

## ON SOCIAL MEDIA, INDIA'S AADHAAR SYSTEM, CHINA, #METOO AND THE LEFT TODAY

NOAM CHOMSKY INTERVIEWED BY SWAGAT BARUAH

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*Professor Noam Chomsky is a pioneering linguist, philosopher, social critic and political activist. The author of multiple highly cited books and articles, the most recent one being "Yugoslavia: Peace, War, and Dissolution", he currently holds a joint appointment as the Laureate Professor of Linguistics, Agnese Nelms Haury Chair at the University of Arizona and Institute Professor Emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In this conversation with the Journal's managing editor, Swagat Baruah, he discusses his concept of the intellectual, social media with respect to his propaganda model, the #MeToo movement, India's Aadhaar system, his idea of freedom of speech, China's constitutional amendment potentially making Xi Jinping President for life, his thoughts on the prospects of anarchism and the Left today, and his times with the French philosopher, Michel Foucault.*

**You wrote an essay titled 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals' back in 1967. Do you think that, in the age of social media and the internet, this 'responsibility' or even the concept of the 'intellectual' has changed, anyhow?**

Well, the notion of intellectual is a very curious one to start with. The term was not really used in the contemporary sense until the time of the Dreyfus trial (the Dreyfus affair), when the Dreyfusards were called and in fact bitterly condemned as intellectuals because these writers and artists were there to attack the majesty of the State and its institutions. Now, the immortals of the *Académie française* bitterly denounced them for this arrogance and so on. And the term came to be used for a curious collection of people.

For one thing, they have a degree of privilege, so if let's say, there's an office with a physicist who won the Nobel Prize in his working on the latest efforts to find dark matter, but he doesn't express his opinion on other issues. He's not called an intellectual. Now, suppose a janitor who takes care of the physicist's office happens to have a very astute understanding of ideas about international affairs and domestic policy and discusses them when you ask him. But he is still not called an intellectual.

Now, the group of those who fit the category have a degree of privilege and they make use of it too, to articulate opinions and attitudes on issues of general public concern. It's roughly what is called intellectuals. There are various trends and notions, to begin with. Getting back to your question, on their responsibility, I don't think it changes much with the use of social media. The question is whether the content that appears merits the dubious value of being treated as intellectual commentary.

**So, you do make a distinction between scholarly-experts and intellectuals?**

The terms are used differently. A scholarly-expert who is working on the history of Mesopotamia for example, or who is doing research on just who participated in the attack on the Bastille is not considered an intellectual. He's a scholarly-expert. Maybe, the person who is a scholarly-expert also discusses issues of public interest and general concern and in that case he might be considered an intellectual. But it's a strange category. I don't give it any particular credit.

**But don't you think that, something like say technology, which is in abundance today but yet requires a specific set of advanced skills to be attained by people, and the people who have attained this specific set of skills are bound to be a bit more advanced than the rest of the general population, and hence in a better position to engage in intellectual commentary?**

It makes them more advanced in the skill they have mastered. So for example, if I try to fix my automobile engine, I would ruin it but if I take it to a skilled mechanic he can fix it very easily. He has skills that I don't have. If I have to have a heart surgery, I'd prefer to go to somebody who is skilled in the profession and who understands the techniques and so on. If I want to learn about, say, Quantum

Electrodynamics, I'll go the person who has mastered the field and ask him to see if he can explain it to me in terms that I can understand.

Sure, there are all kinds of special skills and abilities. Some of them are weird, personally gifted in ways that enables them to master them. I could never be a car mechanic I'm sure. Some are acquired through work and effort. But this is quite separate from the question of the responsibility of the intellectuals, which is the responsibility of people who have the privilege, the basis, and the resources to interact with the general public on issues that are of a major concern. So they have responsibilities.

