

# To What Extent is India a Successful Democracy?

Written by Maurice Dunaiski

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I shall suggest that the *sense* in which democracy in a given country is successful depends upon the absence or presence of its citizens' autonomy. The *extent* to which this autonomy is realized depends upon the effectiveness of citizenship rights. Social indicators can help us determine the extent to which citizens have equal access to these rights. I shall argue that in this sense Indian democracy is both successful and unsuccessful. Moving beyond the analytical framework of the nation-state, a comparison between the states of Kerala and Bihar shall help to illustrate this apparent paradox. While disadvantaged groups in Kerala have made the transition from clients to citizens, the example of Bihar shows us that widespread clientelism under the guise of formal democracy can make citizenship rights ineffective and any notion of autonomy illusory.

To begin with we should note that democracy is not an end in itself. I would suggest that it is rather a means to an end which we can define as autonomy. Autonomy is the condition in which an individual can determine the priorities for his or her own personal life and share in decisions about priorities for the collectivity on an equal standing with others (Beetham, 1992). As a justification for democracy this broad conception of autonomy, which encompasses both the individual's priority and the collectivity's priority, is more appropriate than one based solely on the preservation of individual self-interest. This narrow conception of autonomy implies that an individual's autonomy is infringed upon as soon as a binding collective decision is made whose content the individual does not agree with (Wolff, 1970). Of course individual interests are bound to conflict with the interests of the collectivity at some point. But in a democratic setting 'autonomy' can only mean that individuals have the right to participate in the collective decision-making process as equals (Beetham, 1992). It follows that priorities of individuals are to some extent restricted by the interests of the collectivity, but importantly they are restricted *equally* amongst all individuals involved. The end of democracy defined in this way fits very well into Sen's account of what the primary end and principal means of development should be: The expansion of choice, or in other words the expansion of individual and collective autonomy. Going beyond a definition of development which is synonymous with economic growth he attempts to redefine development as a process in which political, economic and social freedoms reinforce each other in a virtuous circle. These freedoms are instrumental in allowing humans to develop their innate capabilities and achieve more control over the circumstances of their lives (Sen, 1999). The *sense* in which democracy in a certain state is successful therefore depends on the absence or presence of its citizens' autonomy.

However, citizen autonomy is not set in stone; either absent or extant in a certain country. I argue that there are different *degrees* of autonomy attainable for citizens and that the degree of autonomy depends on the effectiveness of citizenship rights. In states with liberal democratic regimes the ideal of autonomy is enshrined in the legal concept of citizenship (Fox, 1994). The two concepts of *democracy* and *citizenship* are inextricably linked together. No political system in which the key collective decision makers are selected through fair and periodic elections and in which every adult is eligible to vote can function without conferring upon these adults certain rights and obligations towards the state. The equalizing and potentially universalizing concept of citizenship is a basic component of any democratic political system (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). A vast array of civil, political and usually some socio-economic rights are established by the state in order to guarantee the autonomy of its citizens (Turner, 1990). However, these formal rights are meaningless if they cannot be exercised *equally* by all citizens. Widespread poverty, illiteracy and sickness amongst segments of the population can force these disadvantaged citizens into clientelist bonds with privileged elites (Fox, 1994). Political clientelism is characterized by "a relationship based on political subordination in exchange for material rewards" (ibid. p.153). In a formally democratic setting with regular and competitive

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elections the elites can offer “minimal benefits and protection [to the deprived parts of the population] in exchange for obedience and political support – that is for an abdication of [their] citizenship rights” (Weyland, 1996, p.5). In cases of pervasive clientelism the equalizing and universalizing concept of citizenship rights is crippled because only the privileged can exercise their rights. The citizenship rights of subordinate groups remain largely ineffective. If poverty, illiteracy, sickness and other deprivations can force people into clientelist bonds, it seems plausible to argue that social indicators such as overall health care provision, school enrolment, gender inequality, income inequality, etc. can help us determine the extent to which citizens of a certain country can exercise their rights *equally* and *effectively*.

It follows from the above discussion that the *sense* in which India is a successful democracy is dependent upon the absence or presence of its citizens' autonomy. The *extent* to which Indian democracy is successful depends on the effectiveness of citizenship rights. It is undisputed that the formal institutional parameters of democratic rule such as competitive elections on a regular basis, universal suffrage, legally codified and enforced rights of association, etc. have been relatively constant in India since independence (Heller, 2000). Civil and political rights which are common in most liberal democracies are enshrined in the 'fundamental rights' section of the Indian constitution (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2011). Social and economic rights such as the right to work, adequate housing, primary education, health care, maternity relief, etc. are recognized in Part IV of the constitution as 'Directive Principles of State Policy' (ibid.). Although these socio-economic rights are not directly enforceable in courts, the Supreme Court has often used the 'directive principles' in conjunction with the 'fundamental right to life and personal liberty' in order to assert their constitutional relevance (Sen, 2011). The responsibility to protect and promote socio-economic rights falls mainly within the ambit of individual states and not the government of the Union (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2011). Constitutional reform in the early 90's has further devolved legislative and executive powers with regard to social and development policy to the sub-national and local levels (ibid. 1992). The fissiparous character of India's federal system and the regionalization of Indian politics in the last two decades (Yadav, 1999) thus require us to look beyond the analytical level of the nation-state and instead focus on sub-national differences. These differences make Indian democracy both successful and unsuccessful. I wish to show that the effectiveness of citizenship rights varies considerably *within* India.

