

Theorizations of Indian State

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Abstract:

The scholarship on Indian state manifests different theoretical frameworks. In turn, this scholarship has questioned, reshaped and caused the evolution of these frameworks. State is a central concept in the study of political process. State has been conceptualized in many different ways, from various theoretical paradigms. The study of state has been moved beyond the liberal and Marxist approaches, and to embrace novel perspective. As the most important agency of transformation towards modern India, State is of central importance in the study of political process in India. This paper reviews different major theorizations of Indian State with the purpose of indicating possible future directions that the theorization of Indian state shall take.

Key words: State, Indian state, democracy, liberalism, Marxism, subaltern perspective

Introduction:

State is the center and the stage of modern politics. Yogendra Yadav (2020: 237), to find a balance between defining State as a set of government institutions on one hand and as political community on the other, defines the State as ‘continuous public power, distinct from and above both the rulers and the ruled’. The nature and role of the State have been defined variously from various ideological perspectives. It is either considered rooted in or autonomous from society, depending on theoretical perspective. But Modern State, as organization of collective power, as arbiter, as allocator is the key agency in social-political processes. State interacts with, operates on, shapes and in turn is shaped by power relations in society. With this centrality of Modern state in our lives, this papers attempts to review major theorizations of Indian state since independence and indicates possible future directions.

Studies in Indian State:

The liberal modernization theory or the structural functional approach focused on institutions of state and deposed hope in the state as the leader of change towards modernity. Partha Chatterjee (2010) reviews the literature on state period-wise. According to Chatterjee, modernization theory did not address or could not explain the disruptions that emerged in the working of democracy.

Rajni Kothari (1970) and Rudolph and Rudolph (1967) are considered by Chatterjee the leading representatives of modernization theory. Kothari saw the political process of the time as a process of consensus making. But his analysis did have space for an open-ended unfolding of this process and did not predict successful conclusion of this process. It was noted that the modernizing elite had to make coalitions with the traditional classes because of electoral compulsions. Rudolph and Rudolph used the phrase ‘modernization of tradition’ and set ground for the study of the interaction of traditional social relations with modern political institutions. The Marxist account built on or was a complication of modernization thesis. It became the prominent mode of explanation with the conflicts and fault lines becoming evident in the political sphere

from 1970s (Chatterjee 2010). This be seen as Non-hegemonic nature of the state and coalition of the dominant classes reflected in the Marxist analysis since beginning.

As Partha Chatterjee (2010) summarizes in his essay on state, the position of state in the transformative role got strengthened in the 1970s and 1980s. The dominant interests in the agrarian sector which were considered a relic from the past emerged stronger in the coalition of dominant classes.

Indian democracy went through changes and came to acquire distinctive features in starting from 1970s, which the scholars have described and interpreted variously. Society came to be reflected in democratic politics more clearly. Bardhan (1998; p. 132-3) saw it as ‘erosion of institutional insulation of the decision-making process’. Barbara Harris- White (1997; cited in Corbridge and Harris 2000) described this as ‘emergence of informal state’. Rise of communalism, caste-bound mobilizations, excessive politicization of life and decline of social movements are some of the important changes noted. Kaviraj (2011) underlines the decline of procedural aspect of democracy as a characteristic feature of the transition.

Rudolph and Rudolph (2010) point out that modernization theory saw westernization as the only path. The journey of the study of identity politics has been traced by them from the appreciative to the critical view of caste politics. Communal politics has been recognized by many scholars as phenomenon shaped by the elite rather than continuation of the primordial forces. Rudolph and Rudolph also mention the turn taken by the postcolonial theory of modernity in the period after 1990s.

Samir Kumar Das’s categorization of the literature on state helps us see the main themes/questions characterizing the body of literature. Both institutionalism and neo-institutionalism, with the later recognizing the socio-cultural rootedness of institutions, hail the transformative role of the state. Das cites the developments in Indian Marxism beyond dominant class coalition model and the relative autonomy argument. Marxism has come to see movements and campaigns in civil society in a new light in recent years. The presence of civil society and its role in reinvigorating democracy have been reviewed (Das 2014: 20- 21).

The modernization theorists treated state as a rational independent agency capable of directing the development of the state. On the other hand, the under-development theorists saw state as working on behalf of world capitalism.

Prof. Rajeshwari Deshpande (2005) maps the state’s responses to the democratic process unfolding in India since Independence and evaluates the success of state in India in achieving its stated objectives. She observes that the nature of constitutional discourse – which was a result of national movement – was itself not singular and unilinear; it had ‘overlapping’ ideals and claims. The post-independence state developed as a blend of colonial and nationalist legacies.

The transformative agenda developed as integral to nationalist movement. This interventionist role of the state was thrown up by the conditions that prevailed at the time of independence and the nature of nationalist discourse. In this paper, Prof Rajeshwari Deshpande makes the important point that the democratic process has to be the channel and

the ground in which the contestation among different values, claims, ideals gets resolved. It is a 'contextualized' democracy and 'context' is important while evaluating its processes.

Atul Kohli (2009)² presents a novel framework to understand the political economic developments on India; it is of the interactions between state and society as two autonomous actors. In this framework he does not see weakening of institutions as a sign of collapse of democracy. While evaluating political changes he uses processes pertaining to society as the reference line. This framework hence becomes more balanced and less judgmental towards deviation from theory.

Thomas Pantham (2004) presents the nature and the role of State in India as it unfolded from the ancient time. The nature and role of State in pre-colonial times is an important aspect of Kaviraj's analysis when he discusses the nature of the impact of colonialism. He observes that the state (or political power) came to have autonomy and even centrality in society in India from around 600 BC and did not remain marginal to socio-religious order. He also observes that the Buddhism and Jainism had revolutionary impact on political sphere. These observations become important for the study in the context of marginality of state in India in pre-colonial times stressed by Kaviraj.