**Very recently the UN's fact-finding mission in Myanmar, headed by Marzuki Darusman, declared that social media had "substantively contributed to the level of acrimony, dissention and conflict" in Myanmar. Now, in your 2015 interview with Byline, you said, "I don't look at Twitter because it doesn't tell me anything."**

**However, a recent research that came out in August 2017 by the Pew Research Centre found that around 67% of Americans use social media for news, and this number is most probably increasing all around the world, as we speak. This just goes on to prove that people are increasingly relying on social media for news. What is your take on that, with regard to your propaganda model?**

Well, first of all, as for the comment that I don't use Twitter continues to be true and for the same reasons. I don't find anything of interest there. It's a way to shoot off your mouth and see words on some topic.

Social media has no real impact on the propaganda model. The propaganda model was a study of the major institutions that provide the fundamental sources of news and information on which the general public relies.

The news that appears on social media, let's say on Facebook, is drawn from the major media. They don't have the investigative reporters on the field looking into what's happening in Myanmar for example. The fact remains that the basic source of news, information, opinion and analysis is still the major media. The propaganda model simply studies their structure. It says what is the nature of these

institutions, what is the audience to which they sell their product, the viewers and readers, what is their relations with other power systems like the government and from this network of interposed institutional social arrangements, we tried to deduce some conclusions about what we expect the content of the media to be.

That's the model. Then comes the investigation and the critical study seeking to determine whether in fact the expectations that arrive from the analysis of institutional structures accounts for what we actually find in the media. In fact, our book, 'Manufacturing Consent', is mostly case studies.

**But don't you see a deeper centralisation of the power of information towards Facebook or social media?**

I think that the centralisation of access to information through the few major corporations that by now virtually monopolize information transmission, like Facebook, Google, Amazon, is extremely dangerous.

**One of the most positive social and impactful movements of 2017 was the #MeToo movement. It has begun a sudden revival in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Feminist movement and it has had profound effects on societies worldwide. What do you think of it?**

I think it grows out of a real and serious and deep problem of social pathology. It has exposed it and brought it to attention, brought to public attention many explicit and particular cases and so on. But I think there is a danger. The danger is confusing allegation with demonstrated action. We have to be careful to ensure that allegations have to be verified before they are used to undermine individuals and their actions and their status. So as in any such effort at uncovering improper, inappropriate and sometimes criminal activities, there always has to be a background of recognition that there's a difference between allegation and demonstration.

**Do you see this movement as rattling power relations in institutions across the world, at least between the two genders?**

I think it has led to a significant and a much belated rethinking of power relations. And that's very healthy towards recalibrating and re-establishing them on different terms. So that can be a very healthy development.

**Recently, in a widely hailed judgement of the Supreme Court of India, the Court unanimously declared that the right to privacy is a fundamental right. On the other hand, Indians are mandatorily subject to a 12-digit unique identity number based on their biometric and demographic data, called the Aadhaar number, which also makes up the world's largest biometric ID system. The Aadhaar was brought out by an executive order and without any legislative backing, back in 2009 and it was in order to bring the citizens of India under one big database system and to link to it the essential services that one requires in everyday life.**

**There have been many theories and in fact a real concern about how the Indian government can, through this big data collection, become a sort of an Orwellian surveillance system. What are your thoughts on such systems, such as Aadhaar, which have been effected under the garb of constitutionality and democratic requirements?**

One could certainly see how such a system could be abused in totally unacceptable ways.

There should be safeguards against that. You can see some kinds of utilities in such a system that would actually help citizens in their ordinary lives and you could also see dangers in the hands of an authoritarian system that would misuse it. So if any such system is instituted and it should be done – it must be done – with democratic public support and it would have to be accompanied by safeguards and structures that prevent the kind of abuse easily imaginable.

