CAPITALISM
A GHOST STORY

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Armed with their billions, these NGOs have waded into the world, turning potential revolutionaries into salaried activists, funding artists, intellectuals, and filmmakers, gently luring them away from radical confrontation, ushering them in the direction of multiculturalism, gender equity, community development—the discourse couched in the language of identity politics and human rights.

The transformation of the idea of justice into the industry of human rights has been a conceptual coup in which NGOs and foundations have played a crucial part. The narrow focus of human rights enables an atrocity-based analysis in which the larger picture can be blocked out and both parties in a conflict—say for example the Maoists and the Indian government, or the Israeli army and Hamas—can both be admonished as Human Rights Violators. The land grab by mining corporations and the history of the annexation of Palestinian land by the state of Israel then become footnotes with very little bearing on the discourse. This is not to suggest that human rights don't matter. They do, but they are not a good enough prism through which to view or remotely understand the great injustices in the world we live in.

Another conceptual coup has to do with foundations' involvement with the feminist movement. Why do most "official" feminists and women's organizations in India keep a safe distance between themselves and organizations like say the ninety-thousand-member Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sanghatan (Revolutionary Adivasi Women's Association) that is fighting patriarchy in its own communities and displacement by mining corporations in the Dandakaranya forest? Why is it that the dispossession and eviction of

millions of women from land that they owned and worked is not seen as a feminist problem?

The hiving off of the liberal feminist movement from grassroots anti-imperialist and anticapitalist peoples' movements did not begin with the evil designs of foundations. It began with those movements' inability to adapt and accommodate the rapid radicalization of women that took place in the 1960s and '70s. The foundations showed genius in recognizing and moving in to support and fund women's growing impatience with the violence and patriarchy in their traditional societies as well as among even the supposedly progressive leaders of left movements. In a country like India, the schism also ran along the rural-urban divide. Most radical, anticapitalist movements were located in the countryside, where patriarchy continued to rule the lives of women. Urban women activists who joined these movements (like the Naxalite movement) had been influenced and inspired by the Western feminist movement, and their own journeys toward liberation were often at odds with what their male leaders considered to be their duty: To fit in with "the masses." Many women activists were not willing to wait any longer for the "revolution" in order to end the daily oppression and discrimination in their lives, including from their own comrades. They wanted gender equality to be an absolute, urgent, and nonnegotiable part of the revolutionary process and not just a postrevolution promise. Intelligent, angry, and disillusioned women began to move away and look for other means of support and sustenance. As a result, by the late 1980s, around the time when the Indian markets were opened up, the liberal feminist

movement in India had become inordinately NGO-ized. Many of these NGOs have done seminal work on queer rights, domestic violence, AIDS, and the rights of sex workers. But significantly, the liberal feminist movement has not been at the forefront of challenging the New Economic Policies, even though women have been the greatest sufferers. By manipulating the disbursement of the funds, the foundations have largely succeeded in circumscribing the range of what "political" activity should be. The funding briefs of NGOs now prescribe what counts as women's "issues" and what doesn't.

The NGO-ization of the women's movement has also made Western liberal feminism (by virtue of its being the most funded brand) the standard-bearer of what constitutes feminism. The battles, as usual, have been played out on women's bodies, extruding Botox at one end and burkas at the other. (And then there are those who suffer the double whammy, Botox *and* the burka.) When, as happened recently in France, an attempt is made to coerce women out of the burka rather than creating a situation in which a woman can choose what she wishes to do, it's not about liberating her but about unclothing her. It becomes an act of humiliation and cultural imperialism. Coercing a woman out of her burka is as bad as coercing her into one. It's not about the burka. It's about the coercion. Viewing gender in this way, shorn of social, political, and economic context, makes it an issue of identity, a battle of props and costumes. It's what allowed the US government to use Western feminist liberal groups as moral cover when it invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Afghan women were (and are) in

terrible trouble under the Taliban. But dropping daisy cutters on them was not going to solve the problem.

In the NGO universe, which has evolved a strange anodyne language of its own, everything has become a "subject," a separate, professionalized, special-interest issue. Community development, leadership development, human rights, health, education, reproductive rights, AIDS, orphans with AIDS—have all been hermetically sealed into their own silos, each with its own elaborate and precise funding brief. Funding has fragmented solidarity in ways that repression never could.

Poverty, too, like feminism, is often framed as an identity problem. As though the poor had not been created by injustice but are a lost tribe who who just happen to *exist*, and can be rescued in the short term by a system of grievance redressal (administered by NGOs on an individual, person-to-person basis), and whose long-term resurrection will come from Good Governance. Under the regime of Global Corporate Capitalism, it goes without saying.

Indian poverty, after a brief period in the wilderness while India "shone," has made a comeback as an exotic identity in the arts, led from the front by films like *Slumdog Millionaire*. These stories about the poor, their amazing spirit and resilience, have no villains—except the small ones who provide narrative tension and local color. The authors of these works are the contemporary world's equivalent of the early anthropologists, lauded and honored for working "on the ground," for their brave journeys into the unknown. You rarely see the rich being examined in these ways.

