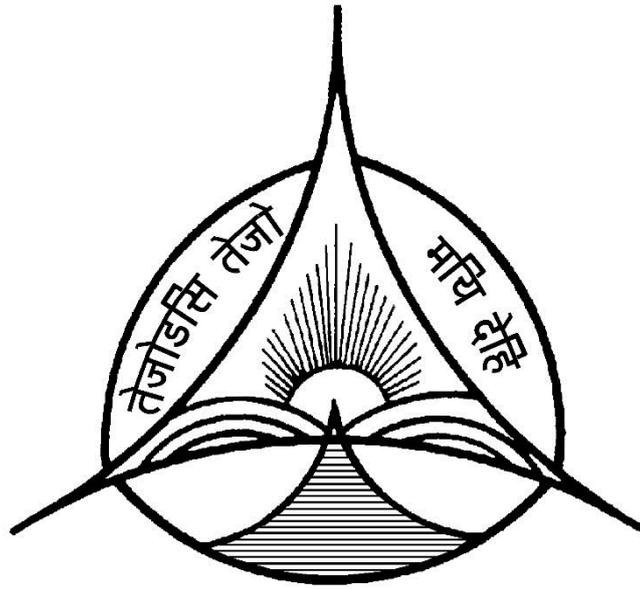


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*Review Essay***'DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT!':
RE-IMAGINING THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL TODAY****DEBADITYA BHATTACHARYA**
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The contemporary order of 'world politics'—to use a rather smug term!—is marked by a strange paradox. On the one hand, the relentless march of neoliberal capital finds itself arrested by a growing impatience and mass disenchantment with the rhetoric of 'progress' as more and more people are cast away into the horrors of recession, casualisation, loss of jobs and dignity, debt burdens, forced displacement, constant surveillance, decaying public infrastructures, and a consequent weakening of welfare measures. Yet, on the other hand, riding on this massive discontent against regimes of corporate imperialism, what we see emerging across the world is the electoral rise of right-wing conservatism allied to the interests of class–caste–gender–race elites. The recent public mandates in Europe (whether Brexit or in the run-up to the French presidential elections), the Trump-led resurgence of a white Christian America and the return of Hindutva's hate propaganda in a Third World context like India's, are all dangerous reminders of a serious pathology that democratic politics seems to have succumbed to.

There is enough evidence to suggest that the global resurfacing of racist–communal–patriarchal forces has its roots in a popular angst against transnational free-market economies of corporate developmentalism and its attendant forms of corruption and loot. However, what is worrying about such political trends is the apparent banishment of progressive secular–socialist forces from the narrative of electoral choice, as well as a potential claimant for substantive social change. What once carried the charge of both a moral and social critique against the workings of capital has, at the moment of the latter's capitulation, failed to offer a credible alternative of democracy. The degree of trust-deficit and the crisis of legitimation, which must have led to a political exorcism of the left from the public discourse of the day, raise several disturbing questions. How or why has the political left failed to translate its

vision and imagination into a language of popular comprehension and the material life of public culture? Why must the imaginative training necessary for a *desiring* of democracy and social justice remain an aborted project, at a time when its urgency is so acutely felt and its conditions so immanently present? Has the moral high ground of the progressive intellectual alienated the everyman-voter beyond every possibility of audience or alliance, or is it their history of social-cultural difference that has effectively separated the two in terms of relative rights and privileges? Has the elite intellectual's revelling in a form of self-imposed exile—as Said observes, in the context of Adorno!¹—torn him off from the daily distresses and desires of the public? Or, has he instead become a foot soldier of the powers that be, and therefore deliberately shuns every attempt at relating/dialoguing with 'other' publics?

