DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

SHALENDRA D. SHARMA

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Shalendra D. Sharma

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To my mother,
and to the memory of my father,
Rishi Deo Sharma (1930–1997)

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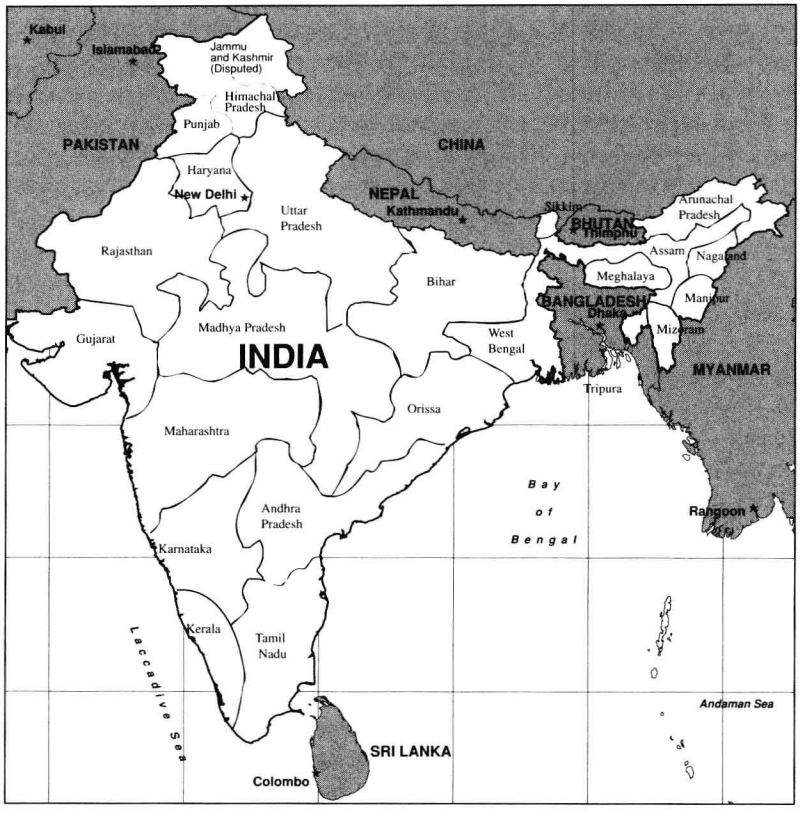
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Introduction

In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. . . . How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life?

—B. R. Ambedkar, speech in the
Constituent Assembly, 25 November 1949

In his address to the expectant nation on the eve of India's independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru eloquently noted that "the service of India means the service of the millions who suffer . . . it means the ending of poverty, ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity." Echoing the hubris and triumphant certitude of the nationalist elite that had vanquished three centuries of colonial rule, Nehru pledged that the fundamental task of the new political leadership was to "build the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell and prosper."[1]

To the architect of the grand design, the intrinsic legitimacy and the tolerant pluralistic culture of a representative democratic polity was indispensable to building the "noble mansion." Nehru, the quintessential renaissance man, remained unequivocal: only a democratic state (which under Indian conditions he envisaged as an archetypal liberal democracy derived from the syncretism of the Indic civilization and Western rationalism) based on legal principles and guided by the ethos of purposive constitutional deliberation had the capacity to expunge the feudal-colonial legacies and carry out thoroughgoing national reconstruction. Moreover, only an authentic liberal democratic polity, which through its representative institutions and constitutional-legal devices prescribed accountability and imposed limits on state power, was endowed with the political-institutional wherewithal to mobilize popular acceptance of the government's development programs and to "plan" national economic development in the manner that avoided the painful vicissitudes of capitalism and socialism.[2] Rejecting the ready-made

exegesis propagated by proponents of capitalism and communism, Nehru stubbornly opted for the heretical "third way . . . which takes the best from all existing systems . . . and seeks to create something suited to one's history and philosophy."[3] Such a balanced and gradualist pathway to modernity (and prosperity) was seen as in keeping with the cherished Gandhian ideals of nonviolent social transformation and a step closer toward realizing the imagined egalitarian Gandhian teleology based on "each according to his needs, from each according to his capacity"—euphemistically called the "socialistic pattern of society."[4]

