Background Paper

Transformations and Social Cohesion in India
SuhasPalshikar

suhaspalshikar@gmail.com

As societies move temporally, the reference point to that movement keeps changing and historical salience of moments in the past varies. Nothing would bring this home more dramatically than the example of most Asian societies that experienced colonial rule until the middle of the last century. For decades, the departure of the colonial ruler constituted the moment of enormous significance. Today, the colonial legacy and its impact would still be important factors in these societies, nevertheless, the more than half century of life after colonialism presents us with new issues and new frames of reference.

In thinking of the 'transformations' that have taken place in a society like the Indian society, there would often be two sets of contextual frames in which transformation might be thought of. The de-coupling from the colonial experience was a momentous development. Countries like India or Sri Lanka became 'free' by the middle of the twentieth century only to confront with tasks of building new national and state machineries. That de-coupling produced a series of transformations with which these societies are still trying to grapple with. But a quarter of a century ago, these—and many other—societies were caught up in the process of a new phase of globalization. Paradoxically, this phase was seen and understood in many societies as being nudged, if not dictated, by global powers that happened to be situated in the 'west' or 'north'. As a result of this location, the processes of moving away from external dominance and of acquiescing into external dominance got mixed up. Consequently, the 'transformations' that we happen to live with (live in) are as much transformations emanating from the moment of moving away from, as they are transformations moving within the circles of, dominance. This duality is deeply ingrained in the contemporary social realities of 'new India' or an India in search of a global status in the twenty-first century.

This duality of self-assertion and dominance, of search for identity and push for merger with the 'global' is evident in the various global objectives and ruling ideas of our contemporary moment. These inevitably lead to confusion and consternation among the ruling elites and the lay publics: democratic governance, millennium development goals, sustainable development, inclusive growth and so on. While these ideas underline the principles of democracy, equality, collective wellbeing, etc., the source for these often always happens to be the outside rather than the inside. The goals become authentic not when the societies themselves pledge for these, but when they are ordained by the international community. The first transformation—of moving away from colonial rule—in fact did talk of these objectives and yet, by the late twentieth century that commitment to creating a

democratic nation-state was set aside in favour of a recommitment to same objectives via a different route of legitimation.

It is this tricky cusp—constituting the slippage of national-state commitment to wellbeing and the reinforcement of same objectives through reinvigorated globalization—that constitutes the basis for any understanding of transformations and attendant challenges in contemporary India in particular and many parts of Asia more generally.

I

Two Moments of transformation

Considering the last one century, while many transformations can be discerned, schematically, it is easier to imagine two particular moments of transformation because both are foundational to India's contemporary self-image and relevant to contemporary debates and fault lines. One of these took shape around 1950 and the other around the turn of the century fifty years later.

The first foundational transformation witnessed by India was the creation of the national state as the political authority. It had three elements: democracy, the ambition of collective wellbeing and nationalism.

Democratic authority: While the formation of state was not necessarily a new thing, the nature of that state definitely was something new—in two respects the state that came into being around mid-twentieth century was 'new'. It was new in its source of authority, and therefore the manner in which that authority was constructed and also the manner in which it was supposed to be exercised. In other words, democracy was formalized and institutionalized with the formation of the new Indian state. The other thing that was 'new' about this state was its purpose. Authority was created not (merely) to regulate but mainly to create a new society as well. This ambition and expectation was eminently modernist in its approach. It believed that departure from older social forms was desirable and that this could be achieved through a democratic state. Therein lay a deep contradiction. If society needed an Archimedean impetus to change, how could this still be a democratic process? The answer was that the authority was founded on democracy while at the same time it was mandated to attempt societal transformations. This presented the new state with enormous burdens—of deciding course of change and delicately working for those changes without jeopardizing the democratic method. This extremely delicate exercise of balancing democratic method and democratic objectives of social change constituted the political transformation—the political in the broadest possible sense of the term.

Goal of wellbeing: Implicit in it also was the transformation of the idea of the state from regulating machinery to instrument of collective wellbeing. The Constitution of India eloquently underlines this task of the state—to attain for all citizens not only freedom on the political-procedural sense, but to ensure better life. The 'Directive Principles' of state policy are a testimony to this just as the numerous policy initiatives immediately on the formation of the republic are indicators of that objective. Not surprisingly, studies on popular perceptions of democracy have found that people

imagine democracy not chiefly in a procedural-institutional format but as equality and welfare. This linking up of welfare and democracy is an important part of the first transformation.

