rural India, with corruption reaching astronomical levels [Shah 2007a]. "Governmentality" is, if anything, in a crisis. Rather than becoming more active in reaching the rural poor, the welfare and development state appears to be in decisive retreat. The unabashed swing to the market and the private sector is ideologically justified with reference to the pervasive failure of the public sector and anti-poverty programmes. This has been the period of market as messiah, with the primary role of the state being seen as one of strengthening markets.¹³

Perhaps the single most important change that occurred post-1990 is one that has become so universally internalised that it is not even mentioned by most observers. Chatterjee is no exception. This is the obsessive preoccupation with the fiscal deficit as a parameter of macroeconomic policy, which culminated in the passage of the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act in 2003. This law binds the government to reduce the revenue deficit to zero in five years beginning 2004-05. Just when a momentum could potentially have been created for reforming the appalling quality of public services in rural India, such a move has been ruled out by legislation. In every country across the globe, across the ideological spectrum, it is the state that has historically borne the responsibility of providing health and education to its people. But in India, which neglected these from day one, what has followed since the 1990s, is the expansion of a low quality, poorly paid service structure, legitimised in the name of populist non-governmental organisation slogans like "people's participation" – a weakly disguised euphemism for the abdication by the state of its fundamental responsibilities towards its citizens. While the neglect of health has deepened immediate distress, that of education has killed future prospects of the poorest people of this country.

Chatterjee is perfectly right in his emphasis on the recent thrust into rural India by corporates, both national and multinational.

The constitutional protection extended to adivasi land, for example, seems to be under great threat, with corporates increasingly being allowed to cross this barrier. The poor peasantry undoubtedly needs to devise an imaginative political response to this new challenge. But it is fairly evident that this renewed push of the corporates, facilitated by the state, is a reflection of the state's own withdrawal from its earlier welfare and developmental role. Precisely the opposite of what Chatterjee suggests. Indeed, there appears to be a discernible shift in the nature of the state after the 1990s. Most poignantly symbolised by the incarceration of Binayak Sen and deriving popular legitimacy from the intensification of "terrorist" attacks, the state acquires an altogether more draconian character by the day. We would suggest this is the most brazen phase of Indian capitalism since independence.¹⁴

4 Reproduction of Power

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) appears to be an exception to this trend. And this brings us to the concluding point about Chatterjee. A historical account, which makes out that the course of history is completely determined by the will and stratagems of the ruling class, always leaves something to be desired. Unfortunately, this is a characteristic of much history in the Marxist tradition, invariably laced also with heavy-handed certainties.¹⁵ As Michel Foucault has remarked, "the order imposed by such functionalist or systematising thought¹⁶ is designed to mask the ruptural effects of conflict and struggle" [Gordon 1980: 82]. Our conception of the relationship of power needs to be "simultaneously anti-structuralist and anti-voluntarist (opposed to the assumption of a unitary, rational, free-willed, autonomous subject)" [Jessop 1982: 254]. As Foucault (1978:94) says, "power relations are both intentional and non-subjective". And their reproduction is never univocal for "they define innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion" [Foucault 1977: 27].

Indeed, struggle is a running leitmotif of all good Marxist historical writing¹⁷, which should effectively lead to a rejection of a teleological Science of History (with S and H in capitals). We must always allow for not

entirely predictable, contingent outcomes, being determined within the spaces of struggle in any unequal society.¹⁸ These outcomes depend on the continually shifting balance of power and are influenced by the creativity of those engaged in the struggle. Mechanisms of legitimation may well be seen as part of a continual attempt of all ruling classes to affirm and reproduce relations of power.¹⁹ But whether or not these mechanisms result in the intended outcomes is always uncertain. For a little beyond the apparent machinations of every strategist of the ruling classes, there necessarily emerges a small space. And it is this space that the oppressed in all phases of history have had to creatively seize upon for them to be able to force change to happen.

