

India: Why I am a communist: Activist Kobad Ghandy on ideology and Utopia

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An interview with the author of 'Fractured Freedom: A Prison Memoir'.

In September 2009, when newspapers reported that activist Kobad Ghandy had been arrested in Delhi's Bhikaji Cama Place, there was a curious historical coincidence to the event.

Just over 90 years earlier, Madame Cama had been arrested for her efforts to further the cause of independence. Now, another privileged member of India's tiny Parsi community had been taken into custody - in an area named for the freedom fighter - for his efforts to help India's most marginalised communities liberate themselves from the structures that perpetuated their exploitation.

The police alleged that Ghandy, who had attended [Doon School](#) and studied in London to be a chartered accountant, was a "top ideologue" of the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist).

Ghandy, who is now 74, spent the next decade in jails across the country, facing [a variety of charges](#). He was finally released on bail in October 2019. On March 16, Roli Books released his prison memoir *Fractured Freedom*, a chilling - and engaging - account of his experiences in India's brutal jails.

In his book, Ghandy details his encounters with fellow prisoners. Amidst dons, rapists, and corrupt businessmen and people accused of political violence, two men earned his affection: Sudheendra Kulkarni, who had been arrested in the "cash-for-votes" case in 2011, and [Afzal Guru](#), who had been convicted in the 2001 Parliament attack case and was later hanged.

Ghandy explains why he was attracted to Marxism as a volunteer with anti-racism groups in London in the late 1960s. His association with radical politics deepened when he returned to Mumbai in 1972, as he began to do social work in the Dalit-dominated Mayanagar slum near his home on the posh Worli Sea Face. He joined PROYOM, the Progressive Youth Movement, and came into contact with leaders of the city's most important trade unions.

Also a member of PROYOM was Arunadha Shanbag, who would become his wife and partner in the quest for social justice. Ghandy's descriptions of her influence on his life and ideas make for some of the warmest sections on *Fractured Freedom*. In the last chapter, Ghandy suggests that the world could be transformed with the introduction of a new set of values that he describes as the "Anuradha-model". She died of malaria in 2008.

In this interview, Kobad Ghandy talks about India's present predicament and his vision for social change.

In the 1970s, when you became an activist and class struggle seemed to be the dominant concern, did you ever imagine that Hindu majoritarianism would be the main challenge to

India's social fabric?

Actually, since the 1980s, the Congress themselves started playing the Hindutva card - opening the locked gates to the Babri Masjid, engineering the Sikh killings after Indira Gandhi's death in 1984 and all that type of stuff. The '80s also witnessed the introduction of the new liberalised economy. And Ramanand Sagar's television programme on the Ramayana (just as TV was newly introduced) created a huge atmosphere for what was to come. As an economist, I had the impression that the two processes were linked.

Of course, neoliberalism was introduced in a big way after the '90s, when Manmohan Singh was finance minister and Montek Singh Ahluwalia was finance secretary, with the instructions of the International Monetary Fund. But the seeds were planted in the '80s itself, when talk about privatisation began.

Liberalisation is nothing but a word for big corporations amassing money at the expense of the poor. Now, even the middle class is finding employment only as contract labour etc.

Being involved with trade unions from the 1970s, we began to see how Bombay's textile mills closed and work shifted on a contract basis to powerlooms. The textile strike of 1984 changed the nature of Bombay, transforming it from a working-class city to a financial hub.

I used to live in Worli at the time and when the mill shifts were about to begin, you could see a sea of humanity coming down the road. That has long ceased. The neoliberal system is a culmination of the seeds planted in the 1980s.

I now get the impression also that the Covid lockdown was also somehow linked to the ongoing depression in the world economies. Even as the poor have been further impoverished, the richest people have got much more wealthy.

The communal division was a necessary effort to divert the attention of the working class and the farmers away from the economic crisis they are facing. And I think, if you take it historically, the Congress has also played a big role in this game.

What is the source of Narendra Modi's popularity?

I don't really know as just after I came out of jail, we went into the Covid lockdown. I've not really been able to interact with people and I don't know their psychology. But my feeling is that he and his party use the communal and nationalism cards very effectively. To do this, they have the media fully behind them. Some of those TV anchors, particularly, can become really rabid. This leads people to believe there's no alternative to Modi, which also is a reality at the national level.

