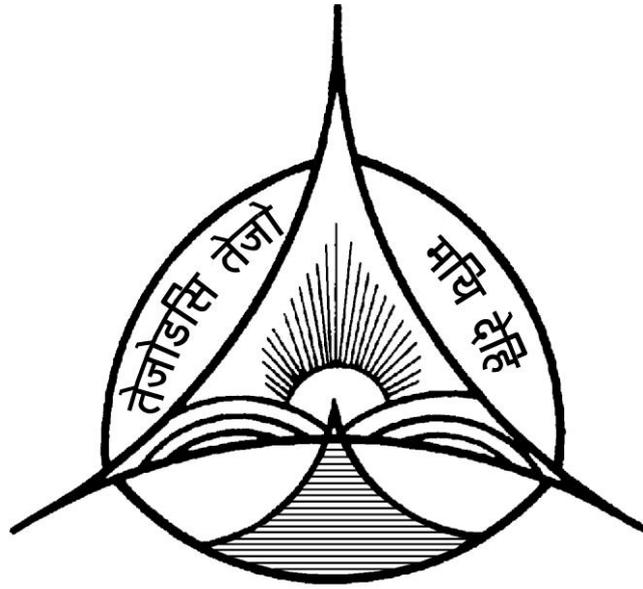


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**CHALLENGING ‘THE DEEP GRAMMAR OF CAPITALISM’ A PRE-REQUISITE  
FOR ITS ALTERNATIVE: SOME THOUGHTS ON INDIA TODAY****RAVI KUMAR***South Asian University*

The world is neoliberal! That is the common refrain you hear from the Left-liberal scholars and activists, and those who are opposed to the inhumanity that contemporary capitalism unleashes. Anybody who believes in the idea of social security, necessity for equal educational opportunities, universal access to healthcare, non-commodification of water, air and everything that is basic to our lives would use the term to characterise contemporary times. No doubt, these are different times when aggression of the state at the service of corporate capital is unprecedented, when the state either vacates all spaces it occupied in the name of welfarism, or itself begins to replicate the market. These are also times when notions of democracy, and even liberal–bourgeois notions, have been turned on their heads. In these times we also lose our self, our agency to act, as we get constituted by the forces of corporate capital to serve its interests. There is a process of self-inflicted violence and repression. We know that the market is dictating terms to us, but we still go there, we hate being rejected by private capital, but we still throng its darbar. The state is repressive, but we still express faith in it. The idea that there is no alternative to the world which we inhabit has allowed us to be subjected to all forms of oppression—all in the name of 'survival' and a 'better future'. In these and many other senses, one can differentiate this age and time from earlier times that we have seen and experienced. These are also interesting times when far-Right neoliberals are coming to the forefront across the world. There is a popular mandate from the oppressed that the oppressor should continue to oppress them. In a certain sense, McLaren (2005) points out that

It is no longer just the capitalists who believe that they are the salvation for the world's poor, but the workers themselves have become conditioned to believe that without their exploiters, they would no longer exist. The entrails of the eviscerated poor now serve as divining mechanisms for the soothsayers of the investment corporations. Even many trade unions have served as little more than adjuncts of the

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state, reimposing the discipline of capital's law of value. Those who wish to avoid both Communist-type centralized planning and the disequilibrium and instability of laissez-faire capitalism have turned to a type of market socialism through labour-managed firms, but have done little to challenge the deep grammar of capital itself.

What is termed neoliberal is in fact characterised as opening up all possible spaces for profit-seeking, and where such spaces have not existed, the state facilitates the creation of such spaces. Scholars of different ideological hues have extensively studied neoliberalism. It has been highlighted by diverse scholars as to how it represents a stage of capitalism and not a different mode of production (Saad-filho and Johnston 2005); it has been seen as a way out for capitalism in crisis (Dumenil and Levy 2004; Harvey 2007a; Saad-filho and Johnston, 2005); it is seen by some as a system that 'thrives on a culture of cynicism, insecurity, and despair' (Giroux 2011: 133); it 'refers to a corporate domination of society...' leading to oppressions of different kinds making it 'one of the most dangerous politics that we face today' (McLaren 2005); for some it is 'the latest stage of the capitalist project... to reshape the public's understanding of the purposes of public institutions and apparatuses, such as schools, universities, libraries' (Hill nd. ).

