Anti-Colonial Struggle and the Challenges of Multi-Cultural Society: Village Republics, Koms and Confederalism

written by DEMOS ARAŞTIRMA | 15 Temmuz 2015

Interview with Dr. Radha D'Souza, Reader in Law at the Universtiy of Westminister, UK, a free lance writer and social justice activist. Dr D'Souza has worked as an organizer and activist lawyer for labour movements, democratic rights and social justice movements in the Asia-Pacific region.

DEMOS met her at the Challenging Capitalist Modernity Conference, 3-5 April 2005, in Hamburg and was inspired by her talk and the connections that can be drawn from the Indian struggle against colonialism and the concept of democratic autonomy which is currently being brought forward by the Kurdish Movement as a solution for the Kurdish Question.

Thank you, Ms D'Souza, for accepting our request to do this Interview.

[In your talk here at the conference] You said you feel very comfortable with the concept of democratic autonomy and confederalism when thinking about the colonial and precolonial history of India. And we were interested whether you could tell us a bit more about why you say you feel comfortable about it and what it is that makes it familiar to the anti-colonial struggle in India.

I think, we as human beings, are concept-dependent beings, and concept is brought to us by language, by culture, by history and by contemporary struggles. So, when you speak of democratic confederalism, in pre-colonial India it was what the British called a system of "village-republics" and in the village-republic system the village was the basic unit of the social world. This is fundamentally different from the western imperialism or better western liberalism, where the individual is the unit of society.

Let me give you an example, e.g. Taxation. Taxation in any European country has always been taxation of the individual. So, that is your individual income that is taxed. Whereas in pre-colonial India the village was taxed. So, we could all be members of a village and this year the government has assessed us for a certain number of tax and you could say "Radha has had a very difficult time this year. We'll take care of that. Or there has been a bereavement in the family, somebody has lost a son, all these kind of things. But because the village was the unit of taxation – and this is just an example of what it means to be a village community. And similarly with the cultivation decisions, land was owned by the village. It was not really owned, a village was structured around the land. So who cultivated what, you needed water to cultivate, these questions were made by the villagers.

So, this was a situation that existed in pre-colonial times. Why do you that the British call this system a "system of village republics"

Because when they came to India this is the structure they found. And the British saw this and they said that there is no private property in India because the village earned the land and it was all communal, although there was a very clear idea about who cultivated what. So, we could all be living in a village, but all knew you cultivated that area, he cultivated that area. Then, there was a

village goldsmith, the village blacksmith, and we even had a village poet. And I remember this, that when I was growing up as a child the village poet would come out in the morning and sing and the village feeds him. So, because my grandma was a little stout, she couldn't run, she would give me rice, fruit, whatever, and she would say "Go, go, run and give it to him" and he had a sling-bag and we would have to put it in that bag. So, it was that kind of system. And I [as part of the] post-independence generation – even at that point there was some of that idea left remaining although the economy had changed.

So what, the British did when they came is that they said there is no private property in this land. So, this is compared to Crown Property in England, because it belong to the village. So, they said it was public property. And now that the Crown is ruling India, all that belongs to us. So, that is how we lost our land to the colonial rule. But, even then, as I said, people's habits don't change – Kurds remain Kurds even after being in Germany for 50, 60, 100 years. They still remain Kurds. So, it is the same way with people's cultures, and people's way of thinking. So, the village economies remained. However, because of the modern economy coming as a rival to the tradition economy, the modern economy grew and grew and grew and pushed us into smaller and smaller spaces. And now, therefore, the discourse is that this is not viable, because the people in the traditional economy are poor. But, our response to that is that our economy was crushed and strangled by this modern economy, by the modern technology, by all of that and it never got an opportunity to innovate, develop and grow. And that is why yesterday I gave the example of water-systems and how we try to demonstrate by model that it is possible to grow and a new kind of science is possible if you actually went back to people to develop that. So, that is why I say I am very comfortable with that idea.

