

Relearning Anarchism in India

Jaimine Bezboznik

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In India as elsewhere, anarchist thought is widely misunderstood. As Bhagat Singh (1907 – 1931), one of the few Indian revolutionaries who had explicit anarchist leanings, put it: “The people are scared of the word anarchism. The word anarchism has been abused so much that even in India revolutionaries have been called anarchist to make them unpopular.”

Before sober minds of India or anyone elsewhere misinterpret “anarchism”, I attempt to thoroughly clarify the greatest bemusement. Thanks to the social culture of ultracrepidarianism (the habit of giving opinions and advice on matters outside of one’s knowledge), though.

Prolusion

Anarchism is a political philosophy that advocates self-governed societies with voluntary institutions. These are often described as stateless societies, but several authors have defined them more specifically as institutions based on non-hierarchical free associations. Anarchism is a broad tradition of historical ideas that contain common elements that are nevertheless, sometimes, conflicting. There is no set of positions that you must hold in order to count as a real anarchist.

Anarchism questions the very foundations that political theory, and by extension, the state, supposedly rests upon. Rather than seeing the state as a given and required for the further development of society, anarchists see the state as it truly is: the institution that has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. That is, a group of people who, for some reason or another, have the ability to use the initiation of force in a way that is deemed acceptable, worthy of respect, obligatory, and even required by the mass of people inside the institution’s claimed territory. In this way, the state relies on false or misguided views about authority and power shared by most people and these widely shared beliefs are what give power to the state.

Abstraction

Anarchism rejects political philosophy along with political authority. It says the conventional wisdom is turned on its head – that the entire notion of political philosophy, of politics requiring or creating a philosophy is asinine. Politics and philosophy are contradictory concepts and tying them together has resulted in justifications for some of the worst atrocities the human race has endured. Where politics relies on a gun, philosophy relies on the mind. Where politics utilizes coercion and hierarchy, philosophy utilizes reason and the human intellect. Where politics brings out the worst in people by creating relationships of power and exploitation, philosophy realizes the best in people by creating relationships of mutual respect in a joint effort to discover truth. Politics relies on just as much philosophy as the mugger in the alley relies on reason and cooperation.

The state views philosophy as the enemy – as it represents reason, autonomy, and self-determination. After all, the philosophical way of thinking requires a hunger for truth and certainty that only a self-directive, passionate person will be able to feed. The philosophical way of thinking requires an independent mind, not one enslaved by the chains of authority and hierarchy. It requires a mind that answers to oneself and no other, whether it be king, general, or president.

Anarchism is about voluntary spontaneous orders, not cultures that are predicated on instances of coercion, such as the norms and beliefs that underline statism and rape culture. Letting people be free to develop their own goals and plans, their own values and philosophies, means a principle of equality of authority. Of course orders emerge from coercive arrangements, but these are not valuable for the same reason that voluntary orders are. The latter are the essence of civilization and progress. They are the cement that holds society together. They lead to peace, mutual respect, and trade and away from war, hierarchy, and violence. Any effort to use coercion to direct others according to your own values and goals displays a fundamental ignorance of the forces that achieve progress and flourishing and a flagrant disrespect for the humanity of both the coercer and the victim. Anarchism is an institutional arrangement that puts into practice what we all already know: that, as Gary Chartier puts it, “People are equal in essential dignity and worth,” and, “There is no natural right to rule.” This respect for persons and their individual authority is what must be the ultimate foundation for spontaneous order to develop. To the extent that coercion is used to direct others, the result fails to be based on a spontaneous arrangement. It fails to be anarchistic.

Eminent anthropologist and political theorist James C Scott in his latest book *Two Cheers for Anarchism* writes: “Acts of disobedience are of interest to us when they are exemplary, and especially when, as examples they set off a chain reaction, prompting others to emulate them.” Scott further adds, “Then we are in the presence less of an act of cowardice and conscience — perhaps both — than of a social phenomenon that can have massive political effects.” Every act of wanton unruliness, therefore, does not correspond to a transformative act of anarchy. Our careless use of the term — pinning the label “anarchist” on all and sundry violators of law (propelled by the arrogance of their power rather than any motivation for radical change) directly contradicts Scott’s thesis.