If you have attended any discussion organised within the ambit of 'Left, progressive, liberal' platforms over a decade or so, you would not have missed the term 'neoliberalism'. We live in neoliberal times and it is a globally accepted term; in some way or the other a reality as indicated by snippets of the debate above. Traced to the advocacy of free market by the Chicago Boys in the 1970s, it emerged as the new avatar of capitalism in Latin America with the dictatorships in Chile (1973) and Argentina (1976). Ronaldo Munck traces its implementation to an 'internal-external dialectic' which meant that the internal conditions of nations along with the external conditions led to its implementation (Munck 2003: 497). He is also specific that there have been variations across nations in its implementation, depending upon their conditions. Harvey terms neoliberalism as 'a theory of political economic practices' that looked at 'human well-being' through the prism of 'entrepreneurial freedoms', with features of 'private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade'. The role of the state is seen as merely a facilitator of the process which would ensure that these features work effectively, and it would use all the instruments at its disposal to

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ensure that this system comes into existence and works well (2007b: 22). However, the category of ‘neoliberalism’ itself has been debated by scholars. Dunn says that

...the left should abandon the concept of neoliberalism. As such, it contributes to a growing discontent with the term but makes a specific argument about its use by those opposed to what they characterise as neoliberal, those on the political left, who gain little by invoking it. The term is not recognised by our opponents, whom it fails to challenge, and it provides little help identifying strategic tasks for the left, muddying rather than clarifying political choices (2016: 1).

Jessop argues that that even those who agree that neoliberalism is a ‘valid analytical object’ have different entry points to make sense of what are its ‘essential qualities—referring variously to a particular genealogy, a particular time period, a particular case or set of cases or a particular policy field’ (2013: 65).

It is important to note that there seems to be a generic opposition to this gargantuan monster called neoliberalism from different quarters of the Left-liberals, social democrats and radical Left (Hill *et al.* 2015). However, it is equally perplexing that if the opposition is so strong, and that too from otherwise ideologically opposed camps of liberals and the radical-Left and so on, why does this form of accumulation persist and why is there no significant opposition to it? It has often been heard that there is growing resistance to it on different grounds—ranging from the inequality that it has fomented to the aggressive forms it has taken. However, despite this, why is it that its more aggressive form—the Right-wing political expression—seems to have taken hold over popular imagination, as one sees in the USA, UK, France, Turkey, and elsewhere. There is also a concern that it has become a commonsense now. Hill *et al.* (2015: 125–26) remark that ‘Many global citizens have become accustomed, blind, or resigned to the fact that inequality, violence, and greed are a “natural” part of life’. However, this is not a new phenomenon, especially if we recognise that reproduction of any system is based on the idea that it generates a commonsense that would facilitate its existence. It employs all instruments at its disposal to ensure this, and the redefined democracy is merely one part of it, along with the ideological apparatuses. In this sense, neoliberalism is nothing new—except in its aggression in every aspect of how the capitalist

state has acted till now. It is overt, blatant and unabashed. It invites you to demolish its premises by creating conditions for its dissolution, but at the same it has been capable of turning the opposition into trivial political forces. Its character becomes apparent when one sees how it openly manipulates the long-cherished ideas of even liberal bourgeois democracy and subverts everything to suit oligarchical capitalism (as controlling forces), as is evident in countries like India.

### **India Today?**

India today is characterised by huge income disparity as ‘poverty is increasing amidst the clamour of a high growth rate’. The gap between rich and poor has widened, and the wealth of the top 1 per cent of the rich has grown at a much faster pace than in the rest of the world (Kumar 2016). Farmer suicides are on the rise, with the suicide rate going up to 16.3 per 100,000 farmers in 2011 from 15.8 in 2001. In Maharashtra it has been as high as 29.1 per 100,000 (Sainath 2013). There is a general trend towards state abdication from social sectors such as education and health for the vast mass of the poor, which has become a non-priority for the government. On the other hand, the state has been doling out resources to corporate capital. ‘A staggering ₹2.5 lakh crore of public money has been lost by India's public sector banks’ (Pocha 2017). The Government of India itself acknowledged that the public sector banks have been without money, and that there has been a need to replenish their treasury. In the 2017 budget, provisions were made by the government to infuse ₹10,000 crore initially to recapitalise the banks (Mathew 2017). Though it has been comfortable with the NPAs and other favours to corporate capital, it refuses to waive farm loans (*Hindustan Times* 2017). The Gujarat government gave a loan of 558.58 crore to Tatas at a measly interest rate of 0.1 per cent (*Times of India* 2017).

