



EXPLORING THE NATURE OF COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE NEOLIBERAL CONTEXT IN INDIA

Aheli Chowdhury

Department of Sociology, University of Delhi, 2017

ABSTRACT

Neo liberalization of the state has led to pluralization with stretching horizontally to include the civil society organizations and market on the one hand and scaling vertically to cover transnational bodies and local self- governance institutions on the other. The civil society organization have assumed a new role where they are 'strategic partners' of the state helping to establish the hegemony of the new world order and contribute in practices of 'good governance'. The good governance project, has been accompanied with emergence of questions of governance, participation and accountability. It has also created democratic spaces that can be seen as intermediate and located at the boundaries of the state and the civil society. These spaces are used for negotiations, exchange of information and making demands on the state and for fixing accountability. Participation, thought to extend the domain of citizenship and deepening democracy on the one hand and on the other hand has led to shrinking of state responsibilities and the progressive exemption of the state from the role of the guarantor of rights. This paper argues that this trend of the neo-liberal project has led to transformation of the way citizens engage and view the state, placing more expectation and accountability on the state than perceived earlier. But with the liberalization phenomena at work, there will be instances where state fails to fulfill its role and increasingly prove to be ineffective to deliver. Therefore, does that suggest that there is a growing potential of an imminent crisis in governmentality, caused due to a growing discrepancy between the rhetoric of accountability on

the one hand and instances of rampant corruption, poor deliver of essential services and abuse of power on the other?

Key words: State, Civil Society, Social Movements, Neo-liberalism

Introduction

India has seen surge of a new forms of activism (Chandhoke 2005) post liberalism. These new forms of activism and collective action have had varying effects on practice of governance and on the relationship of civil society and the state. While the larger literature tracing the effects of neoliberalism on relationship of civil society and the state points to increasing trends of de-centering and pluralisation of the state, the recent collective action demanding for expansion of the domain of citizenship rights seems to be placing increasing amount of responsibility on the state. In this paper, I seek to explore the changing nature of collective action given the context of neoliberalism in India and the implication of these changes on governance.

Background

There has been considerable work done to understand the effects of neoliberalism on the ‘state - idea’ and the ‘state -system’ (Abrams 1977) across the world. Such studies have also demonstrated the effect that neoliberal policies have had on the praxis of governance and the emergence of civil society in the last two decades. While theorizing the neo liberal state, David Harvey argues in *Brief History of Neoliberalism (2005)*, that the essential function of the state is to monopolize violence in order to preserve fundamental freedoms, especially those of private property rights along with maintaining the rule of law and allow for free functioning of markets and free trade. Individuals in the meanwhile should take on their own responsibilities of looking after their welfare (Harvey 2005:66). Following from this are the arguments that neo liberalism has caused increasing de-centering and pluralization of the state at different levels. This has stretched horizontally to include the civil society organizations and market on the one hand and vertically panned across transnational to local self government institutions on the other (Chandhoke 2003: 2957). Therefore, as Petras and Veltmeyer (2005) has argued that there seems to be an emergence of the role of civil society organizations, who are now seen as ‘strategic partners’ of the state and which only helps to establish the hegemony of the new world order. In

this the civil society organizations as partners of the government and international development assistance organizations and entrusted with the responsibility to improve the lives of the poor and contribute in practices of 'good governance', while the state becomes just one of the actors taking part in this. They also argue that this partnership is seen in turn to help in balancing and discouraging any possibility of anti-systemic politics and movements to rise in the country (Petras and Veltmeyer 2005:9). Veltmeyer (2004) traces the emergence of the concept of civil society and indicates to the plurality of actors who can be conceptualized to fall in the category of 'civil society'. Some of these actors are described and conceptualized to work towards strengthening the voices of the grassroots, while others considered in the Gramscian framework to be working towards forming the basis for building counter-hegemonic forces and yet others, who were conceptualized by the international development organizations to be their partners in their pursuit of development (Veltmeyer, 2004).