Having worked out how to manage governments, political parties, elections, courts, the media, and liberal opinion, the neoliberal establishment faced one more challenge: how to deal with growing unrest, the threat of "peoples' power." How do you domesticate it? How do you turn protesters into pets? How do you vacuum up people's fury and redirect it into blind alleys?

Here too, foundations and their allied organizations have a long and illustrious history. A revealing example is their role in defusing and deradicalizing the Black civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s and the successful transformation of Black Power into Black Capitalism.[55]

The Rockefeller Foundation, in keeping with J. D. Rockefeller's ideals, had worked closely with Martin Luther King Sr. (father of Martin Luther King Jr.). But his influence waned with the rise of the more militant organizations—the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panthers. The Ford and Rockefeller Foundations moved in. In 1970 they donated $15 million to "moderate" Black organizations, giving people, grants, fellowships, scholarships, job-training programs for dropouts, and seed money for Black-owned businesses.[56] Repression, infighting, and the honey trap of funding led to the gradual atrophying of the radical Black organizations.

Martin Luther King Jr. made the forbidden connections between Capitalism, Imperialism, Racism, and the Vietnam War. As a result, after he was assassinated even his memory became toxic, a threat to public order. Foundations and corporations worked hard to remodel his legacy to fit a market-friendly format. The Martin

Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, with an operational grant of $2 million, was set up by, among others, the Ford Motor Company, General Motors, Mobil, Western Electric, Proctor and Gamble, US Steel, and Monsanto. The center maintains the King Library and Archives of the Civil Rights Movement. Among the many programs the King Center runs have been projects that "work closely with the United States Department of Defense, the Armed Forces Chaplains Board and others."[57] It cosponsored the Martin Luther King Jr. Lecture Series called "The Free Enterprise System: An Agent for Nonviolent Social Change."[58]

Amen.

A similar coup was carried out in the antiapartheid struggle in South Africa. In 1978 the Rockefeller Foundation organized a Study Commission on US Policy toward Southern Africa. The report warned of the growing influence of the Soviet Union on the African National Congress (ANC) and said that US strategic and corporate interests (that is, access to South Africa's minerals) would be best served if there were genuine sharing of political power by all races.

The foundations began to support the ANC. The ANC soon turned on the more radical organizations like Steve Biko's Black Consciousness movement and more or less eliminated it. When Nelson Mandela took over as South Africa's first Black president, he was canonized as a living saint, not just because he is a freedom fighter who spent twenty-seven years in prison but also because he deferred completely to the Washington Consensus. Socialism disappeared from the ANC's agenda. South Africa's great "peaceful

transition," so praised and lauded, meant no land reforms, no demands for reparation, no nationalization of South Africa's mines. Instead there was privatization and structural adjustment. Mandela gave South Africa's highest civilian award—the Order of Good Hope—to his old friend and supporter General Suharto, the killer of communists in Indonesia. Today in South Africa, a clutch of Mercedes-driving former radicals and trade unionists rule the country. But that is more than enough to perpetuate the myth of Black liberation.

The rise of Black Power in the United States was an inspirational moment for the rise of a radical, progressive Dalit movement in India, with organizations like the Dalit Panthers mirroring the militant politics of the Black Panthers. But Dalit Power too, in not exactly the same but similar ways, has been fractured and defused and, with plenty of help from right-wing Hindu organizations and the Ford Foundation, is well on its way to transforming into Dalit Capitalism.

"Dalit Inc ready to show business can beat caste," the *Indian Express* reported in December last year. It went on to quote a mentor of the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI): "Getting the prime minister for a Dalit gathering is not difficult in our society. But for Dalit entrepreneurs, taking a photograph with Tata and Godrej over lunch and tea is an aspiration—and proof that they have arrived," he said.[59] Given the situation in modern India, it would be casteist and reactionary to say that Dalit entrepreneurs oughtn't to have a place at the high table. But if this were to be the aspiration, the ideological framework of Dalit politics, it would be a

great pity. And unlikely to help the one million Dalits who still earn a living off manual scavenging—carrying human shit on their heads.

Young Dalit scholars who accept grants from the Ford Foundation cannot be too harshly judged. Who else is offering them an opportunity to climb out of the cesspit of the Indian caste system? The shame as well as a large part of the blame for this turn of events also goes to India's communist movement, whose leaders continue to be predominantly upper caste. For years it has tried to force-fit the idea of caste into Marxist class analysis. It has failed miserably, in theory as well as practice. The rift between the Dalit community and the Left began with a falling out between the visionary Dalit leader Bhimrao Ambedkar and S. A. Dange, trade unionist and founding member of the Communist Party of India. Dr. Ambedkar's disillusionment with the Communist Party began with the textile workers' strike in Mumbai in 1928, when he realized that despite all the rhetoric about working-class solidarity, the party did not find it objectionable that the "untouchables" were kept out of the weaving department (and qualified only for the lower-paid spinning department) because the work involved the use of saliva on the threads, which other castes considered "polluting."

Ambedkar realized that in a society where the Hindu scriptures institutionalize untouchability and inequality, the battle for "untouchables," for social and civic rights, was too urgent to wait for the promised communist revolution. The rift between the Ambedkarites and the Left has come at a great cost to both. It has