Inequality notwithstanding, representational politics has increasingly acquired a more instrumentalist role of consensualisation. The popular support for the neoliberals is managed through an elaborate mechanism which involves huge corporate funding. The 2017 Finance Bill removed the earlier limit of 7.5 per cent of a corporate's profit to be funnelled into election funding. This further establishes that corporate capital would have a much greater role to play in Indian politics. And the commonsense, unless dictated by corporate capital,

would tell us that the corporates would fund political parties in order to get as much as possible from them. This funding is to ensure that more and more people vote for the party which would assist the corporates in optimising their surplus accumulation, which would obviously come out of exploiting the voters. It becomes a vicious cycle. Greater favours to corporates are for obvious reasons—the polity becomes subservient to their interests. Between April 2013 and March 2016, seven electoral trusts floated by corporates gave donations of around 432 crore to political parties (Stevens and Sethi 2017). And it is common knowledge that this is only a part of donations which appear on Election Commission records. There is much more that is pumped in; otherwise, how can country-wide campaigning be done by helicopter every day? For instance, the BJP and Congress spent, again officially, 1,230 crore on campaigning in the 2014 elections (*Times of India* 2015).

This act of manufacturing consent for an exploitative and dehumanising system is what the current form of capitalism represents. As Kumar (2012: 1) points out

Capitalism is about the perpetual destruction of human creativity and bringing into the ambit of capital circulation every possible aspect of our life, and neoliberalism represents the most callous and aggressive form of this capital-on-offensive. It takes the labor-capital conflict to a new phase where the consensual politics of the ruling class, combined with its mantra of everything is possible to achieve, goes hand in hand with the project of homogenizing our very mode of living and thinking.

This process can be seen when capital appears in different avatars, making it extremely difficult for a counter narrative to emerge. It employs a pro-poor rhetoric, as can be seen in formations like the Aam Admi Party, or identitarian political formations through regional formations in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh which have done little to improve access to health or education, or to address questions of employment, wages, casualisation of the work force or land reform. All of them are seen to be subservient to the rule of capital, some trying hard to appear welfarist and others appearing in the illusory avatar of messiahs for the downtrodden. Identitarian politics itself has moved from where it began its journey. While some scholars/activists have been arguing that capitalism is the best possibility for bringing about

equality the governments banking on identitarian politics have been implementing policies which have restricted themselves to the politics of recognition and have failed to get into a politics of redistribution, to use Nancy Fraser's term (1995). A politics which could explain and practice how the two aspects of recognition and redistribution emerge out of the same system of production could have the potential to understand the workings of capitalism along with that of caste. The political forces in contemporary India failed on this front and became instruments for private capital. And now, because their utility is over for the ruling class as it finds bolder and popular voice in the form of Right-wing politics, one can see the gradual weakening of such formations.

It is also relevant to point out that this is not a sudden change. A closer look at the continuities and discontinuities would make it easy to trace a gradual process leading to the current state of affairs and the aggressive avatar of capital working through state and acquiring an all-powerful position emerging from 1990 onwards. While one kind of consequence of this aggression has been in the economic sphere, there has been overt physical violence by the same forces. As an illustration it would be relevant to bring in the example of Delhi University over the last few years, which experienced unprecedented authoritarianism, undermined spaces of dialogue and dissent, and the state began a process of transforming a university into a skill development centre without any trace of critical knowledge production. The same is being attempted at Jawaharlal Nehru University where the government through the Vice-Chancellor is trying to undo what a university has come to stand for—generating critical knowledge and an alternative vision of the future. Similar aggression by the state can be seen in far flung universities in our peripheral vision due to the hegemonic orientation of the metropole (which otherwise calls itself progressive and dialogic). All these have a common goal to ensure that the orientation of education is suitable to an ideology of free market, which is also majoritarian and sectarian.