**But this has already led to several abuses, and a highly porous system. People have even lost lives because they couldn't merely present their Aadhaar card when they needed critical treatment. And what is really interesting to note is how this was brought out by an executive order and not by legislation, which was in the case of other successful but not completely similar systems such as the United States' Social Security Number. Aadhaar verifies an individual's identity. Connecting one's basic utility requirements to the card makes one's existence dependent upon it.**

Well, abstractly, one cannot comment on social security or any other identification system. One has to ask, did it arise through democratic participation or public discussion, the kinds of reflections and discourse that would lead to a legitimate democratic decision or did it come about simply by an executive order. That's one question.

Second, if the latter, we already have a significant element of illegitimacy. If the former, it might be legitimate. So, Social Security in the United States has its public uses and benefits and the Social Security Number is beneficial in many ways.

Then comes the question of how it's used. Whether in an abusive way to control people or is it used to facilitate people's everyday lives, to improve things they can do, to make things easier for them and more convenient and so on. So those are the two questions that have to be raised. In the case of the Indian system, which I haven't investigated, but by what you describe, seems abusive in both respects, both in how it was instituted and how it is used.

**You said in the same 2015 interview with Byline, clarifying on your idea of freedom of speech and your stance against prior restraint, that even if someone were to glorify the sending of the Jews to the gas chambers in an advertisement in the Times Square, you'd be against it, but you'd also not want the State to police it. Is this idea of yours restricted to the United States or is this your general stance on the idea of freedom of speech, because, in a religiously and culturally volatile country such as India, such statements could lead to riots and bloodshed.**

There is no right that I know of that is absolute. There are always conditions and constraints, elements of circumstance that enter into any human action. So there are basic rights which are guidelines for behaviour, action, attitudes and so on. But they always have to be adjusted invariably in human affairs to existing circumstances.

So for example, I believe there are constraints on freedom of speech. For example, the Supreme Court of the United States in 1969 reached a pretty reasonable standard on freedom of speech in the *Brandenburg v. Ohio* case, saying that speech should be free up to a participation in an imminent criminal act. So if you and I walk into a grocery store and I'm holding a gun and you say "shoot", well, that's not protected speech. Now that doesn't give a specific and explicit criterion for every case in any means.

Nor does it mean that you should be permitted to put up a huge ad over Times Square saying that “kill the Jews”. I don’t think that would be permitted.

Does it permit you to stand in Times Square and hand out leaflets to people saying “kill the Jews”, yes, I think it does. I think that should be permissible. We have to make judgements and the judgements do have to take into account the nature of the society, clearly.

**Taking this onwards to the idea of dissent with regard to social media. You’ve always argued that dissent will be tolerated, but within the bounds of a narrowly defined “mainstream” discourse, which is policed by the gatekeepers such as newspapers, TV etc. How is dissent contained or tolerated in the age of social media?**

Social Media are basically not regulated. There are efforts on the part of Facebook and Google to censor out speech and material they consider inappropriate. I’ve entirely not looked into the details of how they do it but it’s something that is understandable. But we have to, again, as always be very cautious about abuse of fundamental rights.

There’s plenty of control of speech. I’ve been subjected to it myself. To give you one example, the book that you mentioned about the propaganda model, ‘Manufacturing Consent’, was written jointly with my late colleague and friend, Edward Herman. The first book we wrote was back around in 1973. We wrote a small book called ‘Counter-Revolutionary Violence’. It was published by a small, successful publisher which was doing quite well and it published 20,000 copies of it. The publisher, like many small businesses was owned ultimately by a major conglomerate, The Warner Brothers, now Time Warner. One of the top executives of the conglomerates saw the ads for the book and didn’t like them. He asked to see the book itself and then ordered the publisher to withdraw publication.

They were unwilling to do that. There were various negotiations. Finally, the executive put the entire publisher out of business and the publisher’s stock. Now, is that a violation of freedom of speech? Well, not by United States’ standards. That’s why I brought it to the attention of many advocates of free speech, who wouldn’t mention institutions and people. Their conclusion was that this was not a violation of freedom of speech because it was not a case of government censorship, it was just a corporate censorship. Destroying a publisher, destroying all its stock because they don’t like one book, that it is distributing. Okay, I technically agree. I don’t think that the executive should have been put in

jail or punished. But it is an extreme example, not by any means a normal example. But an extreme example of how dissenting opinion can be blocked and there are many constantly, and many more mild examples.

