

Dilip Gaonkar: **Ethos and Figuration of Demos in Our Times**

What does it mean to view the elections and the electoral process as the Achillean heel of democracy, especially of liberal democracy? There is a growing concern and anxiety among liberal theorists about elections and the electoral process: they are confronted with the political reality that relatively, if not perfectly, free and fair elections have brought authoritarian figures like Orban, Chavez, Erdogan, Modi, Duterte and Bolsonaro to power. With some qualifications, Trump can be added to this list. When they came into power electorally, these figures were not part of an incumbent party or coalition. They acquired the reins of government through a “peaceful transition of power,” another much coveted protocol deemed indispensable for nurturing a healthy democratic tradition and culture since 1800 when the first such transition took place with the election of Thomas Jefferson as the 3rd President of US. Nor have these afore mentioned elections been held in places characterized as “failed states,” “thug states,” and “collapsing societies.” To be sure, there is much corruption, criminality, intimidation and violence, which mars these democracies and makes them ugly. That is not in dispute. But focusing on these features of ugly democracies blinds us to the deeper and irredeemable anxieties that liberals harbor about democracy, or precisely about mass democracy in the age of the people. In this presentation, I will argue that this liberal anxiety revolves around elections, not just around the corruption of elections. Thus, their anxiety about elections goes deeper; it is anxiety about three constitutive features of democracy as such: universal suffrage (as a mark signaling formal political equality), popular sovereignty (as the ultimate source of political authority), and majority rule (as the optimal mechanism for operationalizing democratic governance).