

Habermas in India

Rajeev Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld, eds. 2005. *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions*. New Delhi, Thousand Oakes, London: Sage. 420 pages, ISBN 0 7619 9832 2

Hans Schenk

Does the concept of the public sphere, born of 18th and early 19th century Western Europe, apply to (colonial) India? In addressing the concept of the public sphere, the volume's co-editor, political scientist Rajeev Bhargava, refers extensively to the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, whose *Structural Change of the Public Sphere* appeared in English only in 1991. Its original publication, in German in 1962, spawned a European debate which the book's English translation helped turn into a global one. Embedded in Western European history, Habermas's concept of the public sphere developed with the emergence of bourgeois society, conceiving the 'market' as a meeting place of 'equal' members of an informed bourgeoisie who engaged in critical, rational and enlightened discussions ultimately aimed at formulating the 'common good'. Habermas states that the public sphere reached its zenith in the mid-1800s and subsequently degenerated to an arena of competing private interests. The logic of reason similarly became subjected to manipulation and negotiations that created inequality and degraded citizens to a mass of consumers.

Public sphere?

In his lengthy introduction to 16 essays based on a workshop held in Bikaner, India, in 2001, Rajeev Bhargava discusses this collection's main concepts: civil society, public sphere and citizenship. Civil society is defined by more or less voluntary organisations outside the purview of the state. Public sphere refers to a common and publicly accessible space, such as a market place, pub, newspaper or the internet, which serves the purpose of framing public opinion, while citizenship is membership in a political community. Two essays focus on western issues and the rest (14) on India and its colonial predecessor.

Bhargava answers his key question of the concept of the public sphere applying to (colonial) India in the negative. The story of individuation and freedom in the West, he argues, cannot be replicated in India (pp.21, 44-45); Indian relations between the family and the individual are not conducive to the emergence of autonomous individuals. However, Bhargava concludes, the western concept may help explain the nature of Indian public life and its historical trajectories (p.33). This nuance puts some authors in a challenging position.

They make comparisons by drawing the western concept of public sphere into their discourses and often conclude that its pre-conditions and characteristics do not correspond to Indian societal conditions.

Farhat Hasan explores the public sphere in Moghul India and finds it present throughout, where commoners and the intelligentsia participated in discussions in mosques and markets. However, Hasan provides a wealth of detail that shows these were not meeting places for equal citizens; nor were they egalitarian (Forms of Civility and Publicness in Pre-British India, pp.84-106). Elites dominated the public sphere and the presence of women was limited.

Inequality

Neera Chandhoke demonstrates one reason for this lack of egalitarianism. She reminds the reader that Habermas's concept of the public sphere requires a shared language and the same normative, objective and subjective worlds of its participants (p.334). What happens when two languages expressing different understandings encounter each other in the public sphere? Chandhoke turns to the example of the large-scale displacements of tribal communities for the construction of the Narmada dam and reservoir. The government used land ownership (demonstrated by official documents) to determine the amount of compensation owed to tribal households. However, because this concept of land ownership was unknown to tribal communities, the government simply gave no compensation at all. Chandhoke does not elaborate on bureaucratic indifference but instead concentrates on language, seeing the example '... as a story about the collision of two languages and the victory of one at the expense of the other' (p.338).

Neeladri Bhattacharya is more cautious. Instead of making comparisons with the West European public sphere and analysing the differences, he investigates its conceptual power in the context of India's colonial modernity. He concludes that there was no homogenous, consensual unitary sphere; rather, it was deeply fragmented. Dialogues in the public sphere did not end in consensus; to the contrary, they often reaffirmed differences and continued to be structured by power relations controlled by colonial rulers. Thus the public sphere became an arena of struggle: 'The public language of reason was used by the colonial power to critique Indian

society and legitimate British rule as the bearer of rationality, but the same language was turned around by Indians to critique colonialism as the embodiment of unreason' (p.156).

Some essays emphasise (in)equality in the public sphere. Gopal Guru argues that the inclusion of the former untouchables (now called Dalits) into constitutional arrangements has not brought about equal citizenship for this section of Indian society. It instead faces internal exile, because the Indian public sphere is based on mutually exclusive social groups, and, for the Dalits, characterised by the Hindu purity-pollution logic (pp.275-276). Addressing another form of inequality, Anuradha Chenoy discusses the impact on women of the political sphere's collapse during conditions of civil war (for example, in Punjab, Kashmir, etc), when women were forced to take part in armed conflicts and yet were not accepted as equal combatant partners (Women and the Breakdown of the Public Sphere, pp.365-384).

Civil society and citizenship take a less dominant position in the book, despite one chapter devoted to the constitutional arrangements of citizenship in India and another on refugees and illegal migrants. Only in the exciting contribution by Aditya Nigam does civil

society take centre stage. Starting with a few tragicomedies in Delhi, Nigam contrasts the rational behaviour of civil society's established institutions, such as the press, with the irrational mind of the common people, the 'population'. The author shows the contradiction inherent to a liberal and bourgeois civil society trained in Nehruvian secular and rational discourse and paternalistically opposing an Indian population still largely dominated by 'underground' Hindu and Muslim orthodoxy and particularistic communalism (Civil Society and its 'Underground', Explorations in the Notion of 'Political Society', pp.236-260).

Most essay authors are political scientists and historians, which may explain why the concept of civil society is dealt with in a rather abstract manner, focusing on institutions rather than on their members. A conceptual extension of public sphere and civil society is civil consciousness: the awareness among members (or categories of members) of a society of being related, interdependent and of sharing common responsibilities. Unfortunately, the authors do not incorporate it. Civil consciousness is a sociological or even social-psychological analytical tool and its application could have enriched some of the essays. Manor, for example, applied it

convincingly to help explain the lack of civic action following a dramatic case of alcohol poisoning among the poor in Bangalore, in 1981, which shed light on the nature of the city's civil society and public sphere.¹

However, the book remains very rich and every contribution illuminates aspects of Indian society, past and present, and irrespective of whether Habermas's concept of the public sphere applies. While the book clarifies pluriform (British) India's historical and present societal conditions for those who have at least a good working knowledge of these fields, it is certainly not an introduction to 'India: past and present'. Newcomers may get lost in the sophistication, subtleties and details of essays that sometimes lose touch with Indian realities. Fortunately, essays by Guru, Chenoy, Nigam and others bring the reader back down to earth. ◀

Note

1. Manor, James. 1993. *Power, Poverty and Poison, Disaster and Response in an Indian City*. New Delhi: Sage.

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