

## **Liberalism and democracy in India**

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Liberalism is in a strange historical condition. Everybody wants to live in liberal societies; no one is prepared to defend them. But we should be careful in thinking of a global trend too hastily. Difficulties of liberal societies appear to be a result of co-occurrence, rather than of co-causality. Its conditions of success and failure are historically local, rather than global – probably because economic and political processes have different types of causality: they are structural in case of the global economy, but coincidental and imitative in case of politics.

What kind of history has liberalism had in India? The answer will depend on what goes into the term global – ideas or institutions? To help clarify the discussion, I shall think of liberalism at four levels – as an imaginary, as political theory, as institutional structure, and as [everyday] practice. Clearly, liberalism cannot exist seriously and continuously as practice, if it does not exist at the other levels. But, in non-Western contexts, the presence of liberalism in these other levels can hardly be taken for granted.

I do not want to reprise the history of emergence of political liberalism in the West: its history and its stages are too well known. But, for us who look at it from its historical outside, the important fact is that it is a result of endogenous historical conflicts – a series of protracted struggles for power between segments of the nobility, between the aristocratic classes and the ‘third estate’, and the established bourgeois coalitions and the rising proletariat. Refinement and elaboration of the ideas of liberalism emerged through the course of these historical conflicts – in which ordinary people were always involved. Political theory – in the forms of high, abstract thinking like Hobbes, Locke, Kant or Mill – were intimate participants in political upheavals involving all social groups in society. Instruction in political theory was an historical ‘ordinary’ process, not an esoteric learning of principles from some other historical universe. Indian learnt liberalism in three different ways – (i) through modern education that produced a learned familiarity with political history of the West – particularly England; (ii) through highly selective and cautious introduction

of some representative institutions by the colonial state: we should not believe the comic theory of colonialism as a school of democracy so beloved of the British in the twentieth century; but these representative institutions introduced new types of political action, mobilization, and persuasion into Indian political life; but most importantly, (iii) through the political experience of the nationalist movement – which contested colonial claims of legitimacy of imperial power primarily on the grounds of liberal doctrine of self-determination. An intriguing question here is whether pre-modern Indian traditions of thought contained anything that assisted and provided justification for liberal institutions. Two plausible constructions of Hindu thought can directly contradict each other: the first suggests that the tolerance for intellectual pluralism makes Hinduism a supportive environment for liberal-democratic institutions; the second claims that a social structure so utterly steeped in hierarchy is not conducive to democratic life.

Tocqueville's idea of a providential march of democracy through modern history can only be seen as an argument on the level of a political-social imaginary. His claim that democracy as a social logic – the collapse of aristocratic privilege – once introduced can never be reversed – seems to apply to India. Also, through the protracted history of the nationalist movement, the two questions of freedom of the nation and freedom of individuals were closely intertwined in Indian debates on political theory. But some significant differences of emphasis can also be seen among its great figures: early liberals and Tagore seemed to argue in favor of a classical form of political liberalism; but Nehru and socialists emphasized the need for economic freedom through reduction of poverty, while Ambedkar stressed the requirement of a breakdown of the caste order by forceful intervention of state legislation. Liberal thinking in India – when we get into details – is quite distinct in its concerns and arguments from standard European liberal thought. I find the second more plausible, and do not expect liberalism to get much help from the historical tolerance of Hindu religion.

The standard implicit argument in political theory is that the evolution of liberal theory prepared the ground for institutions. In India, again, the presence of liberal theory can be contested. I have argued that modern Indian liberalism had been overwhelmed from the mid-1940s by the rise of Gandhism and forms of socialism. On the other hand, some of my friends believe that the presence of liberal values and arguments has been widespread and robust: true, there were few liberal thinkers, but almost all major thinkers defended liberal values and principles. Liberal theory has

had a powerful secret presence in Indian thought as an unstated consensus. I believe that the unwillingness of conventional leftists to frontally defend liberal principles, and their constant denunciation of liberalism as a deception, a sham played a large role in leaving liberal institutions undefended. Paradoxically, when Indian governments behaved in undemocratic, authoritarian ways – during the Emergency, or against Leftist activists, or in Kashmir – critics have demanded protection from precisely those principles – which, most of the time, they have regarded as unworthy of defense. How can you protect principles that you do not regard as worthy of defense?

