

Autonomy and Political Subject

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Introduction

We take it that the idea of political subject captures the main agency, the driving force of transformative processes, which aim at a far-reaching realignment of inter- and intra-community relations in an exploitative society - a realignment, which will presumably, and credibly, lead to a better, more just society. These processes inevitably nurture questioning of existing power relations. We would also like to believe that the general idea of autonomy is a source of strength for such regenerative social transformation. It suffuses the transformation with new life. In other words, our interest is in political subject acting to create more just society of autonomous communities.

Autonomy

What is autonomy? I regard autonomy as a distinguishing characteristic of all life. In human life autonomy expresses itself, perhaps more strongly and definitively than in any other life, as creative action and imagination. Autonomous action always creates something new, something which did not exist earlier. Human life is always social life. Therefore, creation and imagination are always social. They are merged too in the new entity brought into existence, be it a crop, or a garment, or an implement, or a song, or a sculpture, or an idea, or a unifying initiative, or an edifice, or a community institution, or a community norm Depending on what it is, the author of this new entity may be an individual, a

family, or a group, or an entire community, or a political subject acting autonomously at their respective levels.

Autonomous action is such only insofar as it is not destructive of autonomous action of others. That is, autonomous action is a farce without "autonomy of autonomies". This further means that truly autonomous action reinforces other autonomies – an idea at the root of human cooperation. In this sense, autonomous action is not "independent" action, but action that incorporates a responsible response. To the extent that at any juncture this may be possible in many ways, this qualification in no way precludes the response at that juncture from being "free" response.

Self-determination / Self-governance: Therefore, autonomy implies self-determination, and governance, the ability of choosing from many possible actions, all of which are in a relation of responsibility with autonomy of autonomies.

Self-correction (Immune System): Responsible response of autonomous entities to autonomy of autonomies also presumes an idea of "self-correction". Self-correction is a result of reflection on previous autonomous action and its result. It leads to more informed, yet routine choice of renewed creative actions. Its nature is as demonstrated, for instance, in an event where the Agaria master who goes wrong in producing the right quality steel in a foreign land, makes amends to account for, say, higher water content in the air, and succeeds. Self-correction strengthens, as well as guides, autonomous existence. This is akin to the way immune systems in life-forms function. The animal immune systems are known

to not only bring into play defensive mechanisms against foreign attacks – a function, for which it is normally credited – but also to trigger specific growth pathways in an organism.

Knowledge and Knowledge Subject: Autonomous creative action is the primary mode of creation of all knowledge, as well as of its renewal and extension. As such, autonomous action in the first place itself partakes of accumulated knowledge. Knowledge is thus a shareable higher form of autonomous creation, the contours of which are defined by the nature of creative activity. Given the reality of any number of distinct genres of human creativity, one may say that each generates a knowledge-world, or knowledge tradition of its own. Given also that social life within any community gives rise to a multiplicity of knowledge traditions, the community may be identified with them. Every community is thus an instance of what we may call the "knowledge subject". That is its identity. Individual members of that community will reasonably be on the intersection of a few of the knowledge traditions in the knowledge-world of the community, providing them several identities at the same time.

Equal and Unequal Exchange: The conception of a community respecting autonomy of autonomies may suggest that the community exists as a singularity, and that its knowledge systems suffer a closure. This may be true in some concrete sense as far as territoriality is concerned. For, it is quite true that the specific territorial existence of a community must make a distinct mark on creative activities it engages in apart from also creating an instinct for territorial preservation and safety. However, that in no way precludes specific knowledge traditions of a community cutting across another community. For instance,

writing about tribal communities here G. N. Devy states that exchanges between tribals and non-tribals "have been of profound significance in areas such as medicine, folklore, narrative technique, religious abstraction, music, dance, theatre and even agricultural technology".¹ One may think of these as primarily a knowledge dialog between the two communities as knowledge subjects. One might say that if such exchanges, as well as the non-knowledge exchanges accompanying these, are to respect autonomy of autonomies, they will in some sense be "equal" exchanges, and so perceived by both the communities. An exchange, which is unequal is so in the sense that it creates a disturbance in autonomous existence of both.

Political Autonomy: There is nothing like "political autonomy by itself". Political autonomy of a community, which is not a knowledge subject, is a farce. The notion itself arises when communities, existing hitherto as knowledge subjects, experience external domination and disruption of their autonomous existence, that is, only after they have ceased to be knowledge subjects.

