Chomsky in India

Jean Dreze

2014

Contents

Easy Guest . . . 3
Time Frame . . . 4
Democracy and Power . . . 5
Anarchist Thought and India . . . 7
Acknowledgements . . . 10

Sometime around 1991 I wrote to Noam Chomsky and invited him to give a few lectures in India. It felt like wishful thinking – for one thing, I had no idea how his visit would be financed, if he agreed. I did not even expect him to reply, flooded as he must have been with more important mail. So I was pleasantly surprised to receive a short letter from him just a few days later (these were the good old times when real letters were delivered at home by a live postperson). He wrote that he would be happy to come, and that the first week he was free was January 1996 – several years down the line. I wrote back that January 1996 would be fine, and that's when he came.

Easy Guest

Astonishing as it may seem today, Chomsky was not particularly well known in India at that time. Even among left intellectuals, few had paid serious attention to his writings. That was, in fact, one of the reasons why I was hoping that he would accept my invitation. I felt that his ideas needed to be better known in India, where the tenets of Marxism did not do justice to the country's rich experience of popular struggles. There is certainly much to learn from Marx, but it requires some serious suspension of common sense to think that the key to India's social problems today lie in the writings of a 19th century German philosopher. India, of course, has its own galaxy of inspiring thinkers, within as well as outside the Marxist tradition. Yet Chomsky's ideas seemed to me to fill some important gaps. Beyond that, I was hoping that Noam's visit to India would lead to a better appreciation of anarchist thought, which tends to be widely misunderstood.

These hopes have been fulfilled to some extent – Chomsky and other anarchist thinkers are much better known in India today than they were twenty years ago, and I think that his visits have contributed to this. Some leading left intellectuals in India, notably Arundhati Roy (herself strongly influenced by Chomsky), even seem to have anarchist leanings. But there has been some resistance too: in 2001, when Noam visited India again, the venue of one of his lectures had to be shifted from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) to Delhi University at the last minute due to firm opposition from a few faculty members at JNU who seemed to think of him as some sort of "left deviationist".

Others had doubts of a different sort. In October 1997, my friend Milan Rai (who wrote an excellent book on *Chomsky's Politics*) gave a seminar on Chomsky's life and thought at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi. He talked, among other things, about Chomsky's propaganda model and the subversion of democracy. Ashis Nandy commented, "All this is fine, but why do we in India need Noam Chomsky?". I am not sure whether he meant that Chomsky's arguments did not apply in India, or that relying on them would reflect a colonized intellectual mindset. I felt that his question contained its own answer.

For the bulk of his Indian audience, however, Noam Chomsky was mainly a famous scholar they had vaguely heard of. It did not take long for him to win the interest and affection of the Indian public. Soon after his arrival in India on 11 January 1996, his interviews received wide publicity and his lectures attracted larger and larger crowds. After a few days in Delhi he went to Kolkata in West Bengal, where the ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist) made up for the reluctance of some of their comrades at JNU by receiving Noam as a state guest. From there his lecture tour took him to Hyderabad, Chennai, and Thiruvananthapuram, in that order. This book, however, covers the Delhi lectures only.

Noam was a very easy and accommodating guest. He was never worried about where we would put him up, what he would eat or what class he would be travelling. His main concern seemed to be to make good use of his time. When I sent him a draft schedule for his visit, he replied, “One lecture a day is not a full day for me”. So we packed more lectures and other engagements in his programme. On 17 January 1996, he gave three lectures in Hyderabad: one on “Intellectuals in the Emerging World Order” at 9.30 am, one on “Globalization and Media” at 3.15 pm and one on “American Foreign Policy” at 7 pm. When I apologized for the low (virtually nil) sight-seeing content of his India programme, Noam wrote back: “No problem… I’ll save that for some time when it’s more relaxed”. I guess that time is yet to come, if it ever does.