Ratiocination

Anarchism is a fearless trek into the unknown. Since it throws out the imposed normative ideals of other political philosophies, anarchism is the complete sacrifice of the ego of a politically driven mind. It forebodes the usual prescriptions and solutions for society’s ills and trusts the forces of cooperative effort, mutual respect, and voluntarism will do better. It’s the respect for the limits of human reason, the fallibility of human power, the unlikely, but unsurpassed, power of unconscious design, the appreciation of innovation and progress brought about by forces completely out of our control and, above all, humility — the recognition of one’s own mistakes, flaws, ignorance, and inability to know the unknown. Anarchism means, “I don’t know.”

Anarchism is the recognition of our ultimately unprivileged position in the world, the acknowledgement of the fact that we are systematically ignorant of the crucial forces that the fabric of social life depends on, and to embrace this dynamism of life is to live happily and freely. To reject the conservatism of coercion, hierarchy, and planning in favor of a permanent intellectual revolution, to see that only a virtuous, impassioned people are capable of developing and maintaining the peaceful emergent orders that allow humanity to flourish requires the humility only honest and everlasting introspective analysis can provide. Only constant self-questioning accompanied with self-improvement will reveal what our lives and our happiness ultimately count on. And

this means the acceptance of the absurdity of life, which makes way for not only joy, but despair, confusion, pain, and everything else that makes joy worth striving towards.

1. How absurd it is that people's egos are naturally conducive to a confidence and value in one's decision-making and reasons, yet society, the aggregate of all those very people, is simply too varied, too specialized, too persistent, dogged, and rebellious to be predictable and controllable?
2. How absurd it is that the most conceited among us get on top and convince everyone else they are somehow special, that they can plan and direct, police and kill, bomb and drone, invade and occupy, kidnap and imprison, spy and torture, tax and counterfeit, prohibit some drugs and not others, decide who can marry and can't, and so on, when they are actually just as fallible and ignorant as everyone else and that these arbitrary powers are what cause chaos?
3. How absurd it is that the way to the good life isn't deference to authority like many may claim, but refusal to submit and self-determination?

Accepting this absurdity leads one to reject politics and all attempts at government as a well intentioned, but meaningless attempt at manipulating the social order by the permanent suppression of revolution – of society itself. This is why freedom, nothing if not the chance to be better, according to Albert Camus, must be the inherently respected value of any harmonious social order and any happy life.

The process of realizing one's happiness necessitates the blissful exercise of one's liberty, to spit in the face of authoritarian governments, murderous tyrants, and the cruel, infinite despair that a world only capable of giving birth to an equally infinite, non-contradictory joy could impart. Happiness and freedom are the easiest things to lose but they are always there for our taking when we're ready.

Nostalgia 1.0

Unlike the modern Western Anarchist theories, the Vedic Anarchism is a time tested and successfully established anarchist model of the ancients. The rishis who have given Vedas are the first founders of Vedic anarchist societies. They dwelled in forests outside the control of any state or governments, and enforced a values based living through the knowledge on Rta and dharma. Unlike the Western anarchism that emphasizes priority to anti-state and anti-rulers policies, Vedic Anarchism deals with balance of powers, non-hierarchical and decentralized polity, community living, and ecologically sustainable lifestyles through its varna, ashrama, dharma, and Janapada systems.

The Janapada system created a non-hierarchical and decentralized polity of root-level democracy.

The dharma system is wisdom in action. The wisdom that brought awareness about natural and social powers is known as Rta. This system attempted values based living, and brought ecologically sustainable lifestyles.

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The ashrama system empowered individual freedom and independent expressions. Based on the biological age, the needs and behavior of individuals are categorized as Student life, Householder life, Retiring life, and Renouncing life.

The Vedic varna system ensured swadharma based entitlements that brought flexibility, non-hierarchical and decentralized distribution of powers among all the communities for a balanced society, smooth inter-dependency, as well as deals with social responsibilities.

From these Vedic systems, arose the Mahajanapada system that formed the basis of all kingdoms and republics of India. This system administered the root-level distribution of political, technological, economical, and social powers. The term “Janapada” literally means the foothold of the people. In Pāṇini, Janapada stands for country and Janapadin for its citizenry.

Each of these Janapadas was named after the Kshatriya tribe who had settled therein. Within each Janapadas existed the Varna system distributing the socioeconomic powers, creating village communities that are completely independent from the state and completely inter-dependent within itself. All of the ancient Vedic period states followed grass-root democracy raising from the village communities.