But, then to take further, the freedom struggles, and I spoke about the Ghader Movement [*Ghadar* is an Urdu word derived from Arabic which means "revolt" or "rebellion."]. The Ghader Movement's idea was very much of a democratic confederalist model, because they said, India is – even today – is the most diverse subcontinent in the world. All the oldest religions are in India. Christianity was brought to India by Saint Thomas. The largest Jewish settlement outside of the Middle East is in India. We have Arab traders, Mongolian traders, Persians. That is why if you look at Urdu language, so many of our words come from farsi, arabic. That is why we have so many shared words: Azadi is an Indian word, as much as it is a Kurdish or a Persian word.

So, the Ghader Movement's conception of freedom; the question they asked was: What should an Azadi Hindistan look like? And they said, this Western style democracy is not going to work for us because we are too many "koms" – you know the word "kom"? So, we are too many koms, so it should be a federation of koms.

Would you say "kom" can be translated with "commune", or "group"?

No, it is a people; a community of people. Kurds – we would say – is a kom.

So, is kom the same as an "ethnic group"?

No, it is a people with a common history, which is not necessarily affiliated to land.

But, are they usually regionally in the same place?

Yes, usually, but many koms can live in one "watan", which is the land, the territory, on which states are based and so on.

And what about people from different ethnicities or different religious groups could they belong to the same kom, in your understanding?

I think this would be a very diverse local situation. This is why there is so much diversity in India. For example, if you take Indian Muslims – and we are home to the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia- people don't realize this, we the second largest Muslim population is in India, not even in Pakistan, or Bangladesh. But for example, the Tamil Muslims, they speak Tamil, they probably don't know any Arabic at all. The women have never covered their heads. We have never known Muslim Tamil women to cover their heads. But, they are Sunni Muslims – as Sunni as anybody else. But, if you go to northern India, even the Hindus cover their heads. And it is probably the Muslim, Arab, influence. So, it is very difficult to pinpoint and to divide India into language, religion, cast, culture, because you will find all these combinations in all the places.

Can you for our readership tell us a bit more about the Ghader Movement, when did the Movement develop and how can we describe them ideologically?

It is not the first independence movement, but the first movement is what we call the "Great Ghader" which was 1857 and shook the British Empire to its very foundation. The English history books call this the Indian Sepoy Mutiny, but we call this the First War of Independence and in popular consciousness it is also known as the Great Ghader.

Does Ghader mean uprising?

Ghader means revolt. It probably comes from Aarabic or Persian. That is the history of that. The second wave of freedom struggle was in the early 1900s and that this the Second Ghader, because that is what links directly to the freedom struggle, to Gandhi, to all of those things. That starts around 1900 and goes on right up to 1928. That is an interesting moment for the freedom struggle, because on the one hand when they started out there was no Bolshevism, Communism and all of that. So, a lot of the formation ideas were about anti-colonialism and that was everything. But they had an internationalist outlook in that sense, because they said if you want to fight the British Empire you have to organize around the Empire. So, it was in some ways the first internationalist movement. I considered it that way, because it was the first movement that was truly global and of working people, because they had networks in Shiraz, in Kenya, in African cities, in Brasil, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Burma, Hongkong, China; wherever the British Empire was they organized on that; because that was their aim to bring down the Empire.

Then of course, the Bolshevik Revolution started, and there was this question of what do we do with this. They made connections to the Bolshevik's. However, their idea of that was always a question of mutual solidarity and help. So, we helped the Bolsheviks to get what they wanted and the Bolsheviks helped us to get what we wanted. It was always seen as a partnership, because the idea of the dictatorship of the party had really not gelled at that time, because this was really a project in the making.

So, there was no party driving the Movement?

There was. They started in 1900 and they formed the Ghader Party in 1913, which was still before the socialist, Bolsheviks. Then, they made alliances with the Bolsheviks, but when the Bolshevik party started getting into this organizing the Third International, they said, we respect the Bolshevik Movement, because it is genuine, but we must find our own way in this. There are a lot of good things about the Bolsheviks, which we are happy to learn, but they said there is a difference – and this is the important thing. One of the leaders writes very nicely about this. He says there is a difference between Bolshevism and communism. And Bolshevism may be right for the Russian people. We don't question that, but for us, he said, it is different. Because the Bolshevik party started saying you must renounce Islam. They said: We should we renounce Islam. We want Azadi for India. Why should we get into Islam is good or Islam is bad. It is not necessary to do that. And

they said if you are talking about communism, within Islam and within Hinduism and within Buddism there are many alternate traditions which are quite consistent with the principles of communism. So, you can look at Islam and find many principles which are not contradictory to communist principles: the brotherhood of people, sharing, simple life etc.