Most societies of the South display this tendency toward redefining democratic state in terms of its ability and responsibility to shape better livelihoods for its citizens.

The national state: Coupled with the coming into being of the new state was the transformation associated with the emergence of the national—not just an idea of the nation but the socio-political fruition of that idea in the form of self-consciousness of national identity and mobilizations based on that. Indian nationhood became the basis for the new state formed as the post-colonial state. While the stateness of that state was in major part inherited from the colonial setup of administration, the ideological basis of the state came from the national self-consciousness. This twin transformation–nationhood expressing through a political authority and that political authority having its legitimation in the idea of democracy—was involved in what is called the formation of the national state authority. This transformation is now pretty distant temporally, but it does constitute and important moment having implications for issues of unity and cohesion as scholars and commentators on India are aware.

The second major transformation took place around the nineties. It is possible to comprehend this transformation too as constituting three elements. In the first place, it consisted of a churning over the issue of national identity. Two, it involved redefining the political economy and three, the class structure of Indian society changed rather substantially.

National Identity: While the contents and the nature of India's nationhood have historically been contested, early twentieth century saw the rise of a consensus mainly under the influence of nationalist paradigm evolved through ideas of Gandhi and Nehru. That became the official version of nationalism and the contesting version remained mostly on the margins. Through a coincidence of many processes, the nationalist vision became the topic of debate by late eighties and the idea of Hindu nationalism began to gain both political strength and public acceptance. This process is still under way, but the older consensus has definitely crumbled and India is going through a deep transformation on the question of national identity—its contents and its purpose—for last quarter of a century. The emergent version combines the ideas of religion and numeric majority to claim nationhood based on a religious (but not spiritual-metaphysical or theocratic) basis. This transformation gels with the changing ideas of national power and the ambition that India would gain status of global power.

Market Economy: The other element of the second transformation is equally complex and multifaceted. It involves changes in the political economy and most political parties are involved in this process, thus giving it the semblance of a consensus. In public debates in India this has been understood as the consensus over 'liberalization' of the economy. This change is deeply connected to the processes of globalization that asserted themselves since the late eighties and continue to constitute the international hegemony. This transformation involved changes in the economic policy, attitude to global capital and ideas of what the role of state should be. While structurally speaking, this change affected the economic policies on a dramatic scale, and while the jury is still out on what exactly is the balance sheet of these policy changes, the package of globalization involved a key change—the idea of development shifted from the focus on collective wellbeing to

a focus on individual material advancement as the principal value.(This is ironical, because as we shall see below, this is also the period of considerable expansion of democracy and yet, the shift away from collectivity to individual has happened—something having implications for the nature of democracy itself).

Class composition: By the time the new economic policies were ushered in, another critical social transformation was already under way: the class composition of Indian society was changing in a major way. The classes that could be broadly identified as the middle classes now became numerous, visible and assertive. If at the point of the first transformation, society was mainly a poor society, at the point of second transformation, though still poverty was an important issue, the face of Indian society consisted mainly of the middle classes. (The reference here to middle class is in the Weberian sense—classes having certain location and capacities vis-à-vis the market and as consumers/buyers; however, it is also possible to imagine a significant shift in terms of share in the 'ownership & control' of resources.) This middle class consists of multiple layers and includes disparate strata, and yet, the imprint of being middle class drives their worldview. More notably, the middle class of the 1990s and onward also had a more diverse social composition than its counterpart four decades ago. It included sizable numbers of the 'OBCs' and a small but growing proportion of Scheduled Castes (SCs). This difference signifies a greater transformation than is often recognized, because besides the economy and the market, this has implications for the social reality of contemporary India.

II

Impact of the two moments of transformation

As would be evident from the foregoing, the two moments of transformation involved many common points of concern. As such, it is useful to consider their impact not separately but as an overall outcome of the processes that emerged during the past six or seven decades. Therefore, this section lists out the larger and long term challenges that have emerged in contemporary India in connection with these transformations and the processes shaped and hastened by those transformations.