Following independence in 1947, India's nascent democratic state embarked on a herculean undertaking: to democratically transform a hierarchically institutionalized, overwhelmingly agrarian order of great antiquity and heterogeneity, burdened with the problems of extreme scarcity, and what Ashis Nandy (1983) has evocatively termed the "pathological anxieties of post-colonialism," into a "modern India" guided by the Nehruvian ideals of secularism, democratic socialism, and social justice. Seeing itself as an exemplar and the legitimate custodian of social order and the repository of the public good—indeed as the only authentic embodiment of universality and progress—no jurisdictions were to be beyond the reach of this interventionist democratic state. In its assumed role as modernizer, mediator, reformer, and nation builder, India's democratic state inaugurated a series of ambitious national development plans that over the past five decades have irrevocably transformed the socioeconomic, political, and normative landscape of the subcontinent, albeit not necessarily in the ways the state had originally intended.[5]

How has India's democratic state interacted with and shaped its society and political economy? What explains the perennial discrepancies between the state's developmental intentions and goals and the actual outcomes? Specifically, why have five decades of democratically guided programmatic state interventions committed to building an egalitarian, socialistic society (the so-called noble mansion) not been realized? More puzzling, and indeed the central paradox of Indian democracy, is why in spite of a profound revamping of the rules of the political game under democratic tutelage—through which the poor and unlettered masses and myriad hitherto underrepresented groups were mobilized, politicized, and substantially empowered with their representatives occupying some of the highest positions in government—the state has failed to utilize its administrative-bureaucratic apparatus and this broad base of support to implement meaningful reform. Why in a country where the poor make up an overwhelming majority of the citizenry, and yet where political participation is open and reasonably fair, have the masses failed to effectively influence public policy or help guide development strategies in a direction that reconciles economic growth with redistribution? Indeed, India's democratic regime's failure to mitigate the "poverty problem" is vividly reflected in

the stark fact that poverty remains as pervasive as ever, with roughly 40 percent or some 350 to 400 million Indians living under variously drawn poverty lines, a proportion that has not changed since independence in 1947.[6]

This study examines these questions with reference to rural India, against the experience of some fifty years of democratic nation building. It chronicles and evaluates the origins and content of the Indian state's developmental and reformist policies, marking "critical junctures" in the state's half century of sustained interventions in the countryside.[7] However, what sets this study apart from earlier accounts is that it examines these questions through the conceptual lenses of the "state-in-society" approach.[8] Such an eclectic approach provides a more subtle understanding of both the palpable and pronounced divergence between the state's developmental goals and the actual outcomes, as well as the ramifications of the state's policies on the political economy of rural India.

Drawing from a rich corpus of literature, as well as my own extensive fieldwork data, this study presents a blend of analysis, comparative synthesis, and reinterpretation of and theorizing about research on the complex relationship between democratic governance and economic development in a "low-income country" setting that is often at odds with standard interpretations.[9] First, it challenges the conventional "economic" assumption that "it is only through rapid economic growth that India will be able to reduce poverty."[10] Second, it contests the monocausal rigidities of utilitarian and rational choice approaches, including those that attribute reformist and distributive failures to "misguided policies" and to the inherent pathology or "cruel choice" between democracy and development. Third, it provides correctives to the state-centric explanations (which *inter alia* emphasize shallow political institutionalization, the exceptional developmental capacities of "strong," meaning authoritarian, in contrast to the weak and fortuitous capacities of the "soft" or democratic regime types) as the root cause of India's malaise. And fourth, it argues that the kaleidoscope of reductionist behavioral and society-centered approaches (which tends to view democratic states as either ineffectual neutral arbiters or "power brokers" or captives of the dominant classes) are deeply flawed in explaining India's political economy. In contrast, this study, in highlighting the mutually conditioned interactions among the multilayered structures that make up the "state" and "society," illustrates how India's rural development experiment and, in particular, the failure to reconcile economic growth with distribution, have been fundamentally shaped by the exigencies of state-society interactions.

Patterns of State-Society Interactions

Alfred Stepan (1978, xii) has conceptualized the state as a centralized, administrative, bureaucratic, legal, and coercive system headed by an executive

authority "that attempts not only to structure relations between civil society and public authority but also to structure many crucial relations within civil society as well." Yet, as Timothy Mitchell (1991, 81) aptly notes, "the state . . . should not be taken as a free-standing entity, whether an agent, instrument, organization or structure, located apart from and opposed to another entity called society." Since the state is inextricably enmeshed in a complex set of relations with society, the boundaries between the state and society are often ambiguous and porous. Yet, the state has a certain salience, in particular, its own identifiable "interests" and programmatic "goals" that it vigorously pursues or attempts to pursue. Integral to the needs of the modern state is its perennial quest for universality and legitimation, its imperative to maintain its sovereignty and hegemony, and the intrinsic impulse of regime incumbents to retain jurisdiction and power.