The rituals of role reversal in peasant societies have been occasions, for example, when devices apparently conceived to reinforce relations of power can become the site for rebellion, when anger pent up for generations finds sudden and not entirely anticipated expression. In his path-breaking work *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Ranajit Guha (1983: 30-36) interprets these rituals as some kind of “safety-valve” device. But from his own summary we find:

the not too rare correspondence between sacred days and insurgency as witnessed, for instance, by the incursion of Wat Tyler’s men into London on the morning of Corpus Christi, June 13, 1381, the beginning of the great series of peasant revolts in Germany during Fastnacht 1525, the conversion of a carnival featuring Mere Felle and her Infanterie into a riot in masquerade against royal tax officials in Dijon in 1630, the coincidence of some of the jacqueries of 1789 in France with Sundays, feast days, etc, as mentioned by Lefebvre and the threat of massive uprising in Bombay during Moharram and Diwali in the year of the Mutiny” [Guha 1983:31].

For 16th and 17th century France, Natalie Zemon Davis provides a vivid account of carnivals of the “Abbeys of Misrule”. She concludes that the “structure of the carnival form can evolve so that it can act both to reinforce order and to suggest alternatives to the existing order” [Davis 1975: 123]. And Le Roy Ladurie (1981) provides a classic account of the eruption of the 1580 “Carnival in Romans” into a people’s uprising.

Forced Concessions

The most important thing to recognise from our point of view is that the rituals of role reversal do not imply an alleviation or negation

of power – they are rather integrally constitutive of it. But in the very necessity of their regular repetition lies the indication of the permanent possibility of relations of power being challenged, even overthrown. Their outcome, invariably uncertain, depends crucially upon a variety of contingent factors within which they are bounded. Thus, every such event in a hierarchical social context could operate as a mechanism for the reproduction of relations of power but could also well become the site for their overthrow.²⁰ As Pierre Bourdieu argues in an analogous context, it is imperative that “the analysis holds together what holds together in practice, the *double reality* of intrinsically *equivocal, ambiguous* conduct” [Bourdieu 1977:179].

All the instruments of governmentality that Chatterjee describes as devices of the ruling classes to rein in those who could become dangerous, are also necessary concessions that rulers have been forced to make in response to the struggle of the oppressed. These devices must not be seen as leading, in a unilinear, uncontested fashion, to the outcomes willed of them by those in power. Indeed, the battle for the very enactment of NREGA can be seen as one of the few successful movements to get the voice of the rural poor heard by the national mainstream.²¹ Whatever be Chatterjee’s reading of NREGA, it is quite evident that one of the chief centres of power in remote, rural India – the ‘thekeedaars’ (local contractors) – are already feeling threatened enough by its radical implications to go on a murderous spree against NREGA activists [Shah 2008]. And clearly this reflects some unprecedented features of NREGA, which the popular struggle for the Act has been able to secure – employment as a constitutional right (as against a welfare dole), the ban on contractors (who have implemented most rural development programmes in India since independence), prohibition of labour-displacing machines, compulsory social audits and entitlements for labour that have never been seen before [Shah 2007a]. These have all been fought for and won, not merely doled out (strategically or munificently) by the state. Surely this distinction is of importance.

Let us hasten to add that this reading of NREGA does not exhaust its entire meaning. But it is an essential element of NREGA in India today. This element however small

cannot be ignored. Analogously, the very concession to vote provided to citizens in a bourgeois democracy cannot be belittled in any way. It contains within it the seeds of totally unexpected outcomes as were witnessed in India during the Lok Sabha elections of 1977 and 2004. Then the “dumb millions” of this country voted with their feet to oust regimes in a manner that no one (not the massive intelligence agencies of the state nor the all-knowing electronic media) had given them a ghost of a chance of doing.²² It is this element of surprise, of the unpredictable, that any historical account must always take into account. We need to practise the “subversive” history advocated by D D Kosambi (2002: 407), which refuses to fit snugly into prefabricated schema of the kind proposed by Chatterjee.

Such spaces, which the ruling classes are compelled to open up in an attempt to legitimise their positions of power, need to be utilised with a renewed creativity by those fighting for a more equal, less exploitative social order. We need courage and imagination to go beyond the stolid certainties of a teleological science of history. These spaces – such as the 73rd Amendment empowering local bodies of self-governance or NREGA – provide glimmers of hope for a new participatory democracy. And they demand an innovative brand of politics. Not one of mere challenge and confrontation. But one that includes nitty-gritty work to build fresh cadres and alternative institutions for a participatory social order. Where democracy, equality and development are not just demanded; they are also constructively built at the grass roots.

