

Research Proposal

Ideals of Developmental Governance - Imaginations and Manifestos of the Political Parties

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Introducing the Research Theme: Global Context

Newfound 'consensus' that has emerged in the form of the acceptance of the concepts of 'democratization' or 'good governance' is about the minimalist form of liberal democracy. Democracy in this form is increasingly being viewed primarily as a set of institutions encompassing a multiparty system, periodic elections, legislative assemblies, constitutional governments, peaceful and periodic change of power, independent judiciary, apolitical army, a rule of law protecting the civil rights of the citizens, and respect for constitutional procedures. With the label of democracy getting detached from the substantive content of the concept, even the 'home-grown' non-democratic regimes have increasingly appropriated the label following the 'democratic transitions'/ 'democratic transformations'.

A near universal uncritical acceptance of the western arrangement of the politics and economy raises, however, a few pertinent questions. Have these recent 'democratic openings' been able to reconcile, if not aggravate the differences that prevail within these 'new democracies'? And also, have these democratic transitions trumpeting the agenda of 'good governance' managed to hold back an overall absence, deterioration or breakdown of social, economic and political institutions of governance? Is there any coherence between the globalisation induced economic development model and peoples' aspirations? These questions impel one to interrogate whether an adherence to the supposedly interrelated and mutually supportive notions of market induced economic reforms, good governance and democracy contribute to the substantive content of 'new democracies'?

Introducing the Research Theme: Indian Context

The above questions have specific relevance for Indian democracy at a time when it is being globally acclaimed for its 'twin successes' namely achieving neo-liberal reforms driven economic growth in recent years, accompanied with a consistent practice of electoral democracy. India for some time is being presented as a case study to validate the propagation that market economy and liberal democracy are not merely compatible institutions but are also complementary in nature. The admiration has further increased in the present times as India has been able to meet the challenge of recession in a far better manner than the economies of 'most of the world'.

That India still lacks almost all the ingredients that makes democracy a success further increases the sense of admiration prompting the analysts at home and abroad to qualify it to be 'an ideal case for testing democratic theories'. Democracy in India, to most of these analysts, has not only survived but appears to have put down deep roots over the last more than six decades, which is reflected in terms of the mobilization and politicisation of the socially and economically marginalized groups, which remained politically dormant in the initial years of independence but now their electoral participation has been higher

than the average. The increased participation is taken as an indication of political involvement and participation, leading to vast expansion in the proportion of active citizens, which, in turn, has caused unprecedented volatility of the electoral outcomes, forcing political parties to seek new forms of political alignments and support.

In the realm of electoral politics, thus, there have been struggles around the assertiveness and conflicting claims of the identity groups, and of struggles amongst them, on lines of region, religion, language, caste and community. The distinctions between or among the identity groups have further been sharpened due to the shift from the development planning model to the neo-liberal market economy model as the latter seems to be privileging the privileged, be it the social groups or the regions.

Objective of the Project

The proposed research project aims at making an attempt to underline the limits of minimalist form of democracy in the Indian context by visiting its electoral politics since the initiation of neo-liberal policies of economic reforms and taking note of the marked disconnect between the two. For the purpose the project intends to refer in a comparative manner to the manifestos released and campaigns undertaken by the two coalition making national parties i.e. Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the last two Indian parliamentary elections held in 2004 and 2009 along with the relevant CSDS-NES survey based data. Since the trajectory of electoral politics is multiple and severely constrained it is proposed to look at campaign language, taking on multiple registers, through a reading of political speeches and verbal icons used for mass mobilization around emotive issues concerning identity politics and then move on to refer to the relevant texts of the manifestos referring to the neo-liberal political and economic reforms relating to development and governance to underline the absence of coherence between the two.

Situating the Research Questions

The research questions veer around the consideration of four relevant facts that enable us to interrogate the widely held thesis about the 'widening and deepening' of the electoral democracy in recent India?

Fact number one is that there has been no consensus on neo-liberal market oriented economic reforms. NES surveys findings 1996 onwards including the NES 2009 show that opinions are divided across classes, castes, occupations, and locations. In fact, a large segments of the Indian electorate especially the poor and the marginal ones have had an overall negative perception about the ongoing economic reform process and still show faith in the ideal of developmental state. This assumes significance given the understanding that it is these historically dormant classes who have been voting in larger number in the recent years (second democratic upsurge/third electoral system). Moreover, when asked whether specific services related to the primary social sector be run mainly by the government or by private companies, an overwhelming majority of the respondents prefer the government. This is contrary to the governance agenda of reducing the scale of government and encouraging public-private partnership in delivery of the services.

The second fact is that Congress and BJP, the two major political parties (and their regional allies at the centre) have emphasised their unambiguous commitment to new economic policies in their election manifestos of 2004 and 2009.

Third fact is to do with the manner in which the two coalition making parties have tackled the issue of identity politics. A cursory reading of the manifestos shows that while they have tried to address issues of the economically poor; they have also sought to play down issues of caste and religion while holding out assurances and promises to the minorities and the marginal groups.

The fourth and the most significant fact relates to how the election campaigns in 2004 and 2009 were actually mounted at the ground level. Whereas the manifestos had focussed primarily on issues of economic policy and governance and played down issues of identity, the reportage on election campaigns clearly revealed that opposite had often been the case when the electorate was directly approached for votes especially by the regional leadership.

Stating the Research Questions

Considering the fact number one and two lead us to a research question as to why the two parties have endorsed neo-liberal economic reforms so strongly in a consistent manner when, as per the CSDS-NES data, there is no consensus among the electorates cutting across the class, caste, regional lines and a majority of the respondents who have any opinion on the subject say that the reforms benefit only the rich. What does it tell about the 'second democratic upsurge', a running theme in most studies of electoral politics in recent India?

A perusal of the texts of the parties' manifestos also brings us to a set of other questions which are intertwined. Why do the two contending parties' manifestos speak the same language of economic reforms and good governance using the same terminology and verbal icons that reminds one of global funding agencies/NGO's lingo? The ideological convergence precludes any kind of debate about the policies of development and governance. Moreover, isn't it that the consensus on developmental policies often is masked by mobilization around the identity politics? To what extent do the manifestos as policy documents influence the way governance is carried out once the vote has been cast and voters have gone back home? What about the ensuring information and transparency in the governance process in the present age of right to information? Do these pro-reform parties realise that by pursuing populist regional/particularistic agenda in the same manifestos, they are superseding their own reformist goals of realising efficiency and creating environment for long term investment? How do they manage to carry out this duplicity?

Considering the fact number three and four leave us with another set of research questions. How does one make sense of the absence of economic reforms as the core issue in the electoral politics considering the fact that they were introduced more than one and half decade ago? Why do those parties, which appear as votaries of reforms in their election manifestos shy away from taking them up as their core electoral agenda? More specifically, why have these pro-reform parties not shown the courage and the competence to mobilize the electorate in favour of reforms by projecting them as beneficial not only to the middle and upper classes but also for the masses? To what extent the parties undertake their electoral promises seriously and whether they raise the substantive economic issues and ask electoral support on the basis of their support or opposition to the market economy? Why do they underplay the social and economic issues related to developmental democracy and bring to fore local and regional divisions based on caste and religion when they undertake electoral campaigns? How does one explain the fact that the reform process has been further strengthened with every change of the political regime at the centre? If the parties are so supportive of the neo-liberal reforms then why do not they seek mandate from the people

during the electoral campaign? Why can't they provide platform for a meaningful conversation between the contending groups? What kind of mandate do they receive even if they manage to win elections? Does it all mean that the peoples' interests are being overtaken by the power of special interests? And finally, why do the under-classes vote so enthusiastically when their opinions do not count in terms of the policymaking?

The above questions assume significance also in the backdrop of the recent drive to keep the manifestos in the memory block of the people as is evident from the *Wada Na Todo* abhiyan, an unusual coalition of NGOs which also released an 'All India Peoples Manifesto'. There have been other significant civil society initiatives also to hold the parties accountable after the elections are held. Accountability in relation to both political manifestoes and political speeches are gradually changing also thanks to information technology revolution.

Looking for Possible Answers

What can be the possible answers to the above two sets of questions?

One possible answer to the first set of question can be that the parties are actually not aware how unpopular, rightly or wrongly, the new economic policies introduced since 1991 are with the electorates. A more convincing answer, given the savvyness of the political class, however, would be that the political parties actually have had a fairly good idea of public sentiments but for reasons that need to be spelt out, they nonetheless continue to endorse neo-liberal reforms. Such a supposition gets credence from the fact that the readings of other parts of the manifestos reveal that the same pro-reform parties seem equally keen to reassure the electorate that the 'new' developmental model would necessarily wear a human face and the poor will not be allowed to suffer. In any case manifestos of catch-all-parties like Congress and BJP under a first-past-the post electoral system, even if not pleasing everybody, always seek not to displease anybody.

The second set of questions can be possibly answered by making reference to the dominance of identity politics, which formed immediate backdrop to the decades of reforms. It has often been argued that the aggressive politics-affirmative legislation in favour of the backward classes and the rise of Hindutva-have so formed the template of political India that identities rather than economic reforms continue to dominate the language as well as the rhetoric deployed at the ground level. Mass politics, already aroused by passions, 'far outweighs reform politics'.

Another kind of explanation is to be found in the informal nature of the working of the institutions in India. The parties show the courage to undertake economic reform measures despite significant opposition due to the existing 'fuzziness of boundaries separating party and non-party political networks'. Reforms are implemented through under-hand and often non-transparent tactics. The political class cutting across the party lines introduce the changes under the guise of continuity, as it remains confident of being the beneficiary of reforms by negotiating policies and accommodating interests.

Central Arguments

- The two different but associated drifts of political power is taking place in recent India towards the regions and the backward and lower castes. Since the enthusiasm for the market oriented developmental model among the richer regions and the upper classes/castes do not 'trickle down' to the marginal ones,

naturally the political parties find it necessary to tone down their reform rhetoric during their election campaigns.

- The entrepreneurial class—a dominant segment of the rich class in a globalizing India has been a great votary of the new economic policies as under the newly created 'operational freedom' has got access to the inflow of global capital and technology and also allowed it finally to look towards market/business abroad. The entrepreneurial class has always had decisive influence over the political parties as among other factors, the latter have always depended upon them for funding. It is obvious that as the election campaigns are becoming costlier with every passing election, this class, which due to enormous expansion of the economy, is in a position to make serious money available to the political parties would also be ending up making serious demands on public policy.

- The entrepreneurial class has received critical support for the reforms from the ever expanding middle classes which has been enthused with a sense of achievement and a widening of economic opportunity as the economy shifts towards service sector. The reformist measures like the reduction in the direct taxes, deregulation, privatisation and greater access to the consumer goods have catered to its interest. It is this politically articulate and vociferous class and not the common masses that follow the ongoing 'scholarly' debates about the impact of neo-liberal policies on the economy, and on the model of development being pursued in the print as well as the electronic media, surf the Internet and may be following the manifestos. Playing a significant political and ideological role which surpasses its actual size, it has been instrumental in according greater legitimacy to the ongoing shift in terms of policy paradigm.

- Political parties in their manifestos have been trying to address two very distinct kinds of audiences separately: English speaking urban middle classes and the global funding agencies on the one hand, and the poor and the marginal on the other. The 'unstoppable' rise of popular engagement in electoral politics has made it impossible for the political class to ignore the latter, howsoever influential the entrepreneurial class and its allies— the rising middle classes and the global capital— may be. It is because of the apprehension about the common voters' disapproval, as reflected in the NES data, that despite having a broad agreement about economic reforms, the political parties are extremely reluctant in making reforms central to their electoral campaigns.

- Political class cutting across the parties no longer enjoy the confidence of the masses that it enjoyed in the first years of independence so that it can sell the idea of reforms as well as it could the development planning model which was projected as a comprehensive definition of development that encompassed not merely an industrial advancement, 'but was also simultaneously a programme of social transformation and political democratisation' built around the then prevailing broad consensus. It is obvious that the political class hardly enjoys any such leverage now even as it refers to its relative advantage in terms of the growth potential of a relatively open economy and the efficiency it brings.

- The reformist 'political class' of India cutting across the party lines is backed now only with a much narrower support base with the desertion of landed rich peasantry, once a beneficiary (and therefore votary) of the capital intensive growth but now experiencing the heat under the WTO regime and the onslaught of the global corporate sector, from the reformist agenda. It was this numerically strong class of landed peasantry-capitalist or semi-capitalist whose social power in terms of the land ownership as well as the dominant caste status in the village India that enabled the political class to gain 'representative' forms of electoral

support for the economic agenda. The breakdown of the 'nationalist historical bloc' in terms of the shift in the strategic relations between the two dominant classes has resulted into a weakened entrepreneurial class that is now left only with the support of the middle classes and the global allies.

- It is here that a reconstruction of the Gramscian exposition of the idea of 'transformism' as a variant of 'passive revolution' becomes instructive and needs to be explored further as the political class, acting on behalf of the entrepreneurial class and the global capital, quietly opts for a path in which the dominant class interests are nearly met, 'by small doses, legally in a reformist manner...to avoid the popular masses'. Such a 'compromise' is being 'manoeuvred' with the help of the middle class intellectuals/political professionals in the political parties who in the modern context approximate Gramsci's concept of 'philosophers and traditional intellectuals'. The political class tends to resort to 'mass politics' to secure political support among large sections of, in Gramscian terms, the 'petty bourgeoisie and even the toiling masses' and also to incorporate the 'potential forces of socialist transition'. This mass politics involves setting the goals and aspirations of the 'new' developmental agenda in such a manner that even as they appear to be contradictory in the sense that the demands of the poor and marginal (read the poverty alleviation programmes in the party manifestos for instance targeting mainly the below poverty line families) are also accommodated along with the interests of the both local and global capital.

Methodology

The proposed library based research would be referring to the manifestos of the two parties namely the Congress and BJP as well as other policy documents released by them. The political speeches, pamphlets, party advertisements would also be referred extensively to establish 'connect/disconnect' between the manifestos and the campaign. The literature on governance and developmental strategies by the global funding agencies, government agencies and the academics of different ideological hues and locations would be also covered. For evaluating the policy outcome the economic surveys as well as the budgetary allocations would be extensively consulted. Selective interviews of the politicians of both the Congress and BJP at the centre who have been either parliamentarians or have been in the government would also be conducted to ascertain their views on electoral arithmetic of economic reforms. CSDS-NES data would also be referred extensively as primary data to provide an empirical base to the theoretical assumptions. The research project would be completed by summer 2010. The research findings would be spelt out in the form of a long essay.

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