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**‘Histories of Power’, the ‘Universalisation of Capital’, and India’s Modi Moment: Between and Beyond Marxism and Postcolonial Theory.**

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### **Abstract**

Capitalist development in India, and the politics of those who are its immediate victims, defies the main varieties of postcolonial theory and Marxism that are today in contentious debate, in which postcolonial theory is identified with culture and particularity, and Marxism with political economy and universalism. Rejecting this framing, I draw attention to recently translated works by Marx, debates in agrarian political economy, and writings that emphasize the temporal specificity of contemporary capitalist development in India. I show the ‘compulsion’ of capitalists to compete and workers to sell their labour and is held back by the on-going politics of hegemony: capitalists want state protection and support for accumulation, and democracy and rights provide the poor with limited but sometimes effective political power. As a result, the primitive accumulation process remains indefinitely incomplete, and mature capitalism, defined by some Marxists as ‘universal’, is held in a sustained state of deferral.

## **Keywords**

Political sociology, political economy, postcolonial theory, Marxism, universalisation, histories of power, hegemony, Modi.

## **Introduction**

Postcolonial theory's rift with Marxism is not new. For the Indian context, Chakrabarty (2009) notes, it dates back to the conditions of the 1970s, when, stimulated by the rise of Maoism as a radical critique of both the postcolonial nationalist project and of party communism, scholars like him, following Mao, sought to replace the primacy of the 'economic' with that of 'the political'. This resulted in the founding of the subaltern school approach, and its successor postcolonial approaches (I refer to them, admittedly awkwardly, as the '(post)subalternist' or PS approaches in this paper). Maoism's traces into the PS approaches are unfortunately unexplored.<sup>1</sup> What is clear is that these approaches that had started as an internal critique of hegemonic 'Marxism', increasingly positioned themselves outside of Marxism in general, and took positions hostile to it. With a few exceptions, the pre-occupations and categories of Marxian political economy such as land, labour and capital, class and state, prominent in early subalternist writings, lost salience as grounds on which to explore radical political subjectivity, and were replaced by alterity and difference from 'modernity', expressed in 'culturalist' terms. India, the PS approach argued, had a different kind of capitalism, and a different 'history of power' (that is, different development of bourgeois and working class politics), than Europe, so much so that new analytical categories were needed to understand them. Today the claims of impasse and incommensurability between Marxism and PS approaches have

been accentuated by a vituperative tone. Both sides accuse each other of fundamental misreadings of history and Marxist political economy, or, alternatively, of being complicit in Eurocentrism and colonial-imperialist violence.

Rather than attempt to reconcile the ‘culturalism’ of the PS approaches with the ‘political economy’ of the Marxists, I assess their accounts of the particularity of postcoloniality and the universality of capitalist modernity, and, relatedly, of emergent forms of political subjectivity. Drawing on the debates on ‘postcolonial capitalism’ in India, a term that combines the supposedly particular with the putatively universal, I raise the following questions. Is capitalism in India today sufficiently different from capitalism’s ‘original’ location and form as to warrant the qualifier ‘postcolonial’? Is the difference primarily ‘cultural’ and, if so, how does ‘culture’ produce this difference? Or is the difference ‘political’, in the sense that the constitution of the political terrain in India makes the development of capitalism – its universalization - sufficiently different than in its original location? Those identifying with the PS position answer these questions with a qualified ‘yes’, while ‘Marxists’ hold that capitalism’s essential dynamics, namely the compulsions of capitalists to compete and of workers to sell their labour, are universal. For the former, capitalism cannot be replicated in the postcolony. For the latter, the encompassment of all social relations in the expanded reproduction of capital no longer leave an ‘outside’ to capitalism: the universalization of capital is ‘complete’, rendering the ‘postcolonial’ qualifier meaningless. Therein lies the impasse.

Neither position explains the politics of the unfolding of capitalism’s ‘essential features’ in India satisfactorily, I argue. To explain how and why Indian capitalism

today is different than the capitalism of the original trajectories, I draw on some recently translated works of Marx, and engage with the new literature on ‘the agrarian questions’ and ‘the agrarian transition’, and writings on ‘postcolonial’ and ‘compressed’ capitalism in India. Instead of taking ‘specificity’ and ‘universalism’ as settled categories I show how class and other forms of struggles, including over ‘leadership’ and ‘cultural’ meaning, produce contingent and unstable formations, a liminal state between completed transition to capitalism of the ‘original’ varieties, and a complete alterity in relation to it.

### **The Specific and the Universal**

In the inaugural essay of the subaltern studies project, Guha (1982) makes a distinction between elite and subalterns in the historiography of colonial India and of Indian nationalism, in which the elite were the protagonists of the movement from colonial subjugation to freedom, and the people were ‘followers’. Such historiography, Guha argued, could not understand the actions taken by “*people on their own, that is, independently of the elite*” outside and in defiance of elite control. (1982: 3; original emphasis) The project was to provide an account of an ‘autonomous domain’ of ‘politics of the people’, Guha’s subalterns, constituted in his original conceptualisation by class categories: workers and peasants, the urban poor and the lower sections of the petty bourgeoisie (Guha, 1982: 5). While interested primarily in the subaltern domain, Guha noted its interactions with the elite domain, led by progressive elements of the indigenous bourgeoisie.

