

The Politics of the Impossible

By Ajay Skaria | May 19, 2023

It does not seem an exaggeration to say that we are in the midst of a re-evaluation of the egalitarian political thinkers and actors of nineteenth and early twentieth century India—Bhimrao Ambedkar, Saraladebi Chaudrani, Mohandas Gandhi, Mohammed Iqbal, Jotirao Phule, M. N. Roy, Bhagat Singh, Indulal Yagnik, Yashpal, and so many others besides. Increasingly, we have come to conceive of them as thinkers of the minor, or at least place their thinking in relation to the question of the minor. Daniel Elam's slim and elegant book is an extraordinarily important addition to this vein of scholarship.

To get to the implications of this term minor, it helps to distinguish between four moments in the writing of the history of modern India. The first three have already been quite extensively described. There is the nationalist moment, which remained a significant strand all the way down to Bipan Chandra, and which celebrated independence as the beginning of an emancipated society. There is the more critical Marxist and leftist tradition, which continues to be important and valuable today, which stresses the way in which post-independence India was marked by the dominance of the subcontinental elite, and which found its telos in seeking a different kind of state. I think what these two moments share, despite the enormous differences between them, is what could be called a statist or sovereignty-centered hope—a hope for transforming the Indian state itself, and for transforming sovereignty too.

And then, from around the eighties, as this statist hope fades, there emerges the early moment of *Subaltern Studies*, which is critical of statism itself as an orientation. In this stage, the emphasis is on the separate domain of subaltern activity, which resists incorporation into the nationalist narrative or escapes it. This is also the moment of the focus on the power of dominant social groups and the disempowerment of subaltern groups.

What I am calling the fourth moment could be described as an intensification of this subaltern critique. This intensification inflects the concept of the subaltern with that of the minor. How do we distinguish the minor from the subaltern? As a concept, *subaltern* names those who find themselves denied equality, and are perhaps so disempowered as to be unable to claim it. Subalternity is morally wrong, something that calls for immediate redress. By contrast, the minor is a moral principle—or, more correctly, comportment—that brings the subaltern into view in a democratic way.

The minor includes but is more than the minority or minors. *Minorities* usually refers to enumerated and identifiable groups in a subordinate position in a polity. *Minors* refers to all those who do not have the power to act as citizens or full legal subjects: today, this term legally applies only to children—but not only, if we remember the Kerala High Court judge who insisted a 24-year-old Muslim woman was not adult enough to decide whom to marry. In

talking of “the minor,” I want to include these two senses, but I also want to get to what underlies both of them: the sense of embodying practices, beliefs, or even a way of being that is at odds with the norms dominant in society.

And it is because the affirmation of a space for such dissent is the core principle of any democratic politics that the minor can be described as a moral principle or bearing. This principle or bearing, moreover, manifests itself as a “who”: it refers to those who are not dominant, but claim equality without abandoning their minor status. Such equality, for example, is very evidently what the LGBTQ+ movement seeks. In other words, the minor is not a majority in waiting. Any equality, to be democratic, must retain an openness to the minor. And a politics that actually assumes the bearing of the minor is what we call a minor politics.

This minor politics itself divides continuously into and between two “forms.” One form concerns itself with a sovereignty-centered politics, and the institutional protections and rights that democratic states extend to individuals and minorities are one manifestation of this form. It is this form that Ambedkar usually describes as political democracy and that manifests itself as republican or liberal democracy, or some combination of the two. The second form is arguably the crux of what Ambedkar describes as social democracy. Here democracy proceeds very differently — by relinquishing or at least maintaining a skeptical relation with sovereignty-centered politics and striving instead for socialities that nourish difference and dissent more intensely than is possible in any sovereignty-centered order.

Of course, the concept of the minor does not work by itself. It brings along with it several other concepts: minority, majority, major, recognition, enemy, civil war, the impossible, critique, sovereignty, violence, and so on. Many of these concepts have been around arguably for a long time. But the concept of the minor serves as a new and especially powerful quilting point, or perhaps one should say a new magnetic lode, that reorients these older concepts, transforms them internally, and brings them together in an especially illuminating way.

