

its leaders were skilled at mobilisation and organisation-building. The Left attracted a large number of creative artists and intellectuals – such as Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Sunil Janah, Chittaprasad, Somnath Hore, MF Husain, FN Souza, SH Raza, Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee, SK Bakre, Ram Kumar, VS Gaitonde, Paritosh Sen – to its fold, under the aegis of the Indian People's Theater Association, which played an important role in taking the party's perspective to the masses.

The CPI's prestige rose further nationally when it managed to win elections to the Kerala assembly in 1957, forming the world's first elected Communist government. Its attempt at land reform however provoked a backlash from entrenched groups and the dismissal of its government by the Nehru regime again boosted the party's image across India. Despite the split in the CPI, with the formation of the CPI (Marxist) in 1964, the movement continued to grow and achieved electoral success in West Bengal and Tripura where the CPI(M) and its Left Front partners came to power repeatedly since the mid-70s. Over the last few decades in Kerala too, the Left Front has alternated in power with its main rival, the Congress.

*The Phoenix Moment* clarifies the record of all these Left Front regimes in the three states mentioned above with detailed data on indicators such as land redistribution, literacy, health, employment, status of agricultural labour, women and minorities. While there were some very important initiatives taken on behalf of the poor and working populations and performance varies according to the state, the overall picture of achievements of the Left Front governments is disappointing.

For example in West Bengal, "By the end of the 1990s 56.2 per cent of the state population lived below the poverty line, compared to 36.5 percent for India as a whole" and the state "lagged behind many other states in quality of health care, child nutrition, literacy and education". Even in the provision of basic services such as safe drinking water, sanitation and domestic electric supply the state's performance ranged from "poor to middling". Kerala performed much better on all these fronts but the credit for that cannot go solely to the communist governments, as the state had a long history of social empowerment, growing literacy and progressive ideals preceding Indian independence.

According to Bidwai, apart from the fact that the Left parties got entangled a bit too much in purely electoral and parliamentary politics, paying less attention to popular mobilisation, building alternative institutions or political processes, there was also a failure on their part to understand the Indian social and economic situation accurately. One glaring example was their indifference to the issue of caste, which was treated as a "feudal remnant" that would disappear with the intensification of the 'class struggle'.

The powerful emergence of the Backward caste and Dalit movements in recent decades, particularly in the populous Hindi heartland, exposed the Left's lack of connect with ground realities. It also raised uncomfortable questions about its integrity, given

the fact that historically the Left parties have been led overwhelmingly by those from upper-caste Hindu backgrounds, with no Dalits, extreme Backward castes, Adivasis or Muslims anywhere in the top echelons of the organisational hierarchy.

On the economic front too, while the Left has been somewhat successful in mobilising urban industrial workers through their trade unions, they form just around 7 per cent of the close to 500 million working population in the country. The vast majority, employed in the informal economy with no minimum wages, harsh working conditions and little security have not figured very much on the Left's agenda. More than half of these workers in the informal sector again are farm labour, a section that the Left has neglected, focusing instead on organising the numerically smaller but socially more powerful middle and rich peasantry.

As if all this was not bad enough, the Left Front regime in West Bengal went to the extent of championing the policies of economic liberalisation and privatisation introduced under pressure from Indian and foreign corporations by the Narasimha Rao-led Congress government in 1991. The Buddhadeb Bhattacharya regime's attempt to forcibly take away land from farmers in Singur and Nandigram on behalf of private industry in 2007 led to massive public protests that finally ousted the Left Front government itself, after being in power uninterrupted for over three decades. Even more shamefully, the barbaric methods – including murder and rape – used by the party and the police under its command to put down these protests tarred the reputation of the entire Indian Communist movement severely.

While Bidwai is deeply critical of the Indian Left parties for their various failures, he remains generally optimistic about the future of the broader Left movement, that includes other smaller communist parties and the sizeable non-party Left and civil society forces. If the bigger communist parties refuse to undergo critical introspection and radical course correction, he says, they will only fade away into complete irrelevance.

In that case, the task of taking Left principles, ideas and agendas forward will fall on the shoulders of other forces that will need to work together in "shared solidarity". As a beginning towards this he suggests the drawing up of a 'People's Charter', through a process of deep reflection and analysis, to work out a plan of transformational action in the Indian context.

Though focused mainly on the bigger communist parties and their history *The Phoenix Moment* raises many issues that would be of interest and relevance to any organisation trying to work towards a socialist, just and democratic Indian future. At any rate, the book is a treasure house of information and is essential reading for anyone trying to understand modern Indian history and the role played in it by the Indian Left.