I hasten to clarify that Noam did not come to India as a kind of preacher, and certainly not as a preacher of anarchism (none of his lectures were on that subject). He came to share his ideas as well as to learn. The discussion sessions that followed his lectures were always lively and often lasted well beyond the anticipated time (ample extracts are included in this book). In between these engagements, Noam had occasions to learn in other ways. For instance, in West Bengal he spent some time with a rural Gram Panchayat (village council), an experience he greatly appreciated. Alas, much of this happened outside Delhi and is not reflected in this book.

Time Frame

The text printed in this book is very close to the original transcripts of Noam Chomsky’s Delhi lectures. Quite a few years have passed since the lectures were delivered. Aside from serial dilly-dallying on my part, publication was delayed because Noam was keen to update these lectures but never got round to it due to innumerable pressing demands on his time (he did correct the original transcripts).

Despite the passage of time, these lectures have not lost their relevance. Along with the question-answer sessions that followed, and the interview reprinted at the end of this book, they cover a vast canvas and provide lasting insights on many aspects of democracy and power in the contemporary world. They can also be seen as an enlightening retrospective on the big events of the 20th century. Beyond this, the book provides a useful introduction to Chomsky’s essential ideas. By the end of it, one feels like a person who had a cataract operation and sees the world in a new light.

In some respects, the interest of these lectures has grown – not diminished – with the passage of time. For instance, they shed useful light on the events that followed the end of the Cold War – events that cast a long shadow on what is happening in the world today. At a time when it was the norm among intellectuals to expect a huge “peace dividend” from the end of the Cold War, Noam Chomsky recognised the situation for what it was, with characteristic clarity: “the disappearance of the Soviet deterrent opened new opportunities for decisive and rapid destruction of much weaker enemies [by the United States]”. This comment goes back to the early 1990s, but it was developed in the Delhi lectures and has applied ever since.

There are many other interesting examples of prescient thoughts in these lectures. Few people in 1996 had a clear sense of the perils of unregulated financial markets – we know something about that today, from bitter experience. Chomsky not only saw the danger but also understood the politics of reckless deregulation better than most economists did at that time (including those who later wrote to the Queen of England, when a financial crisis took them by surprise in 2008, that this was "a failure of the collective imagination of many bright people"). Similarly, there are far-sighted lines in these lectures about the dangers of global warming and environmental destruction. Long before climate change became a household term, Chomsky raised forceful questions about humanity's ability to survive much longer if things continue the way they are. "The prevailing value system," he said eighteen years ago, "is that hegemony is more important than survival". This is all the more true today.

Democracy and Power

It would be presumptuous on my part to attempt a summary of the central ideas of this book. The lectures are packed with insightful thoughts, and what appeals as the central ideas is likely to differ from reader to reader. All I can do is to mention a few ideas that seem to be well worth registering.

The lectures are grounded in Noam Chomsky's principled opposition to the concentration of power – whether it is state power, or corporate power, or for that matter the power of the upper castes in Indian society, of men over women in the family, of an unaccountable party leader, or of the boss at the workplace. This is an old anarchist commitment, but Chomsky's formulation of it is particularly appealing: "… any structure of hierarchy and authority carries a heavy burden of justification, whether it involves personal relations or a larger social order. If it cannot bear that burden—sometimes it can—then it is illegitimate and should be dismantled". This sounds to me like a practical and far-reaching principle of thought and action.

Another overarching theme of the lectures, related to the first, is that the concentration of power and privilege is a major threat to democracy. This, again, is not a new idea, but Chomsky has taken it further than most and applied it with great clarity in numerous contexts. In India, the conflict between democracy and the concentration of power was a major concern of Dr. Ambedkar, who always emphasised that political democracy would be incomplete without economic and social democracy. "Social and economic democracy," he wrote, "are the tissues and the fibre of a political democracy. The tougher the tissue and the fibre, the greater the strength of the body."[1] In this respect Chomsky and Ambedkar are on the same wavelength, even if their respective ideas also diverge in important ways (for instance, on the role of the state in bringing about economic democracy). It is possibly interesting that both Chomsky and Ambedkar were strongly influenced by John Dewey, who was also deeply concerned with the conflict between democracy and the concentration of power.