There are, of course, alternatives at the regional level. But these parties have a limitation on the national stage. Many had put their hopes in the Aam Aadmi Party but it is not playing the role it was expected to. They are playing the soft Hindutva card too. Some claim this is necessary if they are to fulfil their immediate electoral calculations. Besides, they too take no stand on neo-liberal policies, but of course they have done some good work on education and healthcare. But I don't know whether this will bring a long-term payoff.

How do you think it can be countered?

Let's look to the farmers, I think. Lakhs of people are participating in the agitation. But so far, there is no political platform to capitalise on this. They pride themselves on not being political, like most trade unions and movements did in our days also. But I feel unless there's some political platform,

it's all a dead end. I've seen this with many mass movements in my time.

That's where the Naxalites also make a mistake by boycotting elections. Boycotts only help the most reactionary of the electoral forces.

What is your idea of Utopia?

That's a long, very far thing. I don't see it on the agenda anyway in the near future. I have spent 40 years as an activist thinking about this. What is equality - to ensure the basic necessities of life? That is only economics. But what about social and human factors?

Utopia means people should be happy. No doubt that presupposes that they have the necessities of life. Without food, clothing, shelter, and medical care you can't be happy. Some of these rich religious types say that, oh, they might be poor, but they are happy - with all our money and property, we have so much tension. If you actually live the life of a poor person, you'll see the immense mental strain it brings.

That's why I say that the goalposts should change to happiness, which is inclusive of the economic agenda. Capitalism has not provided any of the answers for the masses. And it's only socialism - of whatever type - that has given some relief. Even in the East European countries, people now look back at how they had free education and free health care. Socialism has given benefits to the people. Even China, which has the largest number of billionaires in the world today, has lifted a vast part of the population to a middle-class level.

So economically, no doubt that's the answer. But with these economic gains, happiness, freedom, and democracy need to be linked. This in turn is inconceivable without a new set of values: the qualities of naturalness, straightforwardness, simplicity, without ego and manipulateness. What I have outlined as the Anuradha-type values putting her as a model for others to emulate.

When I speak of freedom I am not speaking merely from the political context, it starts from oneself. Most of us are ourselves wrapped up in numerous knots where we are often alienated from ourselves. We ourselves are unable to understand our own emotions and have become what Marx called a crippled monstrosity. We get wrapped up in our own problems all the time, where subconscious emotions, programmed in our childhood, are in conflict with the actual reality. These are so deep-rooted in our subconscious mind that a mere change in ideology does not automatically bring in the new values.

The new economy must promote a new set of values, happiness and freedom. There are many different types of socialist models - the Soviet one which only focused on the state sector, which everyone's rejected, and the Chinese model of walking on two legs involving a balance between the state and private sectors. There are also examples to investigate in Latin America. Whatever the type of economics, it must be interwoven into a structure that generates happiness.

You have looked to ideas from India's past to provide a model for our present.

A major aspect that is preventing the democratisation and the development of our country in the true sense of the word is the caste system. This doesn't exist anywhere else in the world. In fact, when rulers from afar seek to conquer foreign countries, they try to impose a policy of divide and rule. But in India, with a country divided into 1,000 parts, we give it to them on a platter. Unless that aspect is broken, India cannot advance towards any democratisation as caste is not only divisive it is hierarchical and oppressive.

But we do have some models in our traditions. For instance, the egalitarianism of the Bhakti

traditions, and even earlier the Charvaka and Buddhist past. We have to fully develop them and take these traditions forward, as Phule and Ambedkar did, and build on these democratic foundations to create a better India.

Since coming out of jail, though, I've noticed that many of these traditions are being used for promoting Hindutva and its progressive essence is being lost. We need to reclaim them. Marxists negated the caste question and thought it was all about class struggle. That must change.

Are you still a communist?

Of course, I still say that a form of socialist economy is the only alternative. The method by which it is to be achieved depends on the situation. Looking back, it's clear that armed struggle has only been successful during World Wars. On the contrary, we also see peaceful communist movements have resulted in the most cruel massacres in Indonesia, Chile and numerous other countries.

Communism grows as scientific ideas develop and economic structures change. We have to take the experiences of the past and incorporate happiness, freedom and value systems into any model for change. We have to find a model for radical change to socialism depending on the concrete conditions prevailing in our respective countries.

In a way, the task has become easier as it is no longer the rich vs the poor. But with the international economy so polarised, it would be the 3,500-and-odd billionaires and the vast retinue of hangers-on vs the mass of the people. The wealth that these 3,500 families and agents in politics and bureaucracy hold will be more than sufficient to create a heaven on earth.

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