The move away from this original moment, redolent of Gramsci-inspired 'history from below', to a preoccupation with colonial discourse and with cultural autonomy, is well documented in the literature on the 'linguistic', 'cultural' and 'Saidian' turns in subaltern studies, as briefly charted in the Introduction. The cross-pollination between subaltern studies and poststructuralist and postmodern critiques of metanarratives, enabled by the move to the United States by several key members of the collective, enabled subaltern studies to emerge as a prominent branch of 'postcolonial' theory. The elite-subaltern split in Guha's inaugural essay was now transposed over a world space, leading to the central set of claims of PS scholarship that the history of the postcolonies has been different and autonomous from the history of Europe, that methods and categories of analysis (Marxism and class, for example) emerging from Europe's internal history were inadequate and misleading to analyse these contexts, and that attempts to shoehorn the history of the colonized into these categories constituted epistemic violence.

PS scholars' interest in inassimilable difference, ultimate alterity, and irreducible autonomy of Indian postcoloniality and of Indian subalterns from the universalism of capitalist modernity led them to amend and reject categories emanating from Europe's Enlightenment, and to substitute them with *sui generis* ones. Chakrabarty (2002, 2006) suggests that culture in countries such as India is different enough from the original location of capitalist modernity as to pose a key barrier to capitalism's universalization, and of its attendant analytical and political categories. History 2, the history of the lifeworlds of the colonized, retains sufficient autonomy from History 1, the history of capital. In a later essay on the possibility of 'postcolonial political economy', Chakrabarty (2009) argues that the life experiences of the ex-colonized

exceed categories such as 'culture' and 'economy' that were historically created in societies that made early transitions to capitalist modernity, and as such cannot capture the meanings associated with them by subalterns in places like India.

Chatterjee's 1998 essay "Five Hundred Years of Fear and Love" also outlines a domain of politics, and forms of political organization and expression autonomous of 'Europe'. He traces the lineages of today's civil/political society divide, and the earlier elite-subaltern one, in the bifurcated encounter with colonial rule: most of the elites came to 'love' Europe and attempted to create mimetic versions of it, and the rest never had any knowledge of or positive experiences with colonizing Europe, and so were able to retain both an autonomy and a resentment in relation to it.

These works aim to create an 'Indian historiography' of India (Guha, 2002), based on the recovery of a past from narratives tied to conquest and colonization. They typify the turn to culture, indigeneity and alterity in the form of 'Indian particularity'. For Chakrabarty claims to universalism trace back to the Enlightenment which was itself particular to Europe and thus irretrievably Eurocentric. As importantly, the diffusion of universalist thinking was inextricable from imperialism with all its attendant brutality. For him Marxism cannot be separated from this history (Chakrabarty, 2002: 32). Marxists such as Ahmad and Sarkar have objected that far from being 'radical', this rejection of the Enlightenment in its entirety leads PS scholars to politically reactionary positions. Neither charge is without justification. Marxists like Chibber unproblematically use Robert Brenner's resolutely Eurocentric account of capitalism's origins, which they claim is based on 'universal' principles, to understand India today, and posit 'workers' as a vanguard to new social relations in

that European mould. On the other side, if, as Chakrabarty (2002: 32) says, siding with Enlightenment rationality implies complicity with the colonial and imperialist violence associated with its attempted universalization, then the political implications of creating an 'Indian' knowledge must also be made explicit, especially in light of the violence attending the Hindutva right wing's on-going projects to this end.

While Chakrabarty (2009) dismisses the possibility of 'rightwing' postcolonial theory, today Hindu nationalist authors harness the works of subaltern historians, and of foundational figures of postcolonial scholarship, to their call for an indigenous historiographical and analytical tradition drawn exclusively from Indian sources, and for rejecting 'western' modernity's key tenets such as science and reason, history and the social sciences, secularism and political equality, and class and caste, with huge implications for subalterns.<sup>2</sup> Chakrabarty (2012) suggests an equivalence between the Hindu neo-fascist Sri Ram Sene whose activists attack women they deem as behaving outside the bounds of Hindu civility, and Indian feminists involved in the 'pink chaddi' campaign in which they sent pink underwear to the chief of the Sene. Two ex-members of the subaltern collective now are prominent spokespersons for the Hindu nationalist ruling party in India, the BJP. Insisting on particularity too, not only on the universalism of European modernity, creates troubling political choices.

Another Marxist criticism of PS's rejection of the universalism of capitalist modernity is that they misunderstand capitalism, European history, universalism itself, and Marxism as an analytic approach. While they conceptualise Indian difference against the norm of 'Europe', Chibber (2013) argues that to accept the view that the European bourgeoisie was the harbinger of liberal democracy (in comparison to whom the

Indian bourgeoisie ‘failed’ in its ‘historical mission’) is to accept its self-mythology: it was in fact rapacious in utilizing force and coercion to squeeze value from labour. However, it is not only PS scholars who believe in the progressive nature of bourgeois revolutions in Europe, including their positive role in relation to working class interests: as the recent debates around Domenico Losurdo’s *Liberalism: A Counter-history* (2011) and critical responses by Pam Nogales and Ross Wolfe (2012) and Wolfe (2015) show, that sentiment is present in the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin themselves. This has implications for subaltern subjectivity beyond PS and Marxist explanations, as I show below.

