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THE ROOTS OF DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

Democracy in India is a fascinating phenomenon. Democracy has failed or never started in many poor Third World countries, but it has survived and still prospers in India. The existence of multiparty democracy in India seems to challenge, if not to falsify, the predominant Western theory on the prerequisites of democracy, which correlates the emergence of democratic governance with a high level of economic development. Many social scientists have accepted this hypothesis since Daniel Lerner's book *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958), in which he claimed that "democratic governance comes late, historically, and typically appears as a crowning institution of the participant society"¹, and S.M. Lipset's article of 1959, in which he hypothesized that "the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy"². Empirical evidence supports this hypothesis although not without significant exceptions³. India is a great and the most glaring deviation. Its GNP per capita is very low, but it has a competitive political system - indeed a polyarchy, as Robert A. Dahl points out⁴. How to explain this deviation? Where are the roots of democracy in India? These are the major questions of my study on India.

Theoretical approach

Many researches have tried to explain India's deviation by means of some unique historical factors. It has been popular to refer to India's institutional inheritance from the colonial period as an explanation. Samuel P. Huntington, for example, assumes that two important political institutions, the Congress Party and the Indian Civil Service, dating from the nineteenth century, formed the basis for India's democratic development⁵. During Nehru's time it was usual to refer to his personality as an explanation.

Of course historical inheritance and personalities matter, but I am not satisfied with these explanations. It seems to me that it is too easy to find historical factors which fit the case and to change them according

to the need. Besides, in these explanations politics is often treated as if it were independent of its social environment. This erroneous conception of politics led the colonial powers to an attempt to plant their own political institutions and democratic practices in all their colonies becoming independent, irrespective of social circumstances. It was a noble but deeply unrealistic enterprise, as the post-independence history of these countries has amply demonstrated.

I would like to find a more systematic and universal explanation, which connects the nature of a political system to its social environment. According to my theoretical proposition, the degree of power distribution is ultimately determined by the degree to which important power resources are distributed among independent groups. Political systems in which power is widely distributed can be regarded as democracies.⁶

This theory on power relations was used in my comparative study covering 119 states of the period 1850-1975. Two basic political variables, (1) the smaller parties' share of the votes cast in parliamentary or presidential elections and (2) the percentage of total population which actually voted, were used to measure two dimensions of power distribution or democratization: the degree of competition and the degree of participation.⁷ These basic political variables were combined into two indexes of power distribution. Five social variables - (1) the percentage of urban population in cities with 20,000 or more inhabitants, (2) the percentage of non-agricultural population, (3) the number of students in universities and equivalent degree-granting institutions per 100,000 inhabitants, (4) the percentage of literate population, and (5) the share of family farms of the total area of holdings - were used to indicate the distribution of economic and intellectual power resources. Together, these five explanatory variables were able to explain statistically 65 per cent of the variation in the weighted index of power distribution (WI) in the comparison group of 820 decennial observation units. India remained a clearly deviating case in this study, too. Political power in India seemed to be much more widely distributed than expected on the basis of the five explanatory variables.⁸

On the other hand, because India has remained a greatly deviating case since the beginning of the 1950s, it is reasonable to suspect that India is not a real deviation. Perhaps the fault is in the explanatory variables

which do not take into account all important power resources. For this reason I hypothesized that India ceases to be a deviating case when the distribution of politically relevant human, economic, and intellectual power resources are taken into account more completely than in earlier studies. In other words, I assumed that democracy might be a natural political system in India's circumstances.

Variables

The research problem was divided into two parts. The first task was to locate the roots of democracy in India or to formulate new explanatory variables indicating and measuring the distribution of power resources. The second task was to investigate whether empirical facts support the hypothesis or not.

In every society there are innumerable power resources which can be used and which actually are used in the struggle for power. It was thought that in the case of India the most important power resources might be found from four broad sectors of the Indian society: (1) cultural pluralism, (2) socioeconomic development, (3) economic structure, and (4) the distribution of knowledge.

The first sector concerns cultural and regional cleavages and social groups based on them. It is assumed that these cleavages offer fertile soil for the roots of democracy because they have produced permanent interest conflicts and divided human resources into more or less separate groups.⁹ Pluralistic structures¹⁰ hinder the concentration of power in the hands of one party or the central government and provide a basis for cultural and regional parties. The second sector concerns the level of socioeconomic development. It is assumed that economic and intellectual resources become more widely distributed when the level of socioeconomic development rises. This leads to the emergence of many new interest conflicts and associational interest groups. In the third sector the economic structure is investigated from the aspect of resource distribution. It is assumed that the more widely various economic power resources are distributed in the society the more favourable is the economic structure for the emergence and success of democracy. The distribution of economic power resources will be analyzed separately in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors of the economy. The fourth sector

concerns the use of knowledge as a power resource. The forms of knowledge are innumerable and it is impossible to formulate measures which could take into account all relevant aspects of the phenomenon. In this connection some features of the educational system are taken into account. It is assumed that wide distribution of modern knowledge is favourable for democracy because it makes many competing groups able to take part in politics.