Issues arising from 'development' model:

Whither wellbeing?: The development models upheld and pursued by the two moments are distinct from each other in their ideological pedigree and the route taken. Hence they can be independently critiqued. However, the concerns both have produced are more or less the same. In the first place, the concern with issue of poverty would continue. Differences over the ways to measure poverty notwithstanding, the fact remains that incidence of poverty is at unacceptable levels. Though last couple of decades have witnessed somewhat speedy decline in incidence of poverty, if one in every five persons is poor, it still remains a challenge. The greater part of this challenge is the overall quality of life of the bottom 25 percent and related inequities in the distribution of wellbeing. This challenge then touches upon both issues of basic health and education etc. as also the issue of narrowness of the market in its ability to be inclusive.

Explosion of Aspirations: The related challenge arising from the development policy is the issue of aspirations. Democracy and aggressive markets have produced the window of hope and the burden of aspirations. Surveys have shown how citizens expect their household economic condition to 'improve' over time and particularly expect next generation to do better. This hope can be seen as certificate of achievement and yet, it is also the danger that lurks at the corner—with individual aspirations galloping, the collectiveness of the idea of wellbeing recedes into background and at the same time, governments become vulnerable to aspirations. In response, governments would either be forced to indulge more in populist measures or engage in rhetoric diverting attention away from wellbeing altogether.

New Social Configurations: The rising aspirations and simultaneous urbanization produce awkward social configurations. The so-called urban growth is mostly only formal—in terms of formal census categories. At the same time, a larger proportion of workforce continues to be engaged in agriculture. So, the urbanization of labour is slow; urbanization of locales is continuing. As a consequence, there is ruralization of socio-economic relations in urban sphere (as evidenced by increased presence of caste affinities and informalization of economy) and urbanization of aspirations in the rural. The social basis of various newly emerging caste associations, their demands and the caste identities (and sensibilities) that are emerging, all represent this intermixing of the rural and the urban both spatially and in terms of sensibilities.

Challenges of democratization:

Limits of democratic expansion: The political arena presents a fascinating set of challenges, mainly flowing from the complex journey of democracy. After the smooth onward march, the emergency of 1975 intervened to test the resilience of democracy, but India managed to overcome that challenge. The 1990s have been described as the phase of 'democratic upsurge'. That upsurge referred to large scale acceptance of democracy as the norm and as the instrument of the masses. Moreover, the upsurge also referred to possibilities of inclusion of backward communities into the democratic process. However, this expansion of democracy did not necessarily touch institutions— they remained the same—less amenable to democracy. The expansion of democracy also did not encompass the most vulnerable population of the Adivasis (tribal communities), nor did the expansion touch the delicate peripheries such as Kashmir valley or Nagaland. So, democracy did expand but not adequately.

Absence of deepening of democracy: Another challenge related to democracy is the slow pace of deepening of democracy. While the festivities of electoral democracy are chronicled and noted, the recesses of democracy also need mention. In terms of deliberation and public participation in decision-making, the democratization of politics has been extremely slow. The 'third tier' of democracy—the local government—remains in abysmal condition not only financially but also politically. Secondly, social relations among castes and between men and women can be described as undemocratic if not downright anti-democratic. In these two senses, the deepening of democracy continues to be the challenge.

Governance: But democracy has thrown up another challenge. It pertains to governance. Corruption and lack of accountability are common vices of governments in the country. While the democratic dimension of the use of formal power is weak, the public orientation and administrative efficiency are also important—and unattended—concerns. Institutional proliferation does not necessarily lead to better governance; it only leads to multiple power centres that harass the citizen and embarrass democracy. More crucially, the governance challenge weakens the advantage accruing from expansion of democracy because in the absence of democratic governance, democracy tends to become ornamental. So, the gains attained by the acceptance of democratic norm get neutralized by the absence of democratic practice.

Hindu Identity

As mentioned above, from late eighties onward, the assertion of Hindutva as national identity has occupied the centre stage. This has far reaching implications and at least three effects of this assertion are already visible.

Politicization of religiosity: There has been a renewed politicization of religion and religious identities. This is by no means limited only to the Hindu community. This process is shaping the self-consciousness of all religious communities. As a result, religion becomes more a label to be displayed (in a competitive manner) than something to be followed at personal level. In other words, the public display of religious identity and religiosity have become common. Followers are encouraged to publicize loyalty to the religion they belong to. This has implications for inter-religious relations and interactions. This has also implications for what constitutes the public sphere.