A generally agreed upon definition of what constitutes "civil society" remains elusive. For Hegel, who presented a state-centric view of *bürgerliche gesellschaft* or civil society, only under the universality of a legal-rational state, the "actual reality of the ethical Idea," could civil society experience that second "moment" of the spirit, in which atomistic individuals pursued their particularistic interests, and realize its own true potential. In contrast to the Hegelian teleology, Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic *Democracy in America* presented a society-centric view of civil society, claiming that a free and vigorous associational life and a heterogeneous society not only permitted limits to impersonal government prerogatives and constraints on arbitrary state power, but also served as the agency for creating public accountability and participatory government. If there is a common thread to these divergent views, it is that civil society is an arena occupied by a constellation of loosely bundled ensembles of private and particular interests that are institutionally "independent" (or at least have some spheres of autonomy) from the formal precincts of state tutelage and control.

Depending on the levels of economic development and social differentiation, civil society may encompass a myriad of vertically segmented and crosscutting interests, including voluntary associations (like professional and trade unions, community organizations, and ethnic, kinship, or religious affiliations), market relations (business and economic classes), and cultural groups. In the Indian context civil society, like the many avatars of the Hindu god Vishnu, is a creature of manifold forms, orientations, and consciousness revolving around a plethora of usually inchoate and heterogeneous solidarities based on ascriptive familial, ethnic, regional, religious, communal, linguistic, and caste identities, as well as class and interest-based affiliations and networks.[11] Despite its heterogeneity and particularistic concerns, the constituent elements of civil society may simultaneously associate, affiliate, or disengage on the basis of perceived congruent interests. However, the elements' internal cleavages

and parochial and potentially antithetical concerns can also provide considerable basis for hostility and conflict.

The patterns of interaction between state and society are protracted, multifaceted, and mutually conditioning—or what Frederic Wakeman (1975) in another context has characterized as "dynamic oscillation."[12] The panoply of constituencies that make up the vast realm of civil society continuously renegotiate their ties and allegiance with the state. However, this does not imply that state-society interactions are irreconcilable zero-sum competitions or that a symbiotic structural functional relation exists between the two. Rather, as Joel Migdal (1988) notes, relations between state agents and citizens are characterized by deep ambivalence and contradictory impulses, resulting in a wide spectrum of interactions that ebbs and flows as the protagonists attempt to devise and exercise a range of strategies to deal with the shifting political and socioeconomic circumstances. State pronouncements, trajectories, machinations, violations, and predations may provoke a range of societal responses—ranging from active partnership and collaboration, discrete reciprocity, purposive negotiation, sullen acquiescence, steadfast agitation and confrontation to strategic evasion, collective withdrawal, and, wherever possible, quiescent disengagement.

Understanding this intimate interconnectedness and the permeability of the state and society, and how the reciprocal bargaining, negotiations, and conflicts between them fundamentally influence and shape the patterns of socioeconomic and political change, affords a more poignant understanding of the subtleties of democratic governance and economic development in postindependence India. If anything, such a perspective forces us to recognize that "national development" or "developmental outcomes" are not simply the result of autonomous state actions or some sort of state-dominant class alliance, but are historically contingent upon the more incremental and protean patterns of state-society interactions.

State and Society in India

Seen through the prism of the state-society approach, the legacies of state formation and the resultant patterns of state-society relations carry important consequences for governance and economic development. The scholarly consensus that democracies are responsive and accountable to their citizens and societies is a truism, but it is important to recognize that the disjunction that always existed between India's democratic state and society has in recent years considerably widened, creating real problems for both governance and development. This study attempts to make the case that the fragmentation within both the Indian state and society and the erosion of institutionalized forms of political mediation between them, besides

aggravating the "crisis of governability," have also hindered national development, in particular, reformist and redistributive development.

Over the past five decades, the Indian state has vigorously sought to institutionalize "stateness" by expanding its power and reach beyond the social formation of which it is inextricably a part. Like other successor postcolonial states it has demonstrated a formidable capacity for its own reproduction. The state has become a ubiquitous feature of the nation's political landscape, its jurisdiction and administrative-institutional presence reaching into the remotest rural hinterlands. Yet, the state's instrumental hegemonic trajectory and omnipresence have not made it omnipotent. To the contrary, the state's quantitative expansion has not been matched by a commensurate qualitative increase in autonomy and capacity.[13] That is, even as the state has expanded its size and dominion and acquired an unprecedented centrality, its writ does not seem to run very deep. In fact, the state has become increasingly attenuated and segmented, with its reach and capacities severely constricted.