The class dynamic created by the working of the model of development we adopted after Independence shaped the dissatisfying trajectory of development in India Corbridge and Harris (2000). They present the nature of contradictions in Indian democracy. They observe that the elements of Nehruvian modernity got internalized in the mass consciousness and in fact the revolts against modernity by the elite are balanced by lower class assertions. Their analysis throws light on the development of political culture in modern India. They make an important distinction between failure of government and failure of democracy; while taking note of increasing authoritarian tendencies in Indian democracy they underline that ordinary people not losing faith is an important fact about Indian democracy. They discuss the necessity and efficacy of the role played by the democratic state in the empowerment of the poor.

Ashutosh Kumar (2004) in his paper titled 'Hazma Alavi and Post- colonial State' presents an analysis of modernization theory, under-development theory and post-colonial theories of state. He points out that Hazma Alavi made fundamental contribution to the neo-Marxist theorizations of state that emerged in 1970s and 1980s, and which focused on the peculiar character of the post-colonial state. In these theorizations, state represents the interests of an alliance (or coalition, not an interchangeable use) of classes, manages the competition between them, and by virtue of this condition, is autonomous of them. Multiple versions of this theorization came up in different theorists and they identified differing classes as the classes in ruling coalition/alliance.

The reading of Pratap Bhanu Mehta's 'The Burden of Democracy' gives a perspective on the question and themes that are central to Kaviraj's writing. Pratap Bhanu Mehta hails the experiment of Indian democracy. It was instituted not with ideological conviction but as part of 'struggle amongst the elite'³; nationalism weighed over conscious embracing of democratic values. Democracy politicized traditional Indian social life.

Caste politics, which is an important characteristic of Indian politics, was theorized by modernization theorists. These early theorizations of Rudolph and Rudolph and Rajni Kothari held that caste lost its traditional references to an extent in the modern democratic processes, making it a political category.⁴ They proposed that what has origin in the traditional mode of thinking and organization is not essentially traditional. Paul Brass' 'constructivist' thesis argued that 'group identity is not a given; that it is shaped on purpose strategically for political gains.

Partha Chatterjee's 'Empire and Nation' (2012) is a selection of his essays that analyze Indian democracy. It represents subaltern studies point of view. Partha Chatterjee in his 'Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World' discusses how western theorizations about nation-state set the direction of thinking and institution formation in the countries of Asia and Africa. He discusses three distinct streams of responses to nation-building represented by Chattopadhyay, Gandhi, Nehru. Processes to subvert liberal system that emerged as response to elitism in nation-building – a theme that prominently features in Kaviraj too – are discussed by Chatterjee. He explains 'contradiction' in nationalist thought in India. The nature of Indian modernity is a central theme in Chatterjee's writing.

Ashis Nandy (1989) traces the change in the consciousness and culture that accompanied the rise to prominence of nation-state in India. He says this transition from the pluralist to the centrist consciousness is what the state depends on. A mixture of classical and metropolitan culture shapes the new consciousness. He is part of the stream that stressed the borrowed nature of statecraft. He has explored in his writing reversal of state-society relation in the post-independence period.

As Dr. Ashok Chousalkar (2002) summarizes, Gramsci put forth the idea that a principle, that of dialectical development, can be traced in the development of history but history is not pre-decided; human beings can shape the direction of history through their agency. Gramsci's influence shaped the development of Marxist scholarship in India to a great extent. It was at the core of the theorizations done by the subaltern collective. Gramsci has been interpreted differently and this influence has taken various forms: from the application of the concepts elaborated by him to make sense of Indian reality to exploration of the principles espoused by him in the broadest sense.

Kaviraj (2010) mentions that the largest influence of Marxism on him was the adherence to historical method. Partha Chatterjee has also inquired into India's transition to modern nation-state. The Subaltern Collective scholars considered the colonial origin of modernity to be the explanatory factor that shaped the peculiar trajectory of nation-state and democracy in India. Partha Chatterjee's term 'derivative discourse' indicates this. Antonio Gramsci, and even Marx did not assume that history in other parts of the world would follow the same path as that of Europe under capitalism. Tracing the particular trajectory of Indian state and democracy is Kaviraj's theme of writing.

Conclusion:

The above major theoretical perspectives on the Indian State bring out the themes of colonial shaping of Indian modernity, the role of and transformation of traditional societal structures under modern politics, the dominant class structure and its transformations, ideological hegemony or otherwise of the state in Indian society, negotiations among political elites, transitions from the so-called pluralistic to hegemonic power, role of the rise of masses in Indian politics. Thus the main theorizations, whether from modernization theory, Marxist analysis or subaltern perspective examine class, caste, and elite–mass relations. Gendered power relations remain largely unexplored. The literature also does not sufficiently address women’s political agency, feminist movements, or gendered citizenship in shaping the Indian state. The engagement with state from feminist viewpoint, for example inquiries in the areas of state’s welfare policies, development programs, and gendered citizenship frameworks are emerging as new interest areas among Political Science students. Nivedita Menon (2001) in her essay ‘Rights, Bodies and the Law: Rethinking Feminist Politics of Justice’ underlines the contrast between the universalization and fixing of identities that the concept of justice embedded in Law and the necessary plurality and fluidity that ‘justice’ in the feminist sense requires. She calls for deconstructing the associations between female body and the patriarchally structured concepts. Such pathbreaking engagement with state theory is called to understand the Indian State in a more wholistic way.

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