

What Have We Done to Democracy?

Of Nearsighted Progress, Feral Howls, Consensus, Chaos, and a New Cold War in Kashmir

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While we're still arguing about whether there's life after death, can we add another question to the cart? Is there life after democracy? What sort of life will it be? By "democracy" I don't mean democracy as an ideal or an aspiration. I mean the working model: Western liberal democracy, and its variants, such as they are.

So, is there life after democracy?

Attempts to answer this question often turn into a comparison of different systems of governance, and end with a somewhat prickly, combative defense of democracy. It's flawed, we say. It isn't perfect, but it's better than everything else that's on offer. Inevitably, someone in the room will say: "Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia... is that what you would prefer?"

Whether democracy should be the utopia that all "developing" societies aspire to is a separate question altogether. (I think it should. The early, idealistic phase can be quite heady.) The question about life after democracy is addressed to those of us who already live in democracies, or in countries that pretend to be democracies. It isn't meant to suggest that we lapse into older, discredited models of totalitarian or authoritarian governance. It's meant to suggest that the system of representative democracy — too much representation, too little democracy — needs some structural adjustment.

The question here, really, is what have we done to democracy? What have we turned it into? What happens once democracy has been used up? When it has been hollowed out and emptied of meaning? What happens when each of its institutions has metastasized into something dangerous? What happens now that democracy and the free market have fused into a single predatory organism with a thin, constricted imagination that revolves almost entirely around the idea of maximizing profit?

Is it possible to reverse this process? Can something that has mutated go back to being what it used to be? What we need today, for the sake of the survival of this planet, is long-term vision. Can governments whose very survival depends on immediate, extractive, short-term gain provide this? Could it be that democracy, the sacred answer to our short-term hopes and prayers, the protector of our individual freedoms and nurturer of our avaricious dreams, will turn out to be the endgame for the human race? Could it be that democracy is such a hit with modern humans precisely because it mirrors our greatest folly — our nearsightedness?

Our inability to live entirely in the present (like most animals do), combined with our

inability to see very far into the future, makes us strange in-between creatures, neither beast nor prophet. Our amazing intelligence seems to have outstripped our instinct for survival. We plunder the earth hoping that accumulating material surplus will make up for the profound, unfathomable thing that we have lost. It would be conceit to pretend I have the answers to any of these questions. But it does look as if the beacon could be failing and democracy can perhaps no longer be relied upon to deliver the justice and stability we once dreamed it would.

A Clerk of Resistance

As a writer, a fiction writer, I have often wondered whether the attempt to always be precise, to try and get it all factually right somehow reduces the epic scale of what is really going on. Does it eventually mask a larger truth? I worry that I am allowing myself to be railroaded into offering prosaic, factual precision when maybe what we need is a feral howl, or the transformative power and real precision of poetry.

Something about the cunning, Brahmanical, intricate, bureaucratic, file-bound, “apply-through-proper-channels” nature of governance and subjugation in India seems to have made a clerk out of me. My only excuse is to say that it takes odd tools to uncover the maze of subterfuge and hypocrisy that cloaks the callousness and the cold, calculated violence of the world’s favorite new superpower. Repression “through proper channels” sometimes engenders resistance “through proper channels.” As resistance goes this isn’t enough, I know. But for now, it’s all I have. Perhaps someday it will become the underpinning for poetry and for the feral howl.

Today, words like “progress” and “development” have become interchangeable with economic “reforms,” “deregulation,” and “privatization.” Freedom has come to mean choice. It has less to do with the human spirit than with different brands of deodorant. Market no longer means a place where you buy provisions. The “market” is a de-territorialized space where faceless corporations do business, including buying and selling “futures.” Justice has come to mean human rights (and of those, as they say, “a few will do”).

This theft of language, this technique of usurping words and deploying them like weapons, of using them to mask intent and to mean exactly the opposite of what they have traditionally meant, has been one of the most brilliant strategic victories of the tsars of the new dispensation. It has allowed them to marginalize their detractors, deprive them of a language to voice their critique and dismiss them as being “anti-progress,” “anti-development,” “anti-reform,” and of course “anti-national” — negativists of the worst sort.

Talk about saving a river or protecting a forest and they say, “Don’t you believe in progress?” To people whose land is being submerged by dam reservoirs, and whose homes are being bulldozed, they say, “Do you have an alternative development model?” To those who believe that a government is duty bound to provide people with basic education, health care, and social security, they say, “You’re against the market.” And who except a cretin could be against markets?

To reclaim these stolen words requires explanations that are too tedious for a world with a short attention span, and too expensive in an era when Free Speech has become unaffordable for the poor. This language heist may prove to be the keystone of our undoing.

