

# Colonisers and colonized

Why do the formerly colonized become colonizers?

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Adivasis (Indigenous people) in Korchi, central India - struggling to protect their territory against mining and state-dominated decision-making  
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Kamal Mustafa 'Ataturk' is considered a hero in Turkey, having led the fight to free the nation from occupation by the Allied Forces after World War 1. But in the Kurdish part of Turkey, he and his successors in Istanbul are considered colonizers, for they have consistently persecuted this and other ethnic communities in this region, occupied their lands, and are currently trying to militarily terrorise them into giving up their fight for autonomy and self-determination.

In Brazil, freed from the bonds of Portugal in the 1820s, governments in the capital Brasilia have for decades viewed the vast Amazon forests as a 'frontier' for colonization. This has peaked under the current president Bolsanaro's regime. In the process, there is not only ecological devastation on an unimaginable scale but also the dispossession and genocide of several Indigenous peoples who inhabit these forests.

In India, *Adivasis* or Indigenous peoples (a term the Indian government refuses to recognize), amounting to about 7% of the country's population, have repeatedly seen their territories annexed for mining, townships, highways, industries, and much else. Its current government, under a prime minister who regularly professes to respect *Adivasis*, other local communities and the environment, has attempted to [even colonise its 'frontier areas'](#) previously left relatively unscathed. The scale is now vastly bigger, but the basic idea began when India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru laid out his government's vision of development.

China, never completely colonized as in the above examples, was nevertheless under various kinds of colonial control by multiple European countries and Japan. Its brutal occupation of Tibet is a textbook case of subjugation; not so well known but equally serious is Beijing's control over the various Indigenous peoples and their territories inhabiting its western regions. Its occupation or extractivist designs for Taiwan, parts of India, and territories of Africa and Latin America, are justified by some leftists using all kinds of contorted arguments, but from the point of view of local communities and the environment, are nothing short of neo-colonisation.

## Neo-colonialism

In all these examples, governments of now independent nation-states are doing what is essentially the same that European colonisers did, albeit in different forms and with seductively different narratives. This neo-colonialism is justified in the name of 'development' and 'bringing people into the mainstream', or to make the nation globally competitive. Actually, come to think of it, the narrative is not that different; when European settlers first set foot on Turtle Island (now known as North America) or in Abya Yala (now known as South America), they brought along missionaries who promised to bring salvation to the 'uncivilised races' living there. The term 'development' (in its economic meaning) was not in vogue then, but if it had been, colonisers would undoubtedly have justified their occupation as necessary for the development of local communities and the regions they lived in.

Additionally, many leaders during the struggles for independence and immediately after gaining freedom, have promised to treat ethnic minorities and Indigenous peoples in special ways, even promising them autonomy. Kemal Mustafa 'Ataturk' offered such a status to the Kurds in return for their participation in the uprising against European occupiers [but withdrew it](#) once he consolidated power. *Adivasis* won important recognition as deserving special treatment and relative self-determination when India's Constitution was framed, but much of this was subsequently sacrificed at the altar of profit-making industrialism.

Lest anyone think that this phenomenon is only in countries of the South, let's not forget the colonization of Indigenous peoples and territories in North America or Australia, themselves once colonized by Europeans. Forcible occupation of many kinds is still prevalent in these countries (as it is with regard to Indigenous peoples in Europe too), despite widespread movements of autonomy or self-determination amongst these people.

In all such cases, independent governments also use various kinds of force and violence to quell dissent. Every week, at least four [defenders of land and environment](#) are killed by or at the behest of or in collusion with the governments of the nation-states they live in when protesting the grabbing of their lands and resources for 'development' or 'security' purposes. Levels of violence may not be as horrific as what was seen in the classic heyday of colonialism, but they are nevertheless unacceptable and unjustified. Or maybe even more so, since they are perpetrated by governments over their own citizens.

So why do those who have been colonized, who should know better than to subject others to similar forms of forcible occupation and subjugation, in turn, colonise their own 'subjects'? Or even other nations and peoples outside of their own territories if they can, for instance, Indian companies (backed by its government) taking over pasture and farmlands in Africa, and the Chinese occupation of or extractivist activities in Latin America and Africa. Do they not understand that, whatever kinds of spin they put on such activities, for indigenous people and other local communities whose lands and livelihoods are snatched away, and for thousands of species of plants and animals whose habitats are destroyed, they are nothing short of colonization? Or do they simply not care?