The fortunes of post-war communism in Western Europe have, to a great extent, been determined by debates around the role of the intellectual within and outside the party. At a time when poll predictions in a current-day France signal a massive rout of the parliamentary left and a definitive majority (at least in the first round of elections) for a rabidly xenophobic brand of far-right nationalism, it is worth remembering that the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) had once been a formidable coalition of workers, peasants and intellectuals alike. What happened since then, for those 'forgotten' by the forces of French globalisation (as Marine Le Pen calls her constituency of deprived, jobless, provincial voters! [Willsher 2016]) to have so self-assuredly jumped sides and become the cheerleaders of a regressive undercurrent within populist democracy? While the sustained opportunism of the political left and its complicity with regimes of an unequal growth are of course at the root of a cumulative disenchantment along the contours of what Christophe Guilluy (2014) calls 'la France peripherique' (France in the peripheries), it is important to note the usurpation of an identifiably socialist pro-poor rhetoric by agents of the right today. And, it is here that the figure of the public intellectual—as one sustainably invested in a project of building and moulding public opinion around the invisible structures of power—has failed its social function. In this, left intellectuals have not only allowed their language of transformative politics to be emptied of content as well as affect, but have also contributed to its becoming an instrument of populist sentiment-baiting.

The Intellectual, or/of the Public?

In order to understand why such a voiding of ideological reference has befallen the left, it might be useful to first cobble up the image of the intellectual as represented in contemporary discourse. Imagined as a distinct class by virtue of social privilege and an assured constituency of moral-symbolic appeal, ‘traditional intellectuals’ have been sceptically viewed as tied to their own class interests, and therefore requiring a ritual expurgation of loyalties before addressing the social situation of *an*-other. The popular imaginary of the intellectual has thus been marked by a fissured class subjectivity, which at once enables him to aspire towards a universalism of ‘virtue’, ‘value’ and ‘truth’. Taking off from a Socratic mode of truth-telling, one may imagine Foucault’s prototype of the public intellectual as an engaged *parrhesiast*. In his 1983–84 lectures at the College de France, later serially compiled as *The Courage of the Truth*, Michel Foucault uses pre-Christian sources of antiquity to hint at the ‘ethical differentiation’ that conditions non-professional forms of truth-telling. One can well discern the lineaments of the public intellectual take root in Foucault’s discourse. He is neither the prophet nor the sage nor the teacher, but his life is structured as a relentless and unforgiving coincidence with truth. He is the practitioner of truth, in that he is compulsively bound by its telling and not just a mere possession of its knowledge. For Foucault, therefore, it is in the *making-public of truth* that the intellectual–political vocation of the *parrhesiast* lies—and, the power of his speech-acts derives from the risk that he thus exposes himself to.

For there to be *parrhesia*,...the subject must be taking some kind of risk [in speaking] this truth which he signs as his opinion, his thought, his belief, a risk which concerns his relationship with the person to whom he is speaking.... [I]n speaking the truth one must open up, establish, and confront the risk of offending the other person, of irritating him, of making him angry and provoking him to conduct which may even be extremely violent.... [*Parrhesia*] involves some form of courage, the minimal form of which consists in the *parrhesiast* taking the risk of breaking and ending the relationship to the other person which was precisely what made his discourse possible (Foucault 2011: 11).

In order for the public intellectual to become a *parrhesiast*, he must first found an antagonism with those he addresses. It is in acknowledging his physical vulnerability to the regimes of untruth—parading as populism—that the intellectual pledges to a transformative politics.

Without inserting his body into the physical site of a struggle over truth—an act that consists in foregrounding ‘bare life’ as the primordial claim to political belief!—the intellectual cannot establish a connection with his public. Significantly, the relationship between the intellectual and his public must begin from a premise of hostility, as the condition of possibility of democratic *parrhesia*. And, it is here that the public intellectual marks his difference from the populist rhetorician (in the parliamentarian) or the knowledge-professional (in the teacher). The *parrhesiast*, Foucault maintains through examples from Greco-Roman cultural practice, is fundamentally opposed to the voice of the ‘many’—the structural condition of populist democracy.

The necessary minoritarianism of democratic *parrhesia* is what Edward Said likens to the ‘exilic displacement’ (1996: 62) of the public intellectual. While never at home and never quite driven into professional fantasies of ‘doing well’, the intellectual revels in his own exclusion. The condition of his marginality allows him to imagine difference as the irreducible fact of existence, as much as it helps him escape the lure of a ‘prescribed path’ and its associated tropes of authority.

...[T]o be as marginal and as undomesticated as someone who is in real exile is for an intellectual to be unusually responsive to the traveler rather than to the potentate, to the provisional and risky rather than to the habitual, to innovation and experiment rather than the authoritatively given *status quo*. The *exilic* intellectual does not respond to the logic of the conventional but to the audacity of daring, and to representing change, to moving on, not standing still (ibid.: 63–64).