I follow Gramsci's thinking in thinking about democracy as a constantly fluctuating form. Citizens in democratic systems have entirely unequal experience of democratic government and enjoyment of rights: between regions, between classes, and between historical periods. A great paradox of Indian democracy is shown by the fact that its procedural side functioned well when political participation was low – when democratic politics was primarily a business of the elites. As non-elite groups began to seriously enter political office from the 1970s, some of their leaders began to claim that serious power – which could be used for true social change – should not be circumscribed by democratic constitutionalist procedures. Populist leaders from the lower-castes, when charged with corruption, often protested that they could be tried only by the 'court' of the popular verdict at the election. Institutional functioning of Indian democracy had been seriously compromised since the 1970s – first by Indira Gandhi's Congress using spurious 'socialist' arguments for packing the bureaucracy and the courts, dismissing elected governments, through extra-judicial killings of radical activists. After the decline of the Congress, lower-caste leaders defied constitutionalist proceduralism by constant appeals to their loyal popular base, and using the argument for 'recognition' and prestige of their caste groups. Leftist governments comprehensively undermined liberal rules and principles in West Bengal, where they ruled for forty years, by using standard Marxist rhetoric against bourgeois democracy and fashioning a governing style by social coercion and occasional spurts of spectacular violence. The institutional structures of liberal democracy had been constantly edited, undermined, manipulated and circumvented by all kinds of political parties. Intellectuals, mostly aligned to the Left, 'exposed' the sham democracy of liberalism in favor of announcements of abstract superiority of socialist principles, and complicit silence about the destruction of democratic defense of civil rights by Left administrations. In India too, we encounter the same paradox: everybody wants to live under liberal institutions; no one wants to defend them.

But it is evident that Indian democratic life is now facing a new reckoning – against a government that imperils its structures in ways that are both more violent and more subtle. It swears by the constitution in the very act of dismantling its protections. During the Emergency, the government suspended democratic procedures; the present government slowly undermines and degrades them. Suspension meant that the denial of democracy was explicit, and justified as transient. Degradation is not a transient decline: it is a slow diminution of rights for initially selected groups – like Muslims; and it is not an explicit denial of rights, but a selective reduction which other ‘majority’ groups often applaud. They forget that India is a society of minorities, and denial of rights to one minority or one kind of minority – spells danger for all others – including linguistic and cultural groups who might be reduced to an electoral minority for some time. Also during the Emergency, infractions of democratic rights were conducted by state authorities – using the police and coercive apparatuses of the state. Now such infractions are often conducted by mobs, or organized violent gangs affiliated to shadowy groups for which political parties are rarely directly responsible.

The condition of democracy in India seems to indicate to me that political theorists and academics interested in the understanding of political life ought to focus on several projects that are occluded by the dominance of Western forms and Western arguments in these fields. Study of democracy should be transformed from the analysis of a set of putative conditions and their failures to explain the ‘existence’ of democracy as a static constitutional form. It should be historicized to include the study of the conduciveness of prior intellectual traditions, the particular conditions of colonial dominance under which liberal institutions were formed, and a thicker sociology moving beyond economic statistics of growth and contraction. Political theorists should get into a parallel and difficult exercise to examine the fraught relation between liberal ideal of political equality and the affective enchantment of the internally homogeneous form of the European style nation-state. That is not, as much of political theory lazily accepts, the natural political condition of humanity. It ‘fits’ European countries only because we ignore the history of violence that fashioned them over two centuries. It does not work anywhere else. If we learn to move beyond the latent belief that European history shows to the world the image of its inevitable future, political theorists should explore alternative models of the political community.

The partition of India represented a division between not just two states, but between two radically incommensurable imaginations of what a state should be in a society marked by radical and convex

forms of diversity. Pakistan was modelled primarily on the internally homogeneous European nation-state: India sought in its constitution-making process to search for an alternative heterogenous form. No one can claim that the historical example of Pakistan has been a great success. But recent trends show that supporters of that kind of state of singularity can, given some turns in the electoral process, overwhelm the Indian experiment.