What explains this paradox, and what have been the ramifications for governance and economic development? Many scholars have pointed to how the Indian state's inability to escape from its more unpropitious historical legacies undermined efficacious state building from the outset and how, in the postindependence period, the discretionary top-down state building resulted in feeble political institutionalization and subsequent speedy "deinstitutionalization." We also have a more nuanced understanding of the exigencies of India's "soft" democratic state, especially how its capture and co-optation by the dominant classes and castes undermined its reformist and distributive capabilities. Pranab Bardhan presents a devastating indictment of India's democracy, arguing that it conveniently serves the interests of the three dominant proprietary classes: industrial capitalists, rich farmers, and professional bureaucrats. The industrial capitalists have been the beneficiaries of the government's import substitution policies, industrial licensing system, and restrictions on foreign investment. Rich farmers have benefited from the government's support programs for agricultural products and from subsidized inputs (e.g., electric power, irrigation, fertilizers, diesel fuel) and subsidized credit. And the bureaucratic elite has gained political power and income through its control over what has become an elaborate system of patronage and rent seeking. Although these classes have some competing interests (the private sector, for example, resents many of the bureaucratic controls, and rural and urban groups clash over prices of agricultural produce), the dominant coalition is held together because none of the classes is powerful enough individually to impose its will upon India's polity and economy, and all three welcome state subsidies.

According to Bardhan this "alliance of domination" has had an adverse effect on the country's overall development because, as the dominant

classes are brought under a growing network of subsidies and patronage, the state's resources for economic development and social welfare have dwindled. He argues that this process has not only contributed to a deceleration in public revenue and capital formation but has also severely eroded the state's capacity to meet even its most basic developmental and distributive goals. Thus, to Bardhan, India's elite-dominated democratic polity is the root of the problem. Beneath the veneer of constitutional government, democratic governance serves the functional needs of the political and economic elites—providing an arena for interelite accommodation and thus enables them to utilize the instruments of the state to entrench their power and privileges. While India's democratic regime has served as an arena for conflict resolution and provided a resilient mechanism for relatively stable governance, it has nevertheless also found it difficult to muster the political autonomy necessary to pursue its reformist and distributive agenda.

Yet, for all its limitations, India remains the world's largest constitutional democracy, with a functioning parliament, a political regime of laws and institutions, an independent judiciary and respect for legal conventions, a free press, freedom to join or affiliate with political parties, and relatively free and fair competitive elections in which millions of voters cast their ballots.[14] Over the past half century the "deepening of democracy," reflected in the spread of democratic ideas, competitive politics, and universal suffrage, has spurred unprecedented political activism among formerly acquiescent groups and served as an effective vehicle for the political empowerment of the country's hitherto excluded and subordinate groups. Over the past two decades a broad yet expedient alliance of the lower castes and classes collectively referred to as the "Other Backward Castes"or OBCs[15] (estimated to constitute between 40 to 45 percent of the populace), the *dalits* (between 20 to 25 percent),[16] Muslims (between 12 to 15 percent), and other nonelite groups and communities mired in generations of neglect and oppression have pushed their way into the political arena, translating their numerical preponderance into political power. Today their representatives, who are usually quintessential personalist leaders well versed in the rustic vernacular and the idioms, mores, and manners of their constituents, occupy some of the highest offices in the land. Their political organizations and parties—such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP),[17] the Samajwadi Party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal in the northern "Hindi belt," the Dravida Munnetra Kazagham (DMK) and the All-India Anna DMK (AIADMK) that have ruled the southern state of Tamil Nadu since 1967, and the Telegu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh state are formidable political machines—when not constituting governments are instrumental in determining the nature and fate of governments. As the old certitudes of the Hindu order, in which the low-caste "inferiors" were expected to show ritualized deference to their propertied "superiors," have

crumbled into dust, so has the "top-down" mobilization by the upper castes and classes of the "passive" low-caste vote banks. This sharp erosion of political dominance by the upper castes is nothing short of a quiet revolution that has transformed India's former top-down elitist political system into a truly representative form of majority rule.[18]

