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A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Relationship between democracy and desirable societal development is one of the most intensely discussed issues in the social sciences. When India crops up in this discussion, it is often because examples are found here that turn common perceptions upside down. For example, the school of modernization may be mentioned, which is based largely on the idea that economic growth is a necessary prerequisite for democracy. Barrington Moore developed this view and was quick to make a pessimistic forecast of India's prospects after Independence. It is true that from Independence onwards until the 1980s, the Indian economy did not do well. Economists spoke in deprecating terms of what they called the 'Hindu rate of growth'. As long as economic growth was only two or three per cent, the broad-based middle class that social scientists asserted was a necessary prerequisite for a democracy was unable to emerge. A weak economy and low literacy levels and the extremely uneven distribution of the few resources that existed, handicapped Indian democracy.

KEYWORDS: Globalization, Civil Society, Social Welfare, Politics Of Economic Reform, India

INTRODUCTION

Experts have also argued a reverse chain of causality. How has India's democratic form of government been able to promote a kind of development that is desirable in other ways? On the plus side, it is most frequently mentioned that it is democracy which has given the country stability and ethnic peace. The reform of the 1950s, involving the reorganization of the states of India to coincide to a considerable extent with linguistic divisions, was particularly conducive to the relatively good outcome. When the size of the population and the degree of poverty are borne in mind, it is possible to claim that India has experienced relatively few ethnic conflicts. To understand how India has managed to stay united, Paul Brass has contradicted the assumption we often make, that heterogeneous societies have more conflict than homogeneous ones. He does not regard the threat to India as arising from the heterogeneous nature of the country. On the contrary, he says, this is one of the country's stabilizing factors. When a country contains so many ethnic groups, languages, religions, social groupings, etc., it is in theory impossible for one group to entirely dominate another. But even if the observation deserves consideration, one wonders whether it really can be so simple. Is it a misreading to assume that contradictions in India will solve themselves since no one group, in the long term, can dominate the country alone? We will return to this idea at the end of this chapter and compare it with other conclusions about the patterns of mobilization in India. For there are many factors here that confuse the picture.

It is necessary to raise the question of why during certain periods there has been widespread violence in India where factions have formed on ethnic lines. Atul Kohli in Democracy and Discontent, for example, has convincingly shown how the demand for government services in India tends to outstrip the supply. When the gap between supply and demand becomes too wide, there is no longer any room for political tolerance, and the result is often politically motivated violence, insurrection and sometimes pure ethnic persecution. Soon after Kohli

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published his book, the occurrence of serious conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the country increased. To some extent, the conflict was fuelled largely by the Hindutva movement. But it also arose from the fact that the state apparatus was weak, politicized and corrupt, entirely in accordance with Kohli's analysis.

Three factors that can explain this effect on democracy need to be highlighted in this context. The first is that the supply of government services is not always something measurable in such coarse terms as levels of expenditure. If we want to understand the role of the government and of different institutions in how conflicts arise or can be avoided, we have to take note of the way in which services are provided. Are government services and provisions fair, clientelistic, efficient, complicated, etc.? A weak state apparatus increases the risk of conflict. The important role that the character of the government plays in development was stressed by Gunnar Myrdal in Asian Drama and subsequently, by a number of experts in development and administration. Here, dysfunctional apparatuses of the state in the developing world are designated 'soft' when weighed down by corruption and clientelism. Going further back in time, the idea that institutions play a role in how a society is shaped, in general, and in determining the degree of political tolerance between the citizens, in particular, was first clearly expressed by the writers of the American Constitution – especially James Madison, who played a key role in formulating the American Declaration of Rights and who made sure that the US Constitution incorporated the principles of 'checks and balances'.

The second factor is the role of the political leadership, who play an important part in determining whether people are mobilized under populistic and intolerant banners. Political leaders are not only 'structural dopes' – actors whose actions are determined solely by socioeconomic and cultural conditions, institutions, norms and rules – but also actors who can function autonomously. They can choose to mobilize for short-term economic gain and employ confrontational strategies. Or they may choose to plan for economic development that is sustainable in the long term and bank on political strategies that pour oil on the troubled waters of pluralistic and infected societies.

The third factor is the people themselves. They may be educated, prosperous, well-travelled and well-informed about political processes. Such citizens will probably have a greater chance of acting more tolerantly towards members of society who act differently, and express differing views in comparison with poorly educated and impoverished individuals who have never had direct contact with other political groupings or cultures.

The three factors stated above are important to understand why political mobilization of the population sometimes favours democracy and why it can also turn against democracy. This article is not meant to whip up fear of what in the past – even during the democracy debate of Mill's time in the mid-nineteenth century – was called mob rule. It aims to discuss the real problems that arise when political actors mobilize the masses with a message of intolerance, and democratic institutions cannot protect the rights of the individual.

