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Aditya Nigam

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Afro-Asian solidarity and the “capital” question: looking beyond the last frontier

Aditya NIGAM

ABSTRACT

The argument in this paper is a continuation of an argument that I have been making for some time, which questions the universal history of capital, crucial to which are assumptions regarding its historical necessity. Capital is not only understood to be a historically unavoidable condition but one that has already colonized the world such that there is no outside to it. In developing my argument regarding the “outside” to capital, where I find Kalyan Sanyal’s work very useful and significant, I claim that much of the problem with theorizing capital today has to do not with the beast itself but with the inherited paraphernalia of western theory and philosophy. After a survey of the passive revolution debate in India, which I read as a sign of the actual impossibility of “capitalist” development across different parts of the world, I move on to argue that both “capital/ism” and the “logic of capital” (accumulation) are misleading concepts concealing an essential “emptiness,” which I work out through the idea of “dependent arising” taken from Buddhist philosophy.

KEYWORDS

Capital; universal history; passive revolution; western theory; dependent arising

The Bandung Conference was held in the wake of one of the most significant developments of the 20th century – that of decolonization. There was widespread optimism, not only about the last remaining outposts of colonialism being dismantled in the near future, but also about the more distant future. The idea, that once the colonies were liberated from imperial rule and took their destinies in their own hands, they would soon chart out their own distinct paths of future development, was quite pervasive. There was one problem, however. The Afro-Asian world, notwithstanding notions of African socialism or Arab socialism, was still enchanted by the dream of catching up with the West, desirous of virtually restaging the same trajectory of capitalist development on its own soil, although in its own way and at its own pace. Socialism, in this vision, turned out to be little more than a way of short-circuiting the

long drawn-out history of capitalist development and putting ex-colonial societies on to the high road of capitalist modernity.

Much has changed between then and now. With the collapse of actually existing socialism in the USSR and the Eastern bloc, the worldwide push towards neoliberalism became so powerful that most postcolonial regimes fell in line with the new urgency with which the rhetoric of “catching up” was now being peddled. The old rhetoric of socialism was already quite discredited by this time and had begun to be perceived as an impediment to the actual development of these societies. Politically, the unity of the non-aligned movement, the inheritor of Bandung, was also in a shambles by the onset of the 1990s. The massive assault of neoliberalism, backed by the power of global financial institutions, ensured that, very soon, most postcolonial regimes fell in line with this new

thrust. This meant among other things, countries such as India cozying up to the US and those such as China dedicating themselves single-mindedly to “catching mice” (with apologies to Deng Xiaoping) all over the world – Africa being its latest playground. As a consequence, the project of Afro-Asian solidarity has begun to look like an impossible one.

And yet I want to argue in this paper that the question of Afro-Asian solidarity is today more urgent than it has ever been. There is a need to think the possible bases of that solidarity afresh today – at a time when both nation-state and capital stand in need of serious interrogation as the twin legacies and contributions of Western modernity that have colonized our minds. Afro-Asian solidarity today cannot be premised on the violently oppressive structures of the nation-state, which in any case have lost the emancipatory possibilities that they once embodied, at least for some time after decolonization. Equally importantly, this solidarity needs to be thought outside and beyond the inherited narrative of Capital as the relentlessly universalizing force of our times.

For the purposes of this paper, I will leave out the nation-state from the purview of my discussion and focus my attention on the question of Capital as, in some senses, it is this that stands uninterrogated even today. It presents itself as the unavoidable destiny of all humanity, even in the face of the ecological disaster that stares us in the face today. Theorists and scholars, not to speak of policy-makers, tend to speak of it almost as if it is some kind of demiurge relentlessly fashioning the world in its own image. That is why a Leftist philosopher such as Slavoj Žižek has often said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than imagine the end of capitalism (Žižek 2010, 2011).¹

It may not be out of place to mention here a recent work by an Indian Marxist scholar based in the US that has been lauded by a galaxy of Western thinkers ranging from Slavoj Žižek and Robert Brenner to Noam Chomsky. The book in question, Vivek Chibber (2013), is

conceived as a full-on attack on Subaltern Studies scholars’ writings on capital and its limits. Chibber’s attack on Subaltern Studies’ on this question covers a series of issues, all of which relate to their claim that the so-called universal history of capitalism meets its limits in the postcolonial world. But centrally at issue is the question of the theoretical categories that one deploys in understanding the history of capitalism in these societies. Thus, says Chibber: “the universalizing categories of Enlightenment thought are perfectly capable of capturing the consequences of capital’s universalization and the dynamics of political agency – *indeed these categories are essential to their analyses*” (Chibber 2013, 285, emphasis added).

This is hardly surprising, since it is precisely the theoretical frames and categories that Chibber defends, which *produce* “capitalism” as a universal. It is these frames that make it impossible for us to see a possible end to it: It is almost as if capitalism has become ontologically embedded in the human condition, defying all possibilities of historicization that Marxists are always so insistent about. This is the corner into which Western theorizations of capital, especially Marxist and quasi-Marxist ones have painted themselves. The reason Capital stands uninterrogated, I will argue, is because of our enchantment with Western theory and philosophy, before which we continue to genuflect today, even as we seek to break out of its influence.

The question of “Western theory”

At this point, a word on what I mean by “genuflecting to Western theory” is in order. I am certainly not arguing for the rejection of “Western theory” – which itself is a term that calls for some unpacking. Rather, my argument seeks to “put it in its place.”² That is to say, there is much that is of great significance in it for our understanding of the modern and contemporary world but it is not something we can simply take for granted in theorizing our times, from our own location in the third world.

But before we turn our attention to contemporary Western theorizations of Capital, I need to briefly outline what can possibly be meant by the term “Western theory/philosophy” and why I believe confronting the question of capital involves confronting the apparatus of Western philosophy itself. In using the category of “Western theory” or “Western philosophy,” are we by any chance suggesting that it is an enclosed body of knowledge, and something that is *sui generis*? Are we suggesting that Western philosophy arose, at a particular historical moment in a particular geographical location, outside of any prior history of cultural and intellectual traffic? Such a position seems to me to be historically incorrect and unsustainable. As Peter O’Brien recently put it,

In their historic awakening at the end of the Middle Ages that ushered in the Renaissance, Reformation, Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, Europeans borrowed and augmented a vast array of ideas, institutions and practices, particularly from the Islamic, but also from the Indian and Chinese, civilization. (O’Brien 2011, 18)

O’Brien goes to great lengths to explore the writings of medieval Catholics in Europe in order to make the case that where all through Latin Christendom, “all serious learning took place in monasteries under the supervision of the Roman Curia,” cultivated Muslims by contrast “embraced ancient learning.” They did not merely translate and preserve the works of Greek masters such as Plato, Aristotle and Euclid that were lost to the Latins, but along with Jewish thinkers, augmented and improved the inherited storehouse of knowledge. He names among them scholars and thinkers such as Musa al-Khwārizmī, al-Fārabi, al-Ghazzālī, Abu Ma’shar (Albumasar), Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroës), and Maimonides (O’Brien 2011, 21).