NOTES

- 1 Whatever be our judgment today of the merits of his approach to the question, there is no denying that for D D Kosambi, the doyen of Marxist history in India, caste was a central concern [Roy 2008]. We have all been enriched also by R S Sharma’s classic work *Sudras in Ancient India* (1980).
- 2 This is altogether more baffling as his own previous work has contributed to a greater understanding of these. See, for example, Chatterjee (1993).
- 3 Evidence for peasant stratification in pre-colonial India can be found for north India generally in Habib (1984) and Chandra (1974), for Rajasthan in Singh (1976), Tandon (1978) and Habib (1984), for Punjab in Habib (1984), for Uttar Pradesh in Stokes (1975) and Siddiqi (1973), for the Deccan and Maharashtra in Fukazawa (1984), for Bengal in Ray (1979) and for south India in Kumar (1975) and Shah (1984a).
- 4 Habib suggests that in north India during the Mughal period this labour-force could have formed as much as 20-25 per cent of the rural population [Habib 1984: 249]. According to Dharma Kumar, agricultural labourers might have formed as much as 17-25 per cent of agricultural

- population of the Madras presidency around 1,800 [Kumar 1965: 181]. Supportive evidence for these views may be found for north India generally in Raychaudhuri (1984) and Chandra (1974), for Uttar Pradesh in Siddiqi (1973), for the North-West Provinces in Alaev (1976), for Gujarat in Brennan (1974), for Maharashtra in Fukazawa (1974), for Rajasthan in Mukhia (1977), D Singh (1976) and M Tandon (1978), for Bengal in Ray (1979), for Bengal and Bihar in Chaudhury (1984), for south India generally Hjejle (1967) and for the districts Tirunelveli in Ludden (1978) and Thanjavur in Gough (1981).
- 5 Evidence for very similar agrarian systems in south India come from Hjejle (1967: 86-87) and Murton (1973: 169-70), for the North-West Provinces and Punjab from Baden-Powell (1892, Book III, Part I, Ch 2 and Part IV, Ch 2) and for Gujarat from Baden-Powell (1892, Book IV, Part II, Ch 2).
 - 6 See Shah (1984b) for a detailed argument why it may not even have been an accurate description of Europe, not only because of the historical complexities of inter-regional variation, but also thanks to the specificities of the agricultural sector of production. The latter is a further development of the original argument found in Kautsky (1899).
 - 7 Chatterjee appears grossly uninformed when he claims that microfinance "activities have been introduced quite extensively in India in recent years" (p 55). As Shah et al (2007) have shown, this is still a minuscule proportion of rural credit (less than 5 per cent). We also offer a very different reading of the potential of the SHG-bank linkage model of microfinance in altering the balance of power in rural India.
 - 8 An RBI Technical Group proposes new legislation for "incentivising good conduct" among moneylenders so that they could become part of the solution to the crisis of credit in rural India!
 - 9 As a recent Marxist study of the capitalist state says: "neither capitalism as a whole nor the capital-labour relationship on which its contradictory and conflictual dynamic depends can be reproduced purely through market relations. Both require supplementary modes of reproduction, regulation and governance – including those provided in part by the operations of the state" [Jessop 2002: 12]. And it is fascinating to note Otto von Bismarck outlining the *raison d'être* of the welfare state more than 125 years ago. He suggests that we "should cultivate the view among the propertyless classes that the state is not only an institution of necessity but also one of welfare ... they must be led to look upon the state not as an agency devised solely for the protection of the better-situated classes of society but also as one serving their needs and interests" [Khoudour-Casteras 2004]. A wily fox, Bismarck introduced old-age pensions, unemployment insurance and health insurance in Germany as early as the 1880s. Opening the debate on the subject on November 17, 1881, in the Imperial Message to the Reichstag, he used the term "applied Christianity" to describe his programme. At times he even called it 'Staatssozialismus' (state socialism)! [Richter 1965: 275].
 - 10 2006 Nobel laureate Edmund Phelps (2008) has recently called this "the economic system for industrial peace, social consensus and community stability that began to spring up here and there on the European continent in the late 1920s and 1930s – the corporatist economy" (p 1).
 - 11 We must, of course, confess acute discomfort with the instrumentalist tone.
 - 12 This was also the period of the rise to power of the rich peasantry, embodied in the persona of Charan Singh [Byres 1979], completely missing from Chatterjee's analysis.