The subject of mass mobilization has been dealt with in many critical studies and it is worthwhile here to recollect some of them. John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville were concerned about the unbridled mobilization of the citizenry – what they called 'political mass participation'. To prevent it from getting out of hand – from mobilization of the masses to the mob, so to speak, it was necessary for the people's level of education to be raised, and for them to be socialized in the democratic rules of the game by participating in politics. James Madison averred that the constitution and government institutions should be so designed as to avoid the tyranny of the majority. By enshrining rights in the Constitution and dividing power

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between different institutions – the parliament, the executive and the courts – it was possible to safeguard the rights of the weak and also channel interests so that they could not easily gang up against just one group in society. Nevertheless, the possibility remains of a political elite exploiting groups in society that may have found themselves outside the establishment. They can be utilized in populist movements and be moulded into the core of an entirely authoritarian movement. It is the masses that Hannah Arendt describes as particularly difficult to handle or even dangerous to the life of a democracy.

MOBILIZATION FOR INDIAN DEMOCRACY

The obvious objections to the assumptions underlying the design of this chapter would perhaps be: how can anyone not approve of mass mobilization in India? Mass mobilization has surely been the basis for India's liberation and has, after all, formed the basis for the many popular movements that have questioned the authoritarian tendencies of the state. Let us consider this perspective first.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Indian soldiers, both Hindu and Muslim, took part in a revolt against the British East India Company, which came to be known as the Sepoy Uprising. The incident resulted in the British Crown taking over the administration of the British Empire in India. The revolt, which was enormous in extent, included not only the soldiers recruited by the East India Company but also the civilian population. It is not surprising that the revolt is regarded in India as 'India's first war of liberation' against the British. And this mass mobilization paved the way for continued resistance to outside oppression.

Early in the twentieth century there followed one of the most spectacular displays of mass mobilization that the world had ever seen when India once again rose up against the British Empire. Obviously, some nationalist leaders, such as Subhash Chandra Bose from Bengal, advocated militant opposition to the colonial rulers. But it was a movement based on non-violence and civil disobedience that made the great breakthrough. This movement was led by the Congress Party, with Jawaharlal Nehru as its political leader, but most of the spiritual and ideological inspiration came from Mohandas Karamchand, or 'Mahatma' (great soul) Gandhi. He recommended 'Satyagraha' – a kind of passive resistance that proved hugely effective in winning both a strategic and moral advantage over the British. It began with boycotts of British goods and British education and a refusal to pay tax. The latter acquired enormous symbolic significance when the Indians were urged to produce their own salt to avoid taxation by the British. In 1930, Gandhi walked four hundred kilometres, from Ahmedabad to the coastal town of Dandi, joined by thousands of Indians protesting the British rule by making their own salt from seawater. The protesters soon included millions of Indians from all strata of society and eventually Independence became a reality.

MASS MOBILIZATION AND TRAGEDY IN INDIA

India's Independence in 1947 also came with the displacement of millions of Hindus and Muslims from their homes. More than seven million Muslims fled to Pakistan and equally many Hindus and Sikhs made their way to India. This gigantic process of migration gave rise to conflicts that led to the deaths of around a million people. 'Liberation', therefore, is remembered alongside 'Partition' and forms one of the most painful moments in the history of southern Asia. India and Pakistan have still not recovered from it, and the events around 1947 remain a volatile ground of conflict between Pakistan and India and have also fuelled intolerance between, in particular, Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus. In these conflicts, mass mobilization is an important component, where the state and the political elites exercised a crucial effect on the outcome. The following four examples illustrate this point.

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From these examples, it is easy to confirm that the kinds of contexts in which mobilization with democratic or anti-democratic overtones has arisen are specific to India. However, this does not mean that the dynamics and the patterns we can observe are unique or of an unusual kind. Let us return to the discussion at the start of this chapter and take a closer look at the population, the political leadership and the institutions to examine the role they play in the varied outcomes.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE POLITICAL ELITE

Political leaders around the world are seldom averse to taking personal credit when their own political campaigns are successful from a democratic perspective. This view is reflected in the depiction of political leaders as the founders of the nation in portraits and statues, and in the writing of biographies of the 'great leaders'. When things go wrong, the responsibility of the individual leaders seldom receives the same proclamation – at least not from themselves. Suddenly it becomes necessary to understand 'structures' – such as the laws, the constitution, the economic situation, etc.