For Chibber (2013) PS scholars mistake Marxist claims of capitalism’s universalism as implying homogeneity. Capitalism does not need to flatten cultural differences, and indeed, it both creates and utilizes them. What is universal, says Chibber, are two ‘essential elements’ of capitalism: the ‘universalisation of a particular strategy’ emanating from the compulsion of capitalists to compete with each other, and the compulsion of workers to sell their labour power. It is disingenuous of Chibber to present this resolutely Eurocentric Brennerian account as if it has won the day in the debate on the origins and universalization of capitalism, when it has been subject to trenchant criticism (e.g. Blaut, 1994; Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015). To specify capitalism’s universal principles cries out for an account of the process of *universalization*, which Chibber does not provide.<sup>3</sup>

Part of Marxist hostility towards the PS approach is its elevation as the authoritative framework for producing knowledge about india in the American academy, at the cost of Marxism as an analytical lens (Chibber, 2006). As Sinha (2009) has shown, there

are good reasons for the decline of certain types of Marxism, chiefly that the politics of workers and peasants and the petty bourgeoisie had turned against India's party communism, from whom they were alienated and to which they had, at times, turned antagonistic (though admittedly those parties have now regained some lost ground). The rejection of caste as an organizational category, or the tendency to subsume it under 'class' (as in Chibber's 2016 interview with Srinivasan), makes Marxism irrelevant to, and appear patronizing in relation to, on-going struggles of subalterns. Forms of Marxism still influential in the academy, such as Warrenism, promoting accelerated capitalist development, whatever its political ecological and social costs, dovetail with projects of accelerated growth such as Modi's "Make in India" agenda. Also the kind of Marxism advanced against the PS approaches itself seems amnesiac with regard to Marxism's internal critique since the 1970s, notably of its economism and essentialism.

Portraying postcolonial theory as culturalist, labeling its understanding of capitalism and European history as erroneous, and its political implications as conservative (even revanchist) might be defensible, but as argued above, these charges (except substituting 'economism' for 'culturalism') can also be laid at the door of certain kinds of Marxism. It also occludes arguments by Marxists who take PS approaches seriously, and by PS scholars who derive their position on postcolonial difference via an intimate engagement with Marxist political economy. Recent translations of Marx's own writings, and Marxist writings on the different context of capitalist development today, provide fertile grounds to explore how capitalism in places such as India differs from its original location, and the implications this has for its universalization.

## **How the conditions of capitalist development differ in places such as India**

As noted, early subaltern studies drew on key analytical categories of Marxism, including in defining the subaltern in class terms. At the same time, Guha, Chakrabarty, Spivak and Chatterjee claim that the transition to mature capitalism is incomplete in India, and so produces different kinds of political subjectivity than that of the working class in contexts of completed transitions such as Europe. This is the basis for PS claims of political-economic difference and alterity of India, and of a different ‘history of power’ in India: a polity in which liberalism (in the form of citizenship, civil society, secularism etc.) is not universal, the bourgeoisie is not hegemonic, and the working class is not fully proletarianised.

Kevin Anderson (2010) challenges both PS and hegemonic Marxist understanding of what ‘Marxist political economy’ says about India, suggesting a move in Marx’s writings from an early position in which European experiences with capitalist modernity are replicated worldwide to a later one insisting on alterity of places outside the western European core, specifically including India, because outside of this region, the preconditions were too different (Anderson, 2010: 20). One reason was, Marx notes in *Grundrisse*, the persistence of communal forms of social organization including labour and use of land and other resources, which are not easily individualized. Elsewhere Marx noted that in 19<sup>th</sup> century India there was no ‘capitalist mode of production’ as such, but rather “an historical impasse as the old

forms have disintegrated without progressive new ones being able to .... develop” (Anderson, 2010: 165). Even in the textile sector where British policy undermined traditional producers, “the British ‘work of dissolution’ was proceeding very ‘gradually’” (Anderson, 2010: 167). In his *Critique of Political Economy*, “Marx had written that Asian societies such as India needed to be analysed separately since their histories did not fit into the stages of development that he had worked out earlier on the basis of European history” (Anderson, 2010: 180). The move from primitive to capitalist accumulation proper needed preconditions that Marx did not see in India: deepening of mechanical industry, the domination of internal trade by foreign trade, and fuller incorporation into world markets (Anderson, 2010: 188).

In light of Anderson’s close reading, it becomes difficult to sustain positions such as Chibber’s that Marx suggested a sort of ‘universalisation’ of the rule of capital via reference to its ‘internal dynamism’, that universalization only means the compulsion of capitalists to compete and workers to sell their labour, or this became generalized as a corollary of ‘market dependence’, or that ‘market dependence’ is an already universalized reality. There are questions of timing and process: if, as Marx suggests, the conditions for capitalist accumulation proper did not exist at the time of his writing, and nothing like ‘universalisation’ had happened to any sufficient degree, then when exactly, if at all, can one say these conditions *did* become determining? When and how did the *difference* Marx notes between India and Europe cease to matter?

Marx’s distinction between Europe and India on the conditions for capitalist development and the universalization of capitalism’s essential principles provides the

grounds for a materialist account of postcolonial difference. I suggest that the universalisation process is *politically* driven and faces *political* challenges. Universalisation is a *class* process, in at least four ways. It requires, first, the emergence of classes, capitalists and workers, who will be *compelled* to behave in the ‘universal’ ways that Chibber outlines.<sup>4</sup> Second, in the competition among capitalists the fraction that favours the deepening of the preconditions (Chibber himself shows that not all fractions of capital want this, see Chibber, 2006) outlined above must emerge victorious. Third, in the competition between classes, capitalists supporting universalization must emerge dominant. And fourth, the ‘communal’ peasantry must dissolve adequately into ‘free’ wage labour or lose political power (including that which resulted from their alterity) and thus the capacity to adequately resist the universalization process. Did the balance of class and social forces in India, and of transnational flows and forces as instantiated in India, facilitate these conditions?

