

Comment on

## **"Governing Rural India"**

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This paper presents an interesting analysis of how rules of governance are set up in order to reconcile two opposing forces of political democracy (and equal voting rights) and market economy (and its associated inequalities), that uneasily and unhappily coexist in rural India. It provides a sophisticated, historically grounded, analysis of 'the process of evolution of the rules of governance with respect to rural India'.

The conceptual prism used by Professor Khasnobis throughout the paper is that of Gramsci's idea of hegemony and the 'equilibrium of compromise' in particular. He contends that the rules of governance with respect to rural, predominantly peasant, India are framed keeping the reality of parliamentary system in mind, whereby contradictions of political equality and economic inequality are contained in a variety of ways that combine force with consent. The resultant equilibrium, fragile as it may be, constitutes the 'basis of a hegemonistic rule in a parliamentary regime'.

The author takes us through the various shifts and turns in the style of governance in the countryside, starting from the Nehruvian era, through the heydays of the Congress System, through the period of its eventual decline, to the more recent political climate dominated by neo-liberal thinking and practice. Interestingly, rules of rural governance were not based on consent of the rural masses or on 'the agreement of the majority' in the early Nehruvian period. On the contrary it was the landed gentry, with control over various non-state social organizations, which governed the countryside by coercive means instead of state institutions. In fact, the universal adult franchise notwithstanding, democratic institutions did not quite take root in the then hostile climate of elite resistance. However, over time the power of the landed gentry eroded and the political importance of ordinary people in a 'ballot box' democracy improved and the institutions of parliamentary democracy started becoming relatively vibrant in the rural political setting. And with the growing importance of democratic institutions there was a growing need to address and even accommodate 'the interests of groups over which hegemony is to be exercised'. During Indira Gandhi's poverty-alleviation eon, the regime of governance did not exclude the poor yet functioned under the hegemony of the ruling classes. The interests of the big bourgeoisie and the big landed classes were made secure under the aegis of the Indian state which left the economic relations more or less untouched and the basic issue of land reforms unaddressed.

These contradictory strategies of governance somehow 'squared the circle', the author suggest, mainly due to a number of livelihood and relief programmes that were introduced in the countryside. There were surely occasional cracks that developed in the fragile structure of governance. Still institutions of democracy started functioning on the basis of consent in rural India. At once the bias in favour of dominant classes continued.

While we are in general agreement with the main arguments presented in the paper, we raise the following issues for the author's consideration.

First, although Professor Khasnobis indicates that 'the economic basis of exercising the rule by consent was fragile', especially due to widespread poverty and unemployment in the countryside, and that rules of rural governance were not (and in fact are not at present) perfect, nevertheless he suggests that over time these rules of governance have been perfected. To put it differently, it is as though the machinery of governance has increasingly become more efficient in the countryside. However, in large parts of rural India one observes governmental under-activity (and not hyperactivity), in particular in the social sector, as the author himself indicates, when he compares the social sector record of Kerala with that in the rest of the country, so much so that it is almost a case of shadow governance. In many of these areas minimum conditions of decent living are in short supply, as also modicum of governance.

Second, the notion of 'equilibrium of compromise' that Professor Khasnobis skillfully applies to the context of rural India suggests the construction of a social order which is far from benign or neutral. Is it then an order of injustice? Would counter-hegemony on the part of the assertive working classes, if realized, enhance justice? Intriguingly, however, the paper implies that the justice talk is some kind of a stratagem to protect the economic interests of the dominant classes on the one hand, while manufacturing popular consent on the other. This point needs further elaboration.

Third, the entire discourse on governance in the paper remains largely silent about the governed. How do they 'see' the machinery of governance? There is a body of literature focusing on the ambivalent attitudes of the governed masses that on the one hand make a claim on governmental care but on the other hand are critical of its disciplining techniques. In the paper, their voice, agency, assertion and counter-practice, if not counter-hegemony, remain under-recorded and even unaddressed.

Fourth, surely the author alludes to the possibility of political mobilization of the working classes that could challenge the legitimacy of the existing order and 'undermine the hegemony of the ruling bourgeois and landed classes' and even could develop into a counter-hegemony. But the entity of class, and its solidarity and agentic role have been given absolute primacy in the paper, to the relative neglect of other solidarities of caste and community for example, and of broader social and grassroots movements that are creating democratic stirrings in different parts of the country in recent times. In the author's words, class solidarity and assertion apparently gets 'blurred by "caste", "region" or "justice"' (p18)!

Fifth, one of the main arguments in the paper swirls around the land question, land being an important asset in the countryside. The author forcefully argues that in most parts of rural India (except in Kerala and West Bengal) the elitist bias of economic relations has been left untouched, since in these areas the land question has not been addressed; or more precisely, land redistribution has not happened. It would be important to explore further about how the land question in recent times has developed into a larger issue of the politics of space and displacement. The land grab/land seizure, that the paper alludes to, is a reality

in West Bengal too – the state that no doubt launched a land reforms programme in the past. The new manifestations of the land question and the complexities surrounding these issues need urgent scrutiny.

Sixth, the author holds that since important political and economic decisions are increasingly being driven out of the space of party politics, political competition would become more consensual. However, consensus is built, in the author's own argument, in the democratic space. So if that space itself gets shrunk and eroded, one could argue that there would be more conflict now between the raw market forces, un-tempered by democratic checks, and the forces of resistance that displaced and disenfranchised people can gather on the other.

Finally, we wish to make a general point about the author's use of the Gramscian notion of hegemony to explain how rural India has been and is being governed. While we certainly agree with the overall drift of the argument that the power and control of the dominant group is legitimized through various governance techniques and strategies, we would hesitate to take it to be absolute power. In other words, there could be positive and negative side of power. That is to say, rules of governance entail contradictions that are not easily contained through manufacturing consent. There is a real possibility of power countered by counter-power. We would like to guard against essentializing the notion of hegemony and making it a neat, catch-all, analytical category to explain fully the rural reality, which is rather messy and dynamic. We sometimes tend to accept the hegemony of the idea of hegemony and end up having only discursive politics rather than politics of action and counter-practice.