There is more than an element of liberal humanism in Said’s imagination of the public intellectual, as essentially an agent of ‘free will’. Leaving aside the romanticism that thus gets invoked, the metaphor of immigrancy that situates the intellectual in his own time and space also marks him off the general public. In that sense, the intellectual is placed ‘apart’ from the public in his conscious ‘choice’ of a life of difference. The unequal structures of experience or privilege, which make difference available as ‘choice’ to some and as ‘compulsion’ to others, are mostly whipped away by the romantic appeal of an intellectual *avant-gardism*. This fundamental condition of self-conscious difference (from the public and the quotidian) is however what Said tries to explain away soon after. He contends that the intellectual, despite

his otherness from the everyman-*other*, must attempt to redress this alienation of identity through a practice of ‘amateurism’—‘an activity that is fuelled by care and affection rather than by profit and selfish, narrow specialization’ (ibid.: 82). It is by constantly disengaging oneself from the cold bourgeois logic of ‘competence’ and by questioning the ethic of ‘work’ beyond rational-bureaucratic goals of ‘efficiency’ that, Said believes, the intellectual can forge a relationship with his publics. Solidarity with the *other* comes by way of a process of re-negotiating with one’s own everyday relations of production, rather than being subsumed by the material profits of them.

The amateur-intellectual, as a mediator between divergent realms of practice and regimes of materiality, becomes an allegory for Etienne Balibar’s imagination of Europe as the political conscience of an increasingly militarised order of public justice post-9/11. In his 2002 Mosse Lecture at Humboldt University, Balibar argues about the potential of public intellectuals to ‘set the agenda of European politics, before the *Öffentlichkeit*, the “public realm”, and thus actively contribute to its emergence’ (2004: 205). Vigorously advocating a model of ‘conflictual democracy’ that balances civil liberties with an acknowledgment of structural deprivations and claims, Balibar’s attempt to re-imagine Europe as the transcendental reference for civilisational ‘multilateralism’ is problematic, to say the least. It not only belies the history of European imperialist modernity, but also resurrects a myth of neo-colonial benevolence by returning to fantasies of ‘inner’ civilisational strength and value. Insofar as Europe becomes, for Balibar, the space of a response to as well as responsible negotiation with American ‘hyperpower’, the public intellectual is called to task. He is urged to play the *translator* between inassimilable cultural practices and domains of meaning, while at the same time contributing to his own successive disappearance in the other. While this reconstruction of Europe as a borderline, staging the clash of cultures and mediating a passage between them, uses the metaphor of translation to pit the intellectual against alien publics, it actually does much more. The colonial practice of translation is politically sanitised into a pure exchange of ideas, without making apparent the relations of power that account for both the traffic and the accident of meaning. The public intellectual, in the function of the translator, vanishes into the public that he addresses despite the radical difference of being. As Balibar says:

This is an attempt to restore the political function of intellectuals: notwithstanding other activities and commitments, intellectuals would continuously broaden the horizon of their translating capacities. It also points at a broad, ‘organic’, function of the intellectuals. Intellectuals would ‘disappear into [their] own intervention,’ as Louis Althusser used to say. They would be necessary, but without monopoly. They would be border lines themselves (2004: 235).

Just as the borderline serves as the zone of an *aporetic* indistinction, the intellectual stands as the sole condition for a passage into the community of *others*. In each of these three moments of discourse—that is, through Foucault, Said and Balibar—the origin of the public intellectual is intuited in a fundamental separation from the public. Implicated within a heroic humanism of truth, freedom and value, the intellectual’s estrangement from the plebeian is also a symptom of his withdrawal from the sensory and the affective that drive the public life of democracy. Though his vocation consists in a re-insertion within the domains of public practice—whether as *parrhesiast*, amateur or translator—the language of reason/truth alone cannot bring about this reconciliation. The intellectual must participate in a re-distribution of the ‘sensible’ as the only means of reconnecting with his public. But, how does reason distribute itself within the space of the sensible—as nation, religion, caste, community or ritual? How must the intellectual address these, in an effort to remain moored in the public? Must the intellectual appeal to the ‘sensible’ in speech alone, or in practice?