It would be difficult to make the case that competition-favouring fractions of capital have come to dominate the Indian capitalist class. During the late colonial period, while industrial activity rose, doubling between 1923 and 1947, Indian capitalists did not acquire class power to create the conditions for ‘proper’ accumulation. Capitalism’s ‘pure form’ existed at a scale lower than what Marx describes for Western Europe at the same time.<sup>5</sup> As Tyabji (2015: 98) notes, quoting Levkovsky (1966), unlike in Britain from where the factory as an organizational form was imported to India, and where it “embodied concentrations of industrial capital”, in India factory owners continued moneylending and trade along with manufacturing, increased moneylending during the Depression, and maintained connections with rural moneylending: “the factory form merely cloaked concentrations of merchant and

usurer capital”. In the postcolonial period, state-owned enterprises, which also received funds and technical inputs substantially via international development flows, came to dominate many key sectors, such as banks, mining, energy, steel, infrastructure, railways etc., run on rationales (set out in the Industry Policy Resolutions of 1948 and 1956) that were not only economic but also ‘political’ (e.g. employment, regional equity, national security, self-sufficiency), and accounted for a substantial percentage of GDP, output and employment (Jain et al., 2014). The public sector enterprises developed under Cold War conditions, in which India, by taking a ‘non-aligned’ position independent of both the US and USSR, hoped to receive aid from their blocs. The private sector was subjected to the ‘license-permit’ raj with administrative coercion, heavy regulation and taxation. Foreign investment in the private sector was discouraged. Many enterprises were ‘nationalised’ in the late 1960s and 1970s as Indira Gandhi attacked capitalists for bankrolling her opponents.

The sluggish development of capitalism in India from 1947-1970 is attributed by Chatterjee’s (1996) to the ‘passive revolution’, in which the votaries of rapid capitalist development within the ruling coalition were not dominant. There was accommodation and tussle within the ruling coalition, with different constituents dominating at one time or another, and on one issue or another. Whether one takes Chatterjee’s argument that capitalists *lacked* sufficient power to push through the agenda of rapid capitalist development or agree with Chibber (2006) that they *had* power which they used to orient the state towards protection, the result is the same: the postponement of the conditions of some sort of maturity, in which the universalization of the capitalism’s core compulsions held sway.

From the limited sales of public sector assets by Indira Gandhi's government in 1981 to the full-blown 'liberalisation' of the economy from the 1990s to the present, the scope of the private sector, and of foreign direct investment has expanded tremendously. This is a result both of the impositions by the World Bank and the IMF, or the US and its allies who triumphed in the Cold War, but also a result of changes in the preferences and aspirations of Indian capitalists. These changes form the conditions favouring increasing corporate profits and expansion of the private sector, but compulsive competition is still held at bay by state measures, such as loan write-offs and subsidies to business.<sup>6</sup> Both Indian capitalists individually, and organized fractions of capital, depend upon political contacts to buffer them against domestic and international economic and political risks. Arguably, it is in this way that Indian capitalism is universal, rather than in being subject to compulsive competition.

Since industrialization was limited until the end of colonialism, so was the emergence of the 'paradigmatic' working class. Rural community attenuated, but proletarianisation did not happen at the scale or with the completeness of Western Europe; the exodus of the poor to the cities seen in the west occurred to a more limited degree, despite the colonial state's lack of action to provide succor to victims of regular famines. For the immediately postcolonial period, planned state interventions in the economy aimed to ease 'the rigours of transition' for the rural poor and to take a gradualist approach to a transition to capitalist agriculture. As the 'mode of production' debates of the 1970s and 1980s establish, capitalist relations in

agriculture had become widespread, though as Lerche (2013) notes, this tendency shows wide regional variation.

India agriculture, too, displays evidence of a blocked transition, in that the shift from a rural, agrarian society to an urban industrial one has reached an impasse. Small farms persist, with 70% the rural population (50% of the national population) seeking livelihoods from them. Food productivity, incomes, and share of GDP are down. Precarity is high, with substantial crop losses caused by unseasonal rain, too much or too little rain. Indebtedness too is high, and both crop failure and bumper crops affect farmers adversely.<sup>7</sup> There is accelerated conversion of farmland into non-agricultural purposes, including industry, infrastructure, housing development, special economic zones and economic processing zones, sports venues, etc. Farmers' distress is seen in the high number of suicides, estimated at 200,000 incidences between 1995-2006 (Nagaraj, 2008: 3), and close to 300,000 between 1995-2014 by Sainath (2014).<sup>8</sup>

Unlike classical trajectories of primitive accumulation, Bernstein's (2005) general point that contemporary capitalist development proceeds without the resolution of the agrarian questions, because national industrialization now no longer needs capital released from agriculture domestically, and industry cannot absorb the countryside's 'surplus' population – nor does it need to - is applicable to India. It is difficult for the peasantry either to stay in agriculture or to move to industrial work. As Gupta (2015: 38) notes, "labour is ready to be hired for a song" but does not always find a buyer. Those who migrate to cities to work in industry or in services are not fully proletarianized, but maintain live links with the countryside, and exist in a sustained state of liminality between 'peasant' and 'worker' categories: venturing into non-

agricultural work while still maintaining one foot in agrarian production relations. This availability of cheap labour depresses wages and has resulted in a manufacturing 'boom' in small towns, and rural-to-rural migration.

D'Costa (2014) describes India's current growth phase as 'compressed capitalism' in which "phases of capitalism do not follow each other in sequential order", rather "advanced accumulation" by the corporate sector, including "innovation-led economic expansion" (D'Costa, 2014: 319) coexists with primitive accumulation, resulting in "a massive lag in agricultural transition but a highly speeded up process of industrialization and growth in services" (D'Costa, 2014: 324). Technological complexity and the availability of foreign direct investment allows leapfrogging over 'stages' previously seen as necessary, so there is no mass employment as in the classic trajectories, nor generalized income growth, but rather "the mobilization of vast numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled migrant workers in .... the informal sector in India" with low wages (D'Costa, 2014: 321-2). Forms of petty commodity production persist, contracted to producers in the formal sector (D'Costa, 2014: 332). Compressed capitalism also encourages consolidation of landlord class power rather than its liquidation. On the one hand, as Maoists argue (as per Lerche, 2013), they form part of the social coalition, with usurers, merchants, religious institutions, and local officials dominating the countryside, and as such play prominent roles *as landlords* in local and regional politics. On the other, they invest in real estate and other 'modern' sectors.