## What explains this paradox?

I think it is any one or several of the following factors that cause this strange dissonance. Many of the 'rulers' who take over countries that gain independence have been moulded in the image of their former 'masters'; in India, we call this the 'brown sahib' phenomenon, in which white colonialists were simply replaced by those of the same skin colour as the 'natives'. Indeed, the British in India introduced a centralized bureaucracy, chosen from amongst the elite, to rule the masses; astonishingly Independent India continued the same system, and it still prevails 75 years later. Even the political system we inherited is a copy, with some modifications, of the UK's parliamentary system, giving enormous power to those elected in the modern, neo-liberal version of democracy.

To my mind, the most important flaw in this system, replicated worldwide, is that it has never been truly democratic. If, as the origin of the term indicates, democracy is about the 'rule of the people', and not the rule of those elected by the people and those whom the elected appoint as bureaucrats, then we just don't have it almost anywhere in the world. People have never had the chance, or been enabled, to exercise decision-making power in the collectives and communities they live in, and by such exercise, provide for themselves and also hold the state (where it exists) accountable. It is an illusion, masterfully sustained for decades, that people have the ultimate power simply because they can throw one set of politicians out of power and elect another – all that happens is we once again hand over the power that is rightfully ours, hoping that the new set of rulers will do the right thing by us.

When India gained independence from its colonial masters, Mahatma Gandhi warned that true freedom would only come if we achieve *swaraj* (self-determination, self-rule) where every person and community holds power and exercises it with responsibility. Leader of the Dalits, India's most oppressed people (labelled 'outcastes', 'untouchables', and other such derogatory terms), Babasaheb Ambedkar, cautioned that there was no true freedom unless casteism and poverty were removed. In country after country shaking off its colonial shackles, Indigenous peoples and other class or racial or ethnic minorities and marginalized peoples were never really enabled to exercise self-determination; many continued with more or less the same system of subjugation that they had suffered under colonial rule. Gender, class, race, ethnicity, and other forms of inequality and discrimination, some ancient and some new, remained entrenched in the new systems of governance.

To this was added the single-minded pursuit of 'development', defined by the industrializing west in a way that suddenly rendered a couple of billion people 'underdeveloped'. Economic growth was prescribed as a way out of their underdevelopment, and for the last 6-7 decades this has been the reigning God of economic policy in all countries (other than Bhutan). This deity is so powerful, any questioning of it is seen as anti-people, even anti-national heresy. In the era of economic globalization over the last few decades, it has become even more so, as nation-states vie with each other for markets and productive resources. It is no surprise that international treaties on trade and economic exchange have much more teeth, including the possibility of imposing crippling sanctions against non-complying countries, compared to the treaties on the environment or human and labour rights. Internal colonization is justified in the name of becoming globally competitive, or because it aids 'ease of doing business (with institutions like the world bank actively promoting it). Even national laws relating to the environment and human rights are regularly, [openly violated](#) for this purpose.

And then there is the intense militarization (and the capitalist-industrialist complex related to it) that competing nation-states are engaged in. Invoking the 'enemy outside' is a favourite excuse given by many governments for internal colonization, especially in border areas where armies take over huge swathes of land such as on both sides of the India-Pakistan and India-China borders. Inevitably, these would have been lands where communities farmed and grazed their livestock, or used for trade, as also where wildlife once thrived and migrated. With over a million troops deployed, the Kashmir region in the India-Pakistan border area is the world's most heavily militarized; the inability of the two countries to achieve a peaceful resolution to their long-standing disputes, the main sufferers are the colonized communities and ecosystems of this Himalayan region.

## Can the paradox be avoided?

Where people's movements have tried to fundamentally transform the above contexts, by building on systems from the past that have been relatively less centralized and more aligned to the economies of well-being than growth, bringing

in new progressive ideas where appropriate, one does not see a desire to engage in internal or external colonization. The Zapatista and the Kurdish autonomy movements, or struggles for Indigenous People's self-determination, are fighting off colonization by the nation-states they are contained in but do not replace this with their own processes of colonization. This is because they profess and try to practice swaraj-like governance and economies that are oriented to working within ecological limits (with many imperfections, of course). They challenge the structures and relations of capitalism, statism, racism, patriarchy, and anthropocentrism, and try to replace these with relations of equity and justice, interdependence and reciprocity, solidarity and the commons, or being one with and within nature. [Abdullah Öcalan](#) one of the main activist-ideologues of the Kurdish movement, has repeatedly advocated that true freedom will only come if women are freed from patriarchy, people can govern themselves without a centralized state, and ecological principles are followed. I have written previously [about radical transformation initiatives](#) including the [Kurdish freedom movement](#) and will not repeat them here. Suffice it to say that these demonstrate the possibilities of living in a non-colonising way; they show that resistance coupled with alternatives, often conceived of as prefigurative politics, can indeed lead to justice, equity, and sustainability. These are the pathways we need to follow if we are not to succumb to the paradox of the colonized becoming colonisers.

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