

Comment on

'Ideals of Developmental Governance: Imaginations and Manifestos of the Political Parties in India'

Samir Kumar Das

1. Currently, there has been a perceptible shift in studies in democracy and democratic regimes. Conventionally democracy as a regime is believed to be the 'outcome' that is always preceded by a given set of 'preconditions'. The real challenge in a country like India, for this school of thought, is to ensure that these preconditions are present and democracy will automatically establish itself. If the preconditions cannot be established indigenously, then these must be supplied from outside - as Fukuyama too advocates very recently - whether through structural adjustment programme, project lending by external aid agencies and donors or by the global multilateral agencies like World Bank and IMF etc. or by any other means. Viewing democracy as 'experience' - as Ashutosh does - has the great advantage of taking such an understanding beyond what looks like a simplistically linear relation of preconditions to the democratic outcome. The linear relation gets ruptured in many ways. The availability of preconditions, for example, does not necessarily produce democracy as a form of regime - far less as an experience that has to do with such substantive concerns as citizenship, rights and justice. Ashutosh obviously makes his preference for a more experiential definition of democracy.
2. And here he is constantly struck by the 'puzzle' - the critical 'disconnect' between what he calls the 'minimalist form' and the 'substantive concerns of democracy' such as equal citizenship and democratic values as rights, freedom, justice and accountability. While democracy as a form has been 'widened' and 'deepened' in recent years (e.g. the rate of voter turnout amongst the poor and the underprivileged - 'the marginal sections' as he describes them - far outweighs the national average) and is being celebrated thanks to the writings of Yogendra Yadav, Sandeep Shastri, K. C. Suri and others associated with the CSDS-Lokniti project, such widening and deepening have little impact - if at all whatsoever - on the substantive issues of democracy. According to him, widening and deepening of electoral form - instead of reducing has only accentuated -inequality in the Indian society. He traces a certain incompatibility of democracy as a form with democracy as a substance. Although not a new argument, it runs counter to the familiar claim of democratic theory that the democratic form itself is geared to address and the only way to obtain the substantive issues of democracy. Thus, writings on justice steeped in liberal-theoretical tradition including those of Rawls are keen on formulating its formal principles more than anything else. The argument that democracy first and foremost is an experience involves a certain demystification of the optimism hitherto reposed on form and formal principles by liberal-democratic theory. The same optimism marks the 'resurgence hypothesis' of democracy currently put across by the CSDS-Lokniti combine.

3. According to Ashutosh, there is 'growing ideological convergence' or what he often terms as 'political consensus' on the neo-liberal agenda of reforms cutting across the divide between two great alliance-makers in India. As he argues, at one level, 'they continue to endorse neo-liberal policies of market reforms', but at another 'have equally been keen to reassure the electorates that the neo-liberal reforms would necessarily wear a human face and the poor will not be allowed to suffer'.
4. The inter-party consensus is not to be understood as popular consent given in favour of neo-liberal market reforms. Actually it is the other way round. CSDS-Lokniti survey points out that there is either very poor level of awareness of the neo-liberal reforms undertaken since the early 1990s or intensely critical opposition from the marginal sections. The consensus on democratic form, in other words, is pitted against popular opposition and availability of consent on substantive issues. As a result, the public sphere in India looks severely fractured. As he argues: "It is this politically articulate and vociferous class (the 'new' middle class) and not the common masses that follow 'scholarly' debates about politics of reforms in the print as well as electronic media, surf the internet and may be following manifestos".
5. Ashutosh defines democratic form essentially in electoral terms, that is to say, in terms of voting turnouts registered by diverse sections of people, varieties of campaign strategies followed by political parties, their targets of representation, so on and so forth. The problem is that the representative institutions based on the prevailing electoral system have ceased to become the site of neo-liberal policies of market reforms. In recent years, such policies are increasingly being undertaken and determined outside the ambit of representative institutions of the country. Telecom rates, for example, are fixed no longer by Parliament, which is a representative body but by TRAI, which is a body of experts. The irony is that widening and deepening of democracy occur in those institutions whose role in policymaking particularly in the context of market reforms has been severely depleted in recent years.
6. Manifesto is a special genre of writing – a writing that more than making a case either for or against (and in the Indian context, more 'for' than 'against') reforms in fact seeks to shape and influence people's minds. It articulates a discourse and contributes to collective will formation. Manifesto is not so much about what people think - but about what people should think and how to make them think in the way political parties expect them to. Viewed in this sense, a manifesto is what intends to constitute people into one of its effects. Viewed thus, voters are not situated outside the manifestos and therefore can hardly choose between different manifestos. Ashutosh however does not pursue this line of analysis. His focus is rather different. His paper has more to do with the ambivalence that remains implicit in the text of the manifesto and as a corollary to it, differently constituted subjectivities, which he views as 'puzzle'. But how does one's subjectivity get constituted by a manifesto that one does not read?
7. I think the most important part of the Ashutosh's contribution lies in the conceptual distinction that he makes between party manifesto and campaign strategy. I do not know whether there is any estimate available on the percentage of people who cast their votes only after reading the party manifestos. I have a feeling that it will be nowhere near the total voter