Sanyal (2007) suggests another reason why the transition in India, unlike in the earlier trajectories, is not complete: because programmes undertaken by governments, NGOs

and international development agencies to mitigate the rigours of transition for peasants and the poor maintain them in this liminal space. For him petty commodity production does not signify the universalisation of capitalism, but a hybrid form, exhibiting features of pre-, non- and more recognizably capitalist elements signaling not so much a transition to capitalism as the sustained distress of the subjects of transition. Development assistance provides life to this form via microfinance, livelihoods or other income-increasing schemes targeting particular commodities. Both capital accumulation *and* its legitimation via development programs today happen on a world scale, and the rights of the dispossessed who cannot be incorporated by compressed capitalism are integral to such programs.

Development interventions and rights discourses that aim to protect and enhance livelihoods and incomes present a *potential* barrier to primitive accumulation, but contrary to Sanyal's (2007) and Chatterjee's (2008) suggestion, I argue these measures fall well short of a 'reversal' of capitalist development. Programs of mitigation, such as the public food distribution scheme, the rural employment guarantee, etc., are themselves sites of predatory accumulation by politicians, public officials, and criminals. However, social movements, including armed rebellion by those resisting dispossession of the commons and other means of livelihoods, with involvement of Maoist revolutionaries, strong support from 'progressive' elements of the bourgeoisie, and transnational solidarity channeled via powerful groups like Greenpeace, have succeeded in exceptional cases to stall projects. For the most part, however, projects that will cause dispossession and displacement are common: since 2005 more than 1000 projects have been approved, despite government agencies

warning of risk of violent opposition to the growth model (Government of India, 2008).

In this section, I have shown that the debate on whether Indian capitalism is particular, or just an iteration of the ‘universalization of particular strategies’, erroneously posits ‘culture’ against ‘political economy’, when ‘political economy’ itself provides grounds for arguing for considerable difference between the Indian experience compared to the paradigmatic trajectories of capitalist transition: from Marx’s emphasis on Indian difference, to Chatterjee’s and Chibber’s account of the power of Indian capitalists to slow down an accelerated transition, to agrarian Marxists’ contention that bypassing the resolution of the agrarian questions of capital and labour characterizes contemporary capitalism. Supposedly transitional forms such as the peasantry, petty commodity production and landlord power persist rather than disappear, partly because in a democracy political compulsions emanating from universal suffrage, and legitimation of global capitalism via international development programs and the rights agenda, prevent primitive accumulation from reaching its ‘logical’ conclusion. What are the implications of these differences for ‘histories of power’, particularly as revealed in the new ruling coalition assembled by the current Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi?

### **Histories of Power and the Modi moment**

For PS approaches, ‘histories of power’ in India differ from Europe in that a) the Indian bourgeoisie was unable to create a hegemony of liberal capitalism; b) that nothing like the paradigmatic working class emerged in India; c) the politics of most

of the population remains autonomous from modern-liberal logics and institutional practices; and d) as a result political demands are not made in the language of universal rights but as exceptions. Marxists rebut these claims, arguing that the European bourgeoisie was rapacious and coercive in its relation with labour, and was thus never hegemonic. They urge a restoration of ‘class analysis’ (rather than, say, giving indigeneity, caste or community analytical primacy as PS scholars do) as the main explanatory lens, and endorse politics of workers based on rational and universal principles of solidarity, pursued under the leadership of a mass political party. This assumes that a working class already exists, ignoring Ambedkar’s idea that caste is not only a division of labour but a division of *labourers* (see Teltumbde, 2010). Some questions to ask, therefore, are: What is ‘hegemony’ in the Indian political field and does the power of the ‘Indian bourgeoisie’ approximate it? What role if any do subalterns have in its constitution? What are the modes of establishing hegemony within the Indian political field, and what challenges? And do canonical Marxist or PS accounts adequately explain the politics of the bourgeoisie and of workers and peasants?<sup>9</sup>

Note that both perspectives a) suggest coercion as the opposite of hegemony; b) take hegemony as a form of power operating exclusively in *national* spaces and c) agree that the Indian bourgeoisie was not hegemonic. For Gramsci, hegemony involved some combination of coercion, corruption and consent; domination describes a situation in which power is exercised without needing the active consent of the ruled. To elicit consent, ruling classes accommodate some interests of subordinate classes in agendas of rule. Contrary to the claims of PS approaches and their Marxist critics, in the Indian bourgeoisie *did* exercise hegemony, and not merely domination, with

considerable stability, from the 1930s to the mid-1960s.<sup>10</sup> This is indicated by the (admittedly unequal) incorporation of the ruled into structures of rule, and by their relative political quiescence. While the temporal limits of the ‘postcolonial’ are rarely specified, extending from decolonization to now, I suggest that postcolonial developmentalism (known also as Nehruvian socialism) began to break down from the mid-1970s. Since the 1980s, a new bourgeoisie has emerged as the champion of rapid capitalist development, replacing the postcolonial bourgeoisie, and new categories of workers have emerged that are different from both the PS and Marxist accounts. Both require a new account of ‘hegemony’.

