



"I am the people—the mob—the crowd—the mass."

— Carl Sandburg

The title of political theorist and anthropologist Partha Chatterjee's latest book invokes an imagery of the masses as described by Sandburg's poem of the same title. But the book is not about those people *per se*, but an exploration rather of the phrase. Summoned by many a political aspirant on the election campaign dais, "the people" is an ambiguous construct after all, whose constituency keeps shifting depending on the expediency of the moment of its invocation. What Chatterjee does in this book is to trace a history of the idea of "the people", providing an overview of the rise of populist politics, focussing, largely on the Indian experience. He draws amply upon the works of theorists such as Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Ernesto Laclau in the process, demonstrating the manner in which the meanings conveyed through the phrase have shifted since the end of World War II, and also prescribing ways in which a counter hegemonic strategy could be devised to address the current crisis of liberal democracy.

Based on the Ruth Benedict lecture series he delivered at Columbia University in 2018, this book builds upon the academic's previous oeuvre on nationalism and colonial history that foregrounded the postcolonial experience of southern nations. Chatterjee contends that "various features that are characteristic of democracies in Africa or Asia are now being seen in Europe and the United States because of underlying structural relations that have long tied metropolitan centres to their colonial and postcolonial peripheries" (Preface). His central argument is that while in the West, populism emerged as a result of the contraction of the integral state, in India, it has been a survival tactic for political parties expanding along with the reach of the state.

In Chapter One, Chatterjee critically examines Ruth Benedict's war ethnography *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, in which the American anthropologist sought to identify a unique national culture of the Japanese peoples. Employing cultural relativism, she described Japanese society as emphasising shame as against guilt in Western societies. The author uses this as a starting point to discuss how "on the brink of decolonisation, Benedict was imagining humanity as a congeries of national peoples". (p 5) Thereafter, he proceeds to examine the

On the idea of 'the people'

I Am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today

By Partha Chatterjee

Permanent Black, Ranikhet, India, 2019, 212 pp., Rs 595 (HB)

ISBN - 978-81-7824-553-9

VIDYA VENKAT

What Partha Chatterjee does in this book is to trace a history of the idea of "the people", providing an overview of the rise of populist politics, focussing, largely on the Indian experience. He draws amply upon the works of theorists such as Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Ernesto Laclau in the process, demonstrating the manner in which the meanings conveyed through the phrase have shifted since the end of World War II, and also prescribing ways in which a counter hegemonic strategy could be devised to address the current crisis of liberal democracy

statement of the Indian judge Radha Binod Pal at the 1946 Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, in which the jurist dissented the punishment meted out to former Japanese political heads and army generals, arguing broadly that the winners of a war did not hold the right to pronounce the losing side as "guilty" when the definition of their crime was still debated. Pal insisted that "the victorious side was now creating law on the basis of dubious definitions in order to suit its political interest" (p 16) questioning why the US was not tried in a similar manner for bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Chatterjee juxtaposes Pal's views on Japanese guilt during the war against Benedict's analysis to demonstrate the uneven grounds on which a national culture

could be used to claim sovereignty by a people. The author then discusses how German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte used the idea of linguistic nationalism to qualify "the people" as a construct, which again contrasted with that of Benedict's when he emphasised the need to cultivate an inner spiritual life consistent with the national character and to use that to resist foreign invasion.

In Chapter Two, Chatterjee traces the history of the moral decline of the nation-state. The analysis provides a historical reasoning for the present crisis of liberal democracy, locating it in the "mechanisms of domination grounded in the sovereignty of the people". (p 33) Drawing upon the Foucauldian idea of governmentality,

A category that Chatterjee introduces in the course of his argument is 'people-nation', a twin paired with the 'nation-state'. By introducing this distinction, Chatterjee intends to break the discursive unity forged between a nation and its peoples. In the context of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's Hindutva project in India, Chatterjee describes the scheme as a hegemonic struggle to converge the nation-state and the people-nation, in a bid to capitalise on the idea that the people-nation is as old as Indian civilisation itself. A potential counter hegemonic narrative, therefore, could be mounted by regional populist movements presenting the Indian nation-state as one found by a number of federating peoples who came together to form a sovereign state This, alas, has not been mobilised as yet

the author emphasises the troubled history of state formation, in which a violent process of bourgeoisie power capture and dominance was justified under the rubric of popular sovereignty and sustained through coercive state practices of regulation. Here, Chatterjee revisits a position originally articulated in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986), where he had argued that the Indian freedom struggle was a derivative discourse, with nationalism ushering in a false sense of freedom and reproducing the exploitative structures of rule imposed by colonialism, which was now in the hands of a middle-class elite. Using Gramsci's idea of a war of position, he argues that in postcolonial nations a theatre of war ensues "among social groups to achieve dominance over the people-nation". (p 41) He distinguishes between the historical formation of the 'nation-state' and that of the 'people-nation', arguing that the ruling bloc in a state of passive revolution seeks to "pull together the two different histories – one of the nation-state and the other of the people-nation – that do not necessarily move in step". (p 47)