Developments in India seem to have taken similar trajectories. Ray and Katzenstein (2005) indicate that the developments in India can be traced through three distinct periods; the period post Independence where the state took on a more welfarist role, to the period of deinstitutionalization of the state, which saw the weakening of the Congress Party and rise of the Hindu nationalism. This phase was followed by economic liberalization in the 1990s, which saw the state retracting and the role of the market gaining prominence. Rajni Kothari (2002) tracing similar developments, also indicates that the collapse of the welfare state was seen to be replaced by the market and by the new ideology which not only sought to 'dismantle the state apparatus with regards to distribution of national produce in the social sphere, but to fully and systematically use it for promoting the new technologies and the dual economy that goes with them' (2002:80). He mentions that the state now bears a human face and uses liberal symbols of inviting NGOs, voluntary organizations and liberal intelligentsia and others in its new pursuit. The troupe used is of reduction of role of bureaucracy, depoliticization of government and the administration. Simultaneous to the above, the other dangerous outcome of the crystallization of the ruling class can be seen in increasing communal and ethnic tension, which when coalesced with the 'technologism make the exercise of power increasingly cynical' (ibid. 2002:81).

Considering the changes that the Indian democracy underwent, Ray and Katzenstein (2005) argues that organizing and mobilization also changed and adapted to the changing political field. The social movements post independence mainly revolved around the issue of poverty alleviation and nation building, where the state was seen to be responsible for the well being of the poor. With the fall of the hegemony of the Congress Party and deinstitutionalization, the discourse of social movements underwent significant changes. There was a pluralization of issue that movements raised. This period referred as a period of “frame multiplication” saw emergence of movements represented by different groups (Ray and Katzenstein 2005:18). This period marked a departure from the nationalist mood and Nehruvian socialism and saw the rise of the Naxal movements in parts of the country. Women’s movement, the Dalit movement and other mass based movements also surfaced during this time. Though these movements focused on issues of class, caste, gender, labor, environment and others, but the primary issue of poverty was retained. This period also marked the onset of the weakening of the social contract and trust on the state, i.e. erosion of the welfare and developmentalist idea of the state.

However, after the 1990s, which set of the advent of economic liberalization, the state was seen to have been receding and its place been taken over by the market and by the civil society in the political discourse. This period, as in other parts of the world, brought with it proliferation of NGOs which was mandated to work with the state in undertaking developmental work and empower the citizens to improve the quality and inclusiveness of governance. The social movement discourse also underwent changes, whereby the focus had now clearly shifted from poverty alleviation to more equity focused agenda.

Governance and Civil Society

Scholarships examining the phenomena of neo liberalism have indicated to the complex effects of it on the relationship of the state and civil society. Chandhoke (2005) posits that the Seventh Five Year Plan marked the shift in focus from the government to the civil society organizations and to the market in matters of service delivery. Through the subsequent Five Year Plans we find this trend increasingly getting entrenched in policy decisions. However, what we see from here is formulation of several questions regarding not only the role of the state and the emerging civil society but also on its implication on governance. What Chandhoke raises here is that the

question, that though the state in the neo liberal setting seems to be pluralized, but did that shift happen in the political consciousness of the people? Also with the state apparently retracting, what then happens to issues of accountability and who does the citizen fix responsibility on for provisioning of different entitlements? These questions thus open up the debate around the issues of governance and the emerging technologies of rule in the contemporary settings.

The 'good governance' agenda promoted by the neo liberal order has brought in fore questions of government, participation and empowerment amongst others. Cornwall and Coelho (2007) argue that with the economic reforms taking place the need for remodeling of older institutions with colonial legacies was felt, which then led towards constitutional and governance reforms. These, they argue, have given rise to a host of "hybrid new democratic spaces" which can be seen as intermediate and located at the boundaries of the state and the civil society. These spaces provided by the state and often backed by legal and constitutional sanctions forms space, which are regarded by the state as theirs and where the citizens and their representatives are invited. These then produce spaces for negotiations, exchange of information and others (2007: 1). Corbridge et al (2005) through empirical evidence further examines the concerns around participation and its implication on governance. They indicate that though widening of these spaces seem to be altering the ways in which citizens now 'see the state', but it is rendered complicated with the presence of different intersecting issues on the ground. Corbridge et al (2005) trace the presence of the notion of participation in the nationalists agenda promoted by both Gandhi and Nehru, but say that Nehru understood that spaces for popular participation had to be sustained by politics and institutional changes and not by moral exhortation and appeals to the better nature of the members of the landed elite (2005: 123). Later revoked by Robert Chambers and others, who proposed that with a change in attitude of the public officials and altering of the position of "whose reality counts" it would help in placing the world view of the "lower" (beneficiaries) over that of the world view of the "upper" (policy makers). Thus, participation would have the potential to change power relationships dramatically in the mainstream development practice. However, empirical findings of a study conducted in some districts of West Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand by Corbridge et al. (2005) reflect the complex pattern that participation acquired due to various local factors. Drawing on the example of one of the districts of West Bengal that faired well in the scale of participation in their study, Corbridge