A comparison between the states of Kerala and Bihar shall help to illustrate my point. Differences in terms of size and population notwithstanding, these two states are particularly illustrative of my argument because most social indicators suggest that they find themselves the opposite poles of a continuum between effective citizenship and pervasive clientelism.

The *India Human Development Index 2011* places the state of Kerala on the top of the index for “achieving highest literacy rate, quality health services and consumption expenditure of people” while Bihar ranks last among all Indian states (Deccan Chronicle, 2011). In Kerala the adult literacy stands at 96% for males and 91% for females compared to 71% and abysmal 42% in Bihar (Desai et al., 2010). 27% of all Biharis have never enrolled in school while in Kerala school enrolment is basically universal (ibid.). This stark discrepancy between the two states is not confined to the educational sector. The percentage of mothers who give birth in the presence of a qualified doctor amounts to 98 in Kerala and 29 in Bihar. The infant mortality rate within one month of birth lies at 6/1000 in Kerala and 25/1000 in Bihar (ibid.). The healthcare provision in Kerala is fairly universal while the provision of adequate health and medical care in Bihar remains patchy (Pushkar, 2011). In Kerala, historically disadvantaged groups such as women, the scheduled tribes and scheduled castes have been able to catch up in terms of literacy, education and health (UNDP, 2005). Bihar is one of the states in India where the lower castes have made little progress in this sense (Harriss, 1999). Notwithstanding the problematic nature of poverty lines, the Indian government's poverty estimates can give us an indication of the discrepancy between Kerala and Bihar in terms of the prevalence of abject poverty. The percentage of citizens deemed to be below the poverty line amounts to 41.1 in Bihar and a relatively low 15 in Kerala (Press Information Bureau, 2007). Interestingly, Kerala is one of the most unequal states in terms of income per capita and Bihar is one of the most equal (Dreze & Sen, 2002). However, the limitations of inequality measurements based solely on income become apparent when we look at other social disparities such as inequality between the urban and rural population, inequality between castes or gender inequality. In all three cases Kerala fares far better than Bihar. In Bihar 86% of women are married before they reach their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. In Kerala a relatively low 19% of women see their opportunities curtailed because of early marriage (Desai et al., 2010). Differences between the

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median annual household income in rural and urban areas amounts to roughly 20,500 rupees in Bihar and only 7,500 rupees in Kerala (ibid.). In Bihar class membership is still largely dependent upon caste membership. As one observer puts it, "caste continues to be important for structuring relations of production" (Chakravarti, 2001, p.1451). In Kerala this premodern system of social stratification plays a far less decisive role in determining the life chances and opportunities of its citizens (UNDP, 2005). All these figures can only be a rough approximation to the actual ineffectiveness of socio-economic rights in the respective states. However, the important point is that this ineffectiveness differs significantly *between* these states and *within* India.

Kerala has seen successful land reform, poverty reduction programmes and the extension of social protection measures to all of its citizens (Heller, 2000). Remittances from Kerala's huge overseas labour force have allowed it to finance extensive public welfare provisions despite its relatively slow 'hindu rate of economic growth' (UNDP, 2005). High levels of political participation at the local and state level together with the above mentioned socio-economic prerequisites for *equal* participation have ensured that elected representatives remain accountable (Heller, 2000). Democracy in Kerala has given rise to redistributive pressures that have translated into effective social policy and an exceptional performance with regard to most social indicators (Dreze & Sen 2011). It therefore seems plausible to say that most Keralites have made the transition from clients to citizens.

In contrast, formal democracy in Bihar has not enabled its population to make this transition. Land reform and poverty alleviation programmes in Bihar have largely failed and the benefits have often been hijacked by the dominant propertied classes and landed elites (Sharma, 1995). The democratic process is compromised by nepotism, widespread vote buying and a general "criminalization of politics" which feeds on the above-mentioned disparities of opportunities and social inequalities amongst Bihar's citizens (Dreze & Sen, 2002, p.8). Bihar's deprived citizens are forced to exchange their political rights for minimal material benefits. The widespread deprivation amongst the agricultural labourers of Bihar has given rise to violent class conflict and the Maoist Naxalite insurgency (Chakravarti, 2001). Brutal repression and retaliation measures by the police and dominant caste militias have further curtailed the civil rights of Bihar's citizens (ibid.). The case of Bihar shows us that widespread poverty and deprivation can force many people into clientelist bonds with elites that make formal citizenship rights ineffective.

To sum up, I have suggested that the extent to which democracy is successful depends on the effectiveness of citizenship rights. The comparison between the states of Kerala and Bihar has shown that the degree of citizens' autonomy varies significantly *within* India. Indian democracy looked at from this angle is thus both successful and unsuccessful.

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Date written: 01/12