

Dimensions of Indian democracy

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Abstract

The story of India's state formation since independence has included a story of rising influence on the part of the federal states. At independence in 1947, India inherited the British-brokered constitution of 1935. It embodied two possibilities, a centralized authoritarian "vice-regal" state and a decentralized, or federal, parliamentary state. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the "great leader" of Pakistan, chose the former option, in effect acting as the successor to Lord Louis Mountbatten, the British raj's last viceroy and governor-general of India. Jawaharlal Nehru, despite his personal penchant for centralized rationalization, selected the latter course and became the prime minister of a parliamentary government in a federal system.

The present paper attempts to assess the new dimensions of Indian democracy the excluded population and its performance in creating durable and sustainable community assets in the country.

Keywords: democracy, federal system, parliamentary state, rationalization

Introduction

The dominant-party system of the Nehru-Gandhi era that led to the formation of Congress majority governments was replaced after the ninth parliamentary election in 1989 by a regionalized multiparty system and coalition governments. The 1989 elections resulted in India's first hung parliament. V.P. Singh's Janata Party, which held the largest bloc of seats in the 545-member Lok Sabha, became the nucleus of India's first coalition government. It is clear that coalition government based on a region-favoring multiparty system is a mixed blessing. It has made it possible to avoid ethnic cleansing, civil war, and extremist politics by facilitating the country's capacity to live with difference and to support centrist politics. At the same time, however, coalition government has weakened the country's ability to pursue economic liberalization or achieve vigorous economic growth.

The party system transformed.

The transformation of the party system and the rise of coalition government have also opened the way for the president to play a regulatory role. In the era of Congress party majorities, presidents had little to do beyond the pro forma duty of asking Congress's leader to form a government. Since 1989, however, the exercise of presidential discretion has become crucial in determining the make-up of governments. Presidents in turn have leveraged this newfound influence into a bigger regulatory role for their office.

A social revolution

Analysts of developing countries often stress the importance of economic growth for political stability and legitimacy. What they notice less often is the contribution that social mobility can make to political stability and legitimacy. Status as well as income matter for both. In India, the "status

growth" enjoyed by members of the once-reviled lower castes has been rapid, and this seems to have palliated much discontent with the relatively slow pace of economic growth.

Democracy, media and the public sphere

It has already been discussed that media has been regarded as the fourth estate in democracy. Democracy provides the space for alternative ideas to debate and arrive at conclusions for the betterment of society. The publicly agreed norms are weighed over that of actions on the part of economic organizations and political institutions (Barnett, 2004). This is close in essence to the concept of public sphere where rational public debate and discourse is given importance. Individuals can freely discuss issues of common concern (Tsekeris, 2008). Media plays one of the crucial roles behind the formation of public sphere (Panikkar, 2004).

Media and Indian Democracy

In India public service broadcasting was given much importance after independence. It was used as a weapon of social change. AIR (All India Radio) and Doordarshan, the public service broadcasters in the country had the responsibility of providing educational programs apart from information and entertainment. However, it needs to be taken note of that the public service broadcasting system in the country was closely identified with the state. A monopolistic media structure under state control has the threat of becoming the mouthpiece of the ruling elite. The scenario was bound to change with the opening up of Indian economy in a bid to integrate with the global system. It signalled the emergence of a competitive market in the field of media with public service broadcasters getting challenges from private entities. This, however, had the seeds of a new problem of ownership. Internet, a relatively newer entrant in the field of mass media,

has proved to be more democratic than newspaper and television (Coronel, 2003). Internet has provided the opportunity for citizens who are conversant with the medium to express their views about a number of issues. In many cases groups have been formed by likeminded people who discuss and debate over a number of decisions on the part of the government and seek new ideas for way ahead. The power of the internet can be easily judged from the developments in Egypt in recent times. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter were used to garner support against the regime of President Hosni Mubarak (Kuwait Times, 2010).

Democracy and Economic Development

It is often claimed that nondemocratic systems are better at bringing about economic development. This belief sometimes goes by the name of “the Lee hypothesis,” due to its advocacy by Lee Kuan Yew, the leader and former president of Singapore. He is certainly right that some disciplinarian states (such as South Korea, his own Singapore, and postreform China) have had faster rates of economic growth than many less authoritarian ones (including India, Jamaica, and Costa Rica). The “Lee hypothesis,” however, is based on sporadic empiricism, drawing on very selective and limited information, rather than on any general statistical testing over the wide-ranging data that are available. A general relation of this kind cannot be established on the basis of very selective evidence.

Democratic consolidation in India

The evolution of pluralistic democracy in India has been a gradual process shaped by a wide range of internal and external forces. A number may be clearly identified. First, India's liberal democracy draws heavily on the political and social order preceding British rule. Ties of caste, religion and tribe provided an informal division of labour and social hierarchy-and hence an uncodified system of sanctions and regulations-for many centuries before the arrival of 24 the East India Company. These, arguably, contributed to social stability in pre-colonial India. They also provided bases for political mobilisation that have endured after independence. In addition, the political and administrative system in place under Mughal rule was widely co-opted into the system subsequently maintained by the British. One third of India's territory remained, for political and logistical reasons, under princely rule until independence.

Democracy and Social Rights

Perhaps the most startling aspect of the nutrition situation in India is that there is virtually no discussion of it, outside specialised circles. Chronic hunger rarely figures in public debates and electoral politics. To illustrate, consider the coverage of nutrition issues in the mainstream media. The Hindu, one of the finest English-medium dailies, publishes two opinion articles every day on its editorial page. In a recent count of these opinion articles over a period of six months (January to June 2000), it was found that health, nutrition, education, poverty, gender, human rights and related social issues combined accounted for barely 30 out of 300 articles. Among these 300 articles, not one dealt with health or nutrition. As this simple exercise illustrates, the basic needs of

the Indian people count for very little in public debates and democratic politics, and nutrition issues are particularly out of focus.

The rise of the states

In recent years, the 28 states of India's federal system have played a more prominent role in India's public life. Not least has been their contribution to helping India live peacefully with difference. In a world where armed strife has increasingly taken the form of civil war and ethnic cleansing—of the 96 recorded conflicts between 1989 and 1996, only five were between sovereign states—India's federal system has helped to keep cultural and ethnic differences within relatively peaceful bounds.

Democratic consolidation in India

A first key point is therefore that democratic consolidation in India has been a gradual and extended process, during which it was shaped by a wide range of political cultures. In contrast, democratisation (or 're-democratisation') in East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America has often been a more recent and a much more rapid process, lacking the range of cosmopolitan influences evident in the Indian case during the period of transition and consolidation. Comparative studies have suggested that for democracy to be successful as a system of government there is a requirement for popular consent in conditions of free expression and association. If people cannot consent to go on living together, then the only alternative to secession or civil war would appear to be the imposition of some form of authoritarian rule

Conclusion

The freedom of press in the country is a blessing for the people. However, this blessing can go terribly wrong when manipulations set in. The self regulatory mechanism across media organisations need to be strong enough to stop anomalies whenever they occur. Agencies like Press Council of India need to be vigilant to stem the rot. Big media conglomerates are a serious threat. To counter this problem pluralistic media organisations which are financially viable need to be encouraged. Community participation is a goal that the media should strive for in a country like India. It has not been possible to establish a clear causal relationship between democratic good governance and economic development on the basis of this study. While democracy remains an important end in its own right, 50 years of electoral multiparty democracy in India have failed to guarantee good governance in the economic sphere. Clearly rapid economic development has been achieved in some countries without democratic

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