The Case of India

Romila Thapar’s *The Public Intellectual in India*—including five other essays in response to her own formulations on the theme—is an attempt at grappling with similar questions, albeit in the context of India’s current political climate. Thapar begins by discerning a ‘directional change from the 1990s’ (Thapar 2015: xii), when the spaces for ‘meaningful discussion’ and engaged reasoning in determining the future of public policy began to increasingly come under threat. Pitted against the ascendancy of the Hindu right after the 2014 general elections, the book takes as immediate reference the Indian state’s sponsoring of communal-casteist agendas that have (since the time of publication) seen the killing squads of cow vigilantes

wreak violence on minority publics, local religious organisations ordering the banning of books or threatening deportation of authors, fanatic fundamentalists going on a rampage by murdering scholars/thinkers and then being dismissed as fringe elements, and cabinet ministers presiding over the institutional murder of a Dalit scholar and forced disappearance of a Muslim student from university campuses without much ado. There have been routine calls for a return to Indian [interchangeably, Hindu] culture, in resisting the depredations of Western civilisation—and by championing the uniqueness and priority of everything Hindu over all other faiths/religions. The spectre of a wounded national pride, presumably under attack from all forms of cultural–ethnic difference, has been used to rake up false sentiments of ‘patriotism’ and subject citizens to loyalty tests of ‘belonging’. Little is the understanding, as Thapar points out, that Hinduism as an internally harmonious and identical belief system is nothing but a colonial myth. The sectarian nature of what are now passed off as ‘Hindu’ schools of thought not only consisted in historical contestations and contradictions, but was further refracted in everyday social practice along sharp divisions of caste. Therefore, the attempted reclamation of India’s glorious Hindu past against later defilements of Mughal rule is in itself motivated by the imaginary colonial trope of a ‘two-nation theory’. Thapar contends in the ‘Introduction’ that these jingoistic appeals to religious sentiment as constitutive of postcolonial nationalism are, in effect, calculated to derail the real concerns of democracy—namely, ‘alleviation of poverty, the distribution of national wealth, the assurance of social justice in civil society’ (p. xxv).

It is in order to return us to these crucial questions of democracy that are still far from being answered that Thapar insists on the role of the ‘public intellectual’ in Indian socio-civic contexts. She urges more and more persons of ‘recognised professional stature’ (p. 5) to speak up against both the incursions of the state and the global market into the daily life of democracy. Holding on to a historical distinction between the public intellectual and the philosopher or scholar, Thapar forcefully defines the former as one who is willing to use her/his professional credibility and attendant infrastructures of popular visibility in order to seek ‘explanations for public actions from those in authority, even if such explanations required criticizing authority or power’ (p. 5). In this, the intellectual preserves the space for rational debate and enquiry, and attempts to ensure accountability from public representatives

through acts of dissent and resistance. By ‘constantly re-assert[ing] the rights of citizens in the life of a nation’ (p. xiii), the public intellectual is prototypically a fearless questioner. S/he must question the project of imagining nationhood on the basis of lies peddled as history—for example, what we now see in ICHR journals claiming a pre-modern Harappan civilisation to be Shaivite in nature, the erasure of Gandhi from popular archives of cultural imagination, the appropriation of the Ambedkarite legacy into a saffronised project of rewriting history or the indictment of university professors on murder charges for speaking up against organised state violence on adivasis in Chattisgarh.

The public intellectual, Thapar argues, may find resources for an agenda of committed social action in both the annals of Indian and European history. Ranging through historically situated examples of critical interventionism from Socrates to the Buddha, Voltaire to Emile Zola, and the Charvakas to Amir Khusrau to E.V.R. Periyar, we are told that traditions of dissent and rational interrogation have been immanent to the chronicles of humanistic evolution. Forms of non-belief and atheism have co-existed with dominant expressions of religious *doxa*, and have continued to contest accepted truths and traditional *status quoisms* beyond their constituencies of power. This has naturally invoked the wrath of organised structures of religion and feudal authority, but that is precisely what the public intellectual has to risk. The epistemological adventure of the ‘new’ and the ‘unthought’ is what the public intellectual must, on principle, force the citizenry towards. Because, democratic empowerment consists in enabling the masses to critically negotiate with apparatuses of the state and orders of thought that govern them. Without questioning the structural interests that secure and retain power, individual experiences of deprivation are merely naturalised as fatalistic commonsense. The public intellectual, in being autonomous of dominant coalitions of interest and official party diktats, can potentially be in a position to challenge fantasies of ‘commonsense’ and thus expose the structural injustices that underlie them. ‘The public intellectual has to see himself or herself as a person who is as close to being autonomous as is possible, and more than that, be seen by others as such’ (p. 19), Thapar maintains. It is here that her argument seems to run aground, in almost shunning the Gramscian vision of the ‘organic intellectual’ as always-already compromised to partisan interests. Also, what she identifies and champions as the ‘autonomous public intellectual’ comes curiously close to