The ‘bourgeoisie’ is a more capacious term, in Marx, Engels and Lenin’s account and in popular usage, than merely ‘capitalists’ as in the narrow usage by Marxists such as Chibber. It includes ‘owners of means of production’ and ‘employers of labour’, but also higher-level employees of capitalists, rentiers, the intelligentsia, upper level civil servants and military officials and the like. It also includes part of the ‘middle classes’ whose lower half belongs to the ‘petty bourgeoisie’. This bourgeoisie was arguably hegemonic until the early 1970s, but its hegemony eroded from the late-1960s, signaled by the emergence of the Maoist movement and the massive state repression unleashed on it, and by a range of new movements against the growth model, corruption and persistent caste oppression. By the time of the imposition of the national emergency in 1975, coercion trumped active consent as the core component of hegemony, indeed the imposition of the Emergency was the substitution of hegemony by domination. I have suggested elsewhere (Sinha, 2015) that the bourgeoisie has now bifurcated. The ‘old’ bourgeoisie has lost state power: it now exists as ‘civil society’ defenders of the pillars of an idealized Nehruvian socialism in

a debate that they have now lost, and appear as ‘progressive’ allies of victims of rapid growth, or growing communalization, while the new bourgeoisie has emerged as the champions of rapid growth and opponents of programs to mitigate its social and environmental costs.

D’Costa suggests ‘mature capitalism’ began to take roots in India from the 1990s, following “state intervention in alliance with and in favor of a nascent capitalist class” (2014: 326), whose preference for rapid growth, privatization, market reforms, deregulation, discourses equating state sectors with corruption and inefficiency, need to reduce subsidies, etc., watchwords common to the neoliberal revolution worldwide, have become salient in India. The state brokered and activated relations between national and transnational capital (via facilitating FDI and joint ventures), between ‘public’ and ‘private’ sectors (via public-private partnerships), and shifted public assets to private ownership (via auction of public holdings in industry, mining, land, etc.). These changes were ushered in by the Congress-party led coalitions and deepened by BJP-led ones, with the former retaining a component of welfarism and the latter seeing growth as a substitute for welfare. Currently a key desiderata of ‘good governance’ is to ‘improve the ease of doing business’. This established what Chatterjee (2008) calls the ‘hegemony of corporate capital’, including new fractions of capitalists, and an entire generation of middle classes and aspirational middle classes opposed to state regulation of the economy. Their clearest political expression came with the popular electoral mandate – active consent - for the Modi government. How has the universalisation of capital fared as a political project given that a stronger coalition in support of it exists today than at anytime in the past?

The slowdown in approvals of projects by the previous UPA government, and its turn towards 'inclusive neoliberalism' with policies to mitigate the effects of dispossession, displacement and immiseration, generated the charges of 'policy paralysis' and corruption by the BJP under Modi's leadership, becoming the central plank of its successful election campaign. Modi focused on the inability of the Congress-led governments to complete the transition to mature capitalism, and offered an agenda of large-scale privatization, deepening of markets, further deregulation, making the state more business-friendly, eliminating corruption, cutting subsidies, enhancing manufacture, unleashing the IT sector, massive infrastructure construction, making land acquisition and land use more friendly to capital, and removal of social and environmental constraints to these objectives. Modi lampooned previous attempts at poverty elimination and presented rapid capitalist development as the only way to end poverty and social deprivation. He received unreserved support from all fractions of Indian and transnational capital, from the 'neo middle class', from youth and from rich farmers.<sup>11</sup> Some prominent dalit intellectuals and politicians too supported this agenda.<sup>12</sup> His support cut across class and caste, breaking and drawing fragments that were previously consolidated into other units of political mobilization, though it thinned out down the income scale.

While Modi's agenda is for accelerated growth and the expansion of the sovereignty of capital, whether it will universalise the compulsion to compete that Chibber sees as central to capitalism is more ambiguous. During his frequent international trips Modi has pushed for opportunities for Indian capitalists and certain business houses particularly, including facilitating joint ventures in sectors like Defence which had been near-monopolies of the public sector, while at the same cushioning these houses

from the forces of raw competition, via massive public lands giveaways, mammoth subsidies and tax breaks, or overlooking huge tax arrears (NDTV, 2015). Another component of the bourgeoisie, the traders, shopkeepers and merchants, has opposed the opening up of their sectors to foreign players.

Modi's policies to compel workers to sell their labour are more forthright. Contrary to Lerche's (2013) suggestion that the non-agrarian Indian bourgeoisie does not seem to need to press for a solution to the agrarian question in the classical sense, this social coalition *is* in fact looking to resolve the agrarian question, via its vocal support for an aggressive land acquisition law that removes social and environmental checks, and its opposition to rural employment guarantee, the right to food, and to subsidies generally.<sup>13</sup> Hostility to anti-poverty programs that, for Sanyal, reverse or at least mitigate the effects of compressed capitalism, is evident in ridiculing the poor and the 'critiques of povertarianism' made by intellectuals of this class.<sup>14</sup> Despite campaign promises, output support prices to farmers have not been hiked, and compensation for weather related crop losses is low. Farmer suicides, continuing unabated, are publicly mocked by ministers. So-called labour reforms make hiring and firing of workers easier and collective action more difficult, and replace state monitoring and sanctioning of employers with self-reporting and self-policing. The conversion of agricultural land to industrial, real-estate, infrastructure, sport and commercial uses aims to produce new informal workers, whose low wages and minimally regulated working conditions will fuel Modi's 'Make in India' project.

Establishing the pre-conditions of market dependence involves violence and coercion directed towards those who will oppose it. As for India's Maoists who claim to act on

behalf of tribals, the rural poor and informal workers, Modi promises a ‘fight to the finish’ and supports heavy police action, for which he has significant consent of his electoral base and beyond. However, despite having a clear electoral mandate for his platform, Modi is unable to holding together the coalition for capitalist growth, and simultaneously to maintain coherence to the narrative that he is acting on behalf of, and for the benefit of, the poor. Declaring opponents of his agenda to be threats to ‘national economic security’ and part of a global conspiracy to keep India down, he has clamped down on ‘civil society’ and social movement activists. But Modi politically cannot afford to be seen as anti-poor (see Singh, 2015). The continued agrarian crisis, exacerbated by weather events, has made it difficult to cut subsidies and programs of mitigating primitive accumulation’s effect on the rural poor. Farmers’ groups, including those affiliated with his party, are opposed to dilutions to the land acquisition provisions, as are labour groups to his ‘labour reform’ proposals. Indeed Modi’s 2016-17 Budget is seen as favouring distressed farmers over market reforms (Hotta, 2016).