Diversity under strain?: Second, in a country as diverse as India, the competitive claims on public space by different religious communities and the display of identity, produce a strain on diversity and its traditional acceptability. Both Hindu assertion and Hindu nationalism expect diverse groups to fall in line with the (Hindu) national identity at the cost of their respective identities and traditions. A long process of homogenization of many groups under the pan-Hindu rubric only means loss of their identities and even for the non-Hindu religious groups, the claims of Hindu nationalism mean that assimilation within the Hindutva fold is a precondition to being nationalist. This erodes the socio-cultural diversity of Indian society.

Majoritarianism: Above all, Hindu assertion has produced a majoritarian imagination of democracy, nationalism and Indian society. This majoritarianism argues that because Hindutva is the basis of nationalism and because Hindus are a majority in India, democratic practice has to hinge on the sentiments and expectations of the Hindu community as Hindus. Non-Hindus have also to acquiesce into the Hinduness of this social order. Thus, the most critical fault line in contemporary India is the ideological position over this issue and three decades of the politics of Hindutva have tilted the balance in favour of majoritarianism as far as large sections of Hindu community are concerned.

III

Unity and Cohesion

How do the transformations and their effects affect issues of unity and cohesion? The formal claim of the Constitution is to promote and bring about 'unity & integrity' and to ensure fraternity among all citizens. This claim is the key objective of India's institutional framework. The ideal of fraternity cogently sums up the idea of cohesion. At least at the time of making of the constitution, this ideal was seen as something rather distant and challenging. The practice of democracy and pursuit of wellbeing were expected to forge unity and cohesion.

It is not necessary to list out the multiple fissures that continue to erupt frequently and put a strain on the goal of unity and cohesion in contemporary India. In fact, diversities would always entail possibilities of constant shaping of fault lines that get reflected in power relations. But in the Indian context some broad points need to be made: first, almost near-complete failure to improve the material conditions of the scheduled tribes—Adivasis—has been the most glaring failure of development policies; second, in spite of state efforts and political mobilization, the scheduled castes find themselves at the receiving end of caste injustice; third, the arrival of modernity has not substantially weakened patriarchy. These deep failures need no elaboration. It is more important to understand why these failures persist in spite of democracy and welfare regime mandated by the Constitution.

In other words, the task is to understand this central contradiction: democracy has not empowered social sections enough to address the core issue of cohesion and development has not cared to address the core issue of inclusion. An easy answer could be that both democracy and development in India are a sham. Though easy and attractive, this indeed is not a useful nor a tenable answer. So, one has to grapple with the reality of marginalization and exclusion despite democracy and development (flawed and limited respectively).

On the development front, India has travelled a long distance since 1950s. It has experimented with broadly two different 'models'—for half a century the state-controlled economy sought to ensure development and distribution. For the past quarter of a century (but in fact overlapping with the previous phase, since the 1980s), India has been experimenting with market economy that expects rapid development (to result in subsequent distribution). So, what explains the apparent failure (so far) of development to ensure inclusion?

Paradox of Regulation: The first phase of development policy regime believed in state regulation. It tended to regulate the entrepreneurial initiative rather than the exploitative instincts. It also produced a fat bureaucracy that became infamous for rent seeking rather than advancing public interest. But the next phase of market based economy shows a contrary tendency. 'Market' and private interests have consistently remained inimical to all regulation. The state has thus been unable to enforce the boundaries between exploitation and free competition. This twin failure has only meant that in either of the two models, public good would be ignored and issues of inclusion side-tracked.

Enforcing new life styles: As we mentioned above, past two decades have seen levelling of aspirations. However, this process has done enormous violence to ideas of happiness and achievement. Market in India hinges on a successful shifting of priorities and life styles of the population. More specifically, the market model has survived because it has systematically attempted to change consumer behaviour and literally pulled individuals and families into the market of commodities and services that do not relate to basic improvement in life conditions. The so-called globalization in the Indian context has meant a fundamental shift away from needs and the superimposition of wants overs needs.