Gramsci's definition of the 'traditional intellectual'—who, despite his veneer of apparent liberal neutrality, turns out to be a defender of the *status quo* for purposes of self-preservation. I will return to this point later.

The *Question* of Power (or, the Power of the Question)

Ruining the shrinking of the liberal space for disagreement within current configurations of 'public opinion'—informed by political propaganda, corporate-owned media and a successively impoverished mandate for public-funded education—Romila Thapar passionately urges the public intellectual to stand up and be counted. Insofar as a politics of intervention is no longer a choice but a compulsion, Thapar suggests that 'The fundamental catalyst for the public intellectual..., from the outset, was derived from the following principle: To question or not to question? That is the question (p. 2).

By deeming the form of the 'question' as the discursive mode proper to the 'work' of the public intellectual, Thapar begins by framing the fundamental premise of an ethical engagement with the other. In a Levinasian sense, the epistemological event of the 'question' presupposes a *turning-toward-the-other*—an ethical gesture of opening up to the *otherness* of thought in the 'demand and prayer' for a response. It is the precondition for a dialogue; an act of taking responsibility by setting up a relation with the indefinite other as infinite possibility. The 'question' is what inserts the intellectual into a relationship with the public—indefinable, un-nameable and yet capable of response. It is this opening unto radical alterity or difference that constitutes the ethical promise and imaginative task of democracy—and, therefore, sums up Thapar's plea to the public intellectual as imploring the plenitude of reason and resisting its circumscription in silence. It is interesting to note that the book does not only resonate with this call to speech as the will to question, but is also structured in the form of a dialogue with five of Thapar's respondents.

In this sense, this book does what it urges others to do. It structurally sets in motion a debate in response to Romila Thapar's inaugural lecture-as-question, within the scope of the printed text. It does not stop short of acting on its own plea, by going on to demonstrate an exercise

of democratic reasoning; it intimately engages in a mode of self-questioning through the bulk of its pages. Following the Indian philosophical tradition of ‘commentary’ (*teeka*), Thapar’s pointed argument in the first chapter (*purvapaksha*) is taken up for critical re-examination by five other scholars (*pratipaksha*) as successive commentaries on the origin-text. The first of Thapar’s commentators, Sundar Sarukkai, reflects on the ‘nature of questioning’ (p. 41) that is demanded of the public intellectual. In a brilliant turn of philosophical argumentation in his essay ‘To Question and Not to Question: That is the Answer’, Sarukkai contends that every act of critical questioning must at the same time proceed from a set of ‘foundational beliefs that we are willing to accept (without question)’ (p. 51). It is in finding a ‘common discursive framework’ for debating ‘incommensurable foundational beliefs’ (p. 53) that the true task of the public intellectual lies. This, Sarukkai emphasises, requires both ‘cognitive and affective (p. 53) investments through which to reclaim the relationship between the intellectual and her/his publics. It is incumbent upon the intellectual to engage with an other by simultaneously ‘questioning’ and ‘imagining’ the latter as a product of her/his conditions. Such imaginative engagement with the other, which does not devolve into an act of judgement, is the fundamental ethical demand for any public discourse to address differences of belief/opinion. Sarukkai ends by reminding the public intellectual of her/his being a member of the public, and therefore insisting on a ‘sense of intellectual honesty’ (p. 55) that does not revel in being outside the pedestrianism that defines the ‘habits’ of public citizenry. The critical attitude, in being made into a habit of democracy, will eventually help the public intellectual create conditions for her/his own disappearance. Sarukkai’s essay, for that matter, serves as necessary caution and corrective to Thapar’s general insistence on the form of the question, by reiterating the need for an ethical method.