**Last year, and in continuation, in this year, there were and have been multiple instances of toppling of statues across America. Most famously, the statue of General Robert E. Lee was toppled in North Carolina. There were also such instances recently in India. To reform a society we must first reform culture, as W.E.B. Du Bois used to say. We can't really encourage a statue of Robert E. Lee in a place where we're at the same time trying to attain equality for the blacks. Is this historical revisionism, vandalism or cultural reformation? What do you see this as?**

Well again, you have to look and ask how exactly it is done and when. I would not like to see a statue of Hitler built in a Jewish community in New York for example. I think that could be removed and put somewhere else. Same is true of Robert E. Lee, who was a symbol of some of the worst and clear crimes in modern history. The American system of slavery was the most vicious system of slavery ever known. It was a hideous and monstrous institution of torture, degradation, the murder and the tearing apart of families. The whole history is utterly beyond obscenity. It is also the basis for the economic development of the United States and England.

Now to have someone who represented the defence of that system in a public place is pretty upsetting. My feeling is that statue may not be defaced but it should be removed to the Museum of Slavery, where the atrocities are opened up and discussed and debated and presented, like the Museum at Auschwitz where they describe what happened.

**China's recent constitutional amendment potentially making Xi Jinping the President for life sends out a very strong message for itself. With allegations of neo-colonialism in Africa and in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, it comes to one's notice that China has come to achieve, or would have achieved the superpower status in a very unique manner, i.e. without violence, in distinction to all former superpowers, more currently including the United States. What are your thoughts on this, and also on the recent constitutional amendment?**



The constitutional amendment is another dangerous and unfortunate step towards autocracy and repression in China. It has actually been accompanied by many acts of harsh, brutal repression. All of this should be censured. As for China's overseas activities, in so far as they involve exploitation, destruction of resources, suppression of people's rights, violence, then of course, they should be condemned.

But the fact that the United States and England used extreme violence in gaining their superpower status, of course, does not justify anyone else doing it. By and large, China's international interactions to a large extent have been commercial rather than forceful. But that's not hundred percent true and if those bounds are crossed, then again it should be condemned and prevented. But China is way behind the West in this respect – in the respect of using violence and force to gain power over large parts of the world, at the moment.

**Steven Bannon recently, while speaking to the French National Front asked the far right to embrace racism and xenophobia and to wear those tags as a “badge of honour”. Populist leaders in the West are tapping into the xenophobia, even aggravating it, citing the refugee influx into their countries, but these refugees are from the countries which are being bombed by the West as we speak. Where do you see the far right and its power in light of the huge refugee crisis in Europe and the immigrant crisis in America?**

The reaction to what's called the 'refugee crisis' is in fact a moral crisis in the West. It includes Europe and the United States. Now there are desperate people who deserve care, sympathy, and acceptance. And this is quite apart from the fact that the West has quite often played a major role in creating their plight. It adds an extra layer of responsibility. But the reaction has been extremely ugly and has brought out some of the ugliest features of human nature. The response to the refugees, that's true in the United States and it's true in Europe.

So when thousands of people are dying in the Mediterranean, fleeing Europe often through Libya, these people should be allowed in the rich countries of the West. The United States has ample resources to care for them properly, to ensure that they have reasonable lives until such time that they wish to return to their homes, as most of them do, until it can absorb them back. There's not just ample resources for that, it would be even beneficial to the countries that accept the refugees. Instead, what has happened is that this fight of these miserable people has brought forth extremely ugly and

disgraceful reactions, the kind that you mention, some much worse. And that's a moral problem, a cultural problem in the West that should be addressed. That is the basic crisis of the refugees. As Pope John Paul II put it, it's not the refugees in the crisis it's our reaction to it.