A third theme is the specific threat posed by the growth of corporate power and the "new despotism of state-supported private power". Chomsky is uncompromising in his view of private corporations as "unaccountable private tyrannies". Corporate capitalism, as he sees it, is the last survivor of three systems of tyranny that have common roots. The point is well summed up in his concluding comment at the end of the last question-answer session in the book:

In the twentieth century, three forms of totalitarianism developed: Bolshevism, fascism, and corporations. They really are three forms of totalitarianism. And in fact they have… much the same intellectual roots. They come out of neo-Hegelian ideas about the rights of organic entities over individuals – a big attack on classical liberalism. Well, two of those forms of totalitarianism were overthrown. The third one is rampant. But it's no more engraved in stone than the other two. In fact, I think it's weaker. It doesn't have the same kind of coercive force behind it. So it can be overthrown, too, in favour of democratic control.

---

[1] Ambedkar, B.R. (1946), *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables* (Bombay: Thacker & Co), p. 207.

How "democratic control" is to be exercised is not something for which Chomsky has a formula or blueprint. Rather, democratic control is a general principle that we can have some hope of applying in gradually widening spheres of social life. This includes replacing authoritarian modes of economic organization with alternative institutions, based for instance on worker management, voluntary cooperation, participatory planning and the federation principle.

A fourth essential idea is the role of propaganda in enabling private corporations and other centres of power to undermine democracy and maintain their dominance. In his exposition of the basic idea early on in the book, Chomsky quotes the Australian scholar Alex Carey, who inspired his own work on corporate propaganda: "The twentieth century has been characterized by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy; the growth of corporate power; and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy".[2] The idea that propaganda is a pervasive tool of control in democratic societies may sound far-fetched to those who are not familiar with Chomsky's writings, because it sounds like a conspiracy theory. But corporate propaganda is not an organised conspiracy. It works mainly through a sort of filtering process whereby those who say the right things (the sort of things corporate bosses like to hear) are able to climb the ladder and the rest are left behind.[3] As a result, a corporate-sponsored mass-media system that superficially looks pluralistic and adversarial actually restricts public debate to a narrow framework that suits the privileged and powerful. As Chomsky points out, the propaganda system includes not only the mass media but also related sectors such as the entertainment industry, and even "extends to a good deal more of scholarship than its practitioners like to admit": scholarly ideas that suit the privileged and powerful (such as the odd notion, common in economics, that rationality and self-interest are more or less synonymous) tend to flourish while ideas that threaten their interests get sidelined. The process is obvious enough, but we are so used to the illusion of a propaganda-free society that it takes some reflection to liberate ourselves from it.

These ideas were developed largely with reference to the United States, the country Noam Chomsky knows best and often focuses on in these lectures. But they are highly relevant to India, too, increasingly so as time goes by. Indeed, India is becoming more and more like the United States (the Indian elite's odd model of what a "developed" society looks like). It is certainly in danger of becoming a "business-driven society", as Chomsky aptly describes the United States. And while India is still a vibrant democracy in some respects, the growth of corporate power adds to the fundamental contradictions discussed by Dr. Ambedkar sixty-five years ago. While Chomsky is careful, in these lectures, not to proffer expert advice on India, his ideas are of great help in understanding what is going on in this country.

---

[2] Carey, Alex (1997), *Taking the Risk out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda versus Freedom and Liberty* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press), p. 18.

[3] The point was nicely made, in a different context, by C. Wright Mills: "The fit survive, and fitness means… conformity with the criteria of those who have already succeeded. To be compatible with the top men is to act like them, to look like them, to think like them: to be of and for them – or at least to display oneself to them in such a way as to create that impression. This, in fact, is what is meant by 'creating' – a well-chosen word – 'a good impression.' This is what is meant – and nothing else – by being a 'sound man,' as sound as a dollar." See Mills, C. Wright (1956), *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Pres), p. 141.

