

THINKING TOGETHER

DIALOGUES, CONTENTIONS, AND THINKING TOGETHER: POST-COLONIAL EXPERIENCES

Hosted by Ranabir Samaddar (IN) | 5 August 2014 | 13–19:00

With Ranabir Samaddar one of the seminal thinkers of Indian peace studies will be hosting the seventh session of *thinking together*. As the director of the Calcutta Research Group, as an editor and author he has worked extensively on issues of justice and rights in the context of conflicts in South Asia, on migration and refugee studies, the theory and practices of dialogue, nationalism and postcolonial statehood in South Asia. In his session, Ranabir Samaddar will open a space of reflection and discussion around the notions of dialogue, contention, and thinking together in a post-colonial perspective.

Ranabir Samaddar

present 4–8 August 2014



Ranabir Samaddar is the Director of the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata, and belongs to the school of critical thinking. He has worked extensively on issues of justice and rights in the context of conflicts in South Asia. Samaddar's particular researches have spread over a wide area comprising migration and refugee studies, the theory and practices of dialogue, nationalism and postcolonial statehood in South Asia, and new regimes of technological restructuring and labour control. His recent political writings *The Emergence of the Political Subject* (2009) and *The Nation Form* (2012) have signalled a new turn in critical postcolonial thinking and have challenged some of the prevailing accounts of the birth of nationalism and the nation state.

Key publications: *The Biopolitics of Development: Reading Michel Foucault in the Postcolonial Present* (Sandro Mezzadra, Julian Reid and Ranabir Samaddar, eds., 2014); *The Nation Form* (2012); *The Emergence of the Political Subject* (Sage, 2009); *The Materiality of Politics* (Anthem Press, 2007); a three-volume study of Indian nationalism: *Whose Asia Is It Anyway – Nation and The Region in South Asia*, (1996), *The Marginal Nation – Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal* (1999), *A Biography of the Indian Nation, 1947-1997*, (2001).

What is a Dialogue? What is a dialogic situation? – Notes for a discussion

Ranabir Samaddar

I

Dialogic situations are always pregnant with possibilities, realisable, but also possibilities, which will remain non-realisable but whose faint glimpses we get through the veil of conversations. That is true of all situations of dialogue. Hence a dialogic situation has both an identity of itself (like we can say that this is a dialogue for ceasefire, or dialogue for constitutional innovation, or dialogue for restoration of rights or dignity, or sharing of water or other resources, or a dialogue at a local level), but a non-identity to itself also (like a dialogue for peace may become the precursor to war as the Munich negotiations before the Second World War). People may call this a philosophical issue, but this is a grave political matter, because at its heart is the question: What do you intend to do with a dialogic situation, which is there notwithstanding yourself, which is not an act of God, which no monarch has ordered, or no sovereign has ordained, but which is there because people are conversing and getting into relations, or more scientifically speaking, which has arrived because of a conjuncture of circumstances or factors. Dialogic actors are in this sense like “stars which look stationary and connected to seemingly nothing but darkness and self-imagination in a moonless night sky”, but these are to use Benedict Anderson’s words, “actually in powerful, frantic motion, impelled hither and yon by the invisible power of the gravitational fields of which they are ineluctable active parts”. Dialogic situations are therefore embodiments of relational acts, gravitational force. Studying these relations and relational acts is thus studying the gravitational force in politics, a study in “political astronomy”.

The practitioner of dialogic situation is located in a difficult *position*. A dialogic position is one of taking a deliberate and deliberative position to talk, and to engage through talk. It is thus a willful one. It implies that it is faced with other positions such as a war-like one, or monologue, or deadlock. A dialogic position presumes the existence of the other, concedes at least partial legitimacy to the other, and is based on the principle of making an opening through conversational strategies. Though

this can be also singular in character, but basically dialogic position implies plurality, conceding that there is more than one actor, one issue, one way out, and one level. Clearly then dialoguing is an art. It has relation with rhetoric.

Here is a dilemma. The practitioner of dialogic situation is not a spontaneous dialogist meeting his/her interlocutor on way to market. S/he is dialogist by design. S/he is moved by an effort, s/he has an agenda, a programme, and above all s/he is bound by a choice to continue the dialogue. Though this too is an open ended situation, the practitioner by design through his/her design, programme, and aim, may have closed it, though this does not mean that s/he is not flexible or s/he does not want that the dialogue should continue in a flexible manner. Clearly the challenge is: how far can the practitioner become the conversationalist of the everyday situation, retain its plasticity, and yet turn the situation and the art of conversation to the goal of peace and reconciliation?

With the help of studies of four situations mostly from colonial and post-colonial histories, I wish to address some difficult issues related to the theme, namely: How does one put dialogic concepts to practice? What is a dialogic approach? How does one explore its possibility? How does one assess such possibility? And most importantly, what is the critical element that dialogue carries in deliberation?