The Vedic polity of root-level democracy has turned the entire India as a community and village based society. These villages are completely self-sufficient, self-governing, cooperative, nature bound, and ensured complete independence from the state and its politics. Thomas Munroe, Charles Metcalfe, and Mark Wilks are a few of the Orientalists who have eloquently described this importance village communities held in India.

Because of the Janapada system, anarchism ruled the roots and roosts of India irrespective of kings and other types of rulers. C.F. W. Hegel finds that this system ensured the whole of India and her societies not yielding to despotism, subjection, or subjugation of any rulers. Its influence is very strong and far reaching, even in the colonial period, the colonialists found that the establishment of Vedic anarchism through its village communities as the most difficult barrier to break and could not completely enforce their hegemony.

Nostalgia 2.0

In Gandhi’s view, violence is the source of social problems, and the state is the manifestation of this violence. The nearest approach to purest anarchy would be a democracy based on non-violence.” For Gandhi, the way to achieve such a state of total nonviolence was changing of the people’s minds rather than changing the state which governs people. Self-governance is the principle behind his theory of satyagraha. This swaraj starts from the individual, then moves outward to the village level, and then to the national level; the basic principle is the moral autonomy of the individual is above all other considerations.

Gandhi’s admiration for collective liberation started from the very anarchic notion of individualism. According to Gandhi, the conscience of the individual is the only legitimate form of government. Gandhi averred that “Swaraj will be an absurdity if individuals have to surrender their judgment to a majority.” He opined that a single good opinion is far better and beneficial than that of the majority of the population if the majority opinion is unsound. Due to this swaraj

individualism, he rejected both parliamentary politics and their instrument of legitimization, political parties. According to swaraj individualism the notion that the individual exists for the good of the larger organization had to be discarded in favor of the notion that the larger organization exists for the good of the individual, and one must always be free to leave and to dissent. Gandhi also considered Leo Tolstoy's book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, a book about practical anarchist organization, as the text to have the most influence in his life.

Indian revolutionary and the founder of the Ghadar Party Lala Har Dayal was involved in the anarchist movement in United States. He moved to the United States in 1911, where he became involved in industrial unionism. In Oakland, he founded the Bakunin Institute of California which he described as "the first monastery of anarchism". The organisation aligned itself with the Regeneracion movement founded by the exiled Mexicans Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón. Har Dayal understood the realisation of ancient Aryan culture as anarchism, which he also saw as the goal of Buddhism. The Ghadar Party attempted to overthrow the British in India by reconciling western concepts of social revolution – particularly those stemming from Mikhail Bakunin – with Buddhism.

Nostalgia 3.0

Almost half a century back, John Kenneth Galbraith, the US ambassador to India and a renowned economist, had called India a "functioning anarchy", where the implication was that the country did well despite the government not doing much.

A lot has happened since then, with India going through a series of ideological changes ending in a phase of economic reforms where a number of institutions and structures were created or changed. Have these institutions really delivered or does the epithet – 'functioning anarchy' – still hold?

Broadly, we can look at political, administrative, economic and social institutions that have evolved over the years. One does not quite get a clear picture on these institutions and the public reaction to them is even more intriguing. India remains a democracy despite our disenchantment with various parties and their opportunism. Except for the brief period during the internal Emergency of the mid-seventies, we have had regular elections and several reforms, including control of expenditure on elections and the anti-defection laws. But today the general feeling is that all parties look alike and there is little differentiation between them. There was a promise of youth when Rajiv Gandhi took over, or the illusion of governance when VP Singh came to power on an anti-corruption platform. But little has changed really and at the end of the day it does not seem that governance standards have improved at all.

What do people do here? The rich do not vote and live in a world of their own. They only discuss the decline in standards but do little about it and prefer to concentrate on their own business. The middle class runs around hoping for change. But the level of interest has dwindled and the disillusionment is palpable. The poor actually matter, as they can be swayed by largesse and can be made to vote for specific parties. Therefore, ultimately those who sway this group either through monetary benefits or threats get the votes. It is not surprising that when governments change, names change, but quality does not change significantly. The administrative institutions strike a more dismal picture. One has less faith in the bureaucracy and even less in the judicial system – except at the topmost levels. It is hard to get a ration card without bribery and get-

ting anything through a government department can be frustrating. Systems are not changed because it affects everyone down the line. One wonders why registering an agreement, which is anyway not checked, can't be done online. It would mean a loss of income for the entire chain along the way.

