

REVISTA LÜVO

VOL. 8 N°1 | FEBRERO 2021

ISSN 2665-2005 (EN LÍNEA)



VOCES DE LA TIERRA

Ecologías feministas

Artista's signature

REVISTA LÜVO

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A CONVERSATION ON INDIA

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Context: On September 20, 2020, the Indian government announced the enactment of three agricultural laws. These laws are strongly contested by farmers, since they will allow large corporations and multinationals to negotiate directly with them to buy their products, pushing back the government's system of guaranteed minimum prices which until then had provided small and medium sized producers with some protection from the free market.

D&C: This academic-activist space that you occupy in the conversation on environmental conservation and development in India is extremely exciting. When we were trying to decide how to frame this interview, we wanted to make sure to carve out space for you to weigh in on what is happening in India right now - whether it is the new environment legislations that have been proposed during the pandemic, the ongoing farmers protests or as you mentioned, the state pushback on dissent.



We want to begin by connecting two ideas that you have mentioned in the editorial - the search for autonomy that underlies the various iterations of environment movements in India and your concept of a "Pluriverse" of alternatives. Striving for autonomy is an essential aspiration, especially in the Global South. Your elaboration of Eco-Swaraj and its rootedness in gender equality, social justice as well as the material and spiritual connection between "us and the rest of Nature" as you put it in the context of the Chipko movement are beautiful as well as powerful. However, if we look at the clampdown on the youth environmental activists, especially in the interconnections between their cause and the farmers' protests, a difference seems to be apparent in the persecution of activists. We have been following the discussion by independent Dalit journalists and activists, who have sketched out the divide in the overall treatment, outrage, and media coverage of the trials of Disha Ravi and Nodeep Kaur, two Indian women environmental activists. This oppositional binary is representative of the caste and class divide where Ravi, with her urban background, defended by prominent lawyers, support by elite, English media channels is starkly opposed to someone like Nodeep Kaur, with her rural, working class background as well as her identity as a Dalit woman. The criticism is emblematic of the deep inequalities within India.

Our question to you is how do we resolve the caste privilege of urban environment activism with movements at the ground, especially Dalit activism? What are the rubrics of access, privilege and marginalization at play and how can we navigate them?

A: What you raised are absolutely crucial questions and they are questions for all of us, and we are trying to grope our way to finding solutions to these questions, especially as they are parts of very contested histories of a very deeply divided society. These contestations and divisions, both historically and recently, are rooted in a complex interplay of traditional gender divisions, caste-based hierarchies along with new class hierarchies and discriminations that have emerged.

Firstly, one of the interesting things I found about a number of the youth activists that have come to the fore in the last year or so, in my interactions with them, is that quite a few of them, at least three or four of the organizations I can think of, have actually deliberately reached out to the non-environmental groups and human rights groups. In fact, probably two months before the protests, during a webinar put together by Fridays for Future India, a space was formalized to bring together these diverse voices. Another example that comes to mind is of a youth campaign against the multinational Adani where they managed to give a speaking platform to young indigenous people and others from local communities from three or four sites where Adani is setting up industries, factories or ports.

And so in that sense, we find that unlike some of the earlier environmental groups, that tended to be very narrow with an urban environmentalist sort of orientation, these new youth groups were aware of this urban-elitist criticism of the movement and were trying to break out of that model. Obviously, this doesn't mean that they could completely break out of it, as people who have grown up in a certain class environment or upper caste environment and have simply not had the time yet to transcend this. However, like what I said about eco feminism, even though I completely believe in it, I can't necessarily always break out of my identity of being a man and the conditioning I received. It is like the air around me is patriarchal and that's how I have grown up. It is the same with caste and other divisions. I think the fact that they are conscious of these divisions and are trying to break out of it by attempting to understand other narratives is commendable. I don't think they have done the full distance here, they've just started on their journeys; they have to do a lot more.



Now, the fact that they also reached out to the farmer groups, is to my mind also trying to break out of that mould because they could have simply stuck to straightforward climate narrative. I mean a general criticism against many global environmental movements is their tone deafness to serious issues of racism and class. These young environmental activists however, deliberately and knowing full well that it would be risky, did reach out to the farmers' movement. So, I think one needs to understand - I haven't read too much of the journalist narrative on this but I think perhaps if they are unaware of these attempts at building solidarities, they should make an attempt to know - that at least, there is an attempt to try and break out of that mould, even though they come from the upper caste, urban middle class or upper class families.

