

EXTRAPOLITICS: Indian Democracy and the “Political Outside”

International Workshop University of Göttingen, Centre for Modern Indian Studies

December 5-7, 2012

Outline

How can we understand the proliferation of a range of ways of envisioning what does not, cannot or should not abide by the rules of politics proper? The term *extrapolitics* captures such phenomena by examining political action in three dimensions:

First, consider that in recent years democracies across the globe have witnessed a marked increase in popular dissatisfaction with electoral politics. Although there is considerable cross-national variation in the substantive and procedural dimensions of democracy there is a remarkable global convergence when it comes to the prevailing democratic mood or affective orientation. In most of the world today, citizens are manifestly disillusioned, dissatisfied, and angry with the present state of democratic affairs, with the brunt of their wrath reserved for the institutions, practices, and agents of representative, electoral democracy. India is not immune to this phenomenon of democratic dissatisfaction. Indeed, the spate of anti-corruption agitations in 2011 and the relentless media exposés of political scandals and “scams” remind us that Indian citizens are not merely dissatisfied: they are actively outraged by the excesses and deficits of representative democracy. Thus public expressions of rage are directed against the mendacity and greed of elected officials, the crassness and ineffectiveness of parliament, and the lack of accountability and transparency of government. Scorn directed at the misdeeds of the “political classes” has become a signal feature of public critique, with votaries emerging from diverse quarters, including urban resident welfare associations, rural Maoist movements, civil liberties organizations, popular movements for social justice and equality, national and transnational developmental NGOs, religious nationalist organizations such as the RSS, judicial activists in the Indian Supreme Court, “inclusive capitalism” projects, commercial, grassroots and social media activism, and the violent actions of self-styled vigilante groups against a range of “offensive” objects (from art to intercaste marriage). The specific terms of the critique as well as the proposed remedy for the present ills of democracy vary depending on whether a neoliberal or radical democrat is involved. Thus representative democracy's inherent inefficiency and disorder may be singled out by the former and its exclusivity and cruelty by the latter. But despite these differential diagnoses, the view that existing versions of democracy are in trouble and that electoral politics is the prime affliction constitutes a transideological common sense. From this common sense emerges the view that democracy can be cured by interventions we may call “*extrapolitical*,” a term meant to include all those forms of extra-electoral modification and supplementation that will either reform or entirely obviate the need for electoral democracy. By *extrapolitical*, then, we refer to the kinds of action a range of citizens wish to exert *on* politics proper, from its putative outside.

Extrapolitical as we intend to explore it here, however, has two further definitional registers that share with the first a concern with that outside. There has been a growing scholarly interest in the political participation of actors outside traditional electoral networks, as the recent proliferation of ethnographic accounts of the state and of social movements, and political scientific theorizations of informality attest. One influential set of writings addresses this activity with the thesis of a “split polity.” Scholars such as Ashutosh Varshney

and Partha Chatterjee, for instance, argue that a “two-track” democracy exists in India, where elites and masses (Varshney) and civil and political society (Chatterjee) enact and experience democratic politics in fundamentally different ways. These writings supplant older accounts of civil society, social movements, and subaltern politics but share with them an assumption of separation and opposition between electoral/formal/elite/politics and extraelectoral/informal/subaltern politics that is difficult to validate empirically. Rather than assume their distinction and subsequently set about to explain their manifest connections, we posit these as mutually constitutive. “Extrapolitical” in this sense therefore, is a qualifier that is attentive to how the differential domains of politics (unorganized and organized; informal and formal) require, reconstitute *and represent* one another. How, in short, do the ideas and practices of the extrapolitical, understood as not quite proper politics, produce those of the “political”?

Third, extrapolitics as a field of inquiry addresses what is deemed by states and in the popular imagination to be outside politics entirely, but which is necessary to it in some respect. For the representative state and its bodies, for example, the paradigmatic object of governance is “society.” Government acts upon, draws its agents from, and relies for its legitimation on “society,” even as society is widely valorized for its freedom from the taint of politics. How, historically, did this distinction between society and politics—which undergirds the division between social work and political action that has been central to the Indian political imagination since at least the time of Gandhi—become available, and what are its specific consequences in regional and national political arenas? Likewise, “religion” is said to be an *external* threat to modern politics, even as it is vulnerable to political misuse—yet across the political spectrum invoking hurt religious sentiments is viewed as a valid form of political action, and has been for well over a century. How, to reiterate, does the historical constitution and ongoing reproduction of political “outsides” determine the norms and practices of modern democratic action?

In sum, then, the workshop explores the extrapolitical or “political outside” as an interrelated, and nested set of registers, moving from the non-electoral (critiques of electoral politics) to the non-formal (political society; informal politics) and finally to the idea of the non-political itself (religion; society). Our multidisciplinary engagement with these distinct but contiguous registers has two main aims:

First, to revise the presentism that frames discussions of extrapolitics. For instance, existing explanations for the rise of extra-electoral politics as a normative and material phenomenon have mainly focused on the causal role of economic liberalization. The emergence of extra-electoral action both as an ideal and as an empirical reality has been linked to the consolidation of the “neoliberal India” project since the 1990s. Extrapolitics of this kind, however, has a far deeper history: neoliberalism did not birth the “crisis of representative democracy” as it has been termed, and political experimentation both within and against the logic of representation date back to the earliest inauguration of modern representative bodies in colonial India. A longer view of the social, economic and political transformations that explain ways of imagining the relations among representation, rule and effective action must be taken into account. To this end, workshop papers will examine different historical articulations of extrapolitics in India, and embed the current, “neoliberal” variant in a wider and older social and political landscape. At the same time, papers may choose to explore the historical appearance of “grey zones,” extrapolitical domains like “religion” and “society” that are alternatively valorized or bemoaned as that which cannot be contained by politics but nevertheless has the power to overturn political orders.

Second, the workshop takes the "crisis of representative democracy" as an opportunity to revisit theories of political representation. The critique of representative democracy is at the core of extra-electoral ideologies and practices. We are interested in understanding the character, and limits of this critique: what are the grounds on which representative democracy is challenged; what aspects of representative democracy are deemed particularly troubling or dangerous; and to what extent do the proposed extrapolitical alternatives actually move beyond the paradigm of representational politics? For instance, Anna Hazare's proposal for a Jan Lokpal to prevent political and governmental corruption authorizes "selection" over "election" as the main principle of democracy: the Jan Lokpal is envisioned as a nominated committee comprised of "eminent persons" who will monitor the performance of elected politicians. In this proposal, however, the logic of political representation and the accompanying idea of democracy as a system of delegated and mediated authority relations between a singular representative and those she represents remain unquestioned. By reconsidering in this manner the *nature of representation* that inform this, and other, extrapolitical movements, we render more visible the contingency of the assumed linkage between representation and democracy. Political theorist Hanna Pitkin has famously distinguished between representatives who follow the directions of the represented (the mandate theory) and those who are expected to act independently but in the interests of the represented subsequent to election (the independence theory). Can we examine the empirical instantiations of these normative political-theoretic views on representation—and perhaps devise others—with which to understand what representation is and has been in modern South Asia? How, if at all, have extra-political movements and moments conceived and enacted a *non-representational politics of democracy*, and what relationship does this have to "direct" or "radical" democracy?