Of course, a lot of what Praful Bidwai has written is likely to be deeply embarrassing for the leaders of the communist parties, but it is only someone genuinely anguished by the state of the Left movement who could have written with so much honesty and in such great detail. ■

# The reclaiming of democracy

## Democracy and Power: The Delhi Lectures

By Noam Chomsky (with an Introduction by Jean Drèze)

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As the subtitle highlights, *Democracy and Power* includes five political essays that Noam Chomsky delivered in Delhi as public lectures during his visits of 1996 and 2001 (excluding the Lakdawala lecture, see below). Noam Chomsky has visited India thrice. The first visit was in the early 1970s when he delivered a lecture for the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavana in Delhi. This lecture was subsequently published by the Bhavana individually.

After a long gap of nearly a quarter of a century, Chomsky visited India for the second time in January 1996 and gave many lectures across the country. These included a philosophico-linguistic lecture at Delhi University which was subsequently published in 2000 by Oxford University Press, New Delhi, as *The Architecture of Language*. This little volume turned out to be an international best seller running into several dozen reprints in several languages in the last 15 years. This happened because the volume was able to carve a niche in the otherwise massive Chomsky oeuvre. The political lectures delivered in 1996 have so far remained unpublished to my knowledge.

Chomsky visited India again in the aftermath of 9/11 in November 2001 primarily in connection with the Lakdawala Memorial Lecture organised by the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi. This lecture was individually published by the Institute and subsequently included in a collection of Lakdawala lectures. Chomsky also toured the country extensively on this occasion and gave lectures across the country. These have also remained unpublished as far as I know.

Interestingly, in 2001, Chomsky also gave one philosophico-linguistic lecture in the form of the Bose Memorial Lecture at St Stephen's College. For several years after the event, there was a plan of expanding the extremely dense Bose lecture into a book form with the inclusion of additional, mostly unpublished, material and some elucidatory short essays by renowned scholars in the area. Something like a tentative volume emerged out of this effort. However, as the years passed, more and more of the related material were published elsewhere. Also, the field was undergoing such rapid changes that much of the original lecture was beginning to get outdated. With much regret, the publication plan was abandoned some years later.

In the light of the above, it is important to ask: why are these lectures published now after 20 and 15 years respectively? As noted, this collection comprises just some of the Delhi lectures, excluding the profoundly important Lakdawala lecture; as such, it does not include lectures delivered in Kolkata, Hyderabad, Chennai, etc. If there was a volume containing all of his political lectures in India in one place, it would have had some historical/archival interest for future scholars. What unifies these essays except that they have been delivered by Noam Chomsky, one of the leading public intellectuals of our time?

As noted, the huge lapse of time between the physical event of these lectures and their publication could be viewed as a serious problem. More so, because in the meantime there have been significant publications by Chomsky – *9/11* (2001), *Hegemony and Survival* (2003), *Failed States* (2006), *Interventions* (2007), etc – that cover much of the ground (and more) sketched in the Delhi lectures.

As Jean Drèze, in his Introduction to this volume, reviews Chomsky's lifelong political work, Chomsky's investigations have been fundamentally grounded in a quest for a conception of genuine democracy without any repressive and authoritarian structures – in fact, without any hierarchy at all except those like parent-child which need to be specifically examined and defended on rational and moral ground. In that sense, his work may be viewed as exposing the structures of undemocracy.

Although Chomsky has made detailed comments on classical political thought, especially on Marx and the 'anarchists', over the decades, unlike a plethora of radical thinkers from Adam Smith, Karl Marx to Gramsci, Foucault and others, Chomsky never engaged himself directly with 'theoretical' inquiry; he never proposed a global view of social order and change, never advocated any universal course of radical action. This is because, being a leading scientist in his own field of Linguistics, Chomsky has a clear grasp of what counts as a genuine theory under the severe constraints imposed on the human sciences. Much 'theory', for Chomsky, is nothing but pretension. As he remarks elsewhere:

The idea that deep scientific analysis tells you something about problems of human beings and our lives and our interrelations with one another

and so on is mostly pretence in my opinion—self-serving pretence which is itself a technique of domination and exploitation and should be avoided. Professionals certainly have the responsibility of not making people believe that they have some special knowledge that others can't attain without special means or special college education or whatever.

So, in what did his reclaiming of democracy consist? The answer lies in what he once called Orwell's problem: "The problem of explaining how we can know so little, given that we have so much evidence." As Chomsky explained, George Orwell was concerned with the power of totalitarian systems to instill beliefs that were firmly held and widely accepted despite lacking foundation, "and often plainly at variance with obvious facts about the world around us". Given that varieties of totalitarianism are the ultimate forms of undemocracy, Chomsky's central effort over nearly six decades had been to address Orwell's problem where it is most salient: the tyranny of the US military-industrial complex controlled by the 'backroom boys' that has established violent hegemony over much of the rest of the world in the garb of upholding democratic values and institutions. It has also led the planet and the species close to extinction.