The second thing is, we also need to understand that the schism between Dalit activism and environmentalists is very old. Some of it is based on a genuine and valid feeling by Dalit groups that environmentalists have not taken caste into account, but it also true that Dalit activists have not taken environment into account very often. Some of this opposition is kind of narrowly ideological, the Ambedkar versus Gandhi binary. I mean, sure, it is valid at times because a lot of environmentalists like to quote Gandhi, including me.

This prompts people to then look at people like us and say "oh yeah, these are guardians of these traditional hierarchies". Our narratives are oppositional and work in these stereotypes, and that does not help either 'side'.



Photo credit : Ashish Kothari

We have made attempts to build networks, for instance in the Vikalp Sangam process we have the National Centre for Dalit Human Rights as a core group member, and activists like Jignesh Mevani have participated in some of our initiatives to promote and uphold human rights. These attempts signify the will to try and cut across the ideological barriers. To go beyond our differences and ask the important question of what various environmental and social justice movements have in common? It underlines how imperative it is for all movements to come together especially as in the alternate scenario, by focusing on our divisions we are basically making it very easy for the neoliberal crony capitalist state to pursue its agenda.

D&C: We think that it is a very honest appraisal of what was a rather complex question. Building on that connection between autonomy and "Pluriverse" of alternatives, we would now like to ask you about narratives of autonomy in India, again in the context of the farmers' protests. Connected to the int-

ernational backlash which was directed against the Indian government for its treatment of the protesting farmers and dissenters, the Indian government has invoked another iteration of autonomy - in that, these protests are its internal matter and therefore, it alone has the ability to resolve them in its own time and manner.

How do you think the concept of autonomy as you discussed earlier, can be connected to the government's invocation of it, especially in its connection to self-determination, a hard fought for right by states in the international system?

A: I have never heard the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which is currently in power, talking about self-determination; but self-reliance, yes. I mean suddenly the prime minister, Narendra Modi, woke up in the middle of last year and said - the pandemic has taught me that we need to be self-reliant, every village has to be self-reliant and then every district and every state, and the country as a whole should become self-reliant. Sounds great, but if you look at the actual programs being implemented in the so-called *Atmanirbhar Bharat* package, this 'self-reliance' is really corporatization. It's about saying, okay let's do maximum coal mining so we have all the electricity being produced within India itself, which is a very narrow vision of self-reliance as well as of economic autonomy. Then, when they point to us, the activists of environmental organizations like Greenpeace India, and say, you people are part of a foreign conspiracy which does not want to see India develop, which wants to break up India, our response has always been that actually foreign conspiracies are what you folks, the government and the assorted lobbies aligned with it, are into.

If you look at the Indian state, from 1991 onwards, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, were the ones that twisted India's arm - we willingly allowed this arm twisting to happen of course, supposedly to bring in faster economic development through globalization. This was to be achieved by opening India's economy to foreign direct investment, to greater exports and imports, etc. That was then Congress; if you look at the current BJP government, it has taken a huge quantum jump further by beginning to privatize virtually every sector of the economy. Now privatization can mean Indian companies, since there is a powerful corporate class here, but it is also lots of foreign companies. If you look at India's agriculture, the three farm laws that we are talking about right now, people have traced them back to discussions that began in the World Trade Organization and at Davos, which talked about opening up India's farm sector to corporations from anywhere in the world, essentially as a means by which to create another 200 million people workforce and to convert them into cheap labor for global capital. Right? And by global capital I include Adani and Reliance and the Tatas and so on and so forth, they are all global capital right now.

So, we are actually trying to subvert their accusations and say that if anything, you are the foreign conspiracists! We are trying to say, it is our future that is threatened by this kind of economic globalization model. If in the process of fighting back, we are also supported by civil society elsewhere in the world, what is wrong with that? They are also protesting their own governments and their own corporations for doing what we are doing here in India, they are not simply pointing to India and prescribing a model of development, but they are also pointing to companies and government

agencies in their own backyard. We have not been very good at getting this sense across to the public. To the government, yes, we get our argument across; the government knows and understands but obviously, does not want to listen. It is like Gandhi said, "you can wake up a person who is sleeping, but you cannot wake up a person who is pretending to sleep". The government today is pretending to sleep, frankly, they know these issues, they know that there is nothing, nothing seditious at all in what youth climate or labour activists are doing, nothing anti-national in the infamous toolkit they have made into a dirty word.

They know but they want to hit back at some soft targets because they cannot hit back at the farmers' movement right now, it is just too strong.