So, is it right to say that the Ghader Movement rather drew on the values or concepts that actually existed in the own cultures.

They drew on their own intellectual traditions. That is maybe the better term. However, they did get a lot of support from the Bolshevik Party and the Movement.

In what context did, then, the concept of confederalism come up?

That came up, as I said, in the context of the question they were asking: What should a Azad Hindistan look like? So, they said this should be a federation of many koms, of many people who have a shared Watan, a shared homeland. So, they did not want to break the structure of the people and their communities. But they said, we are against colonialism, we still want a confederation, because we can fight an external power without having a unity of all these people. So, we want to have a federation of all these people.

Was that an ethnic-religious perspective?

That is a very difficult terminology. This is the problem we have with modernism. We don't have a vocabulary to speak about it. Because you can't speak about South-Asia as a religion, as language, as culture. That is why I gave you the example of Tamil Muslims. They speak only Tamil; they are Sunni Muslims; the women don't cover their heads; and you can't say they are Tamil, you can't say they are Muslim, and you can't say that they are progressive or reactionary, because that is how they have always been. This is what Britain did to us. They forced us to choose between one identity. You have to be either Tamil or Muslim or Woman or from a certain place or modern etc. You can't be all. Whereas we are all this. I am Tamil. I am a Woman. I am Indian and I am human. I mean I don't think I should have to choose between one of these identities. I think this is one of the biggest problems. That is why I mention how the first major ethnic conflict took place in India, because the British forced us to choose. If you want democracy, you must choose, whether you are Hindi or Muslim or Sikh or Christian. I refuse to be drawn into this classification. I don't want that vocabulary. I don't care whether you are Protestant, Catholic, be what you like. That is not the point.

Do you think that this problem that we are forced into these categories is precisely what triggers the excitement, as you mentioned, that many young people share towards the concept of democratic confederalism which the Kurdish Movement has brought forward? Was that the point you were making?

I think I have to qualify that. I can't say that there is a big solidarity movement with the Kurdish Movement. Still one year ago, when I started to talk about people about the Kurds, people didn't know about the Kurdish Movement at all. But I think now, with the struggle in the Middle East and in India with the extreme Hindu-fascist government we have now, there is a big section of people from the Muslim population, especially Muslim youths, who look at the Middle East and see ISIS and look at India with its Hindu-fundamentalism which makes them kind of parted between the things they see.

So, when I started talking about these issues – and actually I first started talking about this issue in the India Palestine-Solidarity meeting. It wasn't even a Kurdish group, where I pointed out we need to pay attention to the Kurdish struggle. It is a very important struggle etc. Then, a lot of people got

excited about it, especially with the reports in the newspapers and then Kobani happened. So, I think it would be more correct to say that the Muslim Youth is looking for some source of legitimacy for being South-Asian Muslims. South-Asian Muslims have never been fanatical, Wahabi-type, at all. They have always been very relaxed about it. They have never been very fundamentalist. We have never had that. In fact, until the 1970s the Saudis did not even consider South-Asia Muslims as genuine Muslims. The Kashimiris were too close to Sufism to be called genuine Muslims. The South-Asians were to chilled-out to be called genuine Muslim. So, they were not even considered as such. Now, the Muslim youth in India is being pushed into this. I think what Kobani and the Kurdish struggle did was to show them a space, that is some other way, where you don't have to denounce being Muslim and where Muslim women can come out and do things, for after all they are Muslims. So, why are you telling us we are not Muslims. That sort of space is what is making younger people interested in knowing more. And we hope we can build on that.

This is different from the situation if the Muslim youths join the communist movement. Then, the Muslim cemaat is going to say: these people have all become kafir. But, now, they don't have to do that, because there is a space where you don't have to talk about your religion.

Do you think that this model could be model that leads us beyond how we have been forced to think about ourselves in terms of ethnicity and religions. Can this model lead us out of such thinking or is there a danger or actually reproducing precisely these categories?