Dhruv Raina’s response to Thapar’s postulations, titled ‘Science and Democracy’, looks at the reasons behind the increasing disconnect between science and a social conscience. Taking a cue from Thapar’s lament about the relative dearth of public intellectuals from scientific communities, Raina begins by pointing at a historical irony within the evolutionary chronicles of science. European history stands witness to the fact that the biggest challenge to orthodox institutions and authoritarian practices of power has come from the bastions of scientific knowledge. The isolationism of scientific research—as a form of ‘disembodied

reason' (p. 65) and therefore legitimately divorced from political processes of democracy—was a product of late modernity speeding unto the horrors of the Second World War. Though the collective trauma of the Holocaust ushered in progressive debates around the impact of science on conditions of citizenship, Raina discerningly argues that the current-day corporate financial control of scientific research (through patents, industrial consulting and university–industry interfaces) has imposed external regulations on the public culture of science. Peter Ronald deSouza's essay, 'Living Between Thought and Action', takes off on a very interesting split within Thapar's definition of the public intellectual as both 'autonomous thinker' and 'advocate of social justice' (p. 79). He contends that an effective convergence of these two personae in the person of the public intellectual is 'not as smooth and unproblematic as has been suggested and... there is in fact a creative tension between the two' (p. 79). The reasons for this creative tension, though particularly relevant to an ethnographic imagination of the caste–class–gender identity of the 'autonomous' public intellectual, are rather left untouched in the argument of deSouza—who, instead, marches into a general discussion on the phenomenology of political censure and the biographical histories of three contemporary 'public intellectuals' from India, Israel and Bangladesh.

The next piece in the series, Neeladri Bhattacharya's 'Framing a Question: Questioning a Frame', is an exceedingly incisive and meticulous exposition of the merits and potential ambiguities in Romila Thapar's argument. Bhattacharya starts out by concurring with the urgency and necessity of Thapar's 'ethical and moral plea' (p. 101), but at the same time provokes a deeper critical examination of some of the claims made by her. Bhattacharya rightly perceives in Thapar's lament about the disappearance of a critical public sphere a persistent strain of nostalgia, and alerts us to the dangers of a romanticised exhumation of the past to analyse the anatomy of the present. He maintains that the Nehruvian past of a secular–democratic nation-building that Thapar repeatedly conjures as a time of greater public participation was not only different in terms of its historical conditions or aspirations, but was also a time when 'autonomous' intellectuals were often part of policy-making processes by being appointed to committees, commissions and executive bodies. In this, the secularist–liberal ideal that was collaboratively manufactured by intellectuals and policy-makers alike was mistaken for a 'wider societal consensus' (p.

108), often in complete disregard of majoritarian tendencies that were to erupt later. Bhattacharya disapproves of Thapar's pessimism about the present, and points towards 'smaller acts of persistent questioning' (p. 107) as evidence of a resolute political hope as well as an alternative non-heroic ethic of intellectual *parrhesia* (truth-telling). The final piece of commentary by the acclaimed journalist Jawed Naqvi, 'The Indian Intellectual and the Hindu-Muslim Trap', is an accurate disavowal of the secularist paradigm of intellectual questioning as a largely 'upper-caste innovation' (p. 123). By a magnificent stretch of polemical argumentation, Naqvi contends that there are indeed innumerable instances of fabled Hindu-Muslim unity with which one may talk back to the communal bigot; but what do these stories of elite bonding within a royal economy of patronage mean to the Dalit? Is the public intellectual, questions Naqvi, immune to the coteries of caste privilege that have traditionally regulated the rights to intellectual labour and capital? Passionately arguing for a re-engagement with Ambedkar's vision of social justice, Naqvi boldly decries the Gandhian 'secular-liberal' compact as a rhetorical preoccupation of the high-caste public intellectual. He ends by issuing a manifesto for a renewed intellectual activism, by forging ties with the 'mofussil intellectuals' (p. 135) who might help us realise that: Religious fascism in India can be confronted, not by concocting an ineffective secular Hindu-Muslim remedy, but by systematically defeating agrarian fascism that has flourished in the country on the back of a hidebound caste system (p. 132).

Is Questioning Enough?

