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Democracy against Civility?

Majoritarian Politeness and Subaltern Dissent in Contemporary India

(Board Room 601, 15th December 2016)

The voting for Brexit in Britain and the presidential nomination and election of Donald Trump in USA signify growing solidarity on racial and ethnic lines in these western democracies. In democracies across the world, indeed, issues of class inequalities are increasingly framed along ethno-cultural identities, and India provides no postcolonial exception to this generalisation. Collective identities under democracies and high globalisation tend to privilege cultural majoritarianism, simultaneously constructing a fear of minority culture and numbers (Appadurai 2006). Such fears mobilized on cultural grounds through democratic processes could bring many projects of subaltern emancipation at loggerheads with majoritarian sensibilities.

While democracy as a global project has significant achievements over the last century, present developments and past experiences also point to the universal problems of how to maintain trust and civility. Competitive politics, freedom of speech and association, and universal suffrage do not always result in an extension of civility towards marginal minorities. Democracy has always carried with it the possibility that the majority might tyrannize minorities (Mann, 2005). In India, as against the peril of ethnic cleansing, organized violence is limited to waves (Hansen 1999). While prejudices against minorities are increasingly institutionalized through democratic institutions and cultural codes, violence against minorities is dispersed. Yet such violence often constitutes critical events (Das, 1997). Prejudice is not merely a function of material inequalities, as the history of violence against Dalits, Muslims and other marginal groups in India suggests. Along with majoritarian politeness, prejudice constructs the paradox of democratic consolidation and institutionalised inequalities.

The discourses of tolerance, pluralism and multiculturalism have limited analytical value for studying democracy. While emphasizing peace, these discourses undermine trust and civility across communities. Tolerance runs the risk of becoming a burden to be shouldered by marginal groups whereas majoritarian prejudice may be cast as politeness – and praised as being central for deliberative democracy. This workshop on democracy and civility will bring together scholars to engage with the vexed relationship between democracy and civility in India.

This workshop will be held on 15th December 2016 at Board Room, 601, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. It is part of the UKIERI Collaborative Project between TISS and University of Edinburgh on Marginal Populations, Social Mobilisation and Development.

Suryakant Waghmore and Hugo Gorringe
Workshop Coordinators

Introduction and Welcome (9.30 – 9.45)

Suryakant Waghmore

Ambedkar's Politics and the idea of Democracy without Nationalism (9.45 - 10.45)

Keynote by Faisal Devji

Unique among his contemporaries, Ambedkar did not presume the existence even of a society let alone a nation in India. And while he did think that such a society and nation might come into existence in future, Ambedkar was chiefly interested in the possibility of putting a democratic order in place without them. This order would institutionalize conflict in a non-violent way, and thus make of it a political rather than religious, economic or other kind of opposition. It was a task that required him to rethink a number of received ideas about democracy, and this paper will explore the highly original way in which Ambedkar did so.

Session I: Politeness, Violence and Civility (11.00 -12.30)

Chair: Gopal Guru

Violence and the Founding of Civil Society

Arun Iyer

In her short and provocative book, translated under the title *In Defence of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution*, Sophie Wahnich makes a sterling defence of the September Massacres of 1792, one of the bloodiest events marking the birth of a new form of civil society: the French Republic. This event happens after the transition to the new Republic has already been formally ushered in by the new Constitution based upon the principles of the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.” Yet, taking recourse to the work of Walter Benjamin, Wahnich argues that the September massacres constitute a new category of violence called “sovereign vengeance,” which is the necessary foundation of the new egalitarian civil society that is, chronologically speaking, already in place.

Her argument seems to have one clear and universal implication: Violence is necessary for the formation of an egalitarian society or for the transformation of a deeply non-egalitarian society into an egalitarian one. How does this implication translate to another deeply unequal society: 21st century India? Is it not a challenge for all those Dalit movements struggling for a non-violent transition to an egalitarianism, whose principles are enshrined in our constitution? What indeed is the relationship between violence and civility? In this presentation, I would like to respond to these questions provoked by Wahnich's argument about the September massacres by looking into a very different kind of massacre, the 2006 Khairlanji massacre in India? The presentation thus promises to be a broad theoretical inquiry into the relationship between civility and violence and the lessons we can draw from it here in India.

A Brief Note on Politeness

Parthasarathi Mondal

In this brief presentation, I question the felicity of ‘politeness’ as a terrain to study subaltern dissent (in a postcolonial democracy, if you like). As the Workshop's Note remarks, politeness as culture

and domination point in the direction of the subaltern. The subaltern rebels against it. In all his faith in human emancipation, the specific construction of the binary escapes the subaltern. The subaltern forgets that whereas it could well be that politeness introduces a binary of domination in human society, the idea of human itself institutes a binary – perhaps a fundamental one – between the world of the human species and that of the animal and natural world, an arrangement in which the human dominates or subjects nature. The human considers itself to be superior to nature by virtue of his or her framing of society (or, culture!) at the very moment of its recognition of distinction within its own essence. The subaltern as human, as an argument for human emancipation, thus becomes party to this exclusion. In other words, the account which enables the subaltern to question the foisting of one culture over another or of culture itself presupposes a more fundamental (or, if you like, a co-terminus) foisting of culture over nature, of the human over the non-human. In his dissent with the exclusion of politeness, then, the subaltern cannot escape his complicity with a more fundamental exclusion. The framework of emancipation is the framework of exclusion. To perceive politeness as culture and domination, the subaltern must himself be cultured and dominating. A veritable spiral. Such is the enticement of the Enlightenment.