The truth of the above has been amply demonstrated time and again in detailed studies of experiments in political autonomy since Independence. The chief external power responsible for disruption and destruction of communities as knowledge subjects in our country has been the modern Indian nation state and its collusion with forces of globalization. Studies supportive of the idea of the Indian nation state, as well as those opposed to it, are unequivocally agreed on the conclusion that political autonomy experiments have been exercises for accommodation and more, or less peaceful control so long as possible. Never

have they been efforts at recognizing autonomy of the subject, nor has there ever been any such intention.

Political Subject

By political subject we understand a social power, which stands in contradistinction with existing governmental realities as well as, in general, with power relations in an exploitative society. Political subject is the driver of transformative social and political processes. Liberal thought in Western societies produced the citizen, with democratic constitutional and legal rights and duties as the political subject. As the idea was exported to conquered territory, liberal thought never parted company with the modern nation state, capital and science. In fact, it firmly stood with all these amidst extreme violence and destruction initiated by them all over the globe. Inevitably the citizen as political subject is a non-starter in the global South. Long since, for very large parts of entire populations, "citizen" stands reduced to its opposite pole - a mere object of manipulation. The power of the State is needed at each juncture to keep the illusion afloat. Fissures are all too visible even in the global North – be it Canada with its graves of indigenous children, or USA with its Black Lives Matter, and underground fuel pipes in indigenous lands and manipulated school curricula in South Dakota, or China with complete disappearance of non-state initiative at transformation.

As the political subject initiates transformative processes, it creates new politics. Clearly this is a contentious process. Primacy of existence and thought are both contended for collectively. It is a collective process.

In Marxist thought and practice the proletariat as a class is the political subject. In countries, where the proletarian class was admittedly not well-formed, it was the party acting in the name of peasantry, and other communities, but charged with proletarian ideas. The misconceived notion of "incomplete capitalist development", and of its state-sponsored completion in a reconstructed form led either to collapse, or to emergence of monolithic state power.

The reality is, of course, different from one of incomplete capitalist transformation. In the once colonized world, starkly so. It is one of open destruction of autonomous communities, and of violent displacement of fully functional autonomous knowledge traditions - both sustained by unequal exchange. Gandhi's response to it was rejection of the western civilizing idea in Hind Swaraj, imagination of future as a republic of villages and village, or community of villages as political subject. Unlike the proletariat, a class which "has lost all and has nothing further to lose but its shackles", village is an autonomous community with knowledge traditions capable of a non-violent reconstruction. This is a different genre of political subject. And so will it be in future of these countries.

The social-political reality today is, of course, changed in almost every specific detail. As we have all been engaged for long with understanding it, there is no need to dwell on it - except only to note that: (i) The essential colonial situation has deepened and we face today a situation, which is broadly perceived as one of (a) epistemic reduction of all knowledge to science and knowledge-management and (b) ontological denial, except in their "negative aspects", of real existence of the communities most affected by globalization and

strengthening of the nation state; (ii) Emergence of the global market has intensified an already unequal exchange, thus facilitating the control of all natural resources like land and water as well as of electricity and finance; (iii) The use of ICT's has intensified exploitation of communities living by their knowledge; (iv) Dominant politics has become far more remote from the people, governance far more unresponsive and faceless, and representation meaningless.

All through a period of more than the last two decades we have been with the thought of knowledge in society – Lokavidya. For us the emergence of ICTs marked the recognition of a situation in which there was a real possibility of Lokavidya thought gaining some hold in the public domain. This also means that we see an important role for Lokavidya – understood very broadly as expressing the ontology of knowledgeable autonomous communities of people - in emergence of the political subject.

So, how do we go about grasping this emergence of the political subject?

Emergence of Political Subject

In this last section I will confine myself to just listing a few things. The perception of inter-connections between some of them as well as their import are hazy at most. Yet, I feel they are all relevant here.

1. Emergence of political subject is at the root a question of non-correspondence with dominant political reality. Dominant politics bears no normal relation to the reality as known to the subject.

