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

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The peculiar empirical realities of India's democratic experience over the past half-century have challenged many of the conventional wisdom in social sciences about the relationship between identity, development and the liberal state. While the conventional argument hoped that with increasing modernisation and communication, more particularistic identities would eventually be eroded or would be submerged into national identities; in reality, many identities seek economic and political equality by retaining their socio-cultural distinctiveness, instead of abandoning them.[1]

In fact, in the Indian case, the two quests – that of identity recognition and that of socio-economic change – have been inextricably intertwined in the political process. One cannot be seen to be displacing the other – perhaps, even to a limited extent. It is this complex dynamics of the politics of identity and development that seems to anchor much of India's democratic experience. It is also here that issues of public authority and legitimacy of the political face serious challenges.

The Governance Paradigm: New Directions to Resolving Tensions between Identity and Development?

Contemporary liberal state is facing a peculiar paradox, which creates a fundamental challenge to its continued legitimacy. These challenges both, structure the ability of the political and public authority to deal with challenges of development and identity as well as stretch the basic premises of the liberal state; underlining the a need to re-invent the terms of discourse of the political. This dynamic linkage will inform the basic argument of the proposed study.

The paradox that the liberal state faces is that the concept of governance, interpreted in the broad frame of the political and policy environment of the 1990s, has been used to denote "a baseline agreement that governance refers to the development of governing styles in which boundaries between public and private sectors have become blurred".[2] Consequently, the term is often used to "provide the acceptable face of spending cuts", and has become "a code for less government" but more substantively, "involves recognition of the limit of government".[3] Governance therefore is seen as "a reference point" for challenging "many of the assumptions of traditional public administration".

Stoker offers five propositions as central anchors of governance theory: Governance refers to a set of institutions and actors drawn from but also beyond government; it identifies the blurring of boundaries and responsibilities for tacking social and economic issues; identifies the power dependence involved in relationships between institutions involved in collective action; stresses the centrality of autonomous self-governing networks of actors; and finally, recognises the capacity of collective action that does not rest on the power of government to command or use its authority but sees government only in a steering and guiding role.[4]

The central issue in the debate on governance remains about organising public affairs in such a way that is most democratic and which encourages economic growth. Besides, concern is also focussed on finding the correct institutional mix for such an objective. Further, a significant strand of the literature is also devoted to the issue of democracy and continues the modernisation era debates of the relationship between democracy and socio-economic change. Last, but perhaps most importantly, the conception of the state as a facilitating mechanism versus a structure mediating and upholding citizens rights is interrogated. All these debates are conducted in a context of pluralisation of actors as well as levels of governance, which leads to significant impact on the conceptualisation of liberal rights and a democratic state.

Legitimacy, Democracy and Governance

The essential feature of liberal democracies have been described in various ways – from a focus on participation to rights, from a limited state to the supremacy of the rule of law and many more. While none of these central features of liberal democracies can be quarrelled with, it is also important to underline that the idea of equity and justice has come to acquire a central place in the meaning and features of the liberal state – whether through conceptual redefinition or through cardinal political practice. This centrality of equity and justice issues has thrown up the politics of presence and recognition as well as that of development.

It is in this context that the proposed study will analyse the dynamic contours of the debate on politics of identity and politics of development. Here the proposed study must engage with the paradox that was mentioned at the beginning. While on the one hand, the governance paradigm is geared towards reduction of the degree of engagement of the state with issues of socio-economic transformation, on the other hand, the character of the liberal-democratic state requires it to engage with issues of rights, equity and justice. This leads to the fundamental paradox of the modern state: how is a smaller, less engaged state a more legitimised state?

Liberal democratic states, no matter what the policy compulsion, cannot ignore this issue on account of the fact that "legitimacy is the recognition of the right to govern … To define legitimacy as the right to govern assumes that consent play a major role therein"[5]. This consent is ascertained in electoral contests but is manufactured via the complex process of engagement between the state and various socio-cultural identities. It is this process of manufacturing of 'consent' – in other words generation and sustenance of legitimacy – that is the objective of the study.

Political legitimacy can be seen to be comprising of three components: the normative discursive frame; the process of engagement between the state and socio-political groups; and, outcomes. Normative legitimacy deals with the ways in which the issues of equity and justice are reconciled by the state in its political discourse while the process component focuses on the political process through which contested terms of engagement are negotiated and reconciled. Both these component of legitimacy are linked to state capacity to deliver on the expectations of various socio-political groups without which the first two components become difficult to sustain.