Chatterjee has a penchant for framing analytical categories in the course of his argument. One such category is 'political society', which he introduced in *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (Permanent Black, 2004) to refer to the masses organising outside the state and the civil society in the Gramscian sense. This category was different from Gramsci's (1971)¹ political society that denoted a zone of force where the state extended its coercive influence. The actors of Chatterjee's political society instead comprise the various peoples in postcolonial nation-states, dependent on state welfare and often subsisting under a shadow of illegality. He locates the rise of populism in India amidst this population, arguing that the state has to cater to these groups as a means to sustain power by cultivating their political allegiance. This leads to a sort of mass clientelism and a suppression of civil society characteristic of populist regimes. While the category has analytical value, it is debatable whether its purported meaning could be sustained in describing real-world scenarios. As Mannathukkaren (2010)² has shown, the breakdown of the binaries of civil society/political society in the instance of the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala reveals a need to move beyond such conceptual barriers.

Another category which Chatterjee introduces is 'people-nation', a twin paired with the 'nation-state'. By introducing this distinction, Chatterjee intends to break the discursive unity forged between a nation and its peoples. Post-Marxist philosophers Hardt and Negri's seminal work *Multitude* (2004)³ conceived of the people as the living alternative that grows within Empire. The multitude envisaged a revolutionary people offering a counter hegemonic force to neoliberal globalisation, thus collapsing the boundaries erected by nations and continents. In contrast, Chatterjee provincialises the concept of the people, situating it within national, even regional boundaries. Another significant exploration on populism is Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (2005)⁴. In Chapter Three, Chatterjee draws upon Laclau to note that "the people" can function as an empty signifier filled with a "wide array of grievances" signifying "equivalent, unfulfilled, popular

demands denied by the powerful elite that constitutes the enemy of the people". (p 83) Laclau described populism as a process by which unmet social demands entered into a relationship of solidarity or equivalence with one another and crystallised around common symbols only to be capitalised by leaders who interpellated the frustrated masses to incarnate a process of popular identification that constructs "the people" as a collective actor to confront the existing regime with the purpose of demanding regime change (Arditi, 2010).⁵ But Chatterjee deviates here to argue that populism varies with regards to the integral state as opposed to the tactically extended state. He uses the Indian example of federalism to demonstrate how the 'people-nation' and the 'nation-state' are not the same and that the conditions for invoking "the people" as a collective political subject differ at the levels of the central government and the states.

In the context of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's Hindutva project in India, Chatterjee describes the scheme as a hegemonic struggle to converge the nation-state and the people-nation, in a bid to capitalise on the idea that the people-nation is as old as Indian civilisation itself. A potential counter hegemonic narrative, therefore, could be mounted by regional populist movements presenting the Indian nation-state as one found by a number of federating peoples who came together to form a sovereign state. This, alas, has not been mobilised as yet. Chatterjee prescribes two strategies in the Afterword as a means to address the current crisis of authoritarian populism witnessed in India since the majority BJP government ascended to power. One is to extend political support to left-wing populists to favour pro-poor policies, and the other is to instil a narrative of social transformation in the popular consciousness, which will motivate people into collective political action beyond populist rhetoric. Unless a new relation between the nation-state and the people-nation is imagined, there is no hope, the author concludes.

The strength of this slim volume lies in its construction of a broad theoretical framework encompassing both the global and the national phenomenon of the rise of populism. However, this thereby necessitates the need for generating more empirical material that can illustrate the phenomenon of populism, zooming in on the specifics of the people implied within this framework. It is hoped that these thought-provoking lectures would stimulate further academic work in that direction. ■

REFERENCES:

1. A. Gramsci: *Selections from Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971
2. N. Mannathukkaren: "The 'Poverty' of Political Society: Partha Chatterjee and the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala, India" in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.31, No. 2, 2010, pp 295–314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436591003712007>
3. M. Hardt & A. Negri: *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin Books, 2005
4. E. Laclau: *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London, 2005
5. B. Arditi: "Populism is Hegemony is Politics? On Ernesto Laclau's On Populist Reason", review essay in *Constellations*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2010, pp 488–497. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8675.2010.00587>.