The police force is known to be either inefficient or corrupt, where cases are not allowed to be filed unless one pays for the same. Our antiquated laws ensure that cases never get solved and are heavily in favour of criminals. If one does not have money, one can forget about getting justice. What do the people do here? The rich use agents and pay to get things done. Or they simply keep away from the masses, as that is the best way to ensure that no crime is committed against them. The middle class tries to fight it out, but they finally relent as they have no choice. The poor continue to suffer, but frankly no one cares, as they are a class which has no hope and have the maximum atrocities committed against them. It is not surprising that most crimes are committed against them, right from exploitation and land grabbing to physical abuse. As it involves the poor, they go largely unreported.

The social institutions show an even more distressing image. The Constitution (also called as Condomstitution) as well as manifestoes of various parties speak the same language of providing education, health and other civic facilities to all people, especially the weaker classes. Large amounts of money have been spent every year under various schemes on education, health, water, transport, etc. services. Yet government schools provide the lowest quality of education. At higher education levels, the lacing of politics to admissions policy has compromised significantly on quality with a plethora of reservations based on birth rather than merit. Hospitals are pathetic where patients live in abysmal conditions. Civic amenities are invariably supplied better to the higher strata of society.

What do people do? The rich never make use of public institutions and take recourse to five-star hospitals for health requirements. The new bands of IB schools are preferred, where the logical corollary is to move out of the country for higher studies. The middle class struggles with the system and relies on our insurance companies for support in times of need. While education is still in a state level school or the CBSE or ICSE curriculum, they get squeezed when seeking higher education with marks being skewed heavily through competitive pressure. They are finally opting for taking loans and studying overseas. The poor remain with government schools from where they enter the category of educated unemployed, as the job opportunities for them are limited. This leads to frustration and at the margin and gives rise to crime. The economic institutions are probably the only ones that have fared relatively better in the last two decades but they still present contrasting images. The financial systems are robust – both the institutions as well as the capital market, with a number of reforms and developments having enhanced access as well as quality of services. The fact that the system has held on during crisis times is heartening. The rich have benefited through better access and returns from these segments. The smaller entrepreneurs have struggled against the systems and still fight for survival.

Growth has picked up notwithstanding the hurdles in policy which have certainly clouded the pace of progress. Infrastructure has shown a mixed picture with expressways coexisting with the absence of roads, electricity and urban infrastructure. The middle class has drawn the benefits if located in the metros or larger cities where they have access to modern lifestyles that promise hope for upward mobility. Government programmes for the poor are afflicted with leakages, but have helped some of the poorer sections nonetheless. There is evidently a long way to go here because to reduce inequities in our social fabric, these leakages have to be eliminated. Where does

this leave us? We have created many institutions which are inundated with several challenges. The fact that the country has grown is remarkable because it has happened notwithstanding these obstacles – signs of a functioning anarchy. The economic reforms story has been continuous despite different governments, which again is a good sign.

Indian enterprise has fought to find its way, but the government evidently needs to clean up the administrative and social institutions which will necessarily have to begin with the political structure. Therefore, there are still signs of anarchy where the guilty have an easier time. The rot has set in our institutions fairly deeply. But the country functions mainly due to the people – driven by motivations of faith or fate or just pragmatic realism where they try because that is the only way out.

Finis

Anarchism is considered as a facet of sedition. It isn't a dirty word, in reality. In fact, spontaneous order enriches the sense of liberty, responsibility and accountability. Even empirical analysis can gibe with my observation, if at all they're "independently" peer-reviewed.

Dangerous freedom is always better than peaceful slavery. Every voluntary action happening around is an act of anarchism and it's vile to episteme "without government, who'll build the roads?"

This descriptive article (hopefully you've read) is an attempt to explore anarchism and also endeavors to clarify certain mindless misconceptions. Indians (including nationalists or "liberal" leftists) possess partial information embedded with bounded rationality. I blame this tribe for manipulating the knowledge and discourses.

As a professor, I have faced "ideological discrimination" in my vocational life for teaching my students to look at things from libertarian or anarchism perspective. Does it signify that Indian education system is obsessed with dumping down of imbecility?

I can cite few examples (which are unfortunately uncovered by mainstream media or economists) on people's free association. There are many practical examples for you to search out.

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