The proposed study will therefore use legitimacy and state capacity as twin anchors for the analysis of two broad threads of Indian politics – politics of identity and that of development. The central argument therefore is 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 Kohli has eloquent called "crisis of governance".

Central Argument of the Proposed Study

In light of the brief discussion above, the main argument that the study will interrogate is as follows:

While the governance frame offers analytical ability to focus on a web of relationships that structure the legitimacy and capacity of the state, the crucial factor of equity and justice needs to be factored into the frame to ensure continued relevance of the liberal state. This concern is also underlined by the demands levied on the liberal states to deliver *both*, development outcomes as well as identity recognition. If the political process and the state are unable to find a procedural balance between the two, legitimacy and state capacity is severely compromised leading to threats to the liberal order.

Three-pronged Foci of Study

Over the past half-century, identity politics in India has acquired a variety of forms and expressions, each levying a different kind of demand on the state and the political process.

While there is something to be said in favour of the peculiarity of each such articulation, almost all identity articulations carry within themselves a strong linkage with the politics of development. Further, it must also be noted at the outset that none of there strands of identity articulation are completely exclusive and may overlap significantly, especially in areas structured by the politics of development.

Various contemporary identity articulations may be classified into the following:

(a) Politics of Socio-cultural ('Tribal') Identity

Arguably, the strongest linkage that can be established between politics of identity and that of development lies in the realm of various tribal/ *adivasi* communities in India. There is a wide-variety of articulation of tribal identity in India; ranging from those in the Northeastern States to those in Central India (Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh & Orissa) to those in Gujarat and Maharashtra, as also to those in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka). There is very little similarity between the dynamics of identity articulation between these tribal social groups but their contest for resources with the State take similar forms. Much of this contest is mediated through the politics of development, the latter also forming the basis of a language of dialogic engagement between the State and the identity concerned.

(b) Politics of Regional Identity

The politics of regional identity also takes varied forms across the country. Sometimes, but not always, being mediated by the tribal, socio-communal or other forms of societal identity, the issue of regional identity is often seen as a 'more secular' form of identity articulation by the state. Much of regional identity politics (for instance, that of Uttaranchal, Orissa, Himachal Pradesh and lately, Gujarat and Bihar) takes a strong language of politics of development and seeks to secure a larger share in public resources controlled or structured by the state.

(c) Politics of Socio-communal identity

Arguably, these identities premised often on socio-religious factors, are seen to be the greatest threat of the 'nation-building' process and have also, paradoxically, been one of the most important factors in structuring the national political process. Such identities, by creating a discursive device of a social community (e.g. Hindutva), create a politics of exclusion for all other social groups. Interestingly, the context to these identities is structured by the state not in terms of discursive inconsistency of the claims of these identities but in terms of the developmental-deficits for rest of the social space. For instance, the exclusion (and persecution) of Muslims from the political discourse of Hindutva is sought to be addressed by the state not in terms of the constitutional ideational facets such as the rule of law but though 'developmental' focus on the socio-economic backwardness of the Muslims. The context between the politics of identity and politics of development continues.

Further, this form of politics of identity, that requires the mediation of politics of development for a dialogic space with the state, it the recent articulation of caste politics in many north Indian states, most notably Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana and Rajasthan. While almost diametrically opposite in its premise of articulation from Hindutva-kind of identity politics, the articulation of a caste identity creates a new form of challenge to the premise of liberal democracy, especially, its stress on equity and justice.

The study will focus on these three strands of identity articulation to analyse the complex process of engagement between identity articulation and development politics in India.

The Empirical Focus of the Study

Given the wide diversity of the experience in India on all the three kinds of cases being focussed upon, it is proposed to not focus on any one particular geographical area but undertake an analysis of the evolving discursive contours on matters of identity and development at the national level. Relevant examples shall of course be used to buttress the discussion.

In terms of source materials to sift ideas at the national level, three kinds of documents/ materials will be used: (a) the official documents like those published by the Planning Commission to delineate the changing concerns vis-à-vis the developmental process; (b) Parliamentary debates to analyse the political discourse on the evolving linkage between identity and development; and, (c) party political documents and pronouncements to unravel the changes in identity claims being levied on the political processes.

The study shall focus on these issues since the 1990s.

