

THE UNCHALLENGED RUN OF MAJORITARIAN ENCROACHMENTS

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‘Unlike Israel, Hungary and Turkey, where resistance to the populist right wing has come from the educated middle classes, the Indian case is peculiar’ | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

In a recent speech, senior advocate in the Supreme Court of India, Dushyant Dave, expressed his anguish at the seeming co-option of independent institutions to the will of a powerful executive. Mr. Dave contrasted the passivity of India’s civil society and public institutions with the protests that have paralysed Israel. These protests are the widespread demonstrations that have broken out against Israel’s right-wing government over its stated plans that are aimed at restricting the autonomy of the country’s Supreme Court.

The parallel with Israel (made in the speech) does illuminate a necessary pre-condition for the healthy functioning of democratic institutions. This pre-condition is the existence of a civil society base which fortifies the political legitimacy of autonomous institutions in their confrontation with an overbearing executive. In Israel, the civil society base (which has made its presence felt on the streets), in support of the Supreme Court, is made up of the professionalised middle classes, who zealously guard their individual liberties. In the absence of a written Constitution, it is this social base which has kept mainland Israel (excluding the militarised zone of the occupied territories) a relatively free and democratic space. Meanwhile, right-wing parties such as Benjamin Netanyahu’s populist-nationalist Likud draw their support overwhelmingly from the economically marginalised and the less educated segments of Israeli society.

Unlike Israel, Hungary and Turkey, where resistance to the populist right wing has come from the educated middle classes, the Indian case is peculiar because the middle classes here have tended to be its most resolute ideological backers. As a Lokniti survey of 2017 noted, the educated classes displayed the greatest penchant for coercive violence on dissenting individuals (those who ate beef or refused to say ‘Bharat Ma ki Jai’, for instance), along with a higher level of empathy for dictatorship and suppression of speech than found among the cohort of illiterates.

B.R. Ambedkar once explained the importance of a liberal-secular civil society to an American radio broadcaster this way: “The roots of democracy lie not in the form of Government, Parliamentary or otherwise... The roots of Democracy are to be searched [for] in the social relationship, in terms of associated life between the people who form a society.”

Has such a civil society base evolved in Indian democracy over the last seven decades? In several States of northern India, the collective retribution of “bulldozer justice”, stringent laws over the conspiratorial fantasy of “love jihad”, and the unrelenting stream of “police encounters” have certainly shown up the hollowness of the social and institutional support undergirding our constitutional order.

In his work, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966), political sociologist Barrington Moore identified the liberal bourgeoisie as the historical agents of democratisation. According to Moore, at least in the western democratic tradition, these industrial and professional middle classes played a crucial role in constraining state authority and ensuring democratic freedoms partly by pushing their interests through civil society institutions such as the press and trade associations. The Indian path towards modern democracy confounded Moore because, as he wrote in his book, the country “experienced neither a bourgeois revolution, nor a conservative revolution from above, nor so far a communist one”. Perhaps the case of Indian democracy was best captured by Sudipta Kaviraj’s memorable phrase of “passive revolution”, characterised by an absence of substantive democratic struggle and the entrenchment of ruling class dominance through modest reforms and co-option of the symbols of the opposition.

The thesis of a passive revolution was particularly useful in understanding the Congress’s phase of dominance, where the middle classes and labour unions were firmly integrated into the statist model of nation-building.

This lack of space afforded to an independent and oppositional civil society has plagued not just the Congress’s vision of democracy but also later models of democratisation that came up to challenge its hegemonic rule. We can summarise here two such contrasting routes of democratisation: the Mandal route in Uttar Pradesh and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) route in Tamil Nadu.

In Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party (SP) relied excessively on a top-down fabrication of electoral alliances between backward caste groups, while placing little emphasis on nurturing the political space for a democratic civil society. As political scientist Gilles Verniers argued in the paper, [*Conservative in Practice: The Transformation of the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh*](#) (2018), the SP turned increasingly socially conservative by the turn of the century, moving away from its socialist and progressive roots. The political capital made from the Mandal agitation was fed into the construction of a powerful electoral machine, which came to rely on locally dominant social groups for its electoral mobilisation, rather than on a political programme for democratic emancipation. The paper, “Caste and the Power Elite in Allahabad” (2015), written by Jean Dreze et al. conclusively demonstrated how the commanding positions of civil society continued to be dominated by upper castes.

In contrast, the DMK anchored its political mobilisation on a radical re-conceptualisation of the basis of politics, as the political scientists R. Sriramachandran et al. have illustrated in their recent book, [*Rule of the Commoner: DMK and Formations of the Political in Tamil Nadu, 1949–1967*](#). The thesis of the book revolves around the concept of a counter-hegemonic struggle, theorised by the socialist political philosopher Ernesto Laclau.

The DMK, in this formulation, spurned the path of liberal reforms to the political order and waged a struggle on behalf of the ‘people’ (the majority of the backward castes) against the political elite represented by the Congress. The Dravidian movement succeeded precisely because the conception of the ‘political’ was not confined to elections or democratic procedures but encompassed the transformation of the social and economic relations of power.

However, the DMK, much like the Left in Bengal, also did not put too much store by an independent civil society as a guarantor of substantive democracy. Both parties sought to capture state power and then fashion their own civil society, embedded into various ruling party structures.

Indian civil society remains hierarchical and fragmented, desirous more of integrating itself into ruling power structures than challenging them. Therefore, any resistance to majoritarian encroachments on our constitutional order is not likely to come from civil society formations or the independent institutions that rely on their support.

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