Just to illustrate, I have found Chomsky's ideas quite helpful in decoding the literature on social programmes in the Indian business media. The general refrain (a virtual "party line") is that social programmes are a waste of public money — they should be phased out or privatized. This line is followed with remarkable consistency by a long list of seemingly independent columnists who write under the garb of learned and impartial commentators. The real, unspoken script is this: social programmes are against business interests, because higher social spending means higher taxes, or higher interest rates, or less public money for corporate handouts ("incentives" as they are called). Business columnists who want to do well (for instance, get invitations to corporate-sponsored seminars or TV shows) have a pretty good idea of what they have to write. Many of their articles have little intellectual merit, whether in terms of arguments or evidence, yet they get a wide hearing because they serve privileged interests. Some are relatively cogent and well-informed, and their authors may believe in good faith that social programmes are a waste of money. But even they tend to do well because they say the right things, and abstain from advocating (say) higher taxes or minimum wages. It is hard to believe that their interests do not colour their views. The outcome is a relentless propaganda war that makes it virtually impossible to have a rational public debate on social programmes.

This brief preview would be incomplete without mentioning that the book is not just about the subversion of democracy by unaccountable powers. It is also about how this subversion can be resisted through popular struggles. Chomsky's forthright indictment of concentrated power always goes hand in hand with a basic confidence in the ability of ordinary people to change the world. Indeed, their struggles have already made the world a better place in many ways. Looking to the future, there are vast possibilities of further progress towards "democratic control by ordinary people of every institution, whether it is industry, colleges, commerce, etc." – provided that humanity survives, which is far from guaranteed.

Anarchist Thought and India

Before concluding, let me return briefly to the relevance of anarchism – or rather anarchist thought – to Indian politics and social movements. In India as elsewhere, anarchist thought is widely misunderstood. As Bhagat Singh, 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."

How and why the anarchist tradition came to be comprehensively sidelined in India is not entirely clear. The fact is that very few left leaders, writers or activists in India think of themselves as anarchists. And yet it seems to me that many of them have drawn inspiration from anarchist thought in one way or another, and that we would greatly benefit from a more explicit recognition of this anarchist influence – actual and potential.

There are varieties of anarchist thought (some are pretty weird), just as there are varieties of socialist thought; my concern here is with what one might call cooperative anarchism or libertarian socialism. This is more or less the opposite of what anarchism is often claimed to mean by those whose aim, as Bhagat Singh put it, is to make revolutionaries unpopular. This aim is typically achieved by portraying anarchists as impulsive bomb-throwers who want to destroy the state through violent means.[4] Resistance to state authority and oppression is certainly one of the core principles of anarchism. It is also true that many anarchists believe in the possibility of a state-less society, and perhaps even in the need for a violent overthrow of the state. But anarchist thought certainly does not start from there. In fact, as Chomsky has argued, it is even possible for a committed anarchist to lend temporary support to some state institutions vis-à-vis other centres of power: "In today's world, I think, the goals of a committed anarchist should be to defend some state institutions from the attack against them, while trying at the same time to pry them open to more meaningful public participation – and ultimately, to dismantle them in a much more free society, if the appropriate circumstances can be achieved."[5]

If anarchist thought does not begin with the idea of a state-less society, let alone the violent overthrow of the state, where does it start from? It starts, I believe, from the same point as these lectures – a deep suspicion of all authority and a principled opposition to the concentration of power, whether it is the power of the state, the corporation, the church, the landlord or the head of a family. As Chomsky argues, this does not mean that all authority and power is illegitimate, but it does mean that if it cannot be justified, it must be dismantled.