I think, for us as South-Asians, precisely because it is a very divers place, just like other regions in the Middle East because these are the regions where all the regions were born. Christianity was born there. Islam was born there. Judaism was born there. It is home to so many things in cultural terms. This shows the diversity.

For me, it is important that we refuse to identify as only one. That is the bottom line of this. I should be Tamil and Muslim and India and a Woman. Don't make me choose, because I am all these things. In India, once you start talking about one identity, then we are lost completely, because then there will be language divisions. People will start talking about separate states, secessionism. There is a lot of that happening. If you talk about Hindu Muslims, we have already had 6 Million people displaced and 2 Million people died in the partition. We don't want that again. We have a Hindu government, which pushes us between choosing between Hindu and Muslim. We don't want that. The moment you start talking about Indian tradition, first of all there is no such thing as Indian tradition. India is home to one sixth of humanity. There can't be a single tradition. We have matriarchal traditions, patriarchal traditions. So, when you talk about patriarchy all the North-Eastern and the Southern states say: that is not about us, because they are matriarchal, even today.

Can you tell us more about how the participation of women was conceptualized in the idea of village republics of the Ghader Movement? Were they to participate in decision-making mechanisms?

It is difficult to say, because the village republics were destroyed by the British. Previously, age more than gender was a central factor. But, it was a feudal society. So, it would be wrong to say that women had equality in the way we have equality today. But then women had a place. They had some decision-making powers. Let me give you and example: in the war, the Zenana, which is the women's quarters, if the king made peace in a battle, the women had the power to veto it. The British found this – and this were Victorian men – they were horrified by this, because the men would sign the treaty and the Zenana would veto it and they would come back and say "Sorry, you are not getting a treaty". The Victorian men could completely not understand this. So, if you are saying did they have equality in the sense did they make war together and all that. No, it was a feudal society. But, there were positions there: Women of age as men of age. In this sense, a young man was as disempowered

as a young woman, because the society respects age and you are expected to be trained and groomed to take over charge. Whereas in Western society, you can be 18 and you are free. Whereas I can't be free as long as my mother is alive, basically.

You said that the "village republic" is a term of the British? Can you tell us whether there is a term of the people for this system. How do the people define their system? Was is just lived this way, or did it have a name?

I don't think it had a name. This is something the sociologists invented, the British anthropologists and sociologists invented. Because for the Indian people – if you look back – they would have seen themselves as members of a village. So, place is very important. Even today, the first question an Indian will ask you is where do you come from and by that it means where is your home and it doesn't mean Hamburg or Cologne or Frankfurt. It means you ancestral place. It is still the identity. So, I might be living in London for nearly a lifetime, but when an Indian asks me where do you come from, I know they are asking about my ancestral home. So, in that sense that is still there. But, I don't think they had name for it. This is a name that anthropologists invented for describing India. But, they did have a name for the state. The state was very much there. The villages affiliated all their allegiance to the state. So, they would say our village owes it allegiance to this state or that state, but the connection between the central state and the village was very loose.

In the Ghader Movement, did they have their own term for their concept of democratic confederalism. Did they use the term of confederalism or confederation of the koms?

They used the term the "federation of koms".

We already talked about that these koms were not just a ethnic or religious kind of community, but did they also have a concept of how these koms were to be more democratic or participatory. Was there such kind of element?

They did. One of the interesting things about the Ghader Movement is that they said we want Azadi from Britain and we should be together for that. But we should also have a vision for Azadi Hindistan and how that will look like. And so, they every kom is responsible for making sure that they change from within. So that, we don't want to impose a change from outside, which is what the British was trying to do – liberate women, bring democracy, all of those things. The Ghader Movement said, if we don't want the British to do that, we have to seriously introspect on the nature of our societies. So, for example, they said, that all the koms will have a duty to make sure that all the women get education. This is a hundred years ago. All the koms must make sure that women are respected and treated with dignity. But they said, this is something that you have a responsibility to do, because she have part of the struggle for Azadi.

So, the broad ideas were set, but the whole responsibility and the implementation, if we can call it that way, was left to the koms, is that right?