There are reasons why the question of the minor has come to new prominence now. Socially, a range of developments are enabling the proliferation of spaces for the minor: Dalit mobilizations, movements for gender equality, LGBTQ+ movements, and so on. But there is also the rise, both institutional and social, of a new majoritarianism. On the cusp of these two developments, the minor are arguably more visible today, and by extension more visible as a principle in the past, than they were earlier. Thus we see the minor and the conceptual constellation around it in the work of several social theorists who differ considerably from and with each other but are all broadly committed to an egalitarian and democratic politics; so it is also that we see so many popular mobilizations that are skeptical of sovereign power.

What makes Elam’s book so timely and important in this moment of churning is its very subtle and nuanced exploration of moments when four figures who were quite prominent in Indian politics — Lala Har Dayal, Bhimrao Ambedkar, Mohandas Gandhi, and Bhagat Singh — strove for that politics of the minor which pivots towards a relinquishing of sovereignty-centered forms of power. Elam picks on a minor strand in each of these thinkers and uses it to unsettle our canonical understanding of them. He turns to Har Dayal’s quiet *Hints for Self-Culture* and finds it to be organized around “practices of ignoring the state, rather than

addressing it” — not by “ideas” but by “imagination,” that “unruly unit of political and aesthetic action” (Elam 2020, 35, 41); he finds it also to be invested in “youth, newness and immaturity” (41). He turns to the world of Ambedkar’s early years in Columbia and finds that his “antiauthoritarian critique” and sociology, like those of W. E. Du Bois, took shape before sociology turned scientific, when sociology “was still pliable enough—‘hesitant’ enough—to be useful for a radical politics of anti-racism, anticolonialism, and anti-casteism” (55); this pliability allowed leftist scholars to conceptualize race and caste together as “color-caste.”

With Gandhi, the focus is on moments when he “failed spectacularly” (69); Elam suggests that the “immaturity, superstition, nonsense, incorrigibility, unseriousness, and foolishness” of these moments are “the features of an impossible politics, rooted in perpetual relinquishment of mastery and its attendant values (maturity, reason, comprehensibility, seriousness)” (71). With Bhagat Singh, the book explores his reading practices while facing the gallows and suggests that “reading was revolutionary ... precisely because it was not in the service of scholarship, mastery, authority, or expertise. Reading, especially in the face of death, was revolutionary because it was inconsequential” (93).

Elam’s book deepens our thinking of the minor in three ways. For a start, it affirms critique in the spirit of the minor. We often associate critique with Kant, and rightly so. But in doing so, we sometimes run the risk of forgetting that there is also another tradition of critique. This tradition is represented by many people: those who Elam invokes most emphatically are Walter Benjamin and Frantz Fanon. So rather than saying that critique has run out of steam, as some more sloppy and self-satisfied formulations have suggested, Elam very clearly wants to practice a critique in the spirit of the minor. Such a critique is driven by the spirit of the unknowing rather than the spirit of expertise which seeks to reveal secrets.

Second, this other spirit of critique manifests itself in Elam’s emphasis on the trope of reading. What makes reading so important here is that reading involves, as he puts it, “a disavowal of authorial mastery.” To read is to become impure, affected by others. Thus, Elam brings out how reading was central to each of the four figures that he deals: how they refuse to speak as experts, how they repeatedly assert their lack of expert knowledge, how they insist on their amateur status. As such, reading is anti-authoritarian, refuses to limit itself to any one geographical “culture,” and in its very promiscuity convokes a world literature. In the spirit of this argument, Elam’s chapter on Ambedkar not only notes that Ambedkar was a voracious reader but stresses that he was a reader who “read in ways that cannot be catalogued” (48), and who moreover read in ways that undid the claims of texts to authority. But Elam’s third theme is his most provocative: for him, these four figures are thinkers of the impossible. To get a sense of what is stake in this word *impossible*, it helps to contrast it to its counterpoint — *possible*. To say that something is possible is to be able to define it as an end or goal and to at least dimly see a path to that end or goal. To say that something is impossible is to say one or both of two things: that we see no path or means to the end or goal, or/and that we have only the dimmest apprehension or intimation of what the end itself is.