Some people believe, against all evidence, that power becomes harmless if it is exercised on behalf of the working class. This is the basis of the hope that a "dictatorship of the proletariat" would pave the way for the withering away of the state and a state-less society. The dangers of this idea were exposed early on by anarchist thinkers such as Michael Bakunin, a contemporary of Karl Marx, who said: "I wonder how he [Marx] fails to see… that the establishment of such a dictatorship would be enough of itself to kill the revolution, to paralyze and distort all popular movements".[6]

The fact that anarchist thinkers predicted with great clarity what would happen in societies based on an apparent dictatorship of the proletariat is not the least reason why it is worth paying more attention to them. Similarly, anarchist thought can help us to develop a healthy suspicion of various forms of vanguardism, including the notion that left intellectuals are the vanguard of the proletariat. This notion is of course a terrific deal for intellectuals, since it puts them in command. Vanguardism found a fertile soil in India with its long tradition of Brahminism, guru worship, and deference to authority in general. It is at variance with the spirit of anarchism, which includes a basic faith in people's ability to take charge of their own lives and struggles.

Indeed, anarchist thought and libertarian socialism are not limited to a fundamental critique of power and authority – far from it. They also build on constructive ideas about social relations and economic organization, including voluntary association, mutual aid, self-management, and the principle of federation. The basic idea is that a good society would consist, as John Dewey put it, of "… free human beings associated with one another on terms of equality".

One of the most eloquent exponents of the power of free association and voluntary cooperation was Peter Kropotkin, the 19th-century anarchist and author of *Mutual Aid.* A zoologist and geographer by profession, Kropotkin spent many years in Siberia, where he observed countless examples of mutual aid among animals. Just to give one example, he observed how, just before the winter, large numbers of deer would gather from hundreds of miles around and congregate at the precise point of a river (the Amur) where it was narrow enough for a large herd to be able to cross it safely and reach greener pastures on the other side.[7] He concluded that cooperative behaviour is a plausible outcome of biological evolution – an idea that is being rediscovered today by evolutionary biologists and game theorists.

---

[4] Bhagat Singh did throw a bomb once (in the chamber of the Central Legislative Assembly), but it was little more than a firecracker and the gesture was largely symbolic. There were no casualties.

[5] Chomsky (1996), *Powers and Prospects: Reflections on Human Nature and the Social Order* (London: Pluto), p. 75. This statement must be read in the light of the distinction Chomsky makes between "goals" and "visions" (p. 70): "By visions, I mean the conception of a future society that animates what we actually do, a society in which a decent human being might want to live. By goals, I mean the choices and tasks that are within reach, that we will pursue one way or another guided by a vision that may be distant and hazy."

[6] Michael Bakunin, letter to *La Liberté*, 5 October 1872; reprinted in Dolgoff, S. (ed.)(1971), *Bakunin on Anarchy* (New York: Vintage Books).

Kropotkin went on to study cooperation in human societies (which involves much more than biological evolution) and documented in great detail how mutual aid played a pervasive role at all stages of human history, despite being often repressed by the privileged and powerful. More than a hundred years after the publication of *Mutual Aid*, we have many more examples of human activities and institutions based on principles of voluntary association and mutual aid. Anarchist principles of political action have played an important role in the international peace movement, the environmental movement, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Arab Spring, the Chiapas uprising, the World Social Forum and the right to information movement in India. There have been vibrant experiments with workers' cooperatives and self-management in Spain, Argentina, and Kerala, and also other examples of economic applications of anarchist principles such as the free software movement. In India, the social organization of many tribal communities is still based on a strong tradition of mutual aid and participatory democracy, evident for instance in institutions like exchange labour and Gram Sabhas.

Even the edifice of electoral democracy rests on a simple act of mutual aid, namely participation in elections: voting does not involve any personal gain for anyone, since a single person's vote cannot influence the outcome of elections, and yet most people do vote, often losing a day's wages and braving long queues, harsh weather or even physical danger. Without mutual cooperation, there would be no democracy, even in the most elementary form of electoral democracy. As this example illustrates, mutual cooperation does not necessarily require altruism or self-sacrifice; it can also build on simple habits of thought (specifically, habits of sociability and public-spiritedness) that an enlightened society should be able to foster.

