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Democratic Politics: Search for New Discourses

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Democratic theory is today perhaps the most worn hat that has lost its shape. From the Athenian model to the ever-changing models of democratic governance in African Nations, the flexibility of the modeling of democratic politics has sent a wrong signal to the world that it is one of the weakest and volatile of the versions of government though popular.

This negative propaganda has thus paved the way among the intellectuals to think that democracy needs to be reinvented to fulfill all the major promises it made time and again. This is true of democratic politics in India too. Current discourses on democratic governance in India are imbricate in and reflect trends in international development discourses and policy, as well as Western social science.

The 1980s were undoubtedly the high noon of neo-liberalism in the Anglo-American world, the ideology that scripted the end of the welfare state, which had enjoyed a position of pre-eminence for over 40 years.

However, the grand claims about the 'retreat of the state' were yet distant thunder for countries like India, till other events and factors propelled it in something resembling this direction this was also true because India was witnessing the emergence of new social castes and class.

Curiously enough, even in the Western academy, this was the season when it became fashionable to 'bring the state back in'. thus, this period spoke of the inevitability of the state to both developing and developed states alike.

In India, the state did not need to be ushered in either in social theory or in Political practice, because it already enjoyed a unique preponderance in society.

In fact, the challenges faced by the state in the last years of Mrs. Gandhi's regime were mainly internal, with identity-based secessionist movements in many regions, especially the Punjab and Assam, threatening the centralized system of political authority. Infact this movement for separate states also reiterated the inevitability of the state, while the democratic process of Negotiations were respected and kept alive to resolve the issues within the frame work of the constitution. In the years that followed, there were mainly two developments that presented challenges to the state as it had been customarily imagined in independent India. The first was the collapse of the Soviet Union, the exemplar of India's policies of economic development and the model of the omnipotent, centralized state that these entailed. This in fact halted not only the presence of omnipotent state but gave rise to loose federation with decentralized union government. This other words resulted in the emergence of a capitalist state although its philosophy remained altruistic.

The second,disillusionment in this respective the disillusionment with the mixed economy. Especially persistent poverty, and low rates of growth, had already begun to lead to a questioning of the strategy of mixed economic development, while the economic crisis left India with few policy options except to allow the administration of the IMF-authored structural adjustment program to direct it. Although there were many to oppose this controlled regime economy, the democratic process in the country encouraged it within its mandate. This paradox of opposing economic liberalization at a policy level but endorsing it at a democratic level thus firmly rooted the democratic process of legitimizing a policy in India. The policies of economic liberalization, inaugurated in 1991, set in motion a process of economic reforms whose short-term results appear to be economically ambivalent and socially chaotic.

This altogether leads to the weakening of state authority-and with it. Inevitably, some measure of erosion of legitimacy has had both exogenous and endogenous imperatives.

The relentless march of globalisation, mandating economic deregulation and liberalization, represented the exogenous imperative that had contributed heavily to the emasculation of the state, if not always to its retreat. Unfortunately during the same period the emergence of Hindutva posed yet another challenge to democratic process and governance to resolve. The 'Hindutva' called for redefining nationalism that was resisted. Once again the democratic process came in handy to resolve the issue through a mandate.

However, the chief beneficiary of this development has undoubtedly been the domain of the market, which has gained previously unthinkable pre-eminence in the last decade of the twentieth century. Since the imperative is exogenous in origin, the new pre-eminence enjoyed by market forces rebounds especially to the benefit of transnational corporations. The retreat of the national state emphatically seeks to make space for foreign capital, giving rise to resentment among the national bourgeoisie, which now demands a 'level playing- field.'

The endogenous sources of change include, first, the weakening of central power in the Indian federation-federalism by default-following the rationalization of the political and party system, as well as various autonomy movements and separatist demands, as the tendency towards political mobilization along ethnic /caste lines accelerates. All these movements invariably demand democratic politics as a means to achieve their ends. Second, long seen as the natural agency of development, the state comes to be viewed as a perceptible failure, with a corresponding explosion in the activity of non-governmental organization, especially in the field of rural development.

As a result of these trends, the non-governmental sector, as also radical social movements, have become increasingly important agents of social transformation. However, they were able only to provide an alternative to public sphere and not-replace democratic politics or processes as a legitimizing force. Finally, the trend towards de-institutionalization, inaugurated during Mrs. Gandhi's premiership, has been accentuated in sensitiveness in enforcing the rule of law.