Basic needs: whose baby?: The discourse about basic minimum for decent life has practically disappeared in contemporary India. But issues of hunger, malnutrition, basic health, indebtedness and alienation from sources of livelihood persist on a large scale. State does not seem to have an answer to these issues and markets have no patience for these. Therefore, the development model tends to function on the principle of exclusion rather than inclusion. The emergence of the large middle class has made it possible for the market to sustain itself without further inclusion, however, this is a flawed model even by the logic of market economy.

Similarly, democracy cannot remain smug with its recent expansion and the relative success of the competitive model. So, what issues inform the limited achievements of India's democracy?

Burden of democracy: As mentioned above, India's democracy has been constantly undergoing expansion—new sectors are being democratized, new social sections are competing for power, new institutional mechanisms are being experimented with. In this phase of expansion, it is only natural that the quality of politics would be more acerbic and competitive; that there would be tendency to exploit and emphasize pre-existing fault lines; there would be mobilizations of different sections of society and as a result, instead of being sedate deliberation, democracy would often assume an acrimonious and even divisive character. The politics of identities and the fragmentation of party system need to be seen in this context of possibilities inherent in the democratic project.

Democratic deficit: At the same time, the institutional and governance deficits of democracy in India that we hinted at definitely constitute the limitations of the democratic practice. Besides that, a core deficit of India's democratic practice so far has been that the process of elite consolidation has been far stronger than the capacity of the masses to hold the elite accountable. Therefore, in most sectors of the public arena, one witnesses elite capture without impunity. In spite of the expansion of democracy, India's democracy constantly manifests an inability to balance elite domination with public accountability.

Distortion of Democracy: The third reason why democracy is not able to address issues of marginalization and empowerment in spite of expansion of democracy is because of the distortion it has been going through. As the previous section noted, the slow but steady growth of the majoritarian tendency is neutralizing the gains from expansion. The distortion is happening at three levels. One level is the majority community itself. It begins to believe that it has certain moral rights over the public space by virtue of being a permanent majority. So, the importance of deliberation and compromise is denied. Two, the minority too, is pushed toward the majoritarian logic and keeps searching only for spaces based on its claims as minority, leading to minorityism and producing

parties and politics exploiting the minority complex. Three, and perhaps more crucially, each region, each community locally upholds the majoritarian ethic and thus local majoritarianisms emerge and make it difficult for public reason to shape at the larger societal level.

IV

Concepts and Contexts

In the foregoing discussion, we have bypassed the questions pertaining to meanings associated with ideas of transformation and cohesion. Before we conclude, a brief reference to conceptual issues might be useful. Concepts and ideas can seldom be universal in the abstract sense. They become universal only to the extent certain sensibilities, expectations and empirical conditions become universal. Therefore, it would be appropriate to flag off issues pertaining to the concepts employed in this discussion.

The larger context of transformation: Take for instance the concept of transformation. The discussion of transformations here has focused on three dimensions—nationalism/nation-state, democracy and development/wellbeing. However, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the basic contextual factor. Both in India specifically, and Asia more generally, unlike Europe, twentieth century conceptualization of transformation is mired in a complicated process of vacillation between tradition and the modern. So, all transformation is tinged with debates over what constitutes the modern and whether it strips the society of all tradition. The movement toward the modern is complicated also by the fact that the 'modern' in the form of outward appearances ('lifestyle') is easily adopted in many cases, and in many cases, tradition slips into the modern. The modern in the superficial but relevant sense of technology has also penetrated sections or sectors most resistant to the idea of the modern. But more important challenge to all transformation is the rise of distorted modernities devoid of the fundamental humanitarian drive of modernity. In fact, many distorted modernities deny agency to the human actors, believing in the automatic changes that the modern can bring about. The new forms of religion and religiosity as also the avalanche of market (as choice) and technologies (as emancipation) are instances of distorted modernities. Nation, democracy and wellbeing as ideas and as processes take shape within this larger and complicated context of exchange between tradition and modern in the Asian (or in fact the 'southern') socio-cultural space.

Operationalizing the concept of social cohesion: Let us assume the desirability of social cohesion and also the possibility of its universalization. Yet, two issues pertaining to its operationalization in an empirical setting would remain a challenge to be constantly revisited. First, the idea of cohesion makes better sense in a relatively smaller and /or homogenous social universe. Thus it is easier for members of small-size societies to relate to each other, trust each other and have possibilities of a community feeling. The moment we transpose that idea(l) to a subcontinental society, the issue of scale becomes crucial. What indicators would authentically tell us that someone located in far south in a Kerala village is cohesively linked to someone in Rajasthan or Mizoram?