The following operationally defined variables are used to measure the distribution of power resources in the four sectors of society:

I. Cultural pluralism

I.A. Cultural and regional cleavages

- (1) the combined share of smaller racial or ethnic groups of the total population,
- (2) the combined share of smaller linguistic groups of the total population,
- (3) the combined share of smaller religious groups of the total population.

I.B. Caste system

- (4) the combined share of the smaller castes of the total population.

II. The level of socioeconomic development

- (5) percentage of the population in cities of 20,000 and more inhabitants,
- (6) non-agricultural population as a percentage of the economically active population,
- (7) literates as a percentage of the population (usually 10 or 15 years of age and over).

III. Economic structure

III.A. The structure of land ownership

- (8) the share of family farms of the total area of agricultural land.

III.B. The structure of non-agricultural economy

- (9) self-employed as a percentage of the economically active non-agricultural population,

- (10) workers in the private sector as a percentage of all factory workers,
- (11) deposits in the private sector's banks as a percentage of all bank deposits,
- (12) private sector's share of fixed capital formation.

IV. The distribution of knowledge

- (13) number of students in all schools per 1,000 inhabitants,
- (14) number of students in secondary schools per 10,000 inhabitants, and
- (15) number of students in universities and other institutions of higher education per 100,000 inhabitants.

These basic variables were combined into indexes by sectors. Variables 1-3 were combined into an index of cultural cleavages by calculating the arithmetical mean of the three variables. In the same way variables 5-7 were combined into an index of the level of socioeconomic development, variables 9-12 were combined into an index of the distribution of economic power resources, and variables 13-15 were combined into an index of the distribution of knowledge. Variables 4 and 8 were assumed to be important enough to be used separately. Thus we have 6 explanatory variables. The arithmetical mean of those six variables will be used as an additional explanatory variable. This is a summary variable which is assumed to indicate the total distribution of human, economic, and intellectual power resources. These variables are discussed and statistical data on them are given in the full research report.¹¹

Research methods

The research problem was formulated in such a way that it became possible to test the hypothesis by statistical analysis techniques. Because the use of statistical analysis techniques presupposes the existence of more than one or two cases and because the results based on several cases can be regarded as more reliable than conclusions made on the basis of a single case, I decided to include India's neighbouring countries - Bangladesh, Burma, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka - in the comparison group. The period of statistical analysis covers the years of independence until 1979, in the case of Nepal the years 1920-79. A decade is used as a time unit of

analysis. The comparison group comprises 23 decennial observation units. Correlation and regression techniques are used in the statistical analysis. Correlation analysis is used to test the hypothesized positive relationship between political and social variables. Regression analysis is used to test the hypothesis according to which India ceases to be a deviating case when the distribution of politically relevant human, economic, and intellectual power resources are taken into account more completely than in earlier studies. The Y estimates and residuals produced by regression equations indicate how accurately single countries and decennial observation units have fitted into the regression line.

Results of analysis

The main results of correlation analysis are given in Table 1, which includes the intercorrelations of four political and six social variables in the total group of 23 observation units. One social variable (caste) is excluded from correlation analysis because it is relevant only for India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. It was, however, taken into account in the cases of these three countries when the arithmetical means of social variables were calculated for the summary variable (12). Variable 11 (index of the distribution of knowledge as a percentage of 400 index points) is also excluded from correlation analysis because it is the same as variable 10. It was used instead of variable 10, the values of which are absolute numbers, in calculating the arithmetical means of social variables for the summary variable.

Table 1 shows that all the political variables are moderately or strongly correlated with the social variables as hypothesized, although the strength of correlations varies. Variable 12 has somewhat stronger correlations with the political variables than any of the single social variables. This can be interpreted to mean that it really combines the explanatory powers of social variables 5-9 and 11. In the best case ($r = 0.907$) the coefficient of determination (r^2) is 0.822, which means that the values of variable 12 explain 82 per cent of the variation in WI. These results strongly support the theoretical proposition which claims that the degree of power distribution is ultimately determined by the degree to which politically relevant power resources are distributed among independent groups. In other words, the nature of a country's political

Table 1

The intercorrelations of political and social variables in the group of 23 observation units, 1920-79.

