

Book review

Partha Chatterjee: The Politics Of The Governed: Reflections On Popular Politics In Most Of The World

By

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Overview:

In *The Politics of the Governed*, Partha Chatterjee discusses among others topics like nationalism, the evolution of modern Kolkata, population citizen debate and America's hegemonic role before and after 9/11. The writings were culled from lectures he gave in the US and India. Although *The Politics of the Governed* continues to view India as representative of "most of the globe," it makes significant progress in shifting the emphasis away from elite discourses. In actuality, it accomplishes much more. By underlining how the politics of civil society marginalizes the politics of impoverished people, it fundamentally challenges our definition of the word "civil society" and proposes an alternative term, "political society," as a framework for comprehending the popular politics of disadvantaged groups.

He makes the case that there is a gap 'between the high political fantasy of popular sovereignty and the humdrum administrative reality of governmentality' by prominently referencing the Foucauldian tradition of governmentality studies (36). The article offers an

insightful and approachable commentary on the works of Anderson (1998), Negri and Hardt (2000), as well as a broader engagement with conceptions of governmentality as these play out in the modern global South. They are theoretically as interesting as they are diverse.

The relationship between political engagement and forms of governance, particularly the role the post-colonial state plays in forming its people, is the central idea around which many of these disparate threads come together.

Here, Chatterjee contends and makes a contrast between the two ways that the modern state sees people that is as populations, or subjects who are continuously split and rearranged by government as targets of policy as opposed to citizens or rights-bearing members of a national political brotherhood. He contends that the post-colonial state views its citizens primarily as managed populations, and that it expands interventions under the name of development to cement its mode of functioning. A contrast between "citizens" and "populations" lies at the heart of his argument. The welfare state's focus is on populations, but Chatterjee makes a critical distinction between the welfare state's history in the developed and post-colonial worlds.

In order to improve the welfare of their citizens, post-colonial states frequently received encouragement and assistance from international and non-profit organisations. Older ethnographic concepts frequently entered the field of population knowledge with the adoption of these technical modernization and development strategies as practical descriptive categories for classifying groups of people into suitable targets for administrative, legal, economic, or electoral policy. Thus, in India, caste and religion, ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, and tribes in Africa continued to be the primary determinants of which communities within populations should be the targets of policy. (37)

Because it is impossible to generalise these communities' demands to those of the community, they cannot be handled in the same manner as citizens. This is due to two factors.

- i. The first argument is based on Marx's "On the Jewish Question" article, which raises issues about how the "universal" values of the contemporary state assume the cultural values of the prevailing population.

- ii. Their second problem is a result of the limitations placed on the state by their status as minority communities.

With no disrespect intended, Chatterjee reframes this issue in light of untouchability's contribution to the development of modern India: 'The state's ability to provide those advantages to the entire population' would be hampered by treating population rights similarly to citizen rights, which would also 'only promote additional infringement of property and civic rules'(40). As a result, there is a Catch-22 situation in which the need for marginalized populations to engage in illegal activities to support their livelihoods only serves to further the state's inability to legitimize those illegal activities. This is in addition to maintaining the purely instrumental nature of these marginal groups' relationship to the state. This environment is where Chatterjee's "political society" develops.

The demands of electoral mobilization, on the one hand, and the logic of welfare distribution, on the other, coexist in this area which more so, on the other hand, merged and overlapped. (135)It is true that one of the differences between India and the United States is the participation of the poor in electoral politics, so it is reasonable to question the applicability of the term "political society" to the "West." Chatterjee himself contends that the colonial encounter has significantly altered the history of governmentality in the global "South." Following the establishment of political rights in the fully formed nation-state in the West, "the story of citizenship... goes from the institution of civic rights in civil society to the practices of governmentality outlined by Foucault."

However, in the colonies, where 'tools of governmentality sometimes predate the nation state', this sequence was reversed (36) (e.g anthropometry in India). The vast majority of people in India, and by extension their counterparts throughout the global South, lack full citizenship and are therefore forced to assert their rights to the state through the murky world of political brokerage that Chatterjee refers to as political society. Here, the demands of this marginalized population are expressed and occasionally met, but they are always conditional claims rather than legal rights. Political society emerges as a critical juncture in state-society ties as well as a space of potential where new democratic representational paradigms might be developed by resolving the conflicts of post-colonial governance.

These main points are developed throughout the book using a wide range of examples. These include Ambedkar's drafting of the Indian Constitution, the passing of a sect leader and the current efforts to control madrasah education. The smart utilization of seemingly unimportant or obscure incidents to spark important global discussions occurs repeatedly. It may be debatable if these examples, which are mostly Indian (and notably Bengali), can ever be said to represent "popular politics in most of the world," but this is a leading public intellectual from India who is writing at the top of his game. As a result, *Politics of the Governed* merits a large geographic readership.

Chatterjee lists other instances of this kind from west Bengal, even theatre groups. Because its objective is to legitimize an unlawful community, "The People's Welfare Association," which was founded by a squatter settlement alongside the train tracks, cannot be accorded the same recognition as other civic organisations. The squatters, for their part, acknowledge that it is illegal and improper for them to occupy public property. However, they assert their right to a place to dwell and a means of subsisting, and they do so by using their association as the main tool of their collective power. (59)

They define themselves in terms of the very categories of governmentality in the petition's framework, including a long list of subject 'population' like refugees, landless people, day laborers, home steaders who live below the poverty line, while adamantly insisting that they form a 'single family'. This action is essential in order "to lend the moral characteristics of a community to the empirical shape of a population group" (57). It should be noted therefore that communities are made up of citizens, whereas population groups are built up of subjects. "Political society" is the politics of those who want the same rights as citizens but are not included in civil society (because to their very marginalization).

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In conclusion therefore, the book makes the case that new methods of governmental management are to be blamed for the emergence of ethnic or identity politics, particularly in the post colonial globe. The book investigates the various shapes that the politics of the

governed take using current examples from India. Numerous of these shapes, function outside of the traditionally established boundaries of civil society and the official legal systems of the state. This book examines the global context in which such regional manifestations of popular politics have emerged and demonstrates how both local society and world society have changed.

About The Author Of The Book Reviewed:

Professor Partha Chatterjee is Partha Chatterjee is a political theorist, political anthropologist and historian. He graduated from Presidency College, Calcutta, and received his PhD from the University of Rochester. Since 1997, he has divided his time between Columbia University and the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, where he was the director from 1997 to 2007. He is the author of more than thirty books and edited volumes in English and Bengali. He was a founding member of the Subaltern Studies Collective.