 - 13 And this is the case across the globe. Paul Krugman describes how during the last 20 years in the United States "the empowerment of the hard right emboldened business to launch an all-out attack on the union movement; freed business executives from the political and social constraints that had previously placed limits on runaway executive paychecks; sharply reduced tax rates on high incomes; and in a variety of other ways promoted rising inequality" [Krugman 2007:7]. And fascinatingly, for Krugman, "the arrow of causation" points from politics to economics – "political change in the form of rising polarisation has been a major cause of rising inequality" (ibid). (See note 19 below for a critique of Chatterjee's "economism").
 - 14 Recently, when the prime minister feebly tried to suggest to mega-corporates that, in view of sharp inequalities in society, they might consider tempering their extravagant lifestyles [Singh 2007], he was met with a unanimous howl of loud protests from India's super-rich and their motley spokesmen. This would have been inconceivable even as late as the 1980s, till when there remained some sense of shame about the suffering of others among those more privileged. Ideologically, we live today in times that sharply contrast their portrayal by Chatterjee.
 - 15 As E P Thompson, perhaps the greatest of all Marxist historians, exclaimed in his critique of the "schematism" of Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn's work on British capitalism: "Minds which thirst for a sturdy platonism very soon become impatient with actual history" [Thompson 1978]. The same could be said of the structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser, as most starkly exemplified in the quite astounding statement of two Althusserians: "Marxism, as a theoretical and political practice, gains nothing from its association with historical writing and historical research. The study of history is not only scientifically but also politically useless" [Hindess and Hirst 1975:312].
 - 16 What Foucault has termed "the tyranny of globalising discourses" [Gordon 1980:83], which Chatterjee himself appeared to deeply question when he unapologetically offered a "fragmentary discourse" [Chatterjee 1993: 13].
 - 17 Best exemplified by the work of E P Thompson who sought "to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' handloom weaver, the 'Utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity" [Thompson 1963] (emphasis added). As Thompson says elsewhere, "Class is a social and cultural formation (whose) definition can only be made in the medium of time – that is, action and reaction, change and conflict" [Thompson 1965].
 - 18 As Thompson says, "We can see a logic in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any law. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way" (ibid) (emphasis added). Thompson is scathing in his critique of what he calls "post facto determinism". Another great Marxist historian has recently confessed in his autobiography: "I used to believe you could predict the direction in which history goes. But contingency is clearly more important than we used to allow" [Eric Hobsbawm 2002].
 - 19 Foucault would, of course, also bring into question Chatterjee's "economism in the theory of power" [Gordon 1980: 88]. "Is power always in a subordinate position relative to the economy? Is its essential end and purpose to serve the economy?" (op cit:89). Indeed, a reading of his earlier works such as Chatterjee (1982) would imply a critique of Chatterjee (2008) in this specific respect.
 - 20 We need here to understand the significance of liminality (from *limen*, signifying "threshold" in Latin, Turner, 1969: 96). As Turner explains, "the attributes of liminality or liminal personae ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classification that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" [Turner 1969:95]. As Veena Das has said, "The profound threat of these marginal positions lies in their power to question the ordering of everyday reality, through their capacity to ignore or transcend normal customary divisions" [Das 1976: 252]. Our reading is, of course, quite distinct from the structuralist rendering of Turner and Das.
 - 21 Similar struggles have been waged by people displaced by "mega-development" projects and the advisability for their right to land. These have, after protracted negotiations, resulted in legislation and policy, which not only leave a lot to be desired but are also proving virtually impossible to implement on the ground. Both the struggle and its frustration are a reflection of the increasingly naked face of capitalism since the 1990s. Can Chatterjee really claim, as he does, that these constitute "direct interventions to reverse the effects of primitive accumulation" (p 55)?
 - 22 Of course, it could be argued that these were superficial changes that did little to alter the fundamental balance of power in Indian society. We would deeply question such a view, with its implicit antediluvian unitary and insurrectionist conception of Revolution (with a capital R). But this is too big an issue for us to be able to do justice to in our short response to Chatterjee.

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