II

One may ask: How do we differentiate the dialogues engaged in a senate chamber or for that matter in a luxurious parlour away from the street noises of conversations that mark popular politics? Think of an industrial bargaining situation, where the trade union leaders can go into the bosses’ room to negotiate and may even arrive at some agreement; but they are aware that the workers are standing outside, that the rank and file is waiting to hear from them, and a false move may destroy their credibility. Staged dialogues aim at removing reality from the dialogue scene, which is why we need to keep in mind that the dialogic actors are socially constituted beings, they are agents of

collective interests, and while reality pushes them across group divides to dialogue, dialogue requires continuously innovating critical modes of thinking in everyday situations. In that sense dialogism is at times avant-gardism – from everyday conversation to sustained dialogue is the process where the art of sticking to conversational mode is at play. The impediments to dialogue or the impediments inherent in dialogue are severe. Dialogue is “contested conversation”. Dialogue is never without power configuration. There is no dialogic situation without its power matrix. Thus dialogues are contested, conflictive, and open ended in the sense that till the last moment no one is sure of the outcome. In other words they are historically contingent.

Dialogues (their beginnings, failures, and the partial successes) determine or influence the outcome of other situations. At times they change the face of a country permanently. This is one aspect of what I mean by historical contingency. Possibly one task of the students of dialogue can be to lead the dialogists to do “an audit” of history, meaning attempting to gain historical understanding of the reason and the genesis of dialogues. One can also term it as “genealogical understanding of dialogue”. A dialogic regime is like a “truth regime”. A “truth regime” would mean that there is no time cutting, place cutting, location cutting truth principle, but truth being determined contingently, as an outcome of certain discourses and institutional practices, where the power principle is as important as the knowledge principle. Indeed knowledge would contribute to power. Truth is thus always *in relation*... Similarly, a dialogic regime means an order of conversation set by given discourses, institutions, and structures of power. These discourses, institutions, and structures tell you to talk, or not to talk, they tell you how much to talk and the limits you must not cross; they shape your mind, agenda, the public sphere of conversation, to them dialogue is an inclusive strategy to maintain power. They also cause hierarchies of dialogue. Thus we are familiar with summit talks, parliamentary talks, party level talks, dialogues of statesmen, public talks, talks of citizens, interest group meetings, rival army commanders’ meetings, arms control talks, etc. Yet, do they reduce chances of war? I fear not always? They establish a hierarchical order of dialogues, whereby a lot of

domestication takes place, and a regime of dialogues is established whereby “dangerous talks” are banished.

III

Finally: What is “dangerous dialogue”? When the underprivileged demand talks for justice, when victims of war demand talks for peace, when men and women long suffering from human rights abuses demand talks for restoration for dignity, for new constitution, for new ethical principles, then the talks become dangerous. To the rich, powerful, dominant, and hegemonic, it appears then that “they” are ganging up, and that these are not talks but conspiracies. In all these cases, *justice* is the yardstick. What is the aim? What do they want to achieve *vis-à-vis* the rulers, possessors, and the mighty?

Here we have to grasp the significance of dialogic justice. Dialogic justice links justice to dialogue and sees in the process of dialogue the promise of justice. That promise must be by and large met if we want that society stick to dialogic path. Dialogue does not assure maximal justice, but it has to ensure minimal justice. Maximal justice is programmatic, which may differ from actor to actor or context to context. But minimal justice is historically arrived (that is the reason why I have suggested that past histories of failed and successful dialogues in various contexts should be studied. To arrive historically is to arrive through contestation, through bargaining, negotiations, through truth-conflicts and truth games. Dialogues in this sense are the weapons of the weak who demands talks for justice. Thus minimal justice must ensure through dialogues (a) recognition of past injustices, (b) compensation, restoration, and restitution, (c) guarantee that such instances will not recur again and hence joint custodianship of the process of restitution, and finally (d) innovations in methods and institutions so that society and relations can take a new turn.

No democracy then without dialogues; dialogues are incessant. There is no end to it. They make society plebiscitary. As deep and as wide as relations, dialogues are like flight paths of beings, they configure a new topos of relations, existences, and resistances. They indicate how political subjects make moves, how in many cases the political subject emerges through embarking on the

dialogic path. It has been one of the historical tools of making a political society. Dialogues among sections help setting goals, norms, mores, and a unity called the political society, though dialogues refuse to be compliant to this society. Dialogues make and remake it.

IV

We can discuss all these complexities of dialogic acts through analysis of four studies:

- (a) Conversations and Death: Dialogues in the Mahabharata (see „Death and Dialogue“, Chapter One from *Emergence of the Political Subject*, Sage 2010)
- (b) Dialogues in the Time of War: Delhi during the Mutiny of 1857 (see „The Singular Subject“, Chapter Three from *Emergence of the Political Subject*, Sage 2010)
- (c) The Terrorist and the Dialogist: Chronicles from the Nationalist Time (see „The Singular Subject“, Chapter Four from *Emergence of the Political Subject*, Sage 2010)
- (d) A Rebel's Vision: Talks between an Insurgent and the Post-Colonial State (see „A Rebel's Vision“, Chapter Six from *Emergence of the Political Subject*, Sage 2010)