The capture of Toledo by the Crusaders in 1085, says O’Brien, ironically proved to be one of the most significant moments in their “exposure to the superior Islamic intellect.”

“Al-Ma’mun had compiled there one of the finest libraries in the medieval world, and when the victors found its treasures, they encountered hundreds of books and treatises of which they had neither knowledge nor understanding.” He affirms Dorothee Metlitzki’s description of the conquest of Toledo as “one of the most important events not only in the political but in the intellectual history of medieval Europe. At one stroke the Christian world took possession of a civilization next to which the Latin West seemed ... provincial and barbaric” (O’Brien 2011, 21).

We know today that the range of knowledges that thus became accessible to Latin Christendom included the latest developments in mathematics, astronomy and medicine, and included important contributions of the Indians and Chinese and the Arabs.

In a recent essay, Laura Marks has explored the ways in which certain key philosophical ideas of Islamic philosophers such as Ibn Sina were adopted by thinkers such as Roger Bacon, Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus – the last mentioned transmitting it to a contemporary philosopher such as Gilles Deleuze (Marks 2012, 57). Late medieval Christian Scholastics, argues Marks, acknowledged what they had borrowed from Muslim philosophers but “later European thinkers disingenuously claimed a direct link between European and Greek thought, disavowing the hundreds of years of Islamic philosophy upon which emerging European thought relied” (Marks 2012, 52).

Given this, we cannot really draw a sharp line between Western theory/philosophy and theory/philosophy from any other part of the world. The world of ideas has never been subject to regimes of passports and visas; there has been incessant traffic in ideas – even in the midst of religious wars, as the above instance of the capture of Toledo by the Crusaders shows.

In the context of our own colonial history, we know that Western knowledge was often enthusiastically espoused by the colonized nationalists and even more enthusiastically by many lower caste movements and thinkers. Marxism

and feminism as two significant bodies of thought have also found enthusiastic followers in these societies. What is now being realized, in our contemporary moment of the decolonization of knowledge, is that so far our relationship to these bodies of knowledge has been one of veneration, of *their institution as norms*. Indian political theorist Sudipta Kaviraj calls this phenomenon “Euro-normality” – that is to say that Europe became, thenceforth, the natural North of the compass of social and political theory. These bodies of knowledge have provided the universal norm against which all other societies have been judged, even by intellectuals from those societies themselves.

Thus, nationalists in late 19th and early 20th century India spent a lot of time and energy proving that they too had had political theory and a Machiavelli, in the figure of Kautilya, for instance. They tried to prove how Indians too had a theory of a “state of nature,” right from the ancient times in their notion of *mat-syanyaya*.³ What happens typically, when such claims are made, is that Kautilya no longer gets read as Kautilya but as a Machiavelli, even though he existed some 11 centuries before the latter. One could argue to the contrary, that it is equally possible to read Machiavelli as a modern day Kautilya. Similar things happen when we try to understand the practices of science, mathematics and medicine in ancient India through the lens of the discourse of Science and Reason in the modern West. It is not that these other societies were simply mired in backwardness, ignorance and superstition until the illumination of Enlightenment fell upon them. There were robust traditions of science and rationalism in most of these societies. What they did not have was a discourse of Progress and Modernity on to which these traditions got hooked.

In that sense, the question of “Western theory/philosophy” per se, is not the problem, to my mind. The problem lies, more specifically, with the assumption, best expressed by Chibber in the quote above, that all that can possibly be

thought has already been thought by the West (or the Enlightenment, even more narrowly). It lies in the assumption that the only task of a non-Western thinker can be one of applying readymade categories handed down by Western thought.

Fundamentally, therefore, it is a question of understanding our experience and our histories on our own terms. There are two levels at which we might need to deal with such a problem. The first is with respect to modern developments and phenomena such as, say, capitalism, where we can in principle re-examine dominant theoretical narratives, even while staying within the universe of Western theory/philosophy. Such was the attempt undertaken by Subaltern Studies’ scholars, who raised questions about the supposed universality of capitalism’s history from within the Marxist tradition. They did this by deploying some of Antonio Gramsci’s theorizations that seemed to speak more directly to their understanding of the Indian experience than did most other Marxist writings. More recently, Partha Chatterjee has laid out the task of postcolonial political theory from this perspective by arguing that the norms established by Western thought actually begin to confront a series of exceptions as they begin to be applied to non-Western contexts. The accumulation of these exceptions must lead, at some point, to a questioning of the very norms themselves. He situates his own theorization of “political society” in this context (Chatterjee 2011).

From this point of view, we could argue that there is really no other position from where we can begin our task of theorizing, for we cannot approach the question of “capital” or of that of political forms for that matter, without *any* theoretical baggage. After all, we do not have any access to these histories that is uncontaminated by Western thought.

However, as we move towards gaining a thicker understanding of the cultural-intellectual universes of the social agents, we are immediately confronted with a problem. To

take the example of early 20th century Indian nationalists again, it is important to recognize that although they enthusiastically espoused Western thought in many ways, they remained equally embedded in their own traditions of thought. Their project was to chart out a course of modernity that would be different in significant ways from that of the West. As such, they often deployed categories that did not simply replicate the Western ones. Thus, even while accepting the idea of a democratic polity, for example, when nationalist scholars such as K.P. Jayaswal (1943) traced an Indian genealogy of democracy, they were essentially transforming the very idea of democracy. Even though their idea was to simply claim that “we too had democracy,” the very act of providing an alternative genealogy, tearing it from its Western provenance and giving it another history, does something to the idea itself. Similarly, when Indian nationalists translated the term “secularism” as *dharma-nirpekshata* (neutrality between religions), it was not simply a case of misrecognition or mistranslation. They were actually drawing from another set of histories of religious coexistence that go back many centuries.

This is where the second level at which we might encounter the problem of theorizing non-Western experiences comes in. The question it poses goes beyond what Chatterjee proposes in his programmatic statement referred to above.

Is there any way of reading the experiences and histories of the non-West on their own terms, perhaps in terms of categories of thought that social agents themselves used? In the case of pre-modern histories, it is increasingly coming to be accepted that we must try to enter the intellectual universe of that time and attempt to understand what exactly was going on in those societies, instead of going prepared to find an already familiar Western history being played out there. But the point is that even where it concerns relatively modern concepts and practices, it is possible to understand them simply as derived from an exclusively Western history.