et al. (2005) observed that though during village meetings, which were held to decide on public works, a large number of villagers turned up, but it was mainly to endorse the decision of the village headman or party members. Also in cases when villagers did suggest projects, they were found to have been briefed prior to the meeting by party members. They also observed that during these village meetings, discussions and debates around performance of previous projects and other similar matters were discouraged by the party members and other dominant people. These meetings when people actually voiced their opinion were termed “bad meetings” by the party members. Also Corbridge et al. suggests that since in most cases the lower level state officials found themselves distant from these communities, they often took the route of more “educated villagers” to gain entry into the village and accordingly most of the projects got decided and planned under the influence of the dominant community. In this reference, Moose (2001) mentions that the formal exercise of participation then “serves to represent external interests as local needs, dominant interests as community concerns”(2001: 140). Following from these findings, Corbridge et al. maintain that the rhetoric of participation though have opened up spaces for the citizens to press for their demands and have provided a more egalitarian frame for structuring the state and poor encounters, but enduring presence of factors like lack of awareness and information, persisting and extreme forms of social exclusion, have dampen these efforts. They found that in most cases, the people continue to see the state as they did before the advent of these participatory mechanisms. These findings however indicate to the underlying gaps between normative assumptions promoted by proponents of the ‘good governance’ agenda and empirical realities. Thus making evident that the participation of the poor and the marginalized is far from straightforward and that there are several preconditions that exist which influence their entry into the participatory institutions. Thereby saying that much depends on *who* enters these spaces, on *whose* terms and with *what* authority (Chandhoke 2003).

Therefore, in this context, Evelina Dagnino (2005) highlights a “perverse confluence” between two versions of participation in contemporary debates on governance. She mentions that on the one hand, participation is projected as agenda aiming to extend the domain of citizenship and deepening democracy and on the other hand, participation has come to be associated with shrinking of state responsibilities and the progressive exemption of the state from the role of the guarantor of rights (2005: 159).

Governance and Citizenship

Having laid down some of the debates around the conceptualization of participation in practice of governance, it is important to look at the other aspects that have been on the foregrounded. As discussed earlier, economic liberalization was seen to couple with the need for democratic reforms that sought to relieve the state from its duties and instead bringing in strategic partners from both civil society organizations as well as the market. Linking this with the Dagnino's (2005) argument, we see how the new technologies of rule seem to redefine notions of citizenship and democratic rights. Chandhoke argues that if the state has been de-centered and pluralized, then what happens to citizenship rights? And considering that these rights are given and guaranteed by the state, then with the state retracting, who does the citizen look for enforcement of their rights?

These are crucial questions to examine, not only because the present governance patterns provokes them, but also because the recent activism in India can be seen to advocate for greater expansion of the domain of democratic rights. Recent legislations like the Right to Information Act, the Right to Education Act, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), National Food Security Act and others uses the discourse of rights and accountability and the assumption of the participation of the citizen for claiming these 'rights'.

As Chandhoke (2003) assert that the discourse of 'rights' can be traced in political theories through two interdependent historical processes. First, the transition from the "individual as subject" to "individual as citizen" and second, described as the growth of the modern state. She further explains that on the one hand, the modern state was seen to have acquired power not known to the pre-modern state and on the other hand the centralization of the power in the form of the state was subjected to an entire range of constrains in the form of rules of law, the constitution and most significantly the rights of the inhabitants of the polity (2003:2958). This seems to give rise to the paradox that though individual rights bind the state, it is also the state that recognizes these rights into legal norms and upholds them through the Constitution and the judiciary. Therefore, suggesting the 'reciprocal and interdependent relationship between the recognition of rights and the existence of a single, definable, identifiable system of authority that we term state' (ibid. 2003: 2958).