2. Emergence involves new knowledge of the basis of reality. Questioning of received "common sense" and the universals in existing knowledge of reality is quite clearly a central aspect of the new knowledge. For instance, in 2006 the Naga leader Thuingaleng Muivah spoke of "the peace of the brave" and what should be seen as "reasonable" by the Government of India in dealing with the Naga people.² In a recent debate on TV one of the leaders of the ongoing farmers' movement was told by a panelist not to be disrespectful of M. S. Swaminathan. His response was that no one need enlighten him on Swaminathan's extensive work and not to "forget that it is since the green revolution that the farmers face the burden of heavy debt"! Not only do the farmers know how to handle farm technology, but they are quite aware of its general implications too. Similar is the assertion, "We too know how to run the Parliament" made by Rakesh Tikait during demonstrations in front of the Parliament. This is assertion of abilities to legislate, govern etc, not normally attributed to farmers as a community. Moreover, it is possible to conjecture that Tikait's use of the word is a statement that Parliament should work like the khap. This is akin to Iqbal in 1924 saying, "Western nations are different from our nation".
3. As noted earlier, emergence is a contentious process. One aspect of this process is questioning of existing power, its justification as well as its morality. A call for "Nyaya, Tyaga and Bhaichara", if made by the farmers' movement, may be viewed as a call for such moral questioning. It is natural that this questioning becomes evident to the larger society and gains the public domain at first only in movements. The values the movements talk about have their distinct meaning, understood at once by

those in movement. For example, the "bhaichara" of farmers' movement is quite different from brotherhood as God's children, simply because it springs forth from actual cooperation within farming communities and their autonomous existence. The movement has repeatedly talked of destruction of bhaichara and family farming as inevitable consequence of implementation of new farm laws.

4. Contention is, apparently paradoxically, also important in building of solidarity within the emerging political subject. Political subject necessarily has inherent ambiguities as it matures. Internal contention is to be expected and is bound to confuse identification. Evidently, that contention will be treated and promoted as dissension by the sovereign power and used as such. A dispute on river waters between upstream and downstream farmers' communities is an example. So is the contention for social position between castes and communities in village.
5. Just as emergence creates new knowledge of social realities, it also creates a new imagination and a new "language", in terms of which the new universals are expressed. It also creates a dialogic promoting this language.
6. Another aspect of contention is assertion of existence - an identity, a difference. Collective memory gains importance here and fashions the assertion. Shaheen Bagh is a clear example, where a legislation is perceived as clearly destructive of identity. The Dravid Model initiative is another instance, where difference is the central concern. Both these examples have more to do with rejecting and fighting "ontological denial" and not so much with "epistemic reduction". This is not to say that they are

not important in the emergence of the political subject. In fact, they quite possibly might inaugurate widening of the process.

7. From a knowledge point of view emergence of political subject may be imagined as a solidarity of communities as autonomous knowledge subjects engaged in a knowledge dialogue. Autonomy is a part of imagination in movements of indigenous people. In Ecuador and Bolivia, it is a part of the Constitution.

Nothing in the above, of course, resolves anything about where do race, caste, language, region - territory, ... stand in relation to emergence of political subject, a question that has been engaging us. Except indirectly, as it is difficult, if not impossible, to see them as defining "knowledge subjects", although doing that in each of these cases may not be equally difficult. To me "knowledge subject" seems a reasonable way of identification of a samaj, community as we call it. The farmers of different regions can be seen as members of many such communities. By no criterion is it possible to underestimate the significance of farmers' movement (a major part of lokavidyadhar samaj for us) in thinking of the political subject.

Notes:

1. p. ix, Introduction to *Painted Words : An Anthology of Tribal Literature*, G N Devy.
2. "We rejected the Indian Constitution way back in 1950. Despite an invitation, the Nagas did not attend the constituent Assembly, stating clearly that they were not a part of India... (Yet) India must realise that since 1950 we have taken several steps forward to come closer to it. ... If the Indian political leadership does not appreciate them then how can we say that it wants a solution through negotiations... It will be a federation of India and Nagaland to be bound together by an agreement which elaborate the interdependence between the two... We say interdependence' because we realise that we cannot be totally on our own... (We) prefer to use the term 'federation' in preference to the 'Union of India' as the latter describes the relation between the centre and states of India. The background and history of these states are different from ours. Once the terms

of the negotiated settlement are incorporated in the Indian Constitution as well as in the Constitution that the Nagas will give themselves, we will recognise the Indian Constitution and India will recognise our Constitution. No unilateral change would be permitted in the terms of the settlement either through Ordinances or Constitutional amendments... We think that this is reasonable approach. Both sides would end up recognising each other's constitution as well as the close links binding the two documents. Indians and Nagas would become inseparable. What more could India want?", p.167, *Emergence of the Political Subject*, Ranbir Samaddar.