**What does your coherent understanding of the subject of Anarchism tell you about the prospects of Anarchism or Anarcho-Syndicalism which is your specific school of thought, in today's globalized world?**

Well, I regard anarchism as basically a kind of tendency in human affairs, which is based on scepticism concerning the notion of authority and domination. It is based on the fundamental assumption that any form of domination and hierarchy, any structure, any human social structure in which some give orders and others follow them, some control and others obey, any such structure has to justify its legitimacy. It has a burden of justification, a heavy burden. If it cannot meet that burden, which is usually the case, then it should be dismantled in favour of a freer and just social system. That's the basic principle of anarchism and it applies across the globe, from relations within a family to international affairs and everywhere in between.

So what is the prospect of Anarchism in this sense? Very good, I think. There are many examples. You mentioned to me two movements, one of many which we could mention that is questioning and challenging structures of authority and domination and often doing so successfully. So that's a step towards realising a freer and just society, as like any popular movement, but fundamentally it is a step towards rectifying and overcoming illegitimate structures with domination and authority. So that's a move towards the goal upheld by anarchist principles in a society free from these abusive structures. The prospects, I think, are all around us. They show up everywhere, from inter-personal relations of the kind that are addressed by the #MeToo movement to major changes in the nature of the socio-economic order, like for example, a worker on a worker managed enterprises, which can be the seeds of radical change in the whole nature of various socio-economic systems.

**Capitalism or neo-liberalism today seems really over-empowering over people and social structures, and one of the underlying experiences of capitalism till today has shown how it can again and again reform itself to perpetuate its existence. We're seeing such high spikes in the rate of depression among people especially among young people and teenagers in such**

**capitalist societies. How would you advise the youth to lead a healthy life in today's capitalist society?**

Well, the United States like every other society is remote from being a capitalist society. It's a state capitalist society with large skills with large scale state intervention in the economy and the social life and so on which violates capital principles. State capitalism of the modern variety has taken many forms. So it's the neo-liberal period since roughly 1980s and late 1970s. It's quite different in many respects from the more or less, social democratic period of regulated capitalism that preceded it. These are two different varieties of state capitalism.

The savage capitalism that has come into play in the very recent years is still another phase of state capitalism. As to how students should react today, at least in the United States, I think there are many fruitful and hopeful options available. Let's start with the 2016 Presidential elections. As throughout most of the West, the election reflected the anger and contempt for institutions, fear and recognition of that something is seriously wrong with the basic structure of society and the centrist institutions in fact roughly disappeared in the elections itself, not in the post-election period where they again dominated. But take a look at the elections, very much in the election in Italy and all other elections in Europe. The centrist parties lost out to major groups on the fringe. It was true to a limited extent of the Republican Party. It was true to a great extent for the Democratic Party. It's not all that exceptional for a billionaire with huge financial support and major media support to win a Presidency. Trump did depart from the mainstream Republican establishment but it wasn't that great a departure. What was a spectacular departure was what happened under the Democrats. I mean with the Sanders campaign. This is the first time in American political history that a candidate appears, basically unknown, and used the scare word 'socialist' and had no support from the corporate sector or private power. No media support – he was either ignored or denigrated. But he had huge popular support. He probably would've won the Democratic nomination if it hadn't been for the machinations of the party managers. He might well have gone on to win the elections.

That's a startling change from all of American political history where elections are basically bought. Take a look at how you can predict with almost remarkable precision the vote of the Congress, the Congress person, on four major issues simply by looking at the single factor of campaign funding. That factor alone is an astonishing predictability, in addition to lobbying and all sorts of other effects of private capital. Here's somebody who had none of that and probably would've won the nomination and

maybe even the election if there had been a fair chance. He is now by far the most popular political figure in the country. In a functioning democracy, the person who is the most popular political figure would have a voice. You would see him in the media, see him on televisions, and see him on newspapers. But not here. Now here, that's not violent repression but it's a form of control. The movement itself, however, the popular movement among many young people is functioning at the grassroots, doing all sorts of things. These reflect, coming back to your question, these indicate the kinds of opportunities that are available for the young people to make significant changes in society. By no means, a close system. With all its flaws, the United States still remains a pretty free society.