At another level, the strengthening of corporates is being undertaken by invoking the idea of nation. The idea of nation and everybody's fidelity towards it is being coercively enforced. This idea of nation is obviously about homogenisation of choices and preferences so that it gets centred around religion, food and bovine animals. There is an effort to make nation a symbol that would bring people together in service of a nation which, at the end of the day, is

about an entity which has to generate a sense of pride and extraordinary respect; so it is about growth (of corporate capital), about India's expansion into the world (through corporate capital) as in Africa, South Asia and other regions, about the increasing power of India through militarisation (which is about defence production and sale, and to play along the rhetoric of nation and nationalism). In other words, growth and development aimed at expanding the scope for private capital is actually what defines the nation (and its orientation and purpose is clear from the above), and along with this, there are neo-conservative tendencies that become instrumental in ensuring the imagination of an economy intertwined with religion. Today, religion is a powerful medium along with nation that is driving the consolidation of the rule of capital.

### **Religion, Neoliberal Capital and the Politics of Consensualisation**

Religion–capital–state have become partners to ensure furthering the rule of corporate capital. Religion as the popular conscience is employed to ascertain a rule that reproduces a system that retains the status quo, one which is unequal and unjust. This religion has taken different forms—while it is used to consolidate the bolder form of neoliberal capital, Right-wing politics, it is also becoming corporatised at another level. There are a host of godmen who first become popular on their own USP, ranging from how to live a good, stress-free life to selling fitness techniques. Once there is a captive number of followers/buyers they get into production of *other* commodities and thereafter expand as a brand in the larger market. Baba Ramdev wants to take over the multinationals and cross a turnover of 10,000 crore by 2016–17 (NDTV 2016). Whether he does it or not is not the question. His sales in 2015 were 2,013 crore (Krishnan 2016).

The religious gurus are rich and they compete with each other as businessmen (Puri 2016; Lal 2015). All of them capitulate on the drawbacks generated by capitalism—from stress to violence. While some use religious symbols extensively, others ground their brand in the re-invented ideas of community living, healthy living, and so on. Their legitimacy does not come merely from religion of some sort, but also from political leaders like ministers, chief ministers, prime ministers who are always in attendance. It is a mutual relationship, like that of corporate capital. They benefit each other. While the godmen through their mass following

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forefront the leader, the leader in exchange gives them favours of a different kind, such as free or subsidized goods. In fact, in some of the programmes that they organise, such as the World Cultural Festival, not only were these political leaders in attendance, but the Indian Army, ministries and other agencies facilitated the event (Sharma 2016). Baba Ramdev is the epitome of this. He fanatically pronounces his love for Bharat Mata, coated in anti-Muslim rhetoric, calling them anti-nationals (Bhatia 2016), or when he calls for policy to ‘control’ the Muslim population (Sehgal 2015). The display of religion has gone a step further with the Right-wing (and the bolder among the corporate capital agents) coming to power. Control over food habits, coercively transforming cow worship into a national obsession, and destroying voices of opposition by converting them into religious issues are the new order of the day.

Religion and employment of non-class categories become important for the system to work. It is due to the processes of consensualisation using these instruments that one finds an overwhelming acceptance of Right-wing, aggressive neoliberal politics among the masses in general. We are told how the state manipulates figures of ‘development’ through the logic of growth rates, per capita income, etc., but there is no effort to critically interrogate these concepts. Rather, there is an inevitable agreement through our tacit acceptance of state policies and politics. This has not happened all of a sudden. The so-called opposition—the progressives and liberals—has amassed for itself credentials for being as anti-people as the Right-wing. Scratch the surface of recent history and one will find how different governments (of different political hues) and even those representing the interests of the working class and oppressed castes, and claiming to be secular, etc., have ensured that corporate capital has a smooth ride. In fact, they have been consistent in their policies that furthered inequality and injustice. The only difference between pre-2014 and post-2014 India is the unabashed use of religion to boldly proclaim and operationalise what corporate capital wants. The principles of efficiency, subsidies to corporates, and cost-cutting have been implemented with greater and open aggression. You can be censored to oppose, killed for going against the values that the government and its political formations claim to follow. This is the greatest change from earlier regimes. There are greater continuities—like state patronage to godmen, sidelining parliamentary procedures, censorship in universities, etc.,

more cost-cutting measures for education and health sectors (declining budget on education and health), worker-unfriendly laws (continuous discourse on the need to frame pro-industry laws), extensive use of different instruments of the state to suppress voices of dissent (POSCO, Niyamgiri, etc.) are only a few

