

Comment on

“Identity Needs, Developmental Needs, and Governmental Responses: Reflections on India's Democratic Experience”

Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury

There has been a reconfiguration of the subject-citizen in the recent period. The changing face of nationhood in the neo-liberal age is marked by an explosion of identity politics. This does not only imply ethnic politics, but also the politics of gender, sexuality, age, race, religiosity, and life-style. While most human beings still live as citizens in the so-called nation-states, they tend only to be conditionally and partially citizens of nation-states. Many analysts point out that, the identity struggles, many a time resulting in or emerging from the altercations over resources seem immersed into claims of collective essence, of innate substance and primordial sentiment that nestle within or transect the polity.

Dr. Amit Prakash in his paper entitled “Identity Needs, Developmental Needs, and Governmental Responses: Reflections on India's Democratic Experience” argues that, the peculiar empirical realities of India’s democratic experience over the past half-century or so have challenged many of the conventional wisdoms in social sciences about the relationship between identity, development and the liberal state as the issues of social justice have been one of the main concerns of much of social theory over the last few decades. According to him, during this period, both the scholars and practitioners have been concerned with the creation of mechanisms, institutions and processes to ensure that all citizens, especially those who are marginalized, have an equitable access to the re-distributional processes that the modern liberal states have to offer. And, in this scenario, ‘recognition’ has become a leitmotif of contemporary politics, with a number of theoretical explorations into its meaning, relationship with the idea of redistribution and implications for politics. In this connection, Amit refers to the debate between Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, and shows how theorists, like Axel Honneth, disagree with argument of ‘perspectival dualism’ to propose a ‘normative monoism’ of recognition, and then analyses different forms of the recognition-redistribution debate in his paper with a special emphasis on the case of Jharkhand.

Axel Honneth, the successor of Jürgen Habermas at the Department of Philosophy, University of Frankfurt, has over the last decade written several important essays and a handful of comprehensive books on social philosophy and critical theory. At the centre of his work, one finds a fresh and insightful theory of the good life, and that of human self-realization, elaborated in his *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (1996). Honneth emphasizes on the possibility of realizing one’s needs and desires as a fully autonomous and individual being, that is, the possibility of identity formation, depends on the development of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem.

On his part, Amit points out that, most of these scholars have mainly focused on the claims of recognition on the state and the political process, which in turn structures the debates within political theory. These claims, to Amit, may be classified into three distinct sets: a) claims of special rights from the government, like the special

representation rights, devolution and national self-determination; b) claims of special rights to seek accommodation of a variety of cultural practices, like the exemption rights and cultural rights leading to special status to disadvantaged communities including affirmative action programmes; and c) demands that are not claims to rights but to collective esteem, like the symbolism of flags, names, public holidays, national anthems, public funds for cultural activities, educational curricula, etc. Amit rightly indicates that, while debates continue about the appropriateness of granting the rights being claimed by the articulated ethnic identities, distinction is also made between rights that may be granted to 'national identities' and ethnic identities.

In his well-argued paper, Amit says that, given the plurality of forms that the various articulations of politics of autonomy in India, various contemporary identity articulations may be classified into the following broad categories for the limited purpose of analytical discipline. These are: i) Politics of Socio-cultural ('Tribal') Recognition; ii) Politics of Recognition of a Region; iii) Politics of Recognition by Exclusion; and iv) Politics of Recognition by Representation and Inclusion. Against this backdrop, according to him, the Jharkhandi case reflects a complex relationship between politics of recognition and that of redistribution. He believes that the argument of recognition and redistribution not being sufficient to entirely define the contours of social justice in India is also clear in the case of Jharkhand. The issue of representation has always been a central part of the argument but promises to become more important, according to the author. Perhaps, the most important implication is that any hope of politics of redistribution substituting that of recognition is quite interesting. So, to Amit, while there may be limitations in liberal theory and practice to combine the two, the empirical reality is of the two having been effortlessly combined to levy a claim on representation on the state. There is, therefore, need to find new institutional forms and processes to address this multi-faceted demand.

At this point, his paper brings us to another important question. The changing political economy of the world and the experience of Indian democracy in reconciling these claims seem to indicate that "it is no longer clear that they are capable of addressing the double character of problem of justice in a globalising age." Therefore, the idea of the political and the contests and claims in this realm are integrated into the argument by focusing on the idea of representation. The issue of just processes for enabling participation in the political realm has been a focus of scholars, mainly those concerned with multiculturalism as a frame of state policy as a tool to issues arising from the individual rights-based premises of the liberal state. Amit correctly points out that, the dynamic contours of the debate on politics of identity and politics of development leads to a paradox. While, the governance paradigm is geared towards reduction of the degree of engagement of the state with issues of socio-economic transformation, the character of the liberal-democratic state requires it to engage with issues of rights, equity and justice. So, Amit says that, unless the twin goals of recognition and that of socio-economic change is addressed by the governance process, consent for the right to govern will become increasingly difficult to obtain leading to undermining of political legitimacy of the state leading to what Atul Kohli has referred to as "crisis of governance".

