Habermas in India


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 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 this point, 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 tragicomic episodes 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’ Hindus and Muslim orthodoxy and particularistic communalism (Civil Society and its ‘Underground’, Explorations in the Notion of ‘Political Sphere’, 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, Chennu, Nigam and others bring the reader back down to earth.

Note


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