These are really the more difficult questions when it comes to elucidating our relationship to Western theory/philosophy. The problem becomes more complicated because there are particular modes of “doing philosophy” or “doing theory” in the Western tradition that may be entirely different from those in other parts of the world. A lot of philosophizing in the Western tradition is exegetical and keeps returning to certain canonical philosophers and their texts in a mode of complete self-referentiality. Contemporary philosophers and thinkers in the Marxist tradition provide an excellent example of this mode where, unlike Marx himself, they are far less interested in studying and understanding the changes in capital’s form and structure and more in endless exegesis of Marx’s writings on capital. As a consequence, as Marxism suffers greater and greater defeat and irrelevance in the real world, their theorizations tend to become more and more metaphysical. Thus, to a philosopher such as Žižek, for example, the “proletariat” and the “proletarian position” no longer bear any resemblance to any actually existing proletariat or even to Marx’s proletariat; it is a pure thought-object with no empirical referent whatsoever.

It is here that I want to mark my difference from certain dominant modes of doing theory in the West and underline that theory for us must begin from the messy ground of the empirical/historical world. This becomes all the more necessary because, without this empirical-historical reference, all theory always-already refers back to some Western history or some stylized form of that history.

It is interesting that writing on the historical role of Islam, way back in 1939, the Indian Marxist M.N. Roy, had observed that that role actually consisted of opening up the world to “experimental science and rationalist philosophy,” which were to become instrumental in the promotion of the ideology of the new social revolution (Roy [1939] 1981, 21). In this text, Roy claimed:

Capitalist mode of production rescued Europe from the chaos of medieval barbarism. It fought and in the long run vanquished Christian theology and the spiritual monopoly of the Catholic Church with the potent weapon of rationalist philosophy. This weapon, invented by the ancient sages of Greece, came to the possession of the founders of modern civilization through the Arab scholars *who not only preserved the precious patrimony, but added to it handsomely*. The historical battle begun by the nomads of the Arabian desert under the religious flag of Islam, was fought step by step through a thousand years on fields scattered over the three continents, to be won finally in Europe under the profane standard of the eighteenth century Enlightenment and Bourgeois Revolution. (Roy [1939] 1981, 21, emphasis added)

I will leave out for the moment the problematic conjunction that Roy makes between the capitalist mode of production and rationalist philosophy, as it is stamped by the dominant form of Marxism of its time. What I find interesting in this passage is a recognition that seems to have been completely erased from our historical memory – of the great traffic of ideas that has always been part of a global movement of thought. Nationalism introduced in India – but perhaps elsewhere too – a period of long amnesia by closing the borders of thought in ways that left us with no alternatives but the binary of a colonizing thought confronting defeated indigenous traditions. There is another reason why I believe what Roy says in this passage is important – and that has to do with his gesture towards a methodological debt that he too implicitly owes to the Arab/Islamic thinkers. There is a reference here to two aspects of this debt – experimental science (based on observation) and rationalist philosophy that goes beyond mere inductive generalization.

Roy cites Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and suggests that the distinctive merit of the Arab scholars was the zeal to acquire knowledge through observation. Reason and rationalism must stand on the firm ground of observation and experimentation:

“They [the Arab philosophers] discarded the vanity of airy speculation, and stood firmly on the ground known to them,” Roy goes on to say.

It is interesting that writing roughly around the same period, Muhammad Iqbal, in his classic *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, also underlined pretty much the same methodological point. “The birth of Islam,” Iqbal proclaims, “is the birth of the inductive intellect” (Iqbal 2011, 140). But then he goes on:

In Islam, prophesy reaches its perfection in discovering the need of its own abolition. This involves the keen perception that life cannot forever be kept in leading strings; that in order to achieve full self-consciousness, *man must finally be thrown back on his own resources*. The abolition of priesthood and hereditary kinship in Islam, *the constant appeal to reason and experience in the Qur'an and the emphasis it lays on Nature and History as sources of human knowledge*, are all different aspects of that same finality. (Iqbal 2011, 140, emphasis added)

The inductive intellect, combined with reason and experience, constitute for Iqbal, the ingredients with which he intended to fashion a new, modern and rationalist Islam. Both Roy and Iqbal were deeply philosophical minds. What they were dismissing was “airy speculation” that often took the place of “theorizing” – which I take to be the more concrete practice of working through empirical-historical materials as opposed to “philosophizing” in speculative mode. Both Roy and Iqbal speculate but not quite in a metaphysical mode. Iqbal, in fact, allows a special place for intuition as a mode of knowing.

In a sense, this is the methodological stance I want to take away from the above discussion. In our contemporary philosophical terms, it is perhaps useful to underline, the “empirical-historical” refers to nothing other than context and location; to specificities of practices and meaning making. Indeed, one can even argue that given the ways in which language, discourse and imagination shape and indeed constitute the empirical-historical, these too are rich areas of

research and exploration that can allow us a way of entering different worlds and see what goes on there, rather than merely restage some abstract universal. In the next section of the paper, I will discuss the world of Indian “capitalism” – not by way of telling the specific story of a quaint “failure” but as a moment in a longer history that may help us theorize “Capital” differently.

Capital and its destiny

It is by now reasonably widely acknowledged that capitalism, which was expected to build the world in its own image, actually met with a very different fate as it traversed the globe, moving into different societies. The debate of the 1960s around the question of development and underdevelopment initiated, in particular, by dependency theorists of Latin America, had already pointed to the fact that capitalist development of “the peripheries” was not the inevitable consequence of the integration of those societies into the global capitalist market; that “underdevelopment” was not merely the lack of development but a consequence of the development of the “metropolises” – to use Andre Gunder Frank’s well known characterization. Terms such as “retarded capitalism” and “arrested development” were coined to capture the failure of capital’s universalizing project in the non-West at large. One of the key anxieties, especially among Marxists, was the issue of this failure. Was Marx then wrong in his prognostications? Writing at the end of the 1970s, taking stock of this entire debate, Robert Brenner, a leading Western Marxist scholar of capital stated in an important article that the “appearance of systematic barriers to economic advance in the course of capitalist expansion – the development of underdevelopment – has posed difficult problems for Marxist theory” (Brenner 1977, 25).

Brenner, of course, went on to castigate those scholars who were making such critiques of not understanding Marx and his emphasis on class relations, thus reducing “capitalism” to a mere

exchange-dominated phenomenon, à la Adam Smith. In the process, Brenner sought to establish the primacy of “class relations” as the key to identifying capitalism.

Scholars associated with the Subaltern Studies group in India, however, conducted deeper historical explorations into the ways in which forms of the community that existed in societies such as India’s presented formidable barriers to the expansion of capital, thus putting into question the “universal history of capital.”

In the 1980s, some Marxist scholars in India made another argument about capitalism in post-independence India. This argument outlined a theoretical position that sought to explain the specific trajectory of capitalist development in the peripheries of the world-economy, so to speak. The Gramscian idea of “passive revolution” was especially appropriated by them in order to accomplish this task, although it has subsequently been criticized for the teleology implicit in its “transition narrative” and its historicism.