Why does the impossible matter? To my mind, because it is the most intensely ethical moment: the moment when ethics is transmuted into religion, speaking here of religion not in the sense that modern disciplinary formations such as anthropology or history or sociology have understood it, but in the sense that Ambedkar and Gandhi by different paths bring to

the term. Very broadly speaking, ethics, at least in its modern iteration, lays claim to a certain universality and reason (this is what distinguishes it from a related formation, morality); relatedly, it is concerned with the possible. Ethics is exemplified in the Kantian categorical imperative to treat others never merely as means but also as ends in themselves. Doing so requires an entire institutional apparatus that draws on both public reason and expertise: it is this apparatus that we describe as secular democracy.

Of course there is a certain impossibility to ethics also: nobody is ever going to realize the categorical imperative in most of their relations. But that impossibility is what is commonly (mis)called idealism. (I add 'mis' in parenthesis because this idealism can be very materialist — for example, in many socialist traditions). To be an idealist in this sense is to seek an ethical goal, to recognize that its possibility lies not in the present but in the future, and to try and organize society and sovereignty so as to achieve that future. Such an idealism is surely at work Preamble of the Indian constitution, which calls to a republic organized around justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity; the length of the constitution itself surely has to do in part with instituting possible paths to this ideal.

However, the focus of Elam's book is not so much on this impossibility for which we might retain the term idealism. Rather, the focus here is on something far more intriguing and challenging—the impossible itself as a bearing and comportment. What distinguishes the impossible as such a quasi-concept is that it involves relinquishing sovereignty over oneself and seeking a sociality organized around the relinquishment of sovereignty. This is why the impossible is difficult to describe in terms of the conventional language of means and ends: we require sovereignty over ourselves both to identify a goal and to exercise the means to achieve such a goal. This is also why the term religion is so apposite for describing the impossible: to be religious rather than ethical is to surrender one's sovereignty, and the religiosity of the impossible involves moreover a distinctive surrender—one that is not a subordination to a higher sovereignty.

This politics of the impossible manifests itself in Elam's book in two ways. One is what he describes as the concern with inconsequence. Thus, for example, Bhagat Singh is asking for books to read even as he is preparing for the gallows. Reading when preparing for death cannot be a striving for mastery. There is a certain inconsequential reading going on here, which Daniel beautifully hints at. But what Elam implicitly recognizes, though he could arguably have foregrounded it more, is that the "inconsequential" is not insignificant or immaterial. Rather, the inconsequential matters and signifies in a different way—not because of an externally applied effect, as consequential things do, but because it tries to transform us and those around us in our very being. For this inconsequence, terms such as immaturity or failure—which only invert the Kantian problematic—are not adequate.

For example, when Ambedkar exhorts Dalits to self-respect, this is not a means to an end. It will have consequences, of course, but it is not because of these consequences that he seeks self-respect. Self-respect is an end in itself with incalculable consequences, because once we accord equality to ourselves, it is difficult to predict how we will behave. (In this sense, the Kantian language of autonomy is not enough to understand a radical politics of self-respect.)