Modi’s agenda for rapid transition to mature capitalism faces dilemmas posed by D’Costa’s ‘compression’. Marx, in *Capital I* (1967: 507), had noted that in England by the 19th century, “the very memory of the connexion between the agricultural labourer and the communal property had .... vanished.” In contrast to this amnesia regarding the brutal process of primitive accumulation, that dissolved the peasantry and created the proletariat, India’s new working class, recent and partial-migrants to cities, maintains live links with the countryside, and its political subjectivity is also constituted by agrarian issues, and issues of migration. Historically oppressed castes dominate economic categories like small-holders, share-croppers and landless

workers, and are formed into political constituencies such as ‘extremely backward castes’. The persistence of petty commodity production, which in India is caste and religious-community coded (in the sense that certain castes and religious communities dominate the production of particular commodities), implies a good ‘political economy’ rather than ‘cultural’ reason for the continued political salience of caste. These subjectivities, rather than that of pure ‘worker’, emerge in a context in which movements for rights to nature, rights for dalits and women, rights to food, employment, and education, and for civil liberties, an equitable development model, regional identity and autonomy, are sedimented features of the political terrain. Primitive accumulation cannot be taken to its ‘logical’ conclusion when its immediate victims have rights, institutionalized means of claim making, social movements and solidarity networks.

The ‘cultural difference’ of the victims of primitive accumulation, articulated in the language of rights and based on provisions of the Fifth and Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, poses a continuing barrier to that process: witness the ‘victories’, admittedly contingent and unstable, of Kondh tribals in relation to POSCO, or of SEZ cancellations in Bengal and elsewhere. While Modi had castigated the UPA for delays in clearing mining projects, his ministry was forced within a year to notify state government to respect tribal rights and concerns and constitutional provisions in awarding contracts (Patel, 2015).

Even when the coalition for capital has ‘hegemonic’ power in the form of active consent of and enthusiastic enrolment by a decisive swathe of the population, Modi still needs ‘culture’ to suture ‘nationalism’ to ‘capitalism’, for example via seemingly

bland slogans like ‘India First’ and overt appeals to Hindu nationalism. But hegemony in India today is not what it used to be. Its politics, while still primarily played out in India, now has overt transnational connections, whether in terms of capital flows, or in terms of monitoring and evaluations by international development agencies and investment banks and consultancies, or in relation of networks of solidarity with those resisting primitive accumulation.<sup>15</sup> Also it lacks the stability and longevity that is normally attributed to it, and the discourses and mechanisms for the enrolment of support provide both openings for counter-mobilizations as well as ‘languages of contention’ (Roseberry, 1994). Instead of the stripped-to-the-bones environment of ‘compulsive behaviour’, the agenda is moored in the stated objective of eradicating poverty in record time, which provides grounds for assessment and critique of rule. Modi, while unapologetically pro-capitalist and with close relation to domestic and transnational capitalists, has been ‘pro-business’ but has also been careful not to appear too ‘pro-market’ or ‘pro-competition’. Indeed, he is now recognized not to believe in free-market capitalism (Bandow, 2015). Thus generalized market dependence that would cause universalisation of compulsion-oriented behaviour continues to be held in a sustained state of deferral.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I asked whether Indian capitalism, and the political behaviour of social groups in relation to it, were sufficiently different from those western Europe to warrant the qualifier ‘postcolonial’, how the process of the universalization of capitalism’s ‘essential elements’ as outlined by Chibber over this terrain of difference has fared, and how these have affected the conditions for the emergence of new forms

of political subjectivity. I attempted to move the debate away from its framing as ‘culture/particularity vs political economy/universalism’, in which both sides make exaggerated and empirically unsustainable claims for culture and political economy. If the former does not see how ‘culture’ transforms over time, in part responding to the encounter with ‘Western modernity’, the latter provides no account of the process of universalization, the challenges it faces and the mutations that occur as a result of these challenges. My attempt has been to present the ‘universalisation’ of capitalism’s ‘core principles’ as a process determined by political - including class – struggles, and as an open-ended, indeterminate process in contemporary India.

The universalisation of behaviour of capitalists and workers responding to ‘the dull compulsion of economic force’ implies the completion of a transition to something resembling mature capitalism: a condition of generalized commodity production, in which the imperative of accumulation drives capitalists’ behaviour, and where labour becomes a commodity (Bernstein, 2010: 25-27). In places like India today not only is this process not ‘complete’, but as Sanyal (2007) suggests, it is never likely to be: capitalism will be in a constant state of ‘becoming’, never reaching the state of ‘being’. That deferral of completeness of the transition is the central point of difference between capitalism in India and in the original trajectories of the European core.