One possibility is the intervention of technology, in which case, the cohesiveness would have only a formal technological resonance. The other possibility is the political intervention of nationalism. Which again, can be a constructed cohesiveness. So, in judging cohesiveness in large (and complex) societies, we need tobe careful. It is also possible to approach the issue of operationalization in more way. Actual, behavioural trust in fellow persons is possibly distinct from a normative adherence to, and announcement of, trust. It would be for example quite commonplace in India for a train passenger to 'trust' an unknown fellow traveller and leave the luggage with him/her for a while; or for parents to leave their kids in the care of neighbours while the parents are away. How does one understand these commonplace forms of cohesion alongside the caste/religious/community distrusts that we witness? How does one operationally conceptualise the terms that we use as analytical tools for studying societies? The obvious lesson is that conceptualization would have to take serious note of the dichotomy between practice (uninformed by formal precept) and normative commitment (possibly without practice).

Cohesion vs. Contestation: More substantively, while the objective of social cohesion is indeed important, its contextual relevance and meaning needs to be identified. Without denying the necessity of social cohesion as a goal, one needs to remember that societies like India—and again, the South more generally—are going through a great churning associated with the tradition-modern values and social forms discussed above. Almost epic struggles to overcome traditional inequalities constitute the main narrative of social processes in many parts of the globe. As such, weak social cohesion in these societies reflects these struggles and efforts to come to terms with the paradigm of democracy. Only through contesting and disbelieving in norms and practices of the dominant sections the subalterns in these societies are trying to gain self-confidence and assert dignity. In fact, given their contexts, it would be curious if these societies manifest strong cohesiveness.

For instance, in India, caste being the bulwark of the traditional social order, cohesion would come only when the question of hierarchy associated with caste is sorted out. Till then, cohesiveness within a multi-caste village is bound to be weak. Within its fold, caste or community may generate 'social capital' but that capital would be based on internal hierarchy and external suspicion. Hence, the 'trust' among fellow caste-persons is of a deeply doubtful nature just as the 'distrust' for persons from other castes is not a signifier of lack of social cohesion but a function of hierarchy. One of the most serious theoreticians of caste and inequality, Dr Ambedkar, famously described the caste society as a multi-storey building without staircases. This insular sense of dominance and inferiority that impedes cohesion, just as race and ethnicity, would build distrust both within and without because there is no exchange, no interaction, no platform for relating to each other. Therefore, the lack of social cohesion at contemporary moment might be seen more as a possibility of contesting preordained hierarchies rather than a shortcoming or failure.

Cohesion as hegemony vs. cohesion as consensus: This takes us to a more fundamental issue about the concept of cohesion in the context of power relations. This issue is not context-specific. It concerns the shaping of social norms and their acceptance. Cohesion, in order to be based on sharing, fellow feeling and equality, needs to transcend the barrier of elite imposition. As such, when we deliberate on cohesion, we have to ask questions about the social pedigree of the forces of cohesion. History is full of examples where cohesion shapes through hegemony—a long habitual acceptance of not only physical/material domination, but the dominance of ideas through the numbing of the critical faculty. In contrast, social cohesion could be imagined in situations where democratic social interaction and the possibility of challenging power relations are the preconditions. The core question would be: do we aim at replication of the hegemonic model of cohesion cushioned by dominance or do we dream of cohesion as consensus?

About the Author

Suhas Palshikar is an Indian Academic and social and political scientist. He is Co-Director of Lokniti and was Professor in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at the SavitribaiPhule Pune University from 1989 to 2016. He is also the Chief Editor of the journal *Studies in Indian Politics* an international peer reviewed journal brought out by Sage. He specializes in the areas of Political Process in India, Politics of Maharashtra, Political Sociology of Democracy. He has been associated with both the first and the second round of the project on State of Democracy in South Asia.

He has published extensively in edited volumes and journals as also in magazinnes and news papers both in English and Marathi. His latest publications include the co-edited volume, *Party Competition in Indian States* (OUP, 2014) and The BJP and Hindu Nationalism: Centrist Politics and Majoritarian Impulses, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies,* 38:4, 719-735, December 2015.