Therefore with the neo liberal proponents pushing the state to retreat, and the discourse of governance been taken over by non-state actors, we see the state now taking on a more 'mediatory and enabling' role rather than an apex authority. Thus the argument of Chandhoke (2003) that what then happens to the practices of democratic citizenship, as democratic citizenship was seen to be dependent of a state, which recognized rights as moral constraints on its power (2003:2963). This question is further complicated when we consider the debates around questions of representation and participation. As in this context, Chandhoke (2003) further points out that with increasing instances of civil society organizations becoming providers as well as intermediaries, it not only blurs the boundaries between the civil society and state, but also raises questions on their autonomy and accountability. However, Cornwall and Coelho (2007) points to the reconfiguration of state and society relationship with the introduction of the new democratic sites and practices, which underline the understanding that both of state and the civil society needs to be understood as heterogeneous and mutually constitutive terrains of contestation (Houtzager 2003; Skocpal and Fiorina 1999; Chandhoke 2003, Cornwall and Coelho 2007:7).

Nature of Collective Action

Having placed the above considerations, it may be useful to understand the nature of collective action in the present context. John Harris (2010) argue that contemporary collective action has to some extent been able to restore the receding role of the state. By invoking the language of rights, these movements sought to hold the state 'accountable' for provisioning of entitlements as 'rights'. He mentions that the effects of neo liberal project in India have been tempered due to its Constitutional design and historical state tradition. As Chandhoke (2005) assert that the neo liberal drive is taking place in a context of a society that has strong expectations of responsibilities of the state with regards to provision of social welfare and is widely shared across different social classes. Drawing from empirical data, Chandhoke (2005) indicates that the role of the state has not been dislocated from the political consciousness of people. The political expectation of the state to provide for basic needs persists. She explains the presence of such expectations to be an outcome of two interrelated historical processes – 'the political rhetoric and the political practices of the state, and the practices of the civil society that continue to fix responsibility on the state (2005:1037). Therefore, we see movements evoking both the

Constitution and the judiciary to fix responsibility of the state and restoring citizenship rights, thereby seeking to reinstate the centrality of the state.

Harriss (2010) discusses contemporary collective actions, which sought legislation of different social and economic rights. They include the Right to Information campaign, the movement around the Right to Education Act and the right to food campaign. The right to education campaign after sustained advocacy and mobilization was able to push for a Constitutional amendment in the year 2001 which made the state guarantee provision of free and compulsory education for children within the age of 6- 14 years. This was finally legislated and became a law (The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act) in the year 2009. Similar trends were seen for the collective action under the right to food campaign. This campaign sought the intervention of the Supreme Court to fix responsibility of the state to provide for food grains in times of acute deprivation and scarcity. Subsequent to the filing of a public interest litigation, the Supreme Court issued notices to the government to provide mid day meal to all schools and to extend the scheme of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). After this, the movement has been seen to advocate for legislation of a more holistic intervention to fight hunger and starvation. This campaign along with the right to information campaign advocated for the legislation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Right to Information Act. Both these legislation were passed by the UPA government in 2005 as part of their Common Minimum Program agenda. The MGNREGA guarantees the right to 100 days of rural employment. And the Right to Information Act mandates provisioning of information thereby seeks to bring about greater transparency and accountability in governance.

Having discussed some of the contemporary movements and collective action Harriss's refers to Polanyi. Polanyi in *The Great Transformation* (1944) says that 'the myth of neo liberalism posits self-regulating market economy. Such an economy, in his view, can never be fully realized because it depends upon the reduction of 'labour', which means people, 'land', which means the natural environment, and money, to commodities. In his analysis of the history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries he shows the existence of a 'double movement', as people resist being treated as commodities, and he argues that the turmoil of the first half of the twentieth century can be understood as the outcome of the double movement - which is the push on the one

hand to realize the self-regulating market economy (the goal of neo-liberalism), and the protective countermovement that emerges to resist it on the other' (Block 2001: xxviii).

Therefore, though there seems to be presence of a “double movement” as Hariss explains, but these movements, which have been essentially driven by the middle class and using transnational linkages also demands for caution towards over optimism. Amita Baviskar (2007), while examining the right to information campaign argues that it cannot be reduced to a mere coincidence that forty countries in the world enacted Right to Information legislation in the last decade. She further maintains that though the kind of popular upsurge that this campaign brought about in India was unlike what other countries saw, but the spread of RTI legislations across the world could also be traced to institutions like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. It seemed to feature as one of the key elements of their ‘good governance’ programs (2007:20). Also the fact these movements haven’t been able to address other critical issues like of informalization labor, displacement, problems of urban poverty and others and have mainly functioned by advocating with policy makers points to their limited reach.