### **Only Alternative Lies Outside of Capital**

Is neoliberalism a distinct phenomenon that can be separated from capitalism? To be more specific, is it outside the capital–labour dialectic? We have seen that it is not a mode of production different from capitalism. It is only a different stage/form of capital accumulation, hence, well within the confines of capitalism and located within that dialectics of capital–labour. As stated earlier, it is difficult to escape using the term, but who are the people employing the term to characterise the contemporary moment of history? They are an independent (!) category of people's movements, NGO/social work groups, the welfarists, the Leftists, the social democrats, and so on. It is a huge gamut of opposing forces that want to overturn neoliberal rule. So, if the collective opposition to the neoliberal rule is so strong, why is it that there is a popular upsurge in favour of the Right representing neoliberal capital? There are scholars who believe that this popular upsurge has more to do with the charisma of the present Prime Minister. However, does this mean that the hardships, pauperisation and declining living conditions of the masses are subdued in this charisma? Is that charisma so powerful that despite the intelligentsia berating the harm it would do, no one is listening? The charisma argument forgets that it can work effectively only because there are other forces at play—charismatic leaderships are products of their historical moments and those moments are constituted in the context of how the capital–labour dialectic is engaging with each other and creating political conditions. These scholars also seem to forget that in the political battlefield, the variable of organisation, understanding the condition of the masses and communicating with them is as important. These are not the times of leaders with a history of participating in grand struggles such as the anti-colonial struggle or the fight for democracy against fascist regimes. These are individuals without any popular image of a mass leader prior to that construction by the media and information technology. An image of a tough, bold and overwhelming persona has been constructed of these leaders over a period of time. And it is through this construction that they have arrived to rescue private capital,

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taking it into areas which were untouched and ignored. One needed such a persona, one who can act despite criticism (in fact ignoring them). With one stroke he can undo decades' old institutions and practices because they had been hampering the expansion of corporate capital. Hence, in one stroke the Rajasthan government can change its labour laws, the government can shut down the Planning Commission—a 'relic' of the welfare state, it can declare overnight a change of currency, engage in an open war with the judiciary despite opposition to making the Unique Identification Card (Aadhar) mandatory, takes a strong stand on the Kashmir issue and withdraws from the SAARC summit. This is masculine capitalism on the move, which the masses are supporting with great vigour. Hence, it was a necessity for capital to have such a strong, aggressive and bold agent managing the state and facilitating their expansion. It is not charisma that lures people, as that is created and artificial. It is merely the *appearance* and not the *essence*.

The question of why the masses do not support those forces that oppose neoliberal rule at the moment is a significant question to be explored. What it indirectly concerns is the absence of an alternative to this neoliberal rule (and I am avoiding using the term 'neoliberal capitalism' for specific reasons). History has moved and capital has taken it into a direction that is getting away from the empty politics of identity. It (capital) has generated aspirations, illusions and fear among the masses and through this it governs them. The opposition fails to understand this, not out of ignorance, but out of a deep-seated aversion to engage with the paradigm of how capital operates. It is therefore paying the price. The alternative of the opposition is generally back to welfare capitalism and the reason is obvious: they do not locate the neoliberal stage within the labour–capital dialectic. They might understand that this stage/form is only another way in which capitalism seeks to survive, expand and optimise the surplus accumulation, but they cannot contest because their analysis is not about the processes through which capitalism arrives at this stage/form and through which it governs unchallenged. Consequently, what is the best option that the Left-liberals and social democrats have today in India? Move from a bolder and aggressive agent of corporate capital to a weaker agent. What is happening is that neoliberalism has become a reified category. It congeals the logic of exploitation, and, accumulation is nowhere in sight. So, the realization is that state abdication is not because capital wants this to happen; even if a centrist formation

comes to power this would not go away. For the processes of accumulation and violent exploitation to go away—from where emanate all these phenomena—the only alternative would be a politics that demolishes the façade of centrists as ‘nicer’ than the rightists, and exposes how all of them are there to enact a rule which would suck the blood out of every worker so that they can live longer and happier.

### Brief Bio

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