- turnout even when one takes only the literate voters into account. Manifesto perhaps does not produce as much political subjectivity as do actual campaign strategies. The paper could have reflected more on campaign strategies widely reported in press and maybe by way of conducting surveys and interviews. But that would have completely deflected the thrust of analysis from party manifestos.
8. The dichotomy between inter-party consent and unavailability of popular consent could have triggered off the proverbial battleground for Indian democracy. Ashutosh considers such 'reassurances' that people would not suffer from the policies of neo-liberal market reforms from political parties as a puzzle. For he thinks that the endorsement of market reforms and the reassurances form two distinct parts to 'please two different kinds of audience'. Some of the contemporary writings that he himself has cited do not consider it as a puzzle at all. For example, Kalyan Sanyal in his *Rethinking Capitalist Development* views the reassurances as an integral part of neo-liberal policies of market reforms.
 9. He considers it as 'political duplicity'. Political duplicity is a function of the politicians' ability to 'convince' (or shall we say dupe) the electorate. But the role that manifesto plays in shaping people's mind in a country like India, as Ashutosh surely agrees, is limited. If this is so, I wonder what could be the other means through which the political class is able to 'convince' the electorate – particularly the poor and the marginalized. The verb 'to convince' obviously refers to discursive means. I think, Ashutosh here underplays – if not seriously discounts – the role force, coercion and sheer violence play in Indian elections and how people are forced to participate in them. Besides there are other factors. Elections come once in a while in the life of a poor woman who for once feels her importance and enjoys it like a carnival. I have elsewhere shown how processes of eliciting and providing consent through elections in India are implicated in the role such non-discursive processes play in them. 'Passive Revolution', as Kaviraj too argues, while elaborating the Gramscian concept in the Indian context is about such non-discursive forms of governance when governance through discourse becomes impossible.
 10. If this is so, then the 'assurance' given by party manifestos that the poor and the marginalized would not suffer will be of little consequence. I think, more than the manifesto real-life campaign strategies play a significant role in combining their interests with those of local and global capital – if at all such combinations and accommodations are effected by the political class. I suggest on the other hand that never before in Indian's post-Independence history has the hiatus between the ruling coalition and the poor and the marginal has been so acute as it is now in the age of globalization. The stronghold of hitherto established hegemony and the societal collation of classes across the board have shown signs of crack and it is sought to be mitigated in mainly though not exclusively through violent means. Partha Chatterjee in the recent reappraisal of his concept of 'political society' is no longer interested in interpreting their relationship solely in terms of what he earlier described as 'strategic negotiations' and 'compromise' but also in terms of force, coercion and violence that the state deploys against them. I think, it is difficult to sustain the thesis of 'Passive Revolution' and 'hegemony' in the present-day Indian context beyond a point.

11. The paper reflects in detail on the changing nature of entrepreneurial class, middle class and the political class. His thesis that a new political class has emerged in India cutting across party lines thanks to political convergence underlined above deserves particular attention. The dynamics of these three classes and their changing chemistry within the ruling coalition has generated a rich and growing body of literature. But I do not think, their implications for the changing nature of Indian politics have been fully explored.
12. I thank Ashutosh for flagging certain issues that compel us to revisit democratic theory particularly its dominant liberal variety.