When we talk about autonomy, self-determination, self-reliance or localization even we have a much more nuanced conception of all these terms. Localization is something very prominently appearing in Europe for example, but often in distorted ways, e.g. when they say Germany must be for Germans and we don't want refugees. Or that India must be primarily for Hindus, or

even going further down on the ground, where villages might say yes we want autonomy, we want localization, but it will be the upper caste and class men that rule. This is precisely why we talk about social justice as being an equally important part of this whole campaign. So open localization is the solution, which means, yes India is for Indians, but we welcome Bangladeshis who are climate refugees, and we will try and make sure that they also have space and security. Europe is for Europeans, but it should be open to refugees who after all, are also a product of Northern colonization in one way or the other, in various parts of the world. They should be open to receiving these refugees and give them social and economic security and treat them with dignity.

So, autonomy and localization, but with a very strong core of social justice which then means that if it is Muslims coming from Bangladesh into India, because sea levels are rising or for whatever other reason, or the Rohingyas from Burma, we should be open to accepting them and be willing to provide for their needs. This is precisely what the BJP is not doing. For BJP, autonomy is for Hindus; they are trying to counter hard-line Islamic exclusions in Pakistan, but in so doing, revealing the same narrow mindset. The minorities, because they cannot be done away with have been issued ultimatums in various forms that while they may stay in India, they must follow "our" rules, and have to be quiet and behave themselves. We can counter these narratives by recognizing what is happening and not falling for these traps.

D&C: This point about open localization is so interesting because we think this also connects with that conversation we were having earlier, when you were tal-



king about your book, your concept of Pluriverse and how a search for common values is what can sort of bolster the multiverse of alternatives that are needed by different environmental actors and their diverse contexts. We really like this idea that you have in the concept of open localization. What you have effectively done is given a great example, through these explanations - that yes, while India is for Indians, we have a certain core set of values. So, if there are environmental refugees, we accept them. That is, again, bringing the local together with the global, making the diversity, and variety in indigenous movements, viable, well preserved as well as relevant globally. We don't know if you would agree, but whenever a conversation about multiplicity, say the search for alternatives is proposed, there is so much opposition to such conversations, the general refrain being "oh you are overwhelming us with options, what is the point if every country has to devise its own little bit", then how do we have a concerted dialogue?

So just coming to that, the point that you have already made in a variety of ways during our conversation, about the neoliberal development model, especially the version India adopted in 1991 explicitly and the exacerbations of said model enacted under the BJP. If we look at the successes the government has had internationally with its proposals for renewable energy, say the International Solar Alliance, there seems to be a positive acknowledgement internationally of the climate and energy policies of the Indian government. This stands in stark contrast to the criticisms of the proposed mining and development projects, the new draft laws and the domestic backlash to several proposed projects of

development. Our question to you is, how do the alternatives you sketch, whether the Eco-Swaraj version of development or the more open localization autonomous version of development that you envision, counter the very middle-class, upper caste version of development that supports the BJP and legitimates its rule in the country?

A: Firstly, I do not think it is only a middle class or upper class narrative. It is also a very large section of the working class that has kind of bought into this because of 75 years of following the same ideology. Where you have three generations of people growing up with this idea that we have to develop, and develop according to a certain model. So, there has been incredible brainwashing. Some of us have been lucky enough to have other influences because of which we may have broken out of that inherited mindset or at least question these loaded inherited assumptions but, for a lot of people, you do not have the alternative counter narratives available. Whether you are a farming family, or you are an upper middle-class family or whatever, right? And it is the same thing with patriarchy, it is the same thing with casteism, you know when you do not have access to the counter narratives, then you believe that this is the only truth. Even as let's say as a Dalit, for instance, you know we have had this thing called the Dalit Chamber of Commerce. Now this Chamber argues that capitalism is actually the best thing for the Dalit community, because it will for the first time enable Dalit entrepreneurs to be anonymous, they do not get identified and hence evade the repercussions of caste-based violence and can find work and become rich.

As we know, 99% of the Dalit community does not have that kind of access to means which would enable this sort of wealth creation. Others might argue that this escapism through class from the violence of caste is facetious in the Indian context, but it does represent hope for a large portion of the community that yes, if those guys can do it, why can't we? If that person can become a chief minister, maybe I can as well, if that person can break through into Bollywood and become a famous actor, maybe I can too. These are the dreams that have been sold to all of us, and very effectively, right?