I will lay out the argument and its context in broad strokes followed by a sketch of an important critique that has been made almost from the very beginning but which has been fleshed out in much greater detail more recently. I will also outline my own critique – both of the argument as well as of the critique. In the final section, I will present an alternative narrative of the story of capitalism in India, which I am more sympathetic to and which, I hope to show, allows us to understand the specificity of this experience, unencumbered by the overwhelming narrative received from the West.

The passive revolution argument draws mainly on the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, which brought in questions other than “the economic,” into a discussion of the fate of capitalism – especially questions of moral-intellectual hegemony. In understanding why capitalist development does not follow the logic of head-on confrontation with feudal and pre-capitalist forces, as was said to have happened in England, Gramsci argued that the

weakness of the bourgeoisie forced it into compromises and alliances with those forces, which necessitated a kind of “revolution from above.” In this revolution, there was little place for popular involvement. Rather it depended on the ability of the bourgeoisie to slowly transform the pre-capitalist relations into capitalist ones through a strategy of molecular transformations. As he put it, commenting on Croce’s *History of Europe*, “the ‘passive’ aspect of the great revolution which started in France in 1789 and which spilled over into the rest of Europe with the republican and Napoleonic armies,” resulted “not in their immediate collapse as in France but in the ‘reformist’ corrosion of them which lasts up to 1870” (Gramsci 1971, 119). It is interesting, from the point of my own argument, that Gramsci actually reads the entire *history of Europe* as a history of the passive revolution, for it gestures towards the fact that *even in the “advanced West,” the history of capital does not quite conform to the classical Marxist thesis about capitalist development*. It is important to underline that crucial in Gramsci’s rendering was the point that because of this relative weakness, the bourgeoisie was forced to engage in a long-term “war of position” where it must slowly attempt to establish its cultural-moral hegemony over society at large, for then alone could the passive revolution succeed. The political form of the state becomes central in achieving this hegemony, as it does in the transformation of economic relations.

This was precisely what was interesting about the argument when it was made in the Indian context, in the 1980s. The transition to capitalism was no longer a matter of the economic logic of capital alone. The critique that followed, notably by Marxist economist Kalyan Sanyal, acknowledged this important point of departure of the passive revolution argument, which in the Indian context, brought in the political-cultural level as an important terrain of the struggle for hegemony, into the debate. However, Sanyal pointed out, the proponents

of the argument failed to specify the exact nature of the capital/pre-capital relationship in India, which continued to be seen in the argument as an instance that belonged to capital’s past. The analysis of the theorists of the passive revolution faltered, it was argued, in not being able to understand the specific heterogeneous nature of “the postcolonial economic.” This critique too makes some very important moves, which I will discuss at some length later.

The “passive revolution”: argument and critique

The idea of “passive revolution” was first put forward in the Indian context by Asok Sen (1976) and later taken up by Partha Chatterjee (1986, 1994) and Sudipta Kaviraj (1984, 1987).⁴ Asok Sen (1988) and Kalyan Sanyal (1988), in their contributions to a special number of the *Economic and Political Weekly* on Antonio Gramsci, further amplified on this theme – and Sanyal’s contribution stands out as an early text that outlined a position that was quite distinctive in seeking to avoid the teleology inherent in this otherwise very important idea. The point of the exercise was to theorize the specificity of postcolonial capital which, it was clear by the 1960s, was not living up to Marx’s (and Marxists’) prognostications. Pre-capitalist social forms refused to die. And as we noted earlier, even in Europe, in Gramsci’s reading, the bourgeoisie was unable to carry out an open assault on such pre-capitalist social forces.

We know of the story of capital’s arising as told by Marx: It appears towards the end of *Capital Vol. I*, in the section entitled “The So-called Primitive Accumulation.” This is the story of the expropriation of the immediate producers (i.e. peasants and artisans) and their transformation into free wage-laborers – something that Marx sees as critical for the emergence of capitalism. Here, Marx traces the history of dispossession of the English peasantry through the late 15th and 16th centuries down

to the 19th century. He sees in this process “nothing but the historical process of the separation of the immediate producer from his means of production” – a history he says is written in blood and fire. Although he underlines that this process involves robbery and theft of peoples’ lands, he nevertheless bestows upon it a certain legitimacy by calling it the *historical process* of the expropriation of the small producer. What was, in Marx’s own rendering, a saga of bloodshed and violence came to be written as an *immanent objective process of history* and the pain and tragedy inflicted by it then became the necessary price to be paid for historical progress.

Interestingly, from our point of view, Robert Brenner’s essay, referred to earlier, makes a very important point. This is about why peasant proprietorship turned out to be invulnerable to the rise of trade, in stark contrast to the *Communist Manifesto*’s claim that “the cheap price of commodities is the heavy artillery with which it [capital] batters down all Chinese walls ...” The reason for this “invulnerability” (which is a partial lament for Brenner) is that historically there could be discerned a counter-tendency in operation: “the peasants’ predilection to diversify their own production – rather than specialize – in order to produce as many as possible of their necessities on their own plot, precisely to avoid market dependence” (Brenner 1977, 74, emphasis added). That such seemingly innocuous everyday practices of the peasants could hold back the wheel of history, so to speak, says something about the grandiose schemes and models that had predicted the onward march of capital.

It is perhaps necessary to open a parenthesis here, for this concerns one of the crucial points in our argument: theorizations of capital were not simply *about capital*. They were equally about the larger universe within which these theorizations were taking place. Thus, for instance, when virtues of thrift and spending, of consumption, of the desire to possess more and more wealth and so on were pronounced

as virtues of the civilized, in opposition to which the tendency to be satisfied with little was branded savage and barbarian, it was not simply “capital” that was being talked of. In that post-Lockean universe, the discourse of Reason had to have already made its appearance and it had to have already divided the world neatly into the civilized on the one hand, and savages and barbarians on the other. What is more, it had to have delineated the features that comprise civilization and barbarism. Similarly, when Marx pronounced capitalism to be the force that would transform the world in its image, propelled by its inner logic, it is not difficult to see in this prognostication, the image of Hegel’s *Geist* and its earthly journey. Like the *Geist*, capital’s movement represented the unfolding of an already immanent history. The end was always-already present in the beginning. Hegelian ideas of Totality and contradictions had to have already been in the air for Marx to have theorized capital the way he did. In other words, “Capital” was being theorized not as something *in itself* but was rather *already constituted as such* by the theoretical universe in which it was produced as an object. It can be argued with equal plausibility that if one were to theorize capital in another historical and therefore, theoretical universe, one could get an entirely different theoretical object. This is a point I want to return to in the final section of my paper.