Chomsky had dealt with aspects of the central issue with painstaking research over obscure and carefully hidden material in several languages. He has analysed official proclamations with incisive empirical evidence gathered from a vast area to reveal the falsity of those claims. He has confronted the monstrous propaganda machinery of the mainstream media with facts diligently culled from alternative media and cross-checked with local sources. The effort has led to literally many dozens of books of immense scholarship and insight covering aspects of US foreign policy, US history, the nature of corporate machinations, plus the geo-politics around such sites as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Palestine, Nicaragua, Kosovo, and much else besides.

Some of these books were pretty widely available in India, some with Indian editions – such as, *Manufacturing Consent* (with Ed Herman), *Peace in the Middle East, Profit over People, Class Warfare, Powers and Prospects*, etc – before Chomsky visited India for the second time. As noted, his visits were followed by regular publications supplemented by interviews, talk-shows, short essays, written and delivered across the world.

Jean Drèze's otherwise thoughtful and lucid Introduction, however, doesn't quite explain why this book is separately needed in the expanding Chomsky oeuvre. I mentioned his succinct review of Chomsky's basic concern with the notion of democracy, as with any radical thinker of past and present. However, in doing so, Dreze did not show what additional argument or evidence based on historical analysis has been offered in these lectures.

Moreover, Dreze's long foray into the history of anarchist thought not only diverts attention from Chomsky's formidable survey of the new post-Soviet, neoliberal world-order, it perhaps encourages a rather narrow, maybe even negative, perspective on where Chomsky stands in political



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thinking. Chomsky did show his sympathy for Bakunin, early Marx, Kropotkin etc, in his early writings, but has refrained from directly appealing to the classical anarchist literature in his later writings. Drèze understands the textual problem, but then to hold on to his idea of primacy of anarchist thought, he goes on to include almost every radical thought for social change within the broadly liberal-progressive discourses – Gandhi, Ambedkar, World Social Forum, Bhagat Singh, even 'Naxalites' such as Ashok Rudra and K Balagopal – as examples of anarchist "inclinations". This renders the doctrine of anarchism to be largely trivial. I do not think this part of Drèze's essay does justice either to Chomsky or to the book.

Still, I believe, the publication of the book can be defended from a variety of directions. First, Chomsky's first set of lectures was delivered in the mid-90s, roughly five years after the full-throttle imposition of neoliberal economy in the Indian scene, and roughly ten years after the end of the Soviet-era. For Chomsky, while it was important to understand these changes with their effects across the world, it was also politically prudent not to exaggerate these changes as fundamental in human history. The Delhi lectures gave the occasion to examine this historical juncture in the specific Indian context. Chomsky explained in detail, with recourse to official documents and doctrines going back to the 19th and 18th centuries, that much of the extreme forms of concentration witnessed in the neoliberal era were actually contemplated from the very early days of US political economy, even if there are variations in how the plans and desires actually unfolded. Although he mentioned the Indian scene only briefly during the lectures themselves, much quality discussion

followed each of his lectures with the audience eager to probe Chomsky's views on India. This was something new in the literature.

Second, the second set of lectures in 2001 were delivered in a radically altered political context, namely, the rise of fundamentalist power in Afghanistan and elsewhere, culminating in the catastrophe of 9/11 and the draconian reaction from the military-industrial complex. Now, radical politics went beyond resistance for justice to address the very survival of the species. Since Chomsky visited India just a few weeks after 9/11 and US's planned attack on Afghanistan, he was obviously

re-examining in his mind and in his readings some of the aspects of the erstwhile unilateral global order under the command of the US. Unfortunately, the volume does not include his gem of a paper, "Peering into the abyss of the future", delivered as the Lakdawala Lecture to start his tour of India. In this paper, he voiced a set of very different concerns now directly linked to the issue of terrorism – especially, terrorism of the military-industrial complex – that threatened the species. Although this seminal piece was not included, the volume does end with a rather grim but meticulous sketch of the militarisation of the world order that had receded somewhat to the background for some decades after the end of the Indo-China war. Again, vigorous discussion followed, which touched upon various aspects of the Indian scene now subsumed directly in a menacing world characterised by neoliberalism and terrorism.

It is important to recall that, for the first time in the history of independent India, the communal-fascists had been able to form the government when Chomsky visited India for the third time in 2001. I remember him sitting rather uncomfortably and in silence in the front row of the Shri Ram Centre auditorium beside Defence Minister George Fernandes before he was called on stage. The new phenomenon of communal-fascism in league with rampant neoliberalism with US as its centre was repeatedly discussed in the discussions during that trip. My own feeling is that the spectre of communal power became a significant concern in Chomsky's political thinking in the years that followed his India trip.

*Democracy and Power: The Delhi Lectures*, when read closely along with the lively discussion, does capture a rather defining moment in Indian politics in the context of a changing world order. Only Noam Chomsky's presence could have generated such a global perspective, along with plans for sustained resistance. Unfortunately, another visit by Chomsky, as announced by Drèze in his Introduction, could not materialise. But the thoughts remain. ■