



UGC sponsored National Seminar

Today's India: Culture, Society, State and Economy

Motilal Nehru College (E), University of Delhi

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Concept Note

Today's India: Culture, Society, State and Economy

India today is markedly different from what it was a few decades ago. Its multiple aspects – cultural, social, political, economic and other similar aspects undeniably reflect these changes in significant ways. Evolving an understanding of interests and contents of these changes may help one identify the direction they would eventually take. Normatively, this is an important task to evaluate and judge them in the light of their capacity to strengthen or weaken the social fabric of India, or to put it differently, whether they have succeeded in enhancing India's capacity in terms of fulfilling people's aspirations and entitlements – an aspect that needs to be looked into.

The changes in the world since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the whole East European communist caboodle have had direct bearings on the life and

society of India. They have created new stirrings that manifest in a variety of ways calling for a creative understanding. The consequences of these happenings are evident in the specifically identified areas of life. The socio-cultural domain of a society is not impervious to the influences of other cultures that give rise to a new trans-cultural society. The cross-cultural interaction provides an opportunity to understand each other better and to embark upon a new path of shared goals of humanity. Although this has contributed positively in a myriad of ways, it has also given rise to resentment and resistance by the dominant indigenous cultures to this cultural invasion particularly from the west. Nonetheless, there is a need to evolve a critical understanding of all these influences.

Social life also experiences similar changes. The nature and structure of society no longer remains the same and it embraces them in ways that it could derive maximum benefit out of the changed situation. The changing nature of caste system in India is a glaring example. The impact of modernity is visible in its role in politics and differentiation from the traditional varna system. The transformation of Indian villages under the influence of globalization has made a significant impact on the social structure in general and the caste system in particular. There is a need to understand these developments in conjunction with their historical sequence and significance.

The overwhelming importance of the state is central to the understanding of any post-colonial society. The historical nature of the state in these societies is quite at variance with that of their Western counterparts. The colonial invasion triggered a process of change in the nature of contemporary states. The complex and varied trajectories of the Indian State speak to this ineluctable process. What is the location of power and how is it controlled and produced? Does the state enjoy autonomy on its own or in cahoots with the entrenched social interests ?

What have been the overall changes in the mechanism of controlling and managing power brought about by the state in all these years? These are some of the pertinent questions to which answers are being sought by social groups trying to enhance their power, positions and status in the overall polity from the all pervasive Indian state.

Last but not least, the economy of India passes through structural reforms and it has yet to exhaust this process. The process of reforms is global and its impact grips the entire world. How far has it succeeded in breaking the stranglehold of the entrenched classes or how has it reinforced the old dominance with the support of global capital? In other words, has inequality between the rich and the poor widened or lessened, is the nature of mass poverty and those trapped in it have become less or more troubling? – these are, in short, some of the questions being raised by the people who would prefer critiquing to giving in to the burden of such reforms. India has been through these reforms for a long time and is in a position to develop a critical understanding. Here, the politics of democracy and the economy of reforms present an interesting insight. Do they overlap or work at cross purposes? Explaining the comparative merits of these reforms could be interesting.

Now, the specified aspects of today's India are further elaborated in order to form a coherent understanding.

The social heterogeneity of India is possibly one of the important factors that made people less inclined towards politics and political order. Ashish Nandy says: 'Indian society is organised more around its **culture** than around its politics. It accepts political changes without feeling that its very existence is being challenged, and with the confidence – often unjustified – that politics touches only

its less important self". Social structure of caste together with the all encompassing village life explicitly contributed in creating a wide gap between social and political life of the people. The advent of colonialism and its characterizations of Indian society created a new category in the form of 'orientalism' to understand all non-Western traditional societies. This orientalist construct was quite demeaning to such societies. Even the positive achievements of tradition were ridiculed. The British in India justified themselves as benevolent rulers whose sole aim was to civilize Indian society by introducing and acquainting it with modern educational and social practices. This kind of civilizational challenge from the colonial masters brought the 19th Century Indian reformers into the forefront. These reformers not only rejuvenated the Indian culture but also highlighted serious shortcomings inherent in the process of modernity. Vivekananda, Tagore and Gandhi developed critical and creative understandings of this process. Gandhi's 'Hind Swaraj', a classic historical text that critiqued fundamental tenets of modernity in senses more than one. Subsequently these cultural-philosophical elements laid the foundation of nation and the nation-state, a project about which the colonial masters were most skeptical. The idea of India embodied in the constitution is the result of political imagination of the leaders of the freedom struggle. This cultural-political legacy needs to be reconceived and reconstituted in the wake of sectarian conflicts and in the backdrop of unrestrained market forces. In other words, Gandhi's idea of Swaraj must be asserted as a defence against constant assaults made on the autonomy of self and society in this era of uncritical embrace of neo-liberalism.