The second is the curious place of sovereignty. To be sovereign, after all, is to be able engage effectively in the politics of the possible. Unsurprisingly, then, Elam finds that the four

figures he is most concerned with have a skeptical relation with sovereignty. He brings out this relinquishment of sovereignty most strikingly in Gandhi. As Elam notes, it was precisely through such relinquishment that Gandhi worked. To quote him again, Gandhi's politics often involves a doubled renunciation:

Phrases like "please give me up as foolish," "allow me to lose this debate," and "allow me to be wrong" put Gandhi's self (*satya*) in the grip (*graha*) of others. Gandhi locates a position in which he asks the other to relinquish, on his behalf, himself. ... Losing the ability to lose yourself so that another person might lose you is a precarious and unsustainable politics of radical egalitarianism. (76)

This way of reading the impossible is provocative, but it also raises four difficult questions that the book does not address, and that Elam or others will hopefully take up in future work. One question has to do with the "form" of the impossible. All the four figures Elam deals with are concerned with the impossible, but what is essential to remember is that both the ideal and the impossible are concerned with transforming the potential into the actual. They seek to do so, however, by different paths—one through sovereignty and the other through the relinquishment of sovereignty. So when Gandhi says, "please consider me foolish," this does not only mean "please ignore me"; it is not a request to disengage—not, at least, when he is speaking to those he wants to convert. "Foolishness" itself here organizes a politics of the impossible that seeks to convert those who consider him fools.

A second question arises from the fact that all four are invested in the impossible possibility that is idealism. It is not only the Constitution, whose writing Ambedkar led, which is an exercise in the politics of the possible. Gandhi too did not demand "an impossible Indian as a necessary pre-requisite for Indian self-rule" (74); rather, while he demanded that impossible form of *swaraj* from himself (even if inconsistently) of himself, he accepted that his allies were committed to parliamentary *swaraj* (arguably he was too in some ways) and helped them achieve it. And while I know the writings of Har Dayal and Bhagat less well, my sense is that they too critically cherish a politics of the possible in its highest form, that of idealism. All of which raises the question: what is the togetherness of the impossible and the possible, or the politics of consequence and politics of inconsequence?

The third question is related to these first two: could Elam's argument be thrown into sharper relief by making a distinction between authority and power? Authority is not quite same as power. If you have power over me, it is something you can exercise even punitively. But what is striking about authority is that it stands apart from you and me. Authority is a certain acknowledgment of the rightness of power. This is why it is very possible to have power without authority: this is what we call authoritarianism and is what a tyrant exercises. Social orders become hegemonic when authority and power converge. And somebody like Gandhi or Ambedkar or Bhagat Singh—surely we could say they spent significant portions of their lives exercising authority without power. Authority without power: is this another way of describing the impossible as distinct from the ideal and its social manifestation as hegemony?

The fourth question: these four thinkers, and especially Bhagat Singh, Ambedkar, and Gandhi, are in tension with each other. One question that future scholarship (perhaps by Elam himself) will hopefully take up concerns the relation between these four thinkers,

between various thinkers of the impossible. What would it mean to put them into conversation with each other?

For example, we usually think of Gandhi and Ambedkar as thinkers whose positions are opposed to one another. And as long as we understand them only as historical actors in their time, this is quite correct. For while they shared a hostility to Hindu nationalism and caste oppression, they understood these phenomena in incommensurably different ways, and this resulted in their taking positions that were opposed to each other. But when we think with them—that is to say, elicit the potentialities of their concepts for our own times, understand them as thinkers of the impossible and the minor—then their relation no longer appears as simply oppositional; rather, what comes into view is arguably a parallax relation. What is this parallax relation, and not only between Gandhi and Ambedkar, but also between other thinkers and actors of the minor? Pursuing these questions might shed a different kind of light on the four protagonists of Elam’s thought-provoking book; maybe they will appear as even more complex figures than they already do in this rendering. But in the meantime, amongst the lasting contributions of the book is the new pathways it opens to the thinking of the minor.

Note: Some of the arguments ventured above have been further developed in “The Subaltern and the Minor: For Qadri Ismail” (*Critical Times* 5, no. 3, 2022, and in “Revisiting Non-Willing Freedom: How Gandhi Matters Today” (*Cultural Critique Online*, Frame 2, June 2022), which were both completed after this essay was originally written for a panel on Daniel Elam’s book.

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