I think one of the reasons why the government is so bent on hitting back right now is because for the first time since the BJP came to power, they have actually seen a movement that could act to, maybe, just maybe, unite a very large section of India's working population against the ruling party. I am still saying maybe because it is too early to say how long this can sustain. But the way in which the farmers are mobilized, the way in which workers unions have supported them, feminists have supported them, environmentalists have supported them from across the country - gives hope. This is quite clear to the government also, especially since at least some parts of the media have been covering these solidarities. Such mobilization has really shaken the government. It is these powerful solidarities where I find an answer to the question you asked. We have to find ways by which the narratives we are making on issues of environment and climate work in conjunction with and across ideological and sectoral divisions.

The core of these solidarities is of course supporting the farmers right now, organized against the three farm laws

but they are also talking about the farming crisis in general. To their credit, farmers also came up with the statement against the imprisonment of human rights defenders using the notorious, undemocratic Unlawful Activities Prevention Act. They came out in support of the youth climate activists, and youth labour and Dalit activists. It is these alliances and the narratives coming out of the movement, not just in English but in multiple Indian languages, which we need much more of. In mid-2020, several youth groups wrote to the government saying "we do not accept the proposed Environment Impact Assessment 2020" (which would have effectively dismantled the regulatory regime). They registered dissent not only in English, but in 20 languages. They put messages out on all kinds of social media and in multiple languages - so there were 2 million youth from villages, from towns, who were actually writing to the government. We need much more of this in order to bring out what is it that is really happening in the country - why is it that when 2, 3, 4, hundred million people in India are suffering as a result of unemployment or ecological destruction or land grabbing, why haven't 300 million people gotten together and raised their voices against it? It is difficult, given that much of this worker base is unorganized or informal (deliberately kept so by those who plan our economy).

So, it is a slow process in which these multiple sectors of marginalized and disadvantaged peoples, which I would imagine are the majority of India's population, are able to get together and reimagine their futures. This is why I have decided that I am going to focus on alternatives; even as we critique the system and why is it that people are poor, we will also highlight the succes-

ses, say the many examples of where people have moved out of poverty, where they achieve dignified sustainable livelihoods, mostly because of their own efforts sometimes with facilitation by civil society or even the occasional sensitive official. Why can't that happen across all countries in different fields? And this is exactly why we are doing this kind of documentation and outreach, putting it out in in different languages. But we are still small, we are tiny. I mean, we just need much more of this to happen so that you have both the critiques and resistance, as also the alternatives, maybe that will help to bring change.



D&C: That seems like a powerful and hopeful thought! So let us ask you, what lies ahead for the future of Indian politics? What is the hope for alternative leadership in India, say Chandrashekar Azad from the Bhim Army [1]?

A: Next elections BJP will probably come back, but I think that will be less because of the brainwashing now, and more because there is no credible opposition. I recently saw statistics of the assembly strength of BJP in all the states; the popular image is that the BJP holds a so-called majority in most states, actually in many of the assemblies they are in the minority but they have built up alliances. So, you could be pushing for a massive political shift also, if only the opposition was able to get its act together.

So while there is hope for alternatives, people like Azad cannot become a national figure of that stature in the next three years.

It is a long-term thing, and this is one thing we must learn from the BJP. They did not try overnight to become a national force, they took 30 years, slowly building their foundation which is why they are so powerful. It is because of the RSS [2], a huge cadre of ordinary people, including youth, who have a strong right-wing ideology, who are responsible for the success of the BJP. This is also why people like me face, not just pushback from the government, but also from say, our next-door neighbors, when attempting to get our point across.

In so far as we think some hope lies in elections, the opposition has to actually build that base, slowly. If these emerging alternative political leaders immediately jumped into the foray of national elections, I do not think they are going to get anywhere. I mean, who knows Chandrashekar in that sense, other than a certain group of people? So, yes, I think in the long run, they are critical alternatives. But to realize these alternatives, we have to work slowly, to build that base and have the right narratives, building solidarities among resistances and showing what works even while we point out what does not. And we have to simultaneously move towards *swaraj*, in which power resides on the ground, not in political parties, and where elections become a very small part of democracy.

[1] Chandrashekar Azad is an Indian activist and one of the founders of the Bhim Army, which is a Dalit rights organizations in India. This is an organization that is mainly fighting for the abolition of the caste system in India.

[2] The Rashtriya Swayamasevak Sangh (RSS) is a right-wing Hindu paramilitary faction of which Prime Minister Modi has been a member.