Yes, and I think we should not read history backwards, because we are talking about Öcalan in the 21st century. This was a hundred years ago. This was 1900, which was a very feudal society at that time. We have to remember that even now it is a very feudal society. This is a difference between Gandhi and them.

You are from a country has a federal system and guarantees autonomy from ethnic, cultural and religious groups. Is that right? The Kurdish Movement wants to resolve the Kurdish Conflict through democratic autonomy. Do you think this is a good or possible model to resolve such an ethnic conflict and enable a multicultural living together.

I think that with these concepts and ideas like federalism, we need to not to look at the form, but at the content, at the substance of it. Federalism in India came out of the British system of devolution. So, it was the British who introduced this because the Ghadar Movement started a wave of freedom struggle, which they found very difficult to control. The Ghadar Movement came up during the First World War and Indians were the backbone of the British Army and that is why Britain was caught up in the question of what do you do with that. So, one of the strategies was to devolve for power to Indians. That is why they started negotiating with the merchants and landlords on the one hand and the so-called educated classes on the other, all the people from Oxford and Cambridge and all those places. That was the kind of politics that they were playing. Devolution was very much part of that. The first round of devolution was in 1919; the second in 1935. And we consider 1947 as the third devolution, because what devolution did was to keep the economic power in the central government and the political power was devolved more and more into decentralization. During the freedom struggle, this was one of the big demands of all the states, because the liberals or the educated classes tried to unify the freedom struggle. So, all the different regions in India said we will join the freedom struggle only if you can guarantee us autonomy. So, what the freedom struggle did was that it said, after independence we will divide the states on the basis of language groups. We have 24 language groups. People at that time thought that was democratic, because it is not religion, it is not race, it is not ethnicity and language is something we call speak, so it is a very broad kind of platform. However, after independence the Congress backtracked on that. So, there was another big struggle and in 1956 – that means almost 10 years after independence – we had what we call the linguistic re-organisation of states. So, when you now look at Indian states, they are all based on language. Tamil Nadu is a Tamil-speaking state, Karnataka is a Kannada-speaking place, Maharashtra is Marathi-speaking. So, we have different languages. However, the economic power remains centralized. So, it is very colonial. That is why for neoliberalism in India, the federal government didn't have to do anything, because the British had already given them a constitution which allowed them to do that straight away. So, there was no need for any change.

So, if you ask me if that is a model, then no, because in India for have a movement at least since the 1970s for what we call genuine federalism where the economic powers are also transferred. In 1972 we had a major convention in Punjab. The resolution was called the Anandpur Sahib Resolution. Anandpur Sahib is a place in Punjab. In this resolution, they demanded that the federal government must only have foreign affairs, defense and communication, and all other subjects must be given to the state. This was the demand and it is still the demand. So, if you look at the Kashmir struggle, if you look at the north-east struggles, if you look at many of the movements in the states, they are still demanding this for the states. Because what can a state do? I can speak my language in my state, but if the state doesn't have the economy how are they going to look after anything? So, if you are asking me is that a model? No.

So, it is not only about decentralizing e.g. language or even schooling. This might be something that we would say that sounds very good to decentralize, but even then, you say, if the economic power stays in the centre the problem continues.

Yes, and if I may add, because she asked if this could be a model. One big dangers with globalization and neoliberalism is that it concentrates economic powers in very few international institutions, so it is possible and easy to devolve all the cultural and social things. This is the problem I have with these so-called cultural movements. You can't do much with your culture if you don't have anything to eat. What globalisation says we are all cultural and multicultural and all of that, but the economic power is controlled by them. On the contrary, you wouldn't mind learning two languages if you can have food on the table.

That sounds like a great point to stop. Thank you very much for this interview. It was very inspiring.

Selected Publications by Radha D'Souza:

D'Souza, R. (2014) Revolt and reform in South Asia: Ghadar movement to 9/11 and after. Economic and Political Weekly, 49 (7). pp. 59-73

Austin, D., Choudry, A., D'Souza, R., Thobani, S. (2013) Reflections on Fanon's legacy. Interface: a journal for and about social movements, 5 (1). pp. 128-150

D'Souza, R. (2013) Imperialism and self determination: revisiting the nexus in Lenin. Economic and Political Weekly, 48 (15). pp. 60-69