Variables:

1. Votes
2. Participation
3. Index of power distribution
4. Weighted index of power distribution
5. Cultural cleavages
6. Caste
7. Level of socioeconomic development
8. Family farms
9. Non-agricultural economic power resources
10. Knowledge
11. Knowledge variable as a percentage
12. Mean of variables 5-9 and 11

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	7	8	9	10	12
1.	1.000									
2.	.831	1.000								
3.	.880	.960	1.000							
4.	.949	.951	.980	1.000						
5.	.378	.345	.422	.430	1.000					
7.	.679	.785	.703	.731	.156	1.000				
8.	.461	.655	.528	.534	-.068	.618	1.000			
9.	.739	.379	.454	.573	.397	.446	.070	1.000		
10.	.673	.856	.784	.778	.116	.754	.810	.257	1.000	
12.	.813	.901	.894	.907	.579	.698	.626	.529	.838	1.000

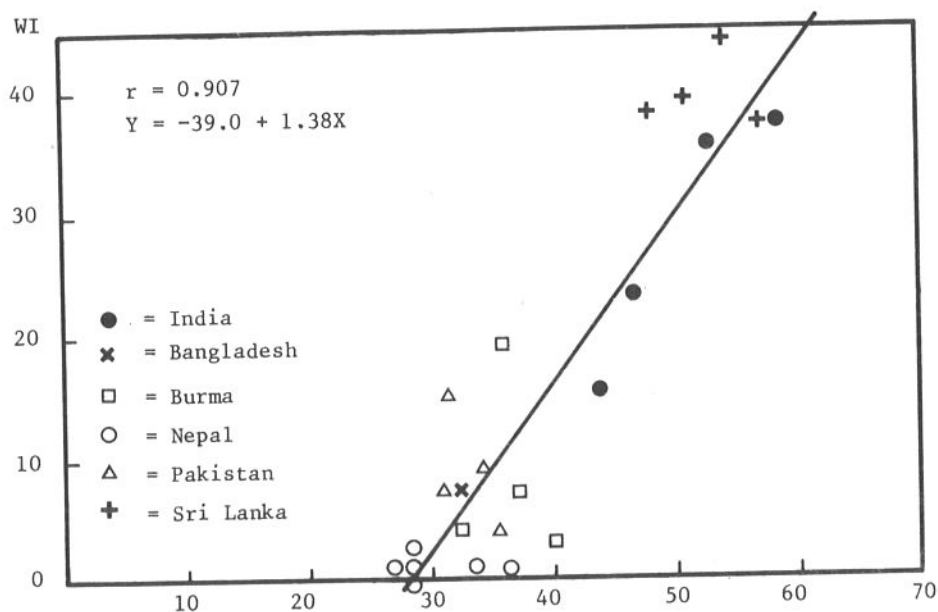
system depends on its social circumstances reflecting the distribution of politically relevant power resources. Compared to the results of my earlier study, the explained part of variation in WI rose 17 percentage points. The explanatory power of the new variables of this study has clearly increased the explained variation in WI. A multiple correlation model, in which social variables 5 and 7-10 were used as the explanatory

variables, produced $R = 0.897$ ($R^2 = 0.80$) in the same group of 23 observation units.

The results of two regression analyses are given in Table 2. WI is used as the dependent variable in both regression equations. Variable 12 is used as the explanatory variable in the regression equation 1 and variables 5 and 7-10 taken together in the multiple regression equation 2. The results of regression equation 1 are also given graphically in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The results of regression analysis for single countries based on the regression equation 1.



Variable 12 (index of the distribution of power resources)

The results of both regression analyses are approximately the same. In the case of India the Y estimates deviate only slightly from the actual WI values, and consequently residuals are small. The same can be seen from Figure 1. These results support the hypothesis. From the aspect of the theory of this study India cannot be regarded as a deviating case. Its degree of power distribution has not been too high compared with the

Table 2

The results of regression analyses for single countries based on two regression equations in which WI is used as the dependent variable and social variables 12 (regression equation 1) and 5 and 7-10 (regression equation 2) respectively as the explanatory variables in the total group of 23 observation units.