To return to our discussion, recall that what Brenner was positing as the reason for the invulnerability of the peasant to the heavy artillery of cheap commodities was an everyday practice of self-provisioning in order to escape the vagaries of market dependence. It is, to some extent, in this context that we should see *the theory of the passive revolution as an attempt to explain the failure of capitalist development in the peripheries of “world capitalism.”* Gramsci, as we have seen, had suggested that in contexts where capitalism is relatively weak, it does not directly attack those formations and liquidate them. Rather, it enters into alliances with

them and gradually transforms old kind of landlords into capitalist landlords and old social relations into capitalist relations. The additional point that we can make here is that not all pre-capitalist property is “feudal” and it is often small peasant property that proves resistant to the untrammelled expansion of the market.

In the Indian context, the idea of passive revolution was deployed in order to deal with precisely such a situation of a relatively “weak bourgeoisie” that was unable to perform its world-historical task of capitalist transformation. Partha Chatterjee’s rendering of the nationalist struggle itself was cast in such terms – as a struggle where the Indian bourgeoisie made a series of compromises and alliances with other pre-capitalist classes since the bourgeoisie did not represent the national-popular. This was true, in his view, not just with respect to the Indian case alone but as a more general condition. He therefore claimed:

The characteristic form of “passive revolution” in colonial countries follows the second path. That is to say, the “war of position” implies a political-ideological programme by which the largest possible nationalist alliance is built up against the political rule of the colonial power. The aim is to form a politically independent nation-state. (Chatterjee 1986, 48–49)

After the formation of the independent nation-state, he argues, the “reorganization of political order” is moderated in two ways: the bourgeoisie neither breaks up nor disturbs any of the modern institutions set up under colonial rule; nor does it not “undertake a full-scale assault on all pre-capitalist dominant classes,” preferring rather, to “limit their former power,” neutralizing them where necessary and making them subsidiary allies within the state structure (Chatterjee 1986, 49).

The strategy of economic development and accumulation that was evolved, then, was one that had to continuously balance the demands of accumulation and the need for political legitimization. The bourgeoisie could no longer carry out the business of industrial development by

resorting to the violent process of dispossession that the classic primitive accumulation model involved.

Sudipta Kaviraj, unlike Chatterjee, locates the imperative of the passive revolution strategy in India, on a certain realignment that the Congress party went through in the period 1946–1950. “The departure of the reformist elements from the Congress led to a feeling among the small elite around Nehru of being encircled within their own party. It provided the initial condition for, and pressure towards, a ‘passive revolution’ strategy” (Kaviraj 2010, 114). Kaviraj argues that the “Indian capitalist class” exercises its control over society through a strategy that is distinct from “a moral-cultural hegemony of the Gramscian type” as well as of the purely coercive type as seen in many newly independent countries. Rather,

It does so by a coalitional strategy carried out partly through the state-directed process of economic growth, and partly through the allocational necessities indicated by the bourgeois-democratic political system. (Kaviraj 2010, 106)

Thus, the program of “serious bourgeois land reforms” was abandoned through a combination of “feudal resistance, judicial conservatism, and connivance of state Congress leaderships” (Kaviraj 2010, 114).

Kaviraj further argues that while the Congress was willing to accept the continuance of “semi-feudal rural power,” it did adopt “massive plans for capitalist development,” clearly rejecting “a trajectory of satellite growth” that seems to have become “a common destiny” of many newly independent countries.

In an early critique, Kalyan Sanyal (1988) had argued against the implicit teleology of the passive revolution idea and the historicism inherent in the capital/pre-capital distinction that undergirded it.

Sanyal sets up his argument against “the concept of economic development,” which he sees as an expression of “bourgeois ideology,” that pushes towards the “full transformation of the

economy from pre-capitalism into capitalism” (Sanyal 1988, PE-27). “The main ideological thrust of bourgeois development economics,” he argues, “thus lies in its identification of economic development with the expansion of the domain of capital” (Sanyal 1988, PE-27).

As against this, Sanyal claims,

Even casual observations reveal that capitalist development in most of the third world countries has reinforced the capital/pre-capital dualism rather than destroyed it ... *it has failed to incorporate the entire economy within the ambit of capitalist development: the rest of the economy remains outside the domain of capital.* (Sanyal 1988, PE-28, emphasis added)

Sanyal does not see this as a transition problem but rather as a *structural limitation* of what he will later identify as postcolonial capitalism. One of the key elements here is the way in which avenues for endless expansion for the third world capitalism are limited by the governmental interventions for poverty-eradication. The economy essentially stands divided between a high accumulation enclave economy and a vast hinterland where needs-based consumption determines production (Sanyal 1988, PE-29).

Sanyal holds that as long as one continued to see “precapital” as something that lies in a time prior to capital, the question will continue to be posed in the way in which Chatterjee in particular was posing it. In his more recent work, Sanyal (2007) has countered the “transition narrative” implicit in what he calls Chatterjee’s neo-Gramscian position, by underlining the need to characterize capitalist development in a way “that theoretically rules out the possibility of capital superseding pre-capital” (Sanyal 2007, 39). In this work, Sanyal deploys the idea of “governmentality,” which he sees as tied to the discourse of “development,” in explaining what he calls a reversal of the effects of primitive accumulation.

The strength of Sanyal’s argument is that it focuses on a specific feature of postcolonial capitalism that has been so far ignored in all

theorizations, including those of the Subaltern Studies scholars, namely, the existence of a vast sector of the relatively informal, “need-economy.” He sees this sector not as a remnant of an earlier time but produced by the workings of capital. He points to the impossibility, in our times, of doing away with surplus populations as in the case of Europe. With nowhere to go, no “new worlds” to transport these surplus populations, they are condemned to remain in those very societies, constituting the wasteland of postcolonial capitalism. But governments today cannot also get away with letting them perish. The logic of governmentality intervenes in order to take these populations under its shade and provide for measures that end up reversing the effects of primitive accumulation.

However, there are two problems with Sanyal’s argument. The first is that he sees the entire process – primitive accumulation *and* its reversal, as internal to “capital” itself – to postcolonial capitalism, to be specific. We can see why he makes this move: by seeing “pre-capital”/non-capital as an internal other, as a product, of capital – he makes its supersession by capital an impossibility. If noncapital is produced by capital, as its *necessary* outcome, then there can never be any point when capital entirely supplants noncapital. But in doing this, Sanyal has to reinstate the idea of a totality or structure, one that is clearly governed by an “internal logic.” Indeed, he says as much: “In short pre-capital’s [i.e. de-capitalized forms] conditions of existence *flow from the internal logic of the expanded reproduction of capital*” (Sanyal 2007, 39, emphasis added). Quite problematically then, “governmental rationality” and “development discourse” also become internal moments of capital’s development in his argument.

While Sanyal’s intervention provides an interesting way of reading the history of “post-colonial capitalism,” his insistence on seeing the existence of noncapital as a product of post-colonial capital’s own logic immediately takes away what he has gained.