**So you do see great prospects for the Left in today's age?**

I think there are very great prospects. Same in Europe. So, Yanis Varoufakis' group DiEM 25 has just initiated a transnational list in Europe to run in elections, which is dedicated to opposing and defying the Brussels' autocratic rule in Europe. Policy in Europe is set in a highly undemocratic way.

It's very substantially determined by unelected groups such as the IMF, the European Central Bank and the European Commission, which is unelected. They set the general policy in Europe and others adapt to it. The policies themselves have been highly regressive in many ways. Greece has been the worst victim, but others as well and there's a groundswell of opposition to this which shows up in all kinds of ways, some of them very dangerous and offensive, like the right-wing neo-fascist groups, and some of them, pretty open and progressive.

The Transnational list is an opening to try to combat this in a popular level in a way which will take what has been good and progressive in the European Union and avoid what has been harsh and destructive and to develop something highly constructive and forward looking from it. Well, that's a possible step forward and it isn't the answer to everything in any means but it is an opening that is available, very much as the Sanders campaign is in the United States.

**The Left in India stands decimated after the recent defeat in the elections in Tripura. Now the Left in India is only left in one state and that is Kerala. What are your thoughts on that?**

The Left in India has been strong in Kerala for a long time and it shows that Kerala is quite different from other parts of India in terms of literacy and human rights and women's rights and so on. It stands out.

The Left did have a powerful position in West Bengal and it sacrificed it for many reasons, corruption, and incompetence and so on. But I think it can be rebuilt. Well yes, there have been times when progressive forces were crushed and they came back from the ashes. American history is full of it. Take the Labour movement in the United States. In the 1920s it was virtually destroyed, a large part of it substantially by violence. Woodrow Wilson's red scare was very violent. There was virtually nothing left in the labour movement. In the 1930s, it was reconstituted and rebuilt. It spearheaded the New Deal Welfare State measures that brought the United States to more or less in line with European Social Democracy and it persisted for the first of the post-war period, in the regulated capitalism period, the period of greatest growth in American history and egalitarian growth, sometimes called the 'golden age of capitalism' and actually, state capitalism. Well, that was the zenith and then there has been a counter-attack and the unions are under serious attack and the labour movement has been and will be devastated by Supreme Court decisions that are coming up in the future. But it can reconstitute again. Business classes are constantly engaged in class war dedicated relentlessly towards adapting to circumstances and the general public has to respond as well.

**It is widely rumoured that Michel Foucault was paid in hashish for doing the debate with you on human nature, justice and power back in 1971 and that he and his Parisian friends would jokingly refer to it as the 'Chomsky hash'. James Miller noted so in his book 'The Passion of Michel Foucault'. Are you aware of that?**

Never heard of that particular gossip and there's absolutely nothing true to it, I'm sure. We spent a very pleasant day together, walking through the Dutch countryside in Holland partly because we just wanted to have a chance to talk to each other and partly as an experiment to see how we would make up with me speaking English and him speaking French. He didn't know much English and I don't know much French. Turned out it worked pretty well so we decided to have the discussion in two languages, English and French. But we just spent the time talking. I'm sure there's nothing beyond that.

**What about the Ali G (Sacha Baron Cohen) interview? You were visibly awkward throughout the interview.**

The request for the interview told me that there was a very serious interviewer who wants to spend time with me and made it seem very significant and important. The minute he walked in, I knew something was wrong. And as the interview continued I tried to be polite and it got more and more absurd, in my opinion. Finally I just ended it. You say it was awkward, I thought it was ridiculous. I don't have time to waste on things like that, I have a busy life.