Country	Y value	Regression equation			
		(1)		(2)	
		Y est.	Residual	Y est.	Residual
1. India 1947-49	15	21.7	-6.7	18.9	-3.9
2. India 1950-59	23	25.8	-2.8	20.5	2.5
3. India 1960-69	35	34.1	0.9	28.7	6.3
4. India 1970-79	37	42.4	-5.4	40.1	-3.1
5. Bangladesh 1971-79	7	5.1	1.9	0.6	6.4
6. Burma 1948-49	7	12.0	-5.0	17.8	-10.8
7. Burma 1950-59	19	10.6	8.4	15.4	3.6
8. Burma 1960-69	4	5.1	-1.1	8.9	-4.9
9. Burma 1970-79	3	16.1	-13.1	17.0	-14.0
10. Nepal 1920-29	0	-1.8	1.8	-3.1	3.1
11. Nepal 1930-39	0	-0.4	0.4	-2.9	2.9
12. Nepal 1940-49	0	-0.4	0.4	-2.9	2.9
13. Nepal 1950-59	2	-0.4	2.4	-2.9	4.9
14. Nepal 1960-69	0	6.5	-6.5	-0.2	0.2
15. Nepal 1970-79	0	10.6	-10.6	6.1	-6.1
16. Pakistan 1947-49	7	3.7	3.3	11.3	-4.3
17. Pakistan 1950-59	9	7.9	1.1	13.3	-4.3
18. Pakistan 1960-69	4	9.2	-5.2	14.1	-10.1
19. Pakistan 1970-79	15	3.7	11.3	10.4	4.6
20. Sri Lanka 1948-49	38	27.2	10.8	25.8	12.2
21. Sri Lanka 1950-59	39	31.3	7.7	30.5	8.5
22. Sri Lanka 1960-69	44	35.5	8.5	35.5	8.5
23. Sri Lanka 1970-79	37	39.6	-2.6	42.2	-5.2

total distribution of politically relevant human, economic, and intellectual power resources, although its degree of power distribution or democracy is much higher than what could be expected on the basis of its low level of economic development. This is the essential difference between the results of my study and those of many earlier Western studies which have found India a more or less deviating case and thus implied that democracy is not a natural political system for India's conditions.

The results of this study offer an explanation for the similarities and differences in political systems between India and its neighbouring countries, too. In Sri Lanka the degree of power distribution has been even slightly higher than in India, but because the values of explanatory variables are about the same as in India, the degree of power distribution has been approximately in balance with the country's social circumstances. Besides, positive residuals have decreased since the 1940s. In the cases of Bangladesh, Burma, Nepal and Pakistan reasons for the failures of democratic experiments can be found from their social conditions. Relatively low Y estimates show that these societies have not yet been able to offer a favourable social environment for the emergence of viable multiparty democracy.

Conclusion

According to the results of this study we find a fairly good explanation for the survival of democracy in India from its social structures and conditions which have dispersed various power resources widely and prevented their concentration in the hands of one group. In such circumstances it is rational for competing groups to share power with each other because none of them is strong enough to suppress the others.

India's deep religious, linguistic, and racial or ethnic cleavages divide the population into separate groups, which offer bases for political cleavages. In the same way caste divides the majority group, the Hindus, into numerous sub-groups and creates interest conflicts which can be used in party politics. These factors of traditional pluralism have played an important role in party conflicts. Economic development has slowly created new social classes, interest conflicts, and interest associations which have growing importance particularly in the urban areas.

The dispersion of land ownership among 70 million peasant families means that the most important economic resource in rural India, land, is widely distributed and with it economic and political power based on land ownership. In urban India economic resources may be more concentrated than in the rural areas, but millions of traders, businessmen, and self-employed craftsmen form a large sector of economically relatively independent people which is not easily manipulated by any political group. The growing economic power of the government forms, it is true, a contrary trend towards a greater concentration of economic power resources, but it has not yet acquired dominant influence upon the total distribution of power resources. Educational development has increased intellectual power resources and they have become shared by many new groups throughout India. It has created an inexhaustible reserve of potential political activists and leaders which is available to all political parties and competing groups. In this kind of circumstances democracy has been more natural for India than any type of authoritarian system. The roots of democracy are deep in the soil of the Indian society.

Notes

- 1) Lerner 1968, p. 64.
- 2) Lipset 1959, p. 75.
- 3) See May 1973.
- 4) Dahl 1971, pp. 68-69.
- 5) Huntington 1968, p. 84.
- 6) See Vanhanen 1979, pp. 13-18.
- 7) Cf. Dahl 1971, pp. 1-9.
- 8) See Vanhanen 1979, pp. 19-31, 78-81.
- 9) Cf. Lijphart 1980, pp. 1-24.
- 10) Cf. Kothari 1973, pp. 309-310.
- 11) See Vanhanen 1980.

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