Today neo-Tocquevilleans such as Robert Putnam (1993, 182) confidently assert that "Tocqueville was right: Democratic government is strengthened, not weakened when it faces a vigorous civil society." This is similar to what is said by radical analysts like Paulo Freire, who in his renowned *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* argues that such empowerment of civil society under majoritarian democracy would "liberate" it from its debilitating parochial identities and interests and facilitates the development of greater social cohesion and common civil consciousness and solidarity. The assumption is that as yesterday's political outsiders displace the traditional political class and turn into incumbents, they more readily use the instruments of state and the organized "power from below" to serve and protect the interests of their constituencies. Liberated from its many burdens, an empowered civil society thus collaborates more effectively for mutual benefit (and overcomes collective action problems) and compels regimes to move expeditiously in promoting balanced self-reliant and sustainable development models—variously labeled "human-centered development," "participatory development," and "basic-needs development."

However, India's mobilized and empowered civil society—that ultimate agency and guarantor (in the Tocquevillean sense) of public accountability and civil probity—has on the whole failed to perform its anticipated progressive mission. To the contrary, the complicity of civil society in abetting socioeconomic inequalities and political divisions and exclusion cannot be overstated. What explains this anachronism? Neo-Tocquevilleans would no doubt stress the obvious, yet understated fact about Indian society—what Mohandas Gandhi called that "layer upon layer of inbuilt resentment, inequality and oppression"—that it is sorely lacking in what Putnam in another context has termed "social capital." That is, although India is blessed with a robust civil society and a rich and vigorous associational life, the patterns of associationism usually correlate to the narrow caste, ethnic, regional, and communal chauvinisms, including patriarchy, class domination, and other tyrannies, which have deep roots in civil society. These cleavages have prevented the development of the ancillary networks of civic reciprocity and engagement, or what Putnam calls "civic community" or "civicness," necessary for the articulation and aggregation of interests, effective collaboration, and good governance. Not surprisingly, despite India's resilient democratic institutions and relatively long experience with constitutionalism, political participation (especially voting) continues to be a collective behavior rather than the exercise of individual choice as envisioned by liberal theory. Thus, to the neo-Tocquevilleans, the

shallowness of social capital has prevented the representatives of the state and civil society to create forums in and through which they can identify and agree to common goals.[19]

However, this study will argue that neo-Tocquevilleans only provide part of the answer. It was Samuel Huntington (1968) who long ago recognized that societies with highly active and mobilized publics and low levels of political institutionalization often degenerate into instability, disorder, and violence.[20] In India, the high levels of political mobilization in the absence of a strong and responsive state and political parties have served to fragment rather than unite society. Instead of responding to the demands of an increasingly mobilized population, the country's weak political institutions have reinforced, it not exacerbated, socioeconomic and political cleavages. Given this unpropitious social reality, the efforts of so many voluntary associations and nongovernmental organizations to build durable and inclusive, representative institutions that would enable those who share common interests to unite politically and pursue collective interests have not been very successful. The record is unequivocal: the resilience and manipulation of the pernicious sensibilities based on idiosyncratic conceptions of class, caste, kin, community, region, and religion, combined with weak political institutions, have worked in tandem to undermine the ability of the state and civil society to act as constituent parts of a common civic realm or public sphere.

India's democratic renaissance, therefore, has a dark side. Even though the new political awakening has provided unprecedented opportunities for a diverse society once tightly regulated and governed by Westernized political elites and by the strict rules and taboos of Brahminic Hinduism to explore its multifaceted and checkered histories, the problem is that the society seems to have become prisoners of its own discursive frameworks and narrative accounts. The nostalgia for the "politics of identity" has spawned controversial and acerbic "inventions of traditions" and "imagined communities"; it has reawakened and incited parochial emotions and pitched these "communities" against each other, especially in the Hindi-speaking northern and central states. Mirroring this jaundiced social reality, political party competition has increased along caste, religious-communal, and ethnic-regional lines, with such loyalties the most significant determinant of electoral outcomes.[21] Not surprisingly, political parties of all stripes today place partisan interests above the public good, often pathetically outbidding each other (through promises of costly state entitlements and other guarantees), to consolidate their base and garner new support. The trend is unambiguous: the response of the upper castes (which constitute between 20 to 25 percent of the population), including sections of the traditionally stoic business and commercial elites, has been to gravitate toward the formerly obscure pro-Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose commitment to "good governance" and "traditional values," not to