On the basis of his discussion on the contours of politics of redistribution-recognition on Jharkhand, Amit concludes that, the Jharkhandi case reflects a complex relationship between politics of recognition and that of redistribution. The issue has not been simply either one or the other but the peculiarity of the political context

ensures that a complex argument is carried forth. He further draws a conclusion that, the argument of recognition and redistribution is not at all sufficient to completely define the contours of social justice in India. According to him, the issue of representation has always been a central part of the argument and promises to become more important.

However, it appears that, to highlight his point, the author could have delved deeper into the issue of injustice by problematizing, say, the question of land in Jharkhand, which is a part of globalizing India, in order to reveal the changing constellation of political forces. This could have given one a much-required idea about the implications that land privatization and individualization has had on the indigenous people of Jharkhand. Perhaps such a slightly deeper analysis would have made it clearer how the Jharkhandis still suffer the usurpation of their remaining bits of land caught between a somewhat rocky representative democracy and hard market.

Incidentally, the Government of Jharkhand signed 71 MOUs (Actually the government had signed 74 MOUs till early 2010, but three of them were cancelled as the signatories were not interested) with an investment of Rs.3,95,000 crore. A February 2010 newspaper report says that: On the move to establish its steel unit at Kasmar, Arcelor Mittal officials marked the land of the village Jarutand, Lukkaya, Kojram, Bemrotand, Ormo, Hanslata, Vedotand, Purabtand, Charakpakhna, Kushlaguj including others. The company officials, therefore, held a meet for acquisition of land along with villagers and government officials in Ormo village of Kasmar block. More than 2000 villagers participated in the meet and raised their demands for employment and compensation among other things before the company officials. Earlier in June 2009, the villagers in Khuti and Gumla districts agitated over the plans to set up a steel plant by multinational steel giant Arcelor Mittal. Arcelor Mittal had identified 11,000 acres of land overlapping the districts of Khuti and Gumla to set up a 12 million tonne steel plant. Labda Toppo, Pradhan of Banai Toli village alleged: "If the company acquires our land, we would die struggling for it. We will further lose our identity, society, religion and our natural resources," alleged.

In this scenario, the author could further examine how and to what extent neo-liberal economy is shaping the nature of democracy and governance in contemporary India, how mining in the recent times has been a method of taking away minerals and other resources from the state and its people, whether market economy is gradually becoming a self-legitimizing process – a political project in itself. It is known to all of us that, neo-liberal ideas set down a quite new agenda which consistently and assertively privileges the private. Moreover, the new politics involving varieties of strategic resources is also characterized by a politics of territoriality. Therefore, the intricate intertwining of territorial identities and contesting social forces requires an analysis which prioritizes the politics of territoriality.

In this shifting context, the conceptual priorities, lines of classification and meanings that guide us in social sciences may all be characterized by a politics of forgetting. So, a slightly more elaborate analysis by the author of the agency of the indigenous people in Jharkhand could have further enriched the paper. It is widely known that, indigenous peoples' agency and their alliances with wider movements themselves can have, and sometimes have had, transformative effects on the emergence of alternative structures of governance that are not rooted in globalizing development. After all, indigenous lives and life projects have never been pursued in a vacuum.

They can only be pursued amidst other projects. In the context of Jharkhand, it becomes more appropriate to re-examine the relevance of the following observations made by the ILO (107 of 1957):

“Considering that there exist in various independent countries indigenous and other tribal and semi-tribal populations which are not yet integrated into the national community and whose social, economic or cultural situation hinders them from benefiting fully from the rights and advantages enjoyed by other elements of the population . . . [g]overnments shall have the primary responsibility for developing co-ordinated and systematic action for the protection of the populations concerned and their progressive integration into the life of their respective countries [although] recourse to force or coercion as a means of promoting the integration of these populations into the national community shall be excluded.”

It is also important to examine whether state-based partial regulation and democratically negotiated inter-governmentalism could tackle the global inequalities exacerbated by neo-liberalism to a greater extent. After all, neo-liberal economy, in its recent apparently triumphant, all-encompassing global phase, offers no alternatives to laissez-faire. Now, the primary question left to public policy is how to succeed in the 'new' world order. This new order hides its ideological scaffolding in the dictates of economic efficiency and capital growth, in the fetishism of the free market, in the exigencies of science and technology, thereby creating aliens of another type in the erstwhile traditional societies. In this context, perhaps a deeper analysis could trace the genealogy of technologies of the self and technologies of domination, the constitution of the subject and the formation of the state so far as Jharkhand is concerned. This could perhaps also uncover the neo-liberal governmentality to an appreciable extent in this mineral-rich state that is home for some of the poorest people in the country. I strongly believe that, Amit would go beyond Jharkhand and examine the patterns emerging in other parts of India as well and compare other instances of recognition-redistribution paradox, if any, in the country for unearthing the neo-liberal governmentality and to establish his points more convincingly.