This has resulted in institutional decay and the substantial erosion of the legitimacy of political authority. Altogether, a structural, institutional, and political emasculation of the state has reinforced the decline in state capacity, while democratic process and politics was affected. Political parties are as you are aware are considered as the intermediate organizations between the citizen and the state.

They are regarded as having an important place in a democracy, carrying the weight and expectation and aspirations of the citizens. If these institutions are declining in their capacity, then there is undoubtedly a threat to democracy and its process of politics.The foregoing account thus suggests that the broadly defined sphere of the market, on the one hand, and the non-governmental sector, on the other, are the two spheres of activity, which have grown and prospered as the state contemplates its own shrinkage or at least ineffectuality with its supportive structures also becoming weak. It could hardly be a coincidence that it is precisely these two domains of the market and the non-governmental sector-that have been identified as critical ingredients in the alternative conceptualization of governance that have marked international development discourse in the 1990s.

The new definitions of governance that have emerged in recent years therefore include not merely institutions of national government, but also those of local and global governance. They suggest that govern-

ance is a more broad-based process, which encompasses state-society interactions and partnerships, and are therefore hierarchical. The empirical referents of this process-based rather than structure-based, definition of governance thus include a range of organizations, public and private, as well as the complex relationships between them. Institutions of local government such as panchayats, civil society organizations ranging from social movements to non-governmental organizations, and from cooperatives to civic associations and private corporations as well as other market institutions, are all relevant actors in the new lexicon of governance. And in all these institutions democratic politics stayed at its heart. It is, however, worth noting that the fact that the shift from government-speak to governance-speak to has had quite distinct imperatives in the North and the South. In the north, the polices of deregulation and cutbacks in social spending were substantially the result of a fiscal crisis in the advanced capitalist democracies, leading them to search for new strategies of public management to replace the inefficient and gargantuan welfare-state bureaucracies, even if these meant reorganizing the state itself along the lines of private industry.

Privatization and liberalization have meant not a reduction in the role of the state or decrease in democratic political process but rather a shift in the means of intervention from decommodifying bureaucracies to marketeering ones. 'Reinventing Government', for example, the replacement of bureaucracies, which directly produce public services by ones, which closely monitor and supervise contracted out and privatized services, according to compels financial criteria and performance indicators. The imperative of globalisation expresses itself in diverse institutional forms, form the spatially limited economic and political federation, to institutions seeking to inaugurate global regimes in trade and environmental regulation.

Together, these tendencies have effected a truncation of the state's role as the regulator of economic activity, as also its role as a provider of social services, but not arguably its role as the 'orchestration of social consensuses. It is here once again I would like to stress the need for democratic politics.

In India, however, governance necessarily has a wide ambit. The recognition that governance takes place in domains other than that of exclusively formal institutionalized political and administrative structures means that governance concerns encompass a variety of spheres.

These include the political; the economic and civil society in its various manifestations, not excluding uncivil associations, the degree to which the activities in these varied domains reflect the substance of the concern for governance varies. For instance, initiatives in some of these areas such as social movements-are participatory, but in may others they are not. Similarly, while some non-governmental organizations potentially offer more effective delivery even of public goods or services, they are not necessarily accountable or transparent, and several even begin to resemble the state and replicate statetist models.

In this endeavour, one needs to note that these changes though inevitable have no bearing on the democratic political process. The Indian state after independence was considered to be, even exclusively, equipped to perform, the project of development. Though it was clearly not designed as a developmental state in the East Asian sense, Development was a function ascribed to it, and along with the attendant task of reducing poverty, was viewed as the unique provenance of the state. The bureaucracy was the chief instrument for the accomplishment of this task. Though the ability of a bureaucracy schooled in the colonial tradition of governing to perform developmental functions came to be questioned fairly early, the debate on state capacity generally, and on deregister regimes in particular, is of more recent vintage. However, what India did was to include development in the agenda of democratic politics thus enlarging the base of its own political and developmental instruments. Thus the democratic politics has often become the victor, vanquishing those who challenged it. Hence, I see that the changing face of democratic politics, calling for new discourse so as to make 'the politics' transparent, accessible and level playing field ensuring equal opportunity for all.

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