The Conceptual Anchors of the Proposed Study

The conceptual anchors of the study will lie in the ongoing and evolving debates on governance, as discussed above. However, in the absence of dependable secondary datasets on many of the issues at hand, as also the limited time and resources available for the study, the focus will remain upon analysing the dynamic discursive contests at three levels discussed above. For this analysis, the study shall draw upon the rich literature on multiculturalism, given the strong correlation of the issues at hand with the idea of rights of individual and its truncation and structuring by group claims levied by these identities.

The fundamental principles of liberal democracies – basic individual civil rights and political rights, "are well-articulated both in the actual functioning of Western liberal democracies and in the tradition of Western political theory"… However, "it is difficult to define the basic features of a liberal-democratic approach to managing ethnocultural diversity…"[6], including myth of 'ethnocultural neutrality' of the state. This myth lies in the roots of the inability of the modern rationalist liberal state in dealing with the diverse claims of rights placed before it by highly mobilised identities premised on cultural factors and demanding autonomy. The state has responded in a rather *ad hoc* fashion with responses ranging from conceding minority cultural rights to denial of all such claims.

"The emergence of ethnicity and minority rights on the political theory mainstream agenda can be traced back to John Rawl's writings on pluralism and consensus as the essence of liberal democratic thinking", which created a large literature engaging with the liberalism-communitarian divide. Autonomy of the individual was pitted against the arguments in favour of "a broader communal socialisation in a historically rooted culture" as necessary precondition for such individualism[7]. This led to debates about the necessity and mechanisms to accommodate communitarian claims into broader liberal political theory.

Amongst other things, attention of scholars has been focussed on the claims that identities lay on the state and the political process, which in turn structures the debates within political theory. These claims may be classified into three sets:

(a) Claims of special rights from the government: special representation rights, devolution and national self-determination

(b) Claims of special rights to seek accommodation of a variety of cultural practices: exemption rights and cultural rights leading to special status to disadvantaged communities including affirmative action programmes

(c) Demands that are not claims to rights but to collective esteem: symbolism of flags, names, public holidays, national anthems, public funds for cultural activities, educational curricula, etc.[8]

While debates continues 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. Theorists have argued that while 'national' identities may be granted special status, smaller ethnic identities can only be granted rights that enable them to integrate with the mainstream on fair terms. This global debate is founded on the central premise of liberal state wherein political process should be founded on interests, free association and ideology and all groups claiming rights on any other basis are somehow less 'legitimate'.

However, what is of interest to the politics of ethnic identity articulation is the fact most modern states operate a diverse set of equalising policies such as "affirmative action" or "protective discrimination", located in the global discourse on development and modernisation, especially when these policies have failed to prevent ethnic identity articulation.[9] Further, most of these articulated identities demand 'autonomy' – a term whose meaning is as fluid in the academic literature as in the popular political discourse. Being subject to the 'affirmative action' of the state, the development argument becomes central to the politics of identity. Thus, there exists a paradox with respect to most identity articulations: almost all ascriptive ethnic identities require a 'rational' argument of socio-economic deprivation as an added premise for their articulation.

It is these conceptual tensions embedded in liberal theory but innovated upon in practice that is the focus of the study. It is hoped that an analysis of the complex ways in which India's democratic experience has grappled with these issues will assist in understanding the transformation underway in the relationship between the demands of identity and development; both of which derive their legitimacy from arguments of rights, justice and equity embedded deep in the notion of a liberal state.

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[1] George M. Scott, 'Group Solidarity: Towards an Explanatory Model' in *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 13 no. 2, April 1990, p. 148.

[2] Gerry Stoker, 'Governance as Theory: Five Propositions' in *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 155, 1998, p. 17.

[3] Ibid., p. 18.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Jean-Marc Coicaud, *Legitimacy and Politics: A Contribution to the Study of Political Right and Political Responsibility*, (Tr. David Ames Curtis), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 10.

[6] Will Kymlicka, "Nation-building and Minority Rights: Comparing West and East" in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, April 2000, p. 183.

[7] Stephen May, Tariq Modood & Judith Squires, 'Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Minority Rights: Charting the Disciplinary Debates' in Stephen May, Tariq Modood & Judith Squires, eds., *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Minority Rights*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p.4.

[8] Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Oxford University Press, 1995 as discussed in Ibid., p. 4.

[9] In fact, in some cases, these very policies of affirmative action may be responsible for encouraging a swifter identity articulation.