However, one can think of the impossibility of capitalist transition in other ways as well – ways that move away entirely from ideas of structures/totalities and their internal logic. I will return to this towards the end of the paper, drawing on an entirely different philosophical tradition in order to suggest a possible way out.

The second difficulty with Sanyal's argument is that, like Chatterjee, he too holds "primitive accumulation" to be a necessary condition of capital's arising. His modification of the logic is temporal – it is *subsequently* reversed through the logic of governmentality. Like Chatterjee and Kaviraj, he too is unmindful of the ways in which capital's drive is not merely delayed but also subverted by the practices and forms that it confronts in its onward journey, so that it never quite comes to be – in the sense in which we understand it from its standard received history.

Before turning to that problem, a word is necessary here in Sanyal's defense against a recent criticism, since this directly relates to the matter at hand. Vinay Gidwani and Joel Wainwright (2014), in an otherwise sympathetic engagement with Sanyal's work, have taken him to task for "his refusal to truck in either Marxist dialectics or the law of value in theorizing postcolonial capital" (Gidwani and Wainwright 2014, 45). Sanyal's "refusal to engage Marx's value theory" they say, "is the real puzzle of *Rethinking Capitalist Development*": had he done so, they claim, "he would have had to confront how production within the 'need economy' can remain outside the penumbra of value" (Gidwani and Wainwright 2014, 45).

This is precisely the kind of argument that I find problematic for it is only by refusing to genuflect to that body of Marxist theory and "refusing to truck in it" that Sanyal is able to give the experience of postcolonial capitalism the place it deserves in his alternative theorization. Gidwani and Wainwright's argument simply reduces an important part of that

experience to a non-problem. Nothing need be explained anymore. Since the object is, in a profound sense, constituted by the theoretical frame and the categories deployed, it is hardly surprising that a displacement or reconstitution of the object would call for a break with the framework itself.

A different narrative of capital/ism

Let us start with a contemporary question, namely, that of climate change and the ecological crisis. In the standard understanding, the logic of expanded reproduction or accumulation is based on the presumption that once the costs of raw materials, costs of depreciation and wages of labor are paid, the capitalist is left with surplus value that s/he ploughs back into production for purposes of technological upgradation and reproduction on an expanded scale. Surplus value, here is essentially unpaid labor.

Now, only in recent years has it started becoming clear that while capital has paid for the costs of raw materials that it derives from the natural resources that any society possesses, it has never been made to pay the ecological costs of production. That is to say, it has never been made to pay for the air and water it consumes and pollutes, depriving local communities of their life-chances and if all the ecological costs of production were to be factored in, there would be little left in terms of surplus value for accumulation. In India, in recent years, since widespread struggles against land acquisition broke out, there has been a rethink among sections of the ruling elites and the previous UPA government's Minister for Mining had been forced to place on the table in the upper house a proposal to the effect that 25% of the proceeds of mining (profits) should actually be ploughed back for the benefit of local communities affected by the operations (Singh 2010). The proposal was later opposed by the mining corporate lobbies but the matter is now there in the public agenda. A more concrete recent development pursuing a similar

line of thinking came up when the Supreme Court decreed the setting up of a permanent fund from mining profits for the benefit of local communities in the case of mining operations in Goa (Chari 2014). At the moment, the Supreme Court's judgment stipulates that 10% of the mining profits be put back in the permanent fund. Although this is a small beginning, it opens the way for a whole new set of claims that can be made on the "surplus value" component of capital's returns. In the long run, these cannot but affect the capacity for capital's expanded reproduction. If that were to happen, and capital made also to pay for the ecological destruction that it causes, where would the logic of expanded reproduction or accumulation stand?

The point then is that the so-called logic of capital accumulation is premised on a certain, now dated, idea of what constitute costs of production. If these costs are internalized, it is possible to argue that what appears as the immutable logic of capital no longer holds. In other words, what I am suggesting is that there is no essential logic of capital. In the final analysis, it is all a matter of the constellation within which we encounter it – and this constellation is crucially tied to a range of knowledges, practices and materialities that emerge into view at any point of time.

It is in order to address this question that I propose to deploy an ancient philosophical idea drawn from Buddhist philosophy – the twin concepts of emptiness (*sunyata*) and dependent arising/origination (*pratitya samutpada*). It is well known that in Buddhist philosophy the idea of *sunyata* or emptiness was invoked to argue against substantialist notions of the Self (*atma*), against which Buddhist philosophers posited the idea of *anatma* or *anatta* (in Pali), that is non-Self. The Self – and by extension, all entities – according to this view, cannot be understood as substance. It is rather something that arises in a constellation. The idea of dependent arising, basically, is meant to underline this idea and it involves the claim

that any entity exists in a particular form because it exists in a network of interdependent existences. Its character is not intrinsic to itself but is the effect of such interdependent relationships. In the Indian Buddhist tradition, this idea achieves its most sublime development in the work of the second/third century Madhyamika philosopher Nagarjuna (Kalupahana 1991).

This idea of dependent arising is actually prevalent, with some modifications, across different traditions of Buddhism – the Tibetan or the Chinese Hua Yan for example. In the Chinese Hua Yan tradition, the combination of the ideas of emptiness and interdependence achieve new heights, according to some scholars (Garfield 2015, 76–77). I read this idea here as something fundamentally different from the idea of a structure or a totality, more as a network of relations or a constellation. Indeed, the metaphor of Indra's net is one of ways in which this is explained in the Chinese tradition as well: "an infinite network, at each node of which is a jewel that perfectly reflects all other jewels in the net" (Garfield 2015, 76–77). If this be the case then it can be argued that no entity would remain unchanged if other entities around it change. A more dynamic idea of the network of dependent existences can thus yield an interesting way of thinking about relationships and interdependences for our contemporary theorizations as well.

From this point of view, "capital" too cannot be identified with reference to any specific positive feature that defines it alone. We know that much bloodletting and name-calling has taken place between Marxists during the different moments of the various "transition" debates through the history of Marxist engagement with the history of capitalism. As the Brenner essay referred to earlier shows, all those who believed that capital has something to do with the emergence of the global market – Paul Sweezy, Immanuel Wallerstein and Gunder Frank among them – were dubbed by him as Neo-Smithian Marxists. It is also worth recalling that the orthodox response to these

positions was one that identified capitalism as a mode of *production*, not reducible to exchange, leading once again to questions about whether, in that case, the very idea of a rising bourgeoisie was possible: what was this class that could be called capitalist, well before a capitalist mode of production even existed? Indian Marxist scholar, Jairus Banaji, has recently explored the networks of commerce and trade in the Mediterranean and the important role played therein by Islam and Arab traders. Through this and some other writings, Banaji argues that “the contrast between capitalism as a ‘commercial system’ and capitalism as a ‘mode of production’ is schematic and overstated, and a major reason why Marxists have paid so little attention to merchant-capital” (Banaji 2013, 273). While Banaji’s explorations of the Arab roots of capitalism are fascinating, the problem with this theorization is that once commercial capital is brought into the picture, we can keep taking the question of the “origins” of capitalism far back in time – right into late antiquity as Banaji eventually has to.