Two decades of “Progress” in India has created a vast middle class punch-drunk on sudden wealth and the sudden respect that comes with it — and a much, much vaster, desperate underclass. Tens of millions of people have been dispossessed and displaced from their land by floods, droughts, and desertification caused by indiscriminate environmental engineering and massive infrastructural projects, dams, mines, and Special Economic Zones. All developed in the name of the poor, but really meant to service the rising demands of the new aristocracy.

The hoary institutions of Indian democracy — the judiciary, the police, the “free” press, and, of course, elections — far from working as a system of checks and balances, quite often do the opposite. They provide each other cover to promote the larger interests of Union and Progress. In the process, they generate such confusion, such a cacophony, that voices raised in warning just become part of the noise. And that only helps to enhance the image of the tolerant, lumbering, colorful, somewhat chaotic democracy. The chaos is real. But so is the consensus.

A New Cold War in Kashmir

Speaking of consensus, there’s the small and ever-present matter of Kashmir. When it comes to Kashmir the consensus in India is hard core. It cuts across every section of the establishment — including the media, the bureaucracy, the intelligentsia, and even Bollywood.

The war in the Kashmir valley is almost 20 years old now, and has claimed about 70,000 lives. Tens of thousands have been tortured, several thousand have “disappeared,” women have been raped, tens of thousands widowed. Half a million Indian troops patrol the Kashmir valley, making it the most militarized zone in the world. (The United States had about 165,000 active-duty troops in Iraq at the height of its occupation.) The Indian Army now claims that it has, for the most part, crushed militancy in Kashmir. Perhaps that’s true. But does military domination mean victory?

How does a government that claims to be a democracy justify a military occupation? By holding regular elections, of course. Elections in Kashmir have had a long and fascinating past. The blatantly rigged state election of 1987 was the immediate provocation for the armed uprising that began in 1990. Since then elections have become a finely honed instrument of the military occupation, a sinister playground for India’s deep state. Intelligence agencies have created political parties and decoy politicians, they have constructed and destroyed political careers at will. It is they more than anyone else who decide what the outcome of each election will be. After every election, the Indian establishment declares that India has won a popular mandate from the people of Kashmir.

In the summer of 2008, a dispute over land being allotted to the Amarnath Shrine Board coalesced into a massive, nonviolent uprising. Day after day, hundreds of thousands of people defied soldiers and policemen — who fired straight into the crowds, killing scores of people — and thronged the streets. From early morning to late in the night, the city reverberated to chants of “Azadi! Azadi!” (Freedom! Freedom!). Fruit sellers weighed fruit chanting “Azadi! Azadi!” Shopkeepers, doctors, houseboat owners, guides, weavers, carpet sellers — everybody was out with placards, everybody shouted “Azadi! Azadi!” The protests went on for several days.

The protests were massive. They were democratic, and they were nonviolent. For the first

time in decades fissures appeared in mainstream public opinion in India. The Indian state panicked. Unsure of how to deal with this mass civil disobedience, it ordered a crackdown. It enforced the harshest curfew in recent memory with shoot-on-sight orders. In effect, for days on end, it virtually caged millions of people. The major pro-freedom leaders were placed under house arrest, several others were jailed. House-to-house searches culminated in the arrests of hundreds of people.

Once the rebellion was brought under control, the government did something extraordinary — it announced elections in the state. Pro-independence leaders called for a boycott. They were rearrested. Almost everybody believed the elections would become a huge embarrassment for the Indian government. The security establishment was convulsed with paranoia. Its elaborate network of spies, renegades, and embedded journalists began to buzz with renewed energy. No chances were taken. (Even I, who had nothing to do with any of what was going on, was put under house arrest in Srinagar for two days.)

Calling for elections was a huge risk. But the gamble paid off. People turned out to vote in droves. It was the biggest voter turnout since the armed struggle began. It helped that the polls were scheduled so that the first districts to vote were the most militarized districts even within the Kashmir valley.

None of India's analysts, journalists, and psephologists cared to ask why people who had only weeks ago risked everything, including bullets and shoot-on-sight orders, should have suddenly changed their minds. None of the high-profile scholars of the great festival of democracy — who practically live in TV studios when there are elections in mainland India, picking apart every forecast and exit poll and every minor percentile swing in the vote count — talked about what elections mean in the presence of such a massive, year-round troop deployment (an armed soldier for every 20 civilians).

No one speculated about the mystery of hundreds of unknown candidates who materialized out of nowhere to represent political parties that had no previous presence in the Kashmir valley. Where had they come from? Who was financing them? No one was curious. No one spoke about the curfew, the mass arrests, the lockdown of constituencies that were going to the polls.