Conclusion

Therefore, while trying to reflect on the different debates in the present discussion we see two interconnected phenomena at work. On the one hand, with the advent of new economic policy in India, we find the state retreating from its social and developmental responsibilities. This has caused pluralization of the state and got in civil society organizations and the market to take its place at different levels. On the other, experiences of different movements in contemporary times points to the fact that they have been able to use instruments of the state to push for legislations that made different social and economic demands as ‘rights’. These along with other similar trajectories have led an expansion of the domain of citizenship rights. These legislations have promoted provision of institutional participatory sphere where citizens can effectively participate and claim their rights. These participatory spaces can be seen to potentially contribute along three dimensions- multiplying spaces in which growing number of people come to take part in political life, give rise to neo political subjectivities and open up many more areas of decision making to public engagement (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007:7). Corbridge et al. (2005) also resonates this argument and posit that even though empirical evidences complicate drawing

straightforward linkages, but such intervention does influence the way citizens now 'see the state'.

But the state is often understood through everyday practices and the representations of the state, therefore it may be said that with the new technologies of rule which makes the state accountable to citizens on the basis of statutory rights may seem to promote better sighting of the state by the citizens.

Thus, viewing both these two intersecting phenomena together, I am left with two main arguments; first, the transformation of the way citizens now engage and view the state places more expectation and accountability on the state than it may have been perceived to have post liberalization, which clearly saw the role of the state diminishing. Second, following from the first, that with the liberalization phenomena at its work, there will be instances where state fails to fulfill the entrusted responsibility and increasingly prove to be ineffective to deliver. Therefore, does that suggest that there is a growing potential of an imminent crisis in governmentality, caused due to a growing discrepancy between the rhetoric of accountability on the one hand and instances of rampant corruption, poor deliver of essential services and abuse of power on the other?

This formulation can find some ground with the eruption and mass mobilization around the issue of corruption and the 'Jan Lokpal act'. This movement clearly saw a new age anti-systemic mass mobilization that managed to forge alliances with different sections of the society across the country. The debates that dominated the public discourse while demanding for strict measures for curbing corruption and holding the corrupt to task by demanding for the legislation of Jan Lokpal, were also interpreted to be inherently challenging the democratic functions and powers of the state.

Thus it may be said that in the neo liberal context in India, the contemporary collective action seems to point towards an evolving trend. These new forms of activism may be seen to reproduce a complex terrain that has reconfigured the relationship of the state and the civil society. Therefore saying that there is need to examine these movements to understand how they

conceptualize and engage with the state and how that is affecting the way people now 'see the state'.

Bibliography

- Abram, P. 1988. Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977). *Journal of Historical Sociology*. 1 (1): 58-89
- Baviskar, A. 2007. *Is Knowledge Power?: The Right to Information Campaign in India*. Institute of Development Studies. <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/Part/proj/pnp.html>. Accessed on January 16, 2012
- Chandhoke, N. 2003. Governance and the Pluralisation of the State: Implications for Democratic Citizenship. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 38 (28): 2957-2968.
- -----, 2005. Seeing the State. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 40 (11): 1033-1039
- Corbridge, S., Williams, G., Srivastava, M., and Vérnon, R. 2005. *Seeing the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cornwall, A. and Coelho, P., Schattan Vera (eds). 2007. *Spaces For Change? The Politics of Citizen Participation In New Democratic Arenas*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Harriss, J. 2010. Reforms Guided by Compassion and Justice?: The Tempering of Neo-Liberalism in India. In Ruparelia, S., Reddy, S.; Harriss, J. and Corbridge, S. (eds). *Understanding India's New Political Economy: A Great Transformation?* Oxford: Routledge.
- Kothari, R. 2002. Masses, Classes and the State. In Shah, G. (eds). *Social Movements and the State: Readings in Indian Government and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Oskar, V. 2005. *Migration and Militants: Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Petras, J., and Veltmeyers, H. 2005. *Social Movements and State Power: Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador*. London: Pluto Press.

- Ray, R. and Katzenstein, M.F. (eds). 2005. *Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power and Politics*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sharma, A. and Gupta, A. (eds). 2006. Rethinking Theories of the State In An Age of Globalization. In *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*. pp Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Veltmeyer, H. 2004. *Civil Society and Social Movements: The Dynamics of Intersectoral Alliances and Urban-Rural linkages in Latin America*. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. Programme Paper no. 10.