My point here is that the Marxist debate itself actually points towards the virtual impossibility of defining what precisely constitutes “capitalism.” There are therefore, as many ways of understanding “capital”/“capitalism” as there are Marxists. At some level, however, once one decided to get out of these sticky questions relating to the “transition” issue, Marxists seemed to agree that in the capitalist mode of production, production would be based on the logic of accumulation or expanded reproduction. Now, it seems, this too could well have been an accounting problem and idea of the logic of accumulation could be maintained so far because capital escaped paying its true costs. However, what I am proposing via the idea of dependent arising is that the constellation has changed. What we know as “capitalism” is inserted into a network of relations that is no longer the same. What we know as “nature” that had, until the late 20th century, appeared to be simply a passive provider of

natural resources for the “economy,” has now begun to talk back. Philosophers today no longer find it possible to talk of “nature” or, more generally, the non-human, as a passive entity distinct and different from the human. New situations, new bodies of knowledge, new challenges have arisen, transforming the field within which we encounter “capital” and it seems to be increasingly difficult to argue that capital will remain what it has “always” been. Indeed, the Marxist impasse referred to above in defining what constitutes capital should itself be read as a symptom of the fact that “capital” has never always been the same, nor always recognizable as such. What we bring under the rubric of “capital” and “capitalism” is itself a fairly large and disparate range of practices and forms – each of which can exist and has existed independently of “capitalism.”

However, it is not only in a global, “world-historical,” sense that we can talk of dependent arising. The story of capital’s development in each context is a story of new and different beginnings, of its insertion into different networks of interdependencies. What this yields is not always what we might recognize as capital from its universal history.

In a book, widely acclaimed by a certain brand of Marxist scholarship, Vivek Chibber (2004) examines the different trajectories adopted by the Indian and South Korean states and their respective capitalist classes. The book, written at the beginning of the 2000s, at the height of neoliberal triumphalism, seeks to explain why the Korean state made the right choice of going the Export-led Industrialization (ELI) way, where the Indian state failed once again to rise to the occasion and not take the chance of abandoning its Import-Substituting Industrialization (ISI) path, even when it could in the 1960s (Chibber 2004, 39–42). It needs to be remembered that by the time this book was being written, the ISI model was already a discredited option and so any state having pursued that option had to be seen as a failure. There are a whole series of problems with

Chibber's reading of the situation in which the two countries, but India in particular, made the choice of adopting the ISI model, not the least being the complete erasure of the Soviet bloc and its role in assisting the setting up key infrastructural and capital goods projects. We cannot possibly go into them here. My purpose in bringing up Chibber's book is to think a bit about his key argument from the point of view of this alternative narrative of capital. Chibber presents his argument in the form of a series of theses, of which Thesis 1 constitutes the core:

Thesis 1: State building in India was stunted because of a highly organized and concerted offensive launched by the business class against the idea of disciplinary planning, whereas it was successful in Korea because state managers were able to harness a leading segment of the business class to the development agenda. (Chibber 2004, 29)

The long and short of Chibber's argument is that the ELI model demanded a certain submission of the capitalist class to the state's disciplining, given the degree of support it required from the latter in the business of playing in the highly competitive global arena; on the other hand, the ISI model, being more protective of domestic capital, defined a different state-capital relation where the state's efficacy was highly reduced because of the power that this model gave the capitalist class. So far so good. But the question that one is left with is precisely why India chose one model while Korea quickly moved to the other, more efficient one? Chibber gives us no satisfactory answer. His response is almost casual:

Why India chose to turn to ISI as the first step in its developmental strategy is not a mystery. The fact is that in the countries which undertook rapid industrialization programs after the Great Depression, *it was simply taken for granted that the road to success involved a period of import-substitution.* (Chibber 2004, 39, emphasis added)

It is almost as if there is a straight line that connects the Great Depression to the path

chosen by the independent Indian state. And the decision is almost entirely dictated by one aspect of the global context – the role of the very presence of the Soviet bloc being completely erased by Chibber. From the methodological stance that I am proposing, that of dependent arising, the picture cannot but be more complex. It cannot but be connected to a whole range of other factors such as the internal configuration of forces, of antecedent conditions, specific histories, existing bodies of knowledge and so on. It does not suffice simply to say that “the fractured and uncoordinated nature of the state itself made its efforts to subsidize exports quite ineffective...” (Chibber 2004, 46), as Chibber does. At the very least, Chibber would need to explain why the nature of the Indian state remained “fractured and uncoordinated.” Is this side of the Indian state revealed only in relation to capital, or does it constitute a more general feature of this state? In fact, it can be argued that the failure of the Indian state has been a more pervasive one, revealed in a whole range of its interventions in transforming social practices especially relating to caste and gender.

It is here that we need to turn our attention to a point made earlier about the ways in which institutions and practices emerge and are shaped by the way social agents imagine them. This imagination, to be sure, draws from earlier histories but is fundamentally an act of intervention in its own time. From the middle of the 19th century, there emerged a body of thought in colonial India that argued that Indian society was organized around very different principles from those of the British. Sudipta Kaviraj has recently pointed out that the leading Bengali intellectual, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay had argued as far back as the 1860s that the distinctiveness of Indian society lay in the fact that it was characterized by an interior organization that was both interior, and anterior to the external authority of the state (Kaviraj 2010, 59). Kaviraj notes, correctly, that by Indian society, Bhudev basically meant

“the Hindu social order based on caste” but was nonetheless making a more fundamental point about the relationship of social order to political power in traditional Indian society. That is perhaps why this argument begins to gain wider acceptability. Thus, says Kaviraj, “[I]t becomes a major argument in much social reflection associated with Indian nationalism, and is echoed, with appropriate inflections, by thinkers like Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore” (Kaviraj 2010, 59).

Kaviraj, however, goes on to argue that even though this strand of thinking becomes important among figures such as Gandhi and Tagore, by and large, “the political imagination of modern India turned decisively in the opposite direction” (Kaviraj 2010, 67). Both the elite and subaltern groups were “enchanted by the state” and decided, in the event, to institute a strong state after independence. It is, however, an open question today as to what extent this modern imagination succeeded, for all evidence points towards the fact that when it came to reforming the practices of dominant social groups (as in the case of caste), this power proved to be quite ineffective. The state itself, being situated within a network of relationships, was hamstrung in its efforts to intervene in transforming dominant cultural social practices.