Not many talked about the fact that campaigning politicians went out of their way to de-link Azadi and the Kashmir dispute from elections, which they insisted were only about municipal issues — roads, water, electricity. No one talked about why people who have lived under a military occupation for decades — where soldiers could barge into homes and whisk away people at any time of the day or night — might need someone to listen to them, to take up their cases, to represent them.

The minute elections were over, the establishment and the mainstream press declared victory (for India) once again. The most worrying fallout was that in Kashmir, people began to parrot their colonizers' view of themselves as a somewhat pathetic people who deserved what they got. "Never trust a Kashmiri," several Kashmiris said to me. "We're fickle and unreliable." Psychological warfare, technically known as psy-ops, has been an instrument of official policy in Kashmir. Its depredations over decades — its attempt to destroy people's self-esteem — are arguably the worst aspect of the occupation. It's enough to make you wonder whether there is any connection at all between elections and democracy.

The trouble is that Kashmir sits on the fault lines of a region that is awash in weapons and

sliding into chaos. The Kashmiri freedom struggle, with its crystal clear sentiment but fuzzy outlines, is caught in the vortex of several dangerous and conflicting ideologies — Indian nationalism (corporate as well as “Hindu,” shading into imperialism), Pakistani nationalism (breaking down under the burden of its own contradictions), U.S. imperialism (made impatient by a tanking economy), and a resurgent medieval-Islamist Taliban (fast gaining legitimacy, despite its insane brutality, because it is seen to be resisting an occupation). Each of these ideologies is capable of a ruthlessness that can range from genocide to nuclear war. Add Chinese imperial ambitions, an aggressive, reincarnated Russia, and the huge reserves of natural gas in the Caspian region and persistent whispers about natural gas, oil, and uranium reserves in Kashmir and Ladakh, and you have the recipe for a new Cold War (which, like the last one, is cold for some and hot for others).

In the midst of all this, Kashmir is set to become the conduit through which the mayhem unfolding in Afghanistan and Pakistan spills into India, where it will find purchase in the anger of the young among India’s 150 million Muslims who have been brutalized, humiliated, and marginalized. Notice has been given by the series of terrorist strikes that culminated in the Mumbai attacks of 2008.

There is no doubt that the Kashmir dispute ranks right up there, along with Palestine, as one of the oldest, most intractable disputes in the world. That does not mean that it cannot be resolved. Only that the solution will not be completely to the satisfaction of any one party, one country, or one ideology. Negotiators will have to be prepared to deviate from the “party line.”

Of course, we haven’t yet reached the stage where the government of India is even prepared to admit that there’s a problem, let alone negotiate a solution. Right now it has no reason to. Internationally, its stocks are soaring. And while its neighbors deal with bloodshed, civil war, concentration camps, refugees, and army mutinies, India has just concluded a beautiful election. However, “demon-crazy” can’t fool all the people all the time. India’s temporary, shotgun solutions to the unrest in Kashmir (pardon the pun), have magnified the problem and driven it deep into a place where it is poisoning the aquifers.

Is Democracy Melting?

Perhaps the story of the Siachen Glacier, the highest battlefield in the world, is the most appropriate metaphor for the insanity of our times. Thousands of Indian and Pakistani soldiers have been deployed there, enduring chill winds and temperatures that dip to minus 40 degrees Celsius. Of the hundreds who have died there, many have died just from the elements.

The glacier has become a garbage dump now, littered with the detritus of war — thousands of empty artillery shells, empty fuel drums, ice axes, old boots, tents, and every other kind of waste that thousands of warring human beings generate. The garbage remains intact, perfectly preserved at those icy temperatures, a pristine monument to human folly.

While the Indian and Pakistani governments spend billions of dollars on weapons and the logistics of high-altitude warfare, the battlefield has begun to melt. Right now, it has shrunk to about half its size. The melting has less to do with the military standoff than with people far away, on the other side of the world, living the good life. They’re good people who believe in peace, free speech, and in human rights. They live in thriving democracies whose governments sit on the U.N. Security Council and whose economies depend heavily on the

export of war and the sale of weapons to countries like India and Pakistan. (And Rwanda, Sudan, Somalia, the Republic of Congo, Iraq, Afghanistan... it's a long list.)

The glacial melt will cause severe floods on the subcontinent, and eventually severe drought that will affect the lives of millions of people. That will give us even more reasons to fight. We'll need more weapons. Who knows? That sort of consumer confidence may be just what the world needs to get over the current recession. Then everyone in the thriving democracies will have an even better life — and the glaciers will melt even faster.

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