Situating civility: Between reason and passion

Rowena Robinson

This presentation will take up the ideas of civility and civil society as articulated by scholars who distinguish between open associations and secular institutions in civil space as opposed to populist movements, particularistic (such as caste, tribal or ethnic group-based) associations and the like. In other words, the ‘civil’ and the ‘constitutional’ are separated from the ‘populist’. This distinction traces itself back to the divide between reason and passion, which may be viewed through Max Weber and his theory of sociological action. In contrast, it may be pertinent to recall Laclau’s reassertion of populism as a terrain of reconstruction and not mere demagoguery. Civil society is a heterogeneous terrain and, in the light of recent controversies in India, it may be useful to look at the space of the university as a site of civility; at the same time, there are structural components that stratify such spaces and constrain the ‘universality’ that may be otherwise associated with them. The norms of civility may return then as conformity and be employed against women, against the margins, to close off dissent, obstruct the need for “witness” or constrain the passionate voice of subjectivity.

Session II: Majoritarian Civility and Dominance (2.00 -3.30)

Chair: Faisal Devji

Democratic Exclusion: Questioning Sovereignty and Representation in India

Swagato Sarkar

The tribal dominated areas of India have been treated and nurtured as a zone of extraction from the colonial period. After the liberalisation of mining sector in 1993, this process of extraction has both expanded and intensified. In 1996, the Indian state has also expanded the scope of 73rd Amendment to the Constitution in the tribal-dominated Fifth Schedule areas through the promulgation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA). How do these parallel processes of expansion of extractive capitalism and the expansion of grassroots-level democratic institution play

out in the Fifth Schedule Areas? I will deliberate on this apparent contradiction in this paper.

I will present an ethnography of politics around the Utkal Alumina bauxite-mining project in Kashipur, Odisha. The mining project required a large tract of land, and the people residing on that land and cultivating it were unwilling to give it up. They had started a resistance movement against the mining project, which invited a massive state repression. This people's movement did not receive support from any political party; instead, all the parties were vehemently in favour of the project. The NGOs, which were initially involved in organising the people against the project, withdrew from the movement to save themselves from the harassment of the state. The movement received support from a very few human rights activists. After a long resistance, the movement gradually faded away and the mining project has been established.

I consider this as an exceptional case in a competitive electoral democracy, where a constituency could be abandoned by the representative politics and exposed to the state violence. And the extractive capitalism has managed to nullify the provisions of PESA. I will argue that this is not a contingent issue or a stray incident. Increasingly, the people's movement and their assertions of rights are systematically excluded from the considerations and calculations of parliamentary democracy. Indian democracy has developed new capabilities and technologies to create this exclusion. This new condition of democratic exclusion requires us to re-theorise Indian democracy and social power, which I will attempt in this paper.

The gastronomy of majoritarianism and civility in contemporary urban India Qudsiya Contractor

Debates around religious minorities, their cultural identity, representation and development have been central to contestations surrounding nationalism, secularism and democracy. Post-Independence, nationalist leaders tended to be preoccupied towards maintaining national unity rather than addressing the concerns for representation of its religious minorities. Notions of citizenship in India have been shrouded in this historical anxiety that continues to haunt any efforts of the state at addressing social exclusion of religious minorities. Using the recent ban on beef in Maharashtra as an illustration, this paper looks at how the politics of food cultures exposes the challenges of civility in contemporary urban India by setting the limits of majoritarian cultural accommodation and membership in a moral collectivity. While beef forms an integral part of the Muslim food culture and identity, the prohibition of beef and the disgust of beef-eaters are becoming essential to defining the homogenised Hindu identity. This paper argues that food as a communicative substance underpins certain social and moral propositions that renders beef-eaters more specifically lower caste Muslims unworthy of civility.