But the weakness of the state is not the only point at issue here, although that may have had some connection to the adoption of the ISI model by the independent Indian state. Could there have been some other logic at work in this decision of the new political elites? It is interesting, in this context, to note that among the entire range of economic thinkers in modern India, starting with Rammohum Roy in the 19th century to G.V. Joshi, Dadabhai Naoroji and later Ranade, Romeshchandra Dutt and G.K. Gokhale, two tendencies coexisted side by side. While they were all eager to see India adopt the path of capitalist/industrial development, none of them actually saw this as antithetical to the improvement of the lives of the peasants and of agriculture in general. Poverty

was a central concern and industrial development made sense to these thinkers insofar as it was meant to improve the lot of the ordinary people of the country (Ganguli 1977). The question of the *home market* – as opposed to export orientation – was naturally likely to receive priority in any model that sought to develop this tradition of thought. Thus, as Ganguli puts it,

The response of Indian intellectuals to such themes as equality, socialism and ruralism was not merely escapist speculation; it was rooted in the anguish generated by mass poverty and degradation and the exploitative character of British rule, particularly during the second half of the nineteenth century. (Ganguli 1977, 24)

Interestingly, this is a concern that goes right up to the early years of the founding of the Indian republic, when Jawaharlal Nehru takes charge, and despite Nehru’s deep disagreements with Gandhi’s vision, the state he commandeered could never adopt the stance of violent decimation of agricultural/pre-capitalist property that capitalism in the West did.⁵

In the 1940s, both Gandhi and Nehru, despite the emergence of very sharp differences between them from the time of the Faizpur Congress (1936), began increasingly talking about a cooperative economy in agriculture. If, in 1942, Gandhi was talking about taking to cooperative farming to derive the full benefits of agriculture (Ganguli 1977, 250), Nehru too was thinking along similar lines and the Congress, on his initiative, adopted the term “cooperative commonwealth” from the vocabulary of Fabian socialism (Ganguli 1977, 259).

In fact, themes of rural development based on some reactivation of the panchayat system, combined with the idea of a cooperative economy, were quite prevalent among a range of thinkers on economic issues.

The question of pre-capitalist forms of property brings us to another interesting issue that tells the story of the formation that emerged in India. It gives an interesting dimension to the question of the “dependent arising” of this

formation. Right from the time of Rammohun Roy, the push toward a modern industrial economy was quite evident. However, people such as Rammohun Roy were equally aware of the need to effect the transformation from within the given field. Roy therefore “used his deep knowledge of Hindu law in trying to interpret authoritative Hindu scriptures and commentaries and the legal tradition, in defense of a progressive economic philosophy of property and inheritance, designed to assist the process of economic modernization” (Ganguli 1977, 50). Roy was more favorably disposed towards the *dayabhag* system of inheritance and considered the other, more widely prevalent *mitakshara* system, relatively retrograde. In the *dayabhag* system that was practiced mainly in the Bengal and Assam region, the male head of the family was the owner of property and the sons could become inheritors only on the death of the patriarch. Further, it made no distinction between ancestral and self-acquired property. On the other hand, in the *mitakshara* system, the property became the property of the sons right from their birth so that in effect, the patriarch was never the sole owner of the family property. To Roy it seemed evident that economic modernization entailed alienability of landed property and *dayabhag* was eminently suitable for that task, given that it required just the decision of the head of the family. *Mitakshara* however, placed an obstacle in the way of alienation of what was essentially family property. Not surprisingly, Rammohun Roy held the *mitakshara* law to be responsible for the “backwardness of the Upper Provinces” (Ganguli 1977, 52).

Today, it seems quite plausible that it was the widespread prevalence of the *mitakshara* system that perhaps also became one of the biggest impediments in the establishment of capitalism in large parts of the country insofar as the alienability of property is concerned. At any rate, this is what lends “Indian capitalism” some of its notable features after colonial legal interventions reconstructed it in the light of

modern British law, as demonstrated by Ritu Birla (2011). As Birla puts it, where 19th century capitalism reconstituted the social through “the legal codification of corporate life,” bringing into view entities such as the limited liability corporation, the nonprofit association, the registered society and the charitable trust, in the Indian context this process brings to the fore “forms of corporate life” such as the joint family, “which did not quite fit contractual paradigms.” “The legal coding of the mercantile firm as the Hindu Undivided Family, and so as site of radical difference from the modern relations of contract, was one important effect of this asymmetry” (Birla 2011, 105).

It is not possible to explore the implications of these different transformations here. Suffice it to say that these were not one-sided processes and the legal interventions did not simply succeed in rewriting the social in the new language of British law. The practices governed by the more traditional notions of family, property and inheritance now found new and different ways of being that were never fully in line with the requirements of the modern bourgeois subject. The state, after independence, was certainly interested in pushing towards modern economic development but it too was perhaps never too invested in a violent decimation of the older, now reconstituted forms of property and ownership until, in the 1990s, it finally moved towards the dismantling of the ISI model. That is another story, which we cannot go into here.

To return to our initial question then, if our above discussion tells us anything, it is that there is really no such thing as capital that works according to sacrosanct laws, just as there is no God called Capital who needs to be propitiated at all costs. In fact, our discussion should lead us to the recognition that the well-being of ordinary people has no necessary connection to the capitalist development that comes to us in the form of the economic ideology of “growth.” On the

contrary, if anything, we might be closer to a recognition today than ever before that capital as we know it is, in fact, inimical to the interests of people and society in general. We might need, therefore, to think of Afro-Asian futures afresh, outside of the “catching-up” syndrome.

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Notes

1. Often, this was said by him in a part serious and part ironical way, but as in most of his writings this seems to be his way of evasion – of saying and not saying something at the same time.
2. This expression has been used by T.N. Madan in relation to secularism in his well-known essay, “Secularism in its Place.”
3. *Matsyanyaya* literally means the “logic” of the fishes – that is to say, the idea that big fish live off small fish. In a sense, it indicates a sort of “might is right” idea that operates in nature.
4. The dates above refer to the original publications although I have used the subsequent reprints in Kaviraj 2010 – all reference henceforth shall be to that volume.
5. This is not to say that there were no cases of dispossession of the peasantry. To be sure, there were but mostly in cases where larger “national interests” were brought in as justification for building infrastructure. That, however, was a far cry from the Western, particularly British style of decimation of agricultural communities.

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Notes on contributor

Aditya Nigam is a political theorist based at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. His recent work is concerned with histories of "capital" from India and the non-West in general. He examines formations of the economic and the political, as twin aspects of the modern in the context of contemporary India by moving away from standard western theorizations. He is the author of *The Insurrection of Little Selves: The Crisis of Secular Nationalism in India* (2006), *Power and Contestation: India Since 1989*, with Nivedita Menon (2007), *After Utopia: Modernity and Socialism and the Postcolony* (2010), and *Desire Named Development* (2011).