Romila Thapar's is indeed a persuasive wake-up call to public intellectuals across the country, as much as the directness of her vision and lucidity of expression are aimed at mobilising non-academic constituencies of readership into seeing through the everyday assaults on Indian democracy. The force of her convictions is sure to secure the confidence of ideological antagonists as much as lay audiences; and it is this purpose that successfully animates the rationale and timing of this publication. I do not doubt this degree of earnestness in her argument, but one is also led to believe that collaborative efforts like these are —at the same time—the only opportunities for nuancing a public culture of critique. As a public

intellectual herself, Thapar has never failed to speak up and express solidarity with democratic movements for rights; but a book of this kind demanded that affective mobilisations around abstractions like ‘injustice’ and ‘inequality’ be translated into cognitive methods of identifying exact structures of power. It is then that a politics of social transformation might be articulated as a process of converting rage into reason, passion into critical discernment. Of course, the polemical structure of Thapar’s book—designed in the form of a debate—creates the conditions for an auto-critique. To that extent, all the five commentaries touch upon important points of contention within Thapar’s idea of the ‘public intellectual’ while tempering the latter with necessary qualifications. Yet, there are a few questions that linger on.

Doesn’t Thapar’s insistence on liberalism—as the minimal ingredient of belief in the ‘public intellectual’—sound like a humanist defence of individual freedom at the cost of collective rights and determinations? It is here that Peter Ronald deSouza’s abandoned argument seems to find sense, in the prolonged history of the liberal intellectual’s divorce from collective claims of historical justice. In taking a bourgeois individualism of rights and constitutional safeguards as the starting point of democracy, aren’t the recuperative claims of a community and its continued histories of structural discrimination relegated to the undersides of official reason? Isn’t left-liberalism, for the public intellectual, always an excuse for dismissing realities of caste oppression and the inevitability of identity politics as ‘unreason’? One needs to look no further than the enormous chasm of distrust that exists between progressive left intellectuals and the Dalit-bahujan populations today. This is a point that Naqvi obliquely alerts us to, while demythifying the ‘autonomy’ of the public intellectual as a vanguard position—speaking for and on behalf of the subaltern other. One wonders whether Thapar’s imagination of the autonomous intellectual—in privileging an ethic of political distance from all interest groups alike—would ever breed the possibility of a Dalit or an adivasi intellectual? Does this myth of ‘autonomy’ as political neutralism amount to a deligitimation of Gramsci’s concept of the ‘organic intellectual’, rooted as it was in every community’s rise/claim to power? Would a Dalit intellectual, in articulating a demand for social justice on the basis of lived experience or community interests, violate the principle of autonomous subjectivity?

In this context, it is not surprising that Thapar's candidate for the 'public intellectual' has to be one of professional stature and public visibility, such that s/he can mobilise the weight of opinion along. The intellectual here is implicated within a heroic cult of leadership, and her/his acts of speaking up celebrated as 'philanthropic' instances of re-presenting the other. In being made into a hero, the work of the public intellectual is separated from the tactical manoeuvres of the everyday and the everyman. Marking a cognitive distinction between the intellectual and the non-intellectual 'other' by virtue of class and social capital, Thapar's argument runs the risk of dismissing the 'small voice of history'. Can those on the outsides of a professional logic of 'excellence' and 'eminence' aspire to the voice and task of the public intellectual? Furthermore, doesn't the public intellectual's professional identity compromise his autonomous being? In other words, can belonging to a profession and mustering a degree of 'competence' necessary for public eminence still exempt the 'intellectual' from allegiance to institutional codes or protocols? In that sense, is the public intellectual—as a figure of professional expertise—really free from the norms and rules of membership within his profession? Against this backdrop, it would have been interesting to analyse the relationship of public intellectuals to universities or academic institutions, especially at a time when norms of censorship are being legislatively woven into professional codes of conduct and terms of employment.

The Public Intellectual in India, while encouraging resolute speech-acts of resistance, might seem to only reinforce a Hamlet-like imagination of the intellectual as a man of words and not the man of action. But, when the spectre of fascism looms large over the futures of transformative politics, it is in every such rejection of silence and every refusal to be complicit with 'collective conscience' that we rage against the dying of the light! Thapar, herself an example of this order of resilience, leaves the reader—intellectual deservedly perturbed into a self-questioning.

Note

¹ Refer to Edward Said, 'Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginal', in Said (1996: 54–55).

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