Coming back to the left tradition in India, elements of anarchist thought can be found in one form or another in the life and writings of many Indian thinkers, even if they never thought of themselves as anarchists, and indeed were not anarchists. I have already mentioned Bhagat Singh, who had clear anarchist sympathies. Just to give one or two other examples, Ambedkar was not an anarchist by any means and yet we can find traces of anarchist thought in his writings, for instance his notion of democracy as a "mode of associated living" based on "liberty, equality and fraternity". I think that many anarchists would also be proud of Periyar, who taught people to resist the oppression of caste, patriarchy and religion and have faith in themselves. Even some leading Marxist thinkers belong here: for instance, Ashok Rudra's critique of "the intelligentsia as a ruling class" has some affinity with Chomsky's analysis of the role of intellectuals in the modern world.

Also within the Marxist tradition, here is something K. Balagopal (one of India's most committed and thoughtful left activists) wrote around the end of his lifelong engagement with a variety of popular struggles:

---

[7] Kropotkin, Peter (1902), *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London: Heinemann), Chapter 2.

"What seems to be required are 'localised' (both spatially and socially) movements that are specific enough to bring out the full potential and engender the full self-realisation of various oppressed groups, subsequently federated into a wider movement that can (in a free and democratic way) channelise the aroused energies into a broad movement. This is quite different from the Leninist notion of a single vanguard party that would centralise all knowledge within itself and direct (top down) the struggles of the suppressed masses. In such an effort, the suppressed masses would not even be half awakened to their potential. Even if such a party were to claim that it learns from the people, and even if [it] were to honestly try to do so, the very strategy would be inadequate. If there can at all be a single 'party' which would lead a movement for social transformation, it can only be a federally structured organisation, whose free and equal units would be the political units, centred on the self-directed struggles of various sections of the deprived."[8]

This sounds to me like anarchist thought *par excellence*. As I have illustrated earlier, anarchist principles are alive not just in Indian political thought but also in social life and popular movements. None of this is to say that the time has come to embrace anarchism (or libertarian socialism) and give up other schools of thought. But greater openness to anarchist ideas would certainly bring some fresh air. For instance, I believe that anarchist thought could help us to think more clearly about the relation between caste and class, beware of all authoritarianism, enlarge our understanding of democracy, and open our eyes to the workings of power (for instance, patriarchy and caste discrimination) within our own movements. Last but not least, anarchist thought can inspire us to change the world without waiting for state power, and give us confidence that democratic struggles here and now can be, as Bakunin put it, "the living seeds of the new society which is to replace the old world".

Acknowledgements

These lectures would not have seen the light of day without the help of a few people who generously gave their time to transcribe the recordings, suggest editorial corrections and read successive proofs. Special thanks are due to Reetika Khera, Swati Narayan and Jessica Pudussery. I also take this opportunity to thank all those (too numerous to list) who facilitated Noam Chomsky's visits to India in 1996 and 2001. Different parts of his 1996 programme were kindly sponsored by the Centre for Development Economics at the Delhi School of Economics, the Centre for Applied Linguistics and Translation Studies (University of Hyderabad), the Indian Institute of Technology (Madras), the Centre for Development Studies (Thiruvananthapuram) and *Frontline* magazine. Finally, I am grateful to Anthony Arnove and Alessandra Tosi for facilitating the publication of these lectures by OpenBook. It was a pleasure to cooperate with this new publishing venture, which fits well with the spirit of Noam's writings.

An agreeable feature of OpenBook publishing is that it makes it easy to produce new editions with updated material from time to time. We are eagerly hoping that Noam Chomsky will visit India again in early 2015, and if so, an updated edition will be prepared. And who knows, perhaps Noam will get a chance to do some sight-seeing this time!

Jean Drèze
Ranchi, October 2014

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright

Jean Dreze
Chomsky in India
2014

Democracy and Power
This is Jean Dreze's introduction to the book Democracy and Power, by Noam Chomsky (OpenBook, 2014).

usa.anarchistlibraries.net