It is obvious that institutions, conventions, unwritten and written systems of rules and so on, can lead, and even force, political leaders to adopt positions and strategies that polarize groups in an anti-democratic direction. It is difficult to blame a party which resorts to arms after being harassed and suffering drastic restrictions of freedom over a long period. We can see elements of this process in Kashmir and Punjab. At the same time, it is wrong to exonerate political leaders in every situation that leads to conflict. Perhaps the leaders could have acted differently. Perhaps they could have implemented conciliatory strategies in critical situations. As well as cases that are difficult to assess from a perspective of responsibility, there are many examples of conflict stirred up by politicians whose main concern has been to maximize their personal power and influence. Conflict may then arise as an unforeseen consequence. Sometimes polarization is an expression of a desire for revenge, or of an intention to drive out or wipe out another group in the community. The Kashmir conflict, as it developed in the 1980s and the early 1990s, is an example of a conflict that was not created deliberately. The Congress Party, and also the strong local party, the National Conference under the leadership of Farooq Abdullah, pursued a policy focused solely on maximizing their own influence.33 This then led to the politicizing and/or dismantling of democratic institutions, which resulted in greater polarization and conflict. So even if armed conflict was never intended, the major parties and their leaders were to blame. In the wake of the Ayodhya conflict, we find examples of direct provocation of Muslims led by a Hindu nationalist elite. The most blatant example is Gujarat's Chief Minister Narendra Modi, who is alleged to have sanctioned the attacks on Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. The fact that instead of resigning as Chief Minister, he used the attacks as a platform for re-election, bears witness to dominant views of Muslims as well as his and the political elite's cynical exploitation of opportunities – which continues to constitute a problem for Indian democracy.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS IN THE MOBILIZATION OF CITIZENS AND INTERESTS

The pioneering work of Sullivan et al. on political tolerance draws attention to James Madison's perceptive observation that a state contains a large number of political groups and differing interests. As long as the structure of the state incorporates well-developed principles of separation of powers and a decentralized administrative structure, interests are divided between different levels and are always to some extent opposed by other interests. This means that no group can easily achieve total political dominance, and no group ends up

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entirely outside the system as a loser. Nor does the federalist model anticipate that any political group or leader will, to any great degree, stand up heroically to defend another political group that is subjected to threats, violence or other activities that curtail its freedom. This function is the task of the executive power, the legislative assembly and the judicial system as prescribed in the Constitution and in its declaration of rights.

These observations are particularly interesting in an Indian context, because the Indian Constitution envisages a kind of federation based on rights that finds parallels in the American Constitution and elsewhere. There are many cases where the Indian Constitution and the institutions of the Indian state have worked together in uniting the nation and upholding democracy. The Indian state has never been as soft-centred as many have imagined after reading Gunnar Myrdal's Asian Drama. The language question that we mentioned initially is an example. It was solved by amending the Constitution and by the court's upholding of government directives. What might have become a prolonged conflict on borders and the status of the different languages was turned, instead in the 1950s, into one of the strongest foundations currently supporting the Indian nation. Furthermore, it was the Constitutional reforms in the early 1990s along with administrative reforms, such as the panchayati raj reforms, that led to India becoming more decentralized and gaining a better-functioning democracy with a considerably higher number of women in politics.

TOLERANCE OF THE CITIZENS AND THE RADICAL LOSERS

Finally, it is necessary to put in perspective the role of the citizens in the mobilization processes. As we have seen, elites and institutions have a big influence on the direction of democracy. They can influence citizens and structure their preferences, their feeling of solidarity, their interpretation of reality, etc. However, first, not all citizens are affected in the same way by the same information or incentive structures. Second, the reverse order of causation is relevant – elites and institutions are often shaped by the pressure from beneath in the form of the will and methods of expression of the people. When these take an anti-democratic course, terms such as 'mob' and 'rabble' are heard. When they take a democratic or other more sympathetic course, they are usually called grassroots movements. But even if the citizens are motivated by widely differing aims, it is possible to ask whether the underlying dynamics in political processes are not basically similar. This question is well beyond the scope of this chapter. But it is worthwhile to provide some illustrations of how the characteristics of individuals shape political movements and what may constitute differences that are very important to democratic development.

CONCLUSIONS

The diversity of India is not an adequate safeguard against oppression in India, despite the observation by Paul Brass that India cannot become a fully-fledged dictatorship because the country is too heterogeneous. In saying this, Brass challenged Muhammed Ali Jinnah's theory of two nations, which propounded the view that the British Empire in India comprised two great cultures and thus, two nations, the Hindu and the Muslim. They were destined to go their separate ways. Otherwise, Muslims would be condemned to live forever under a kind of oppression of the majority under the Hindu regime. So Brass succeeded to some extent in undermining Jinnah's argument by pointing out the great heterogeneity that is hidden under the lid of the Hindu cauldron. But I do not believe that Brass wants us to be excessively optimistic on the strength of his thesis. The argument may very well hold good as long as many different individuals and groups direct their intolerance at many different targets at the same time. This creates countervailing pressures and a kind of equilibrium with everybody keeping each other in check and therefore, preventing anyone from achieving complete

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domination. However, research shows that group identities, alliances and loyalties are constantly changing and that heterogeneity is not in itself any guarantee against a tyrannical majority, as James Madison, and later Jinnah, feared, taking hold of power.

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