Pluralism and the Post-Minority Condition: Reflections on the 'Pasmanda Muslim' Discourse in North India

Khalid Anis Ansari

The modernist imagination of nation and democracy—and the associated teleological aspiration of a territorial and homogenized political community—have been increasingly problematized in the era of late capitalism where the social confronts enormous drives towards pluralisation. The period of 1990s onwards saw an immense interest in ideas of citizenship, multiculturalism and minority rights,

especially in Western political theory scholarship. However, the deepening of democracy is throwing forth new subterranean political subjectivities and transformative spaces in various jurisdictions that are putting severe strains on official minority discourses. Some of these new constituencies that are now struggling to inscribe themselves onto the registers of justice may cut through the majority-minority dyad and find the binary to be deeply inhibitive in addressing their concerns. Are we therefore reaching the limits of minority politics? Is the ‘majority-minority’ or ‘minority rights’ framework now capable of addressing the emerging questions around justice, dignity or misrecognition? This paper reflects on the discursive ruptures in minority space in India instantiated by the pasmanda movement, which is a movement of subordinated castes within the largest religious minority in India, the Muslims. Employing caste analytics the movement has complicated the majority-minority (Hindu-Muslim) duopoly and destabilized other related conceptual assemblages. I argue that the discursive rupture inaugurated by the pasmanda movement poses tremendous challenge to the minority framework and its discursive field of secularism, cultural rights and state-led reforms. Breaking away from the political templates of community articulations, the movement rather than claiming space of ‘yet another minority’ or ‘minority within minority’, calls forth new assemblages of political solidarities, discursive ruptures and social critiques. The emerging social and political condition that informs the democratic striving of the pasmanda movement may tentatively be termed as ‘post-minority’.

TEA BREAK (3.30 – 4.00)

Session III Caste, Civility and Democracy (4.00 – 5.30)

Chair: Rowena Robinson

Brahmin qua Brahmin? Rethinking the ‘Brahmin Script’ in modern politics

Ramesh Bairy

This is a preliminary attempt to ask a set of questions about the changing configurations of the caste question with respect to electoral democratic politics. I am seeking to suggest that the primary move the (south Indian) Brahmin made when challenged with democracy (and the more consequential democratisation) since the early twentieth century – one that was shamefaced and eager to enunciate the self in myriad proxy forms and formulations – perhaps is undergoing a decisive shift. The shift – that I flag as the ‘Brahmin qua Brahmin’ – is a possibility that appears to have been engrained in the very (structural) ways in which caste worked with and against the logics of democracy and democratisation, and the (im)possibility of conjuring a ‘Hindu public’ that Ambedkar pointed to. This paper is concerned with describing this shift and through such a description – to point to a possible constitutive defect in democratic politics.

Debating Indian Citizenship: Constitutional-Legal Changes and Popular Imaginations

Praskanva Sihnaray

The question of citizenship has once again taken the centre-stage in Indian democracy on the eve of the passing of the new Bill in the Parliament in 2016. The proposed Bill, which for the first time promises Indian citizenship on the basis of religion, has received a wide range of reactions from political activists, commentators and legal experts. The debate around citizenship in India is particularly interesting because of its direct link to the Partition of the country in 1947 which not only saw the highest recorded displacement in human history but is still witnessing massive population transfers, especially from Bangladesh. The citizenship laws have been amended time and again in order to meet newer claims and demands of the migrants. Simultaneously, citizenship has

been a core issue for mass mobilization for political parties, pressure groups and even religious organizations since independence.

This paper thus aims to analytically approach the current debates on citizenship in the wake of the new Citizenship Amendment Bill 2016. Firstly, it shall track the changes in legal-constitutional understanding the idea of the 'Indian citizen'. And secondly, it shall try to understand how citizenship in India is perceived by popular political outfits with huge support base at the grassroots level. Based on an ethnographic research, the paper shall discuss the organizational structure, style of activism, and claims and demands of an emerging popular forum of the Namasudras in West Bengal, namely, the Namasudra Bikash Parishad (NBP) which has been engaging with the citizenship debate quite rigorously in the recent years. How is a popular Dalit organization in contemporary West Bengal engaging with the question of citizenship? What are the interests, demands and claims of these people? Can we connect the constitutional-legal changes and these popular demands on the question of citizenship? If yes, how has this connection changed over the years? And finally how can we then imagine the 'Indian citizen' in the coming years?

Hierarchy, Difference and Equality: Notes on Social Practice of Caste in Mumbai **Suryakant Waghmore**

In my previous research on caste and Dalit politics in rural Marathwada I have explored the dynamic nature of caste in rural spaces. The changing caste relations in political and economic fields also point to a new sociality of caste tolerance. The new forms of tolerance when analysed with occasional violence facing Dalits, points to an evolving practice of Hindu politeness in rural publics. In the present paper I extend analyses beyond rurality of caste to study of caste in the city. Urbanism affects changes in the social practice of caste and radically challenges the tenacity of caste. Based on the qualitative study of caste associations in Mumbai, this paper presents the repertoires of individuals and groups to sustain caste pride and bonds. Caste associations thus help individuals negotiate urban subjecthood and gain a sense of history, pride and rooted selfhood. The coming together of caste and urbanism however points to limits of vernacular modernity where equality is not the highest good.

Valedictory Address by Gopal Guru (5.30 – 6.30)

Problematic of inserting conceptual order between Modernity and Democracy.

The main argument that I would like to make is about the arrogance of modernity that seeks to inferiorise democracy. The historical trajectory of the sequence between modernity and democracy generates this picture of democracy as inferior form politically organising a particular society such as India.

Vote of Thanks: Kokila Shetty, Doctoral Candidate, Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

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