For Marx the universalization of capital involved violent subjugation and annihilation of non-capitalist ways of life, as Anievas and Nisancioglu (2015) remind us. But because the victims of primitive accumulation are subjects of rights and protagonists in powerful movements (and not only because ‘capital does not need the resolution of

agrarian questions' as per Bernstein), in India the annihilation of non-capitalist ways of life – including hybrid production relations - and categories is necessarily incomplete, and are kept alive by development interventions to benefit those who are excluded from capitalist relations but have some political power in the form of laws and justice and solidarity discourses that firm up non-capitalist forms of subjectivity, and put limits to the violence of the universalization process on extra-economic grounds. Caste, gender, tribe and region remain inextricable from the category of labour, and from class identities, rather than separated from it, and are points for the emergence of political subjectivity in addition to – sometimes as alternative to - that of the 'working class'. An argument for an extension of class analysis and a class-based universal solidarity must take into account these non-economic – though still 'rational' - forms of subjectivity: a 'pure' class consciousness of workers and peasant might emerge at specific moments, but a permanent and stable subjectivity of the 'working class' of earlier, more successful transition contexts, is not possible. Culture is key to the constitution of political subjects opposed to the universalisation of capital and in the politics of solidarity, not an optional add-on. This is a more complex task than building solidarity on some woolly notion of 'basic human needs' as Chibber (2013) suggests: 'dignity' and 'recognition' figure as important goals of subaltern movements, not only wages. It is in that sense that we need to approach the issue of 'histories of power'.

What is universalized today is not only aspects of the experience of early capitalist transitions but also certain features of postcolonial capitalism: informalization and precarity of work is widespread in capitalism's original homelands, 'cultural' elements such as nationalism, ethno-centrism and populism return as key elements of the politics of the working class, and the long term decline of the paradigmatic

organisations of workers signals that the conditions of the postcolony now define core relations in the metropolitan centres. We therefore need to think of ‘universalization’ not as a diffusion of core principles radiating from the centre, but as dynamics with multiple points of origin creating a shifting, changing universe.

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### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Except, tangentially, in Chaudhary 1987.

<sup>2</sup> This is exemplified in the writings of Rajiv Malhotra, who draws on Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Ranajit Guha, Ashis Nandy and Enrique Dussel, among others.

<sup>3</sup> This critique is also made in Knafo and Teschke (2015), footnote 9.

<sup>4</sup> In fact one could say that different compulsions are constitutive of class position and structure.

<sup>5</sup> See Birla (2009) for an account of the attempt by colonial authorities to create the preconditions for the spread of capitalism’s core principles, and the compromises made with community and with the realities of colonial rule. Simeon (2014) points out that the other compulsions were at play in colonial conditions: the Tatas were *compelled* to work for the colonial state, which cushioned it from the sort of compulsion Chibber has in mind.

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<sup>6</sup> Sainath (2014b) mentions a figure of Rs 36.5 trillion in customs duties, taxes and bad loans written off between 2005-6 to 2013-14. Mallet and Crabtree (2015) estimate that 14% of public sector bank assets are ‘bad assets and doubtful loans’.

<sup>7</sup> See Kar’s (2015) report on the suicides by potato farmers in Bengal when bumper crops pushed prices down to half their normal level, rendering them unable to repay their loans.

<sup>8</sup> Arvind Panagariya, now Economic Advisor to the Modi government, estimated that close 40% of these suicides were due to reasons connected with agriculture. (2008: 153) This is considered a low figure.

<sup>9</sup> Whether liberal capitalism was never ‘hegemonic’ in Europe, even in the Golden Age of the Keynesian National Welfare State, an important question, is outside of the scope of this paper. See Overbeek and van der Pijl (1993) for a fuller consideration of the end of this hegemonic project in Western Europe.

<sup>10</sup> A Maoist intellectual, ‘VV’, tells Sudeep Chakravarti (2008: 230), “In Nehru’s time, from independence to 1964, there was an illusion of welfare state. During his daughter Indira’s time there was the illusion of Garibi Hatao. Even the state...is not claiming to be a welfare state anymore.”

<sup>11</sup> The ‘neo-middle class’ referred to Modi in his speeches and in the BJP manifesto are newly urban or from so-called ‘tier-2’ and ‘tier 3 cities’, are aggressively aspirational, hyper-nationalist and are overwhelmingly involved in non-state sector employment. Some of these attributes are also recognized in Jaffrelot (2013: 83-84).

<sup>12</sup> In the words of prominent pro-capitalist Dalit intellectual Chandrabhan Prasad, “capitalism is changing caste much faster than any human being. Therefore, in capitalism versus caste, there is a battle going on and Dalits should look at capitalism as a crusader against caste.” <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/capitalism-is-changing-caste-much-faster-than-any-human-being.-dalits-should-look-at-capitalism-as-a-crusader-against-caste/1127570/0>. (Consulted September 14 2014). D Shyam Babu, a senior fellow at New Delhi’s Centre for Policy Research, a New Delhi think-tank, argues that Dalits’ political preferences have moved from human rights violations, land reforms and other social issues, to the need for entrepreneurial opportunities, occupational diversity and mobility. <http://www.rediff.com/news/report/ls-election-caste-or-progress-what-young-dalit-voters-want/20140425.htm> (Consulted September 15 2014). Neither of them endorsed Modi’s campaign.

<sup>13</sup> They suggest, for example, the removal of the ‘consent clause’ in the Forest Rights Act which requires permission of right-holding communities before forested land is converted for mining or other extractive or developmental purpose. See <http://www.financialexpress.com/article/fe-columnist/righting-forest-rights/111217/>

<sup>14</sup> I have in mind Gurcharan Das, Shekhar Gupta, Surjit Bhalla and Tavleen Singh who are prominent columnists for the the major newspapers and regular commentators on Indian television news programs.

<sup>15</sup> Witness the Modi’s government’s moves to change the calculation of the growth rate to attract FDI, and the claims of its supporters that India’s rank as the top destination of FDI legitimizes his rule. These figures are questioned by international development agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank. Indian ruling coalitions take seriously the credit ratings given to India by Moody’s and Standard and Poor. Aware of the potential of transnational solidarity networks in disrupting the growth plans, the Modi government has banned 13,000 NGOs, including prominent transnational ones such as Greenpeace.

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