The cultural challenge posed by the colonial modernity was confronted with all seriousness to effect some required modifications in the cultural-social realm of the life of the people. This is indeed the context of the 19th century reform movement that re-articulated India's civilizational idea of metaphysics, self and

society while simultaneously attacking the evils that had crept into society in the forms of caste, patriarchy and other evil practices. However, the social reality of caste still persists. Its encounter with colonialism has accorded it political identity as well as endurance. That apart, the technology of colonial governance like decennial census along with social categorization of Indian population made caste a strong new category of social and political mobilization, a fact amply underscored by the post-colonial political developments. However, the initial conception of **caste** was based on textual interpretations and the construction of orientalism by the colonial masters. The changing conceptual contours of caste could best be captured by what Prof. Surinder S. Jodhka calls ‘three moments of caste- caste as tradition; caste as power politics, and caste as humiliation’. They are not mutually exclusive and could help one develop a conceptual understanding of its different phases.

Caste as traditions

Caste as an ancient social reality has most often been conceptualized through traditions. The western scholars and colonial rulers grappled with the reality of caste to develop an understanding of the South Asian region. Of course, caste has a pre-colonial continuity with all its divisions and diversifications but these diverse and often contested realities of the native social order were oversimplified and too neatly demarcated by the Western idea of caste. By the late 19th century, the British rulers came to believe that caste was the fundamental fact of Indian society, both to Hinduism and to the Indian sub-continent as a civilizational region.

The foundational aspect of neatly defined caste categories was derived from the ancient texts and it sought to understand the reality of caste in the 18th and 19th centuries without giving much attention to a hiatus of several centuries in writing

of these texts and their application in deriving meanings and understandings.

The stereo-typed colonial understanding of castes persisted for a pretty long time. The publication of *Homo Hierarchicus* by the French sociologist, Louis Dumont in 1966 reproduced the same orientalist conception of caste in the idioms of modern social science. To him, caste represents the cultural 'difference' between India and the West. The core ideology of the West, according to Dumont, is individualism and equality. In India, inequality is a cultural fact, a legitimate and valued mode of social organization, over-determined by Hindu religious ideology. If the West is a modern society established on the ideas of individualism and equality, India, by contrast, is a kind of traditional culture based on ideas of 'totality' and 'holism'. In India, inequalities of status and hierarchy are more critical than economy or politics / power. Status encompassed power. (Jodhka : 6,7) Despite being an important scholarly work, his proposition of difference between status based hierarchy and economic based power in the context of caste was questioned by later works.

Caste as Power

The second moment of caste revolves around the ideas of power and politics of caste. 'Hierarchy' and 'status' are not simply matters of cultural difference. They are also dimensions or forms of 'power'. During the 1950s and the 1960s, sociologists described the various dimensions of the relationship of caste and power in great detail. Prof. Srinivas introduced the concept of the 'dominant caste'. According to him, the ritual status of a caste-group became relevant only when it was accompanied by the other forms of dominance, most importantly material prosperity. Several studies validate this fact –the practice of untouchability was about control over the lives of untouchable – a relation of power reinforced

through coercion.

Through his study of a kingdom in Tamil Nadu, Nicholas Dirks shows the absence of any 'ontological separation of the "religious" from the "political" domain.' Religious institutions and the domain of power were completely intertwined. The unfolding of democratic political process in the contemporary India further reinforces this relationship of caste with power and how it could easily adapt itself to modern democratic politics.

Humiliation and discrimination

The third 'moment' of caste looks at it as a system that institutionalizes humiliation as a social and cultural practice. The origin of this formulation can be traced to the writings of the 19th century reformers like Jyotiba Phule and Dalit ideologue B.R. Ambedkar. However, the third moment of caste first begins to acquire visibility and academic respectability only in the late 1980s and 1990s. India celebrated the centenary of Ambedkar's birth in 1991. While major figures in India's nationalist movement, such as Nehru, Patel or even Gandhi appear to be losing their political appeal, Ambedkar has continued to grow in stature and significance. No discussion of caste today is possible without invoking Ambedkar and his critique of caste and Hindu society.

The nature of rural India has significantly changed since Prof. Srinivas's characterization and his concept of dominant caste. The life of low castes or untouchables is perhaps no longer controlled by higher castes as it used to be in the past. The remarkable change that has taken place in village India is now visible in the de-linking of land and authority. In keeping with such unprecedented changes and disintegration of the jajmani system reported from different parts of the country, new possibilities of mobilization and assertions of such castes particularly

Dalits have emerged. Kanshi Ram and Mayawati long visualized this and successfully translated these mobilizations into electoral gains.

The third moment of caste and democratic possibilities brought about by these new assertions and mobilizations enabled dalits to frame caste question differently. The conceptual legacy of Phule and Ambedkar was invoked to develop a political critique of caste. According to Ambedkar, the 'anti-social' spirit of castes had poisoned the mutual relations of sub-castes. Unlike in a class society where inequalities could result in revolutionary changes, 'in a system of graded inequality, the aggrieved parties are not on a common level. Even the low is a privileged class compared with the lower. Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the system'.

These three moments capture conceptual understandings of caste along with its incredible resilience in today's India. Even as caste has seen a significant ideological decline, it remains a critical issue for those who have traditionally been at the lower end of the caste hierarchy. In other words, we need to explore what makes it possible for caste to re-produce itself even outside its 'traditional' social universe - the Indian village. Caste-based atrocities occur even in those areas where the old relations of hierarchy have lost their relational and 'functional' frames. It is indeed challenging to understand this survival of caste in contemporary India, which is increasingly becoming 'modern' and urban.

The idea of state is central to the understanding of the configuration of social power in the context of the functioning of the state. Although this unique modern institution has been variously construed keeping in view different ideological preferences, genealogical understanding of the modern state has transcended all these ideological limitations in order to develop a more-nuanced understanding of

this ever growing institution. In many of its formulations as pointed out by Sudipto Kaviraj, state has suffered conceptual ambiguity mainly because of the use of old terminology conveying altogether different meanings than what has actually been acquired by it in the modern times. Foucault used a metaphor which captures this aspect of the unprecedented character of the modern state. A 'state of sovereignty', Foucault remarks, sets up a relation between the ruler and his subjects which resembles one between shepherd and his flocks. His relation to the flock is external : if the sovereign loses his territory, or his domination is reduced, it has an external relation to him. By contrast, the relation between the ruler and the ruled in a 'state of governmentality' – the exact difference he was so interested in capturing – was like that between the passengers and the captain of the ship : the fates of the rulers and the ruled are inextricably connected. Explaining the nature of state through his numerous articles and books, Manoranjan Mohanty arrives at the conclusion that the state is an aggregate of social power. And he also refrains from dichotomizing the relation between the structure and the agency in deciphering its nature. He instead believes that both should be synchronized in a way to identify their interconnected dynamism to develop a complex and comprehensive understanding of the functioning of the state. Rajeev Bhargava also deals with the similar theme. The modern state, according to him, is a form of public power, relatively independent of the ruler and the ruled. In this conception, the political continues to be the domain of power but power does not emanate from the sovereign and is embodied less in state institutions and far more in disciplinary social institutions and norms (hospitals, schools, prisons, welfare departments). Power functions less to command or directly control others and more to make everyone conform.

Elaborating the above mentioned aspect of the state power, Kaviraj also pinpoints its expanding role from taxation, finance, social engineering to the

manifold tasks of the modern bureaucracy. In this way, the state became an agency primarily concerned with the most fundamental arrangements of its own society. The political groups try to get hold of the state not because they want to conquer territories but because they intend urgently doing things for their own society. History shows that the greatest transformations of the internal arrangements of social power have been made by modern states.

The equally significant aspect of modernity and the functioning of the state is the simultaneous emergence of political activity. The idea of politics evokes a sense of hope and a desire to alter the prevailing situation according to one's preferred vision. Kaviraj underlines that in the modern world, all politicians, from devoted constitutionalists to radical fundamentalists, share a belief in the plasticity of the social world and feel the irresistible attraction of the activity called politics, the activity which, presupposing this plasticity, means to shape the structures of that malleable social world to their collective preferences. The alterability of the social world is thus possible through this modern political process, providing safe passage for the smooth functioning of the idea of the political through the exercise of state power.

To conclude the debate on the nature of the modern state, it is important to underline why the state formation in India could not lead to an exact duplication of Western state-formation. First, absolutism in Europe had introduced a form of internal sovereignty dissolving all competing claims to political authority, the like of which Indian society had never seen. Second, Kaviraj points out, the colonial state itself refracted its initiatives through orientalist conceptions of Indian society, which emphasised the fact that the environment was basically different; therefore the colonial rulers withheld certain western practices and modified other practices . Finally, according to him, even where the colonial practices were introduced, like

judiciary, the contextual difference and reliance on the Indian personnel made it quite distinct from the European models.

Moreover, given the contextual and epistemological differences between India and the West, the absolute adoption of the process of state-formation was not possible. Anything like a long culture war in the Western society, as an example, between the Church and the State has not taken place in India towards developing the idea of secularism. In the practice of secularism the West has reached a stage where, according to Charles Taylor, 'faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others'. In contrast, India is a deeply religious society and its practice of secularism is not the result of conflict but of the necessity of its multicultural society. Here, according to Rajeev Bhargava, 'secularism is an ethically sensitive negotiated settlement between diverse groups and divergent values.'

Thus, a deeper intellectual engagement with the Indian State in its evolution and its complex nature acquired in the process would yield some creative insights.

In the era of globalization, momentous economic changes have taken place all over the world, and India is not immune to this process. In the wake of its worst balance of payment crisis in 1991, India introduced fundamental economic changes at the instance of IMF as recommended by its Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). The salient features of this programme are – economic growth combined with economic efficiency, reduction of the role of state in the process of economic development and far more reliance on market, and lastly, openness of economy to foreign capital. These core elements have dominated the Indian economy since 1991. These paradigmatic changes, however, have not been successful in bringing about a broad political consensus on these issues. Instead, they have created a

paradoxical situation between ‘economic of market’ and ‘politics of democracy’ in India as put by Deepak Nayyar.

To cut a long story short, two contrary parallel processes are important to analyze. For over two decades, the politics of India is marked by the social segmentation of caste and religion. They are the contributory factors in the rise of many regional and OBCs parties along with political appropriation of religion by the political actors. Although BJP has got absolute majority following the 2014 parliamentary election, the decline of national parties has been the hallmark of Indian politics since the 1990s. In such a situation, each social segment stakes a claim to the state power. It is not about empowerment alone, there are the material spoils of office, with or without corruption.

These tensions, as pointed by Nayyar, are further aggravated by conflicts between the sphere of economics and the realm of politics. As he further elaborates, ‘the people who are excluded by the economics of market are included by the politics of democracy. Hence, inclusion and exclusion are asymmetrical in politics and economics. The rich dominate the economy now more than earlier, but the poor have a much stronger voice in the polity than earlier. And there is a mismatch’.

Again, it would be prudent to conclude this section of economics by Deepak Nayyar’s very apt comments – ‘the economics of liberalization and the politics of empowerment represent an unstable, if not volatile, mix. Ultimately, empowerment is a more potent force than liberalization. At present, however, it would seem that these forces are moving the economy and the polity, for the first time in independent India, in opposite directions, without any concerted attempt at a reconciliation or a mediation’.

The portraying of the above situation shows explicit contradictory paths taken by politics and economics in today's India. It needs further analysis to realize the future consequences of these contradictory processes.

Human societies are passing through an unprecedented transition and their values and social and institutional practices are rapidly changing. India today reflects all these changes typical of societies in transition. A critical analysis of these changes would be the focus of the two day International Conference.

Sub Theme:

- 1. Today's India : Culture, Society and State: A Panoptic View**
- 2. Modernity, Orientalism and Culture in India: Context and Contestation**
- 3. Constitution, Cultural rights and the Idea of Nation: A post- colonial perspective**
- 4. Social Heterogeneity, Hierarchy, Hegemony and Caste in India: A discursive View**
- 5. State, Sovereignty and Governmentality : An interpretation of state discourse in India**
- 6. Subaltern Consciousness: The significance of identity and agency in India**
- 7. Semiotics, Literature and Pedagogy in India: A Semiotical analysis**
- 8. Politics, Perspective and New Social Movement: Epistemological Analysis